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Un católico en Nueva York: Lorca's Tragic Vision of the United States

El presente artículo analiza el papel de la tradición católica española en la poesía de Federico García Lorca, especialmente en Poeta en Nueva York*. Partiendo de conceptos claves de* Del sentimiento trágico de la vida *de Miguel de Unamuno que dilucidan esta tradición de irracionalidad, sufrimiento, y vitalidad espiritual, se ve que Lorca utiliza ideas semejantes para oponerse a una modernidad "protestante" que, según Lorca, favoreció progreso materialista e ignoró el sufrimiento humano. El artículo también describe cómo el uso de la tradición religiosa española complica los estereotipos antiguos con respecto a una supuesta falta de modernidad en España.*

Palabras clave: *Federico García Lorca, Miguel de Unamuno,* Poeta en Nueva York*, catolicismo,* Del sentimiento trágico de la vida

This article discusses the role of Spanish Catholic tradition in the poetry of Federico García Lorca, especially in Poeta en Nueva York*. Beginning with key concepts from Miguel de Unamuno's* Tragic Sense of Life *to elucidate this tradition of irrationality, suffering, and spiritual vitality, we see that Lorca uses similar ideas as resistance to a "Protestant" modernity that, according to Lorca, favored materialist progress while eschewing human suffering. This article also demonstrates how the use of Spanish religious tradition complicates long-standing stereotypes of Spain's supposed lack of modernization.*

Keywords: *Federico García Lorca, Miguel de Unamuno,* Poet in New York*, Catholicism,* The Tragic Sense of Life

In one of Federico García Lorca's last interviews before his assassination, a reporter inquired about his political identity. Lorca responded with his usual wit: "Soy católico, comunista, anarquista, libertario, tradicionalista y monárquico" (Puente). While we can read this as an example of his classic wit and whimsical evasion, Lorca did embody a number of contradictions that lend perhaps a bit of seriousness to his statement. For one, he felt a deep affinity for traditions – flamenco, the Spanish *romance*, Andalusian folk culture – yet he also penned some of the boldest experiments in modern

Peninsular literature like *El público* and *Poeta en Nueva York*. Recent critical work has also identified how commentators have tended to simplify Lorca's political beliefs in the wake of his assassination. Scholars such as Jonathan Mayhew (*Apocryphal Lorca*) and Gayle Rogers, for example, have shown that Lorca's reception in the Anglophone world tends to romanticize him as a socialist martyr while conveniently ignoring his refusal to declare clear political affiliations. Paul Julian Smith, following Luis Fernández Cifuentes, has also warned of reducing such a complicated and contradictory figure to a single ideological or aesthetic stance (169).

This article aims to shed more light on Lorca's complex and contradictory character by focusing on a little-studied aspect of his above self-description, namely, Catholicism. I argue that Catholicism, particularly a certain Spanish Catholic tradition, plays a fundamental role in his poetry, even as he maintained an openly critical stance toward the Church. As this heterodox yet culturally rooted tradition connects irrationality, suffering, and charity through the paradoxical suffering of Christ, it undergirds both Lorca's propensity for experimental form and his care for marginalized populations. Lorca's engagement with Catholicism has not been a major subject of critical inquiry, but important references to the religion appear consistently in his poetry, especially throughout the middle of his career: in the three poems dedicated to the patron saints of Andalusia in *Romancero gitano*, in the lengthy yet little-studied "Oda al Santísimo Sacramento del Altar," and, most prominently, in *Poeta en Nueva York*, where Christ and Catholicism appear throughout the entire volume.[1] Several poems make direct references in their titles, such as "Navidad en el Hudson," "Nacimiento de Cristo," "Luna y panorama de insectos (El poeta pide ayuda a la Virgen)," while images of Christ's Passion and Resurrection appear throughout, including wounded hands, ribs, blood, nails, whips, and crosses. Given the prominence of Catholic themes and imagery throughout *Poeta New York*, I focus primarily on this text, while also discussing the presence of Christian redemption in Lorca's theory of the "*hecho poético*," a synthesis of irrationality, wounding, and divine grace.

Lorca's sense of identity as a Spanish Catholic likely arose so prominently in his New York poetry due to the contrast he felt between his own religion and what he understood as the Protestant character of the United States. In a public lecture that he gave in Spain in 1932, Lorca directly criticizes Protestantism as the central cause of New York's corrupt materialism, epitomized by Wall Street: "Y lo terrible es que toda la multitud que lo llena [Wall Street] cree que … su deber consiste en mover aquella gran máquina día y noche y siempre. Resultado perfecto de una moral protestante, como español típico, a Dios gracias, me crispaba los nervios"

(*Obras* 348). Lorca's association of Protestantism with the stock market is not surprising given the influence of Max Weber's famous thesis that Protestant rationality enabled the rise of capitalism. By the time Lorca left for the United States in 1929, public intellectuals such as Ramiro de Maeztu and Fernando de los Ríos (one of Lorca's professors) had already begun debating to what extent Weber's reformative ideas might help or hinder Spain's modernization (Ruano de la Fuente 545-46). In *Poeta en Nueva York*, we find further accusations of Protestantism's materialism, such as in "Nacimiento de Cristo," where Luther, mentioned explicitly, guides a ghastly procession around the lofty advertising billboards and the gaudy, imitative architecture of New York on Christmas Eve: "La nieve de Manhattan empuja los anuncios / y lleva gracia pura por las falsas ojivas. / Sacerdotes idiotas y querubes de pluma / van detrás de Lutero por las altas esquinas" (*Poeta* 208). Instead of the birth of the Savior, Lorca sees the coldness of snow and a sky/heaven (*el cielo*) interrupted by capitalist marketing. Only as a typical Spaniard – that is, as a God-fearing Catholic – does Lorca acquire the spiritual perspective needed to denounce the dehumanization caused by materialist notions of progress.

In the same lecture cited above, Lorca gives us more clues to his understanding of the differences among Christian faiths as he briefly cites a poem by "*el gran padre*" Miguel de Unamuno, an influential commentator on Spanish Catholic tradition and its difference from European Protestantism.[2] In *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida*, Unamuno describes this divide, not surprisingly, in Weberian terms: Protestant *Dieseitigkeit* (this-sidedness) focused on material progress against a Catholic *Jenseitigkeit* (other-sidedness) focused on transcendental aspirations (57). Though otherworldly, Catholicism does not give rise to an evasive or detached outlook; rather, for both Unamuno and Lorca, it leads to an awareness of human suffering that inspires compassion and charity. As this attention to suffering stems from the irrational torture and murder of Christ, a perfect being, Unamuno argues that suffering and paradox become fundamentally life-giving and redemptive. Due to the similarity in their thinking, the first part of this article will explore Lorca's intellectual debt to Unamuno, demonstrating how Lorca recuperates Catholicism as a mystical tradition that mediates the physical oppression of bodies through the irrationality of a vulnerable God. At a difference from Unamuno, we will see that Lorca envisions this care as a fundamentally poetic endeavor, since poetic language fully realizes the irrational yet fundamental nature of human suffering.

Beyond providing insight into the nuances of his poetics, establishing Lorca's religiously grounded irrationalism via Unamuno brings into relief a

set of key cultural and aesthetic issues with deep roots in Spanish history. Since at least the Counter-Reformation mysticism of Santa Teresa de Ávila and San Juan de la Cruz, Spain's cultural identity has often been accused of irrationality and belatedness, especially in opposition to Northern European Enlightenment ideals (see Iarocci 1-52 for an overview of these issues). This has resulted in a precarious geopolitical identity for Spain, at once stereotyped as violent, belated, archaic, etc., yet also as a source of celebrated artistic innovations tied closely to irrationality – from Cervantes to Dalí, as well as the poetry of Lorca. In the past two decades, works by Anthony Geist and José Monleón (1999), Mary Lee Bretz (2001), Michael Iarocci (2006), Gayle Rogers (2012), and Christopher Soufas (2007, 2015) have examined how Spanish artists and intellectuals have responded to this simultaneous disparagement and celebration of Spanish culture. These scholars show that this complex situation has led to a number of works that self-consciously explore the often-marginalizing attitudes from abroad.[3]

Examining *Poeta en Nueva York* as one such work, I read it as a deliberate effort to revitalize Catholic tradition as a source of progressive aesthetic and social ideals and as an antidote to the perils of a modern, capitalist world. Such attempts to redefine and renovate Spanish culture were common at the time, since there had been a prominent intellectual and public debate about the legacy of Spain and its role in the modern world following the *Desastre* of 1898 when Spain lost its last colonies following the Spanish-American War. While critics have long read *Poeta en Nueva York* as a piece of surrealist literature, the project was not about adapting a foreign aesthetic, as Dalí and Buñuel had done with French surrealism.[4] Indeed, both of these artists had criticized their friend Lorca for being too provincial, traditional, and Catholic (Dalí and Lorca 16).[5] Though frequently critical of tradition, neither Lorca nor Unamuno aimed to jettison the past in the kind of revolutionary gesture proposed by figures such as Marinetti and Breton. While influenced by the intensity of avant-garde experimentation, Lorca rather aimed to recover an already intense, rebellious, and mystical irrationalism latent within Spanish religious culture.

I begin by exploring a few key concepts from Unamuno's *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida*, demonstrating that his ideas on suffering, irrationality, and the nature of Catholicism undergird Lorca's poetic theory of the "*hecho poético*." I then examine how the poems of *Poeta en Nueva York* express a socially and aesthetically minded Catholicism, beginning with the work's initial poems describing Lorca's shock at the modern metropolis, to the later odes where the poet recovers a sense of purpose in denouncing social tragedy. In the conclusion, I return to some of the larger geopolitical questions regarding Spain's relation to the rest of Europe, showing how my

reading of *Poeta en Nueva York* demonstrates Spain's precarious yet crucial role in the development of modernist art and literature.

UNAMUNO'S "*SENTIMIENTO TRÁGICO*" AND LORCA'S "*HECHO POÉTICO*"

From early studies like Gustavo Correa's *La poesía mítica de Federico García Lorca* (1957), critics have noted that much of Lorca's spiritual vitality is rooted in pagan myths and symbols. More recently, Martha Nandorfy (2003) has argued that Lorca's poetry – in particular the New York poems – aims to "preserve [mythical spaces] from the ravages of time" (5) as a means of maintaining vitality against a dehumanizing modernity. While these studies recognize mythology as a key part of Lorca's poetic world, I aim to show that Catholicism can help us understand why suffering and irrationality suffuse practically all of Lorca's work. Scholars such as Juan Matas Caballero (2000) and Willis Barnstone (1993) have noted the influence of the Catholic poetic tradition, particularly through San Juan de la Cruz, though neither of these connects how the Passion of Christ informs Lorca's irrational and socially engaged poetics.[6] Again, it is my contention that an understanding of Miguel de Unamuno helps demonstrate the centrality of these ideas in Lorca's poetry.

Like Lorca, Unamuno's religious, political, and intellectual character has been particularly hard to reduce to any single position. As Katrine Helene Andersen notes, he has been deemed a rationalist, irrationalist, idealist, utilitarian, individualist, socialist, fascist, progressive, Catholic, Protestant, mystic, and atheist (330). Though he initially favored the "Europeanization" of Spain, by the beginning of the twentieth century he settled into a position against the need for a rationalizing influx from the North (García Jambrina 14). While much of the intelligentsia of post-*Desastre* Spain sought to revitalize their nation's culture by looking to the rest of Europe, Unamuno argued for embracing Spain's spirituality, irrationality, and "arbitrary" nature rather than yielding to the rest of Europe's supposed "modernity" (*Europeización* 159-60). His reflections on Spain, irrationality, and spirituality would culminate in his philosophical masterwork, *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida* (1912). Here, Unamuno sets forth a tragic, irrational vision of Catholicism explicitly opposed to what he saw as the focus on a "this worldly" progress of Protestantism. Examining a few of the concepts in this book illuminates key ideas in Lorca's poetics regarding Catholicism and also connects him to a heterodox yet thoroughly Spanish aesthetic tradition.

Unamuno founds his tragic conception of life on what he understands as the incommensurable yet necessary divide between life and knowledge (*Sentimiento* 33). Not only do we all possess an innate desire to continue

living and to live forever (an idea he borrows from Spinoza), but we also act as though we are sure of this immortality; if we truly die, then our actions would be meaningless. As rational beings, however, we doubt this immortality and strive to prove it through reason and philosophy, which are limited in their capacities. Unamuno describes the problem as a series of propositions:

> [No] quiero morirme del todo, y quiero saber si he de morirme o no definitivamente. Y si no muero, ¿qué será de mí?; y si muero, ya nada tiene sentido. Y hay tres soluciones: a) o sé que me muero del todo y entonces la desesperación irremediable, o b) sé que no muero del todo, y entonces la resignación, o c) no puedo saber ni una cosa ni otra cosa, y entonces la resignación en la desesperación o esta en aquella, una resignación desesperada, o una desesperación resignada, y la lucha. (*Sentimiento* 32)

What determines our capacity to live and to act in meaningful ways is precisely the irrational belief that we will live forever. This irrational belief in life, however, must constantly defend itself from our rational mind, which doubts the belief and works to find a definitive solution regarding our immortality. A definitive answer either way, however, would result in complete despair or complete resignation, hence the vital struggle (*lucha*) between belief and knowledge.

In Lorca's lecture "Imaginación, inspiración, y evasión," delivered several times shortly before his trip to New York in 1928, he describes how his own poetics similarly embraces uncertainty and ambiguity over absolute conclusions. Here, he asserts that the poet's primary task is to give life, which surpasses the limits of truth or falsehood: "La misión del poeta es ésta: animar, en su exacto sentido: dar alma ... Pero no me preguntéis por lo verdadero y lo falso, porque la 'verdad poética' es una expresión que cambia al mudar su enunciado" (*Obras* 279). Just as in Unamuno's conception of Catholicism, Lorca places the life of a poem, its animation, *before* notions of logical "justification," arguing instead that poetry is received like the grace of God: "algo que no debe comprenderse, sino recibirse en una especie de estado de gracia" (285). Lorca frames his notion of "*verdad poética*" within a Christian salvation narrative rather than rely on logic and reason – faculties that for Unamuno cannot transcend the human realm.

Unamuno drew upon numerous continental philosophers to form his ideas on vitality and uncertainty. The idea that man innately desires to live forever, for example, comes directly from three principles of Spinoza's *Ethics* (Unamuno, *Sentimiento* 63). Unamuno also likely draws on Henri Bergson in his conclusion that rational knowledge cannot solve the question of our existence (Fraser 753-54).[7] Yet, what is crucial for his particular outlook, and what will be crucial for Lorca's poetics as well, is the blending

of these ideas with Catholicism. In a chapter entitled "La esencia del catolicismo," Unamuno argues that the power of Catholicism stems from its sustenance of both mysticism and rationalism. The two belligerents in the "tragic" battle of life – the religious mystery of eternal life and rational theological attempts to understand this mystery – are incorporated in Catholic dogma in a series of "harmonized contradictions," such as the unity of God and the Holy Trinity or the co-existence of free will and divine prescience (*Sentimiento* 64). The most central of these paradoxes, and the most tragic, is the example of Christ: a "perfect man" whose unjust suffering gave eternal life to humankind (53). According to Unamuno, this paradox of Christ as a God who suffered "scandalized" Jews and Greeks alike, for no longer is eternal life found in forms of perfection but rather in suffering: "Fue la revelación de lo divino del dolor, pues sólo es divino lo que sufre" (155). For Unamuno, the great paradox of Catholicism is that God suffers, which is to say, God lives. While Catholicism does have a strong theological tradition of attempting to logically resolve these paradoxes, the mysteries hold a special place and are considered irresolvable, necessitating faith and creating what Unamuno calls Catholicism's "profunda dialéctica vital:" the oscillation between life and reason (64).

While Unamuno does refer to a dialectic, seemingly connoting "this-worldly" progress, María Zambrano notes that this dialectic should not be understood as Hegelian (and by extension, we might say, Protestant). In her posthumous book *Unamuno*, she argues that Unamuno understood the Hegelian dialectic as transcendental logos or reason perfecting the order of the cosmos in its unfolding. Unamuno himself, however, saw reason as limited to the realm of mankind, hence the need for "otherworldliness" (Zambrano 89). Furthermore, Pedro Cerezo Galán notes that Unamuno generally rejects any sense of an objective, collective truth, tending instead towards a "dialéctica de la pasión" that only holds true within the framework of an individual life (Cerezo 313). Any perfect ordering of society through a Hegelian dialectic is impossible, not only because it would lack the tragic oscillation between reason and life, but also because it would undermine the uniqueness of each individual's experience.

Like Unamuno, Lorca sees true vitality in moments of suffering, particularly the suffering of an individual in search of the truth of poetry. In the lecture cited above, Lorca connects the life-giving power of authentic poetry with the wounding of Christ:

Como poeta auténtico que soy y seré hasta mi muerte, no cesaré de *darme golpes* con las disciplinas *en espera del chorro de sangre* verde o amarilla que necesariamente y por fe habrá mi cuerpo de manar algún día. ... Desde luego, no he pretendido

convencer a nadie. Sería indigno de la poesía si adoptara esta posición. La poesía pone *ramas de zarzamora y erizos de vidrio para que se hieran por su amor las manos que la buscan.* (*Obras* 285; emphasis added)

Lorca yet again denies that poetry conveys logical meaning, arguing instead that the poem's irrational expression should have a wounding effect reminiscent of Christ's Passion. This sense of bodily harm will become a central theme in *Poeta en Nueva York* as it guides Lorca's attention to the shocking physical suffering he witnesses. On one hand, the experience of this suffering leads to a political conviction, since, as Christopher Flint argues, Lorca saw the constant mistreatment of bodies "in the cause of a 'universal' ideal" (Flint 183). On the other hand, this political and philosophical conviction cannot be separated from the spiritual wounding of Christ, evidenced by the language of grace that Lorca employs to describe the aims of his poetry. Through a poetics that establishes pain as foundational for life – that is a poetics in tune with the "sentimiento trágico de la vida" – he attends to the immediate, immanent suffering caused by ideologies of progress.

Lorca's attunement to suffering connects him not only to Unamuno, but also to a much older tradition of poetic wounding based in the Spanish Counter Reformation, particularly the mystic poetry of San Juan de la Cruz. In many of San Juan's poems, the poetic voice experiences a divine wounding as an expression of the contact between the eternal, primordial nature of God, and the fleeting, incidental life of man. This is figured especially in the poem "Llama de amor viva," in which contact with the divine is described as a burning flame that gives life as it wounds:

¡Oh, llama de amor viva,
que tiernamente hieres
de mi alma en el más profundo centro!
Pues ya no eres esquiva,
acaba ya, si quieres,
rompe la tela deste dulce encuentro.
…………………………………………………..
Matando muerte en vida la has trocado. (Juan de la Cruz, *Obra poética* 101)

Here, the presence of God is felt in the body as a burning pain, as sensation and not as reason, and hence as an expression of the paradox of Christ's life-giving sacrifice. Poetry not only represents this divine wounding, but true poetic language has the ability to surpass our reason and speak directly to our "tragic" affect; the wounding of poetry is then its animating, life-giving

quality. If for Unamuno "sólo es divino lo que sufre," then poetry is the divinization of man through the realization and expression of our fundamental suffering.

For Lorca, the highest expression of poetry's ability to wound divinely lies within his concept of the "*hecho poético*," a concept he outlines in "Imaginación, inspiración, y evasion" (*Obras* 280-85). These irrational yet emotive "poetic events" or "facts" operate under a mysterious "lógico poético" (*Obras* 281). In one version of the talk, Lorca describes the phenomenon as this: "Hay que aceptarlo [el hecho poético] como se acepta la lluvia de estrellas. Pero alegrémonos ... de que la poesía pueda fugarse, evadirse, de las garras frías del razonamiento" (*Obras* 284). Though the "*hecho poético*" epitomizes poetry's evasive aspect, we see here that evasion does not imply the total automatism of the surrealists (Anderson 159). Rather, Lorca primarily wishes to evade the fixedness of rationality, much like Unamuno. Furthermore, Lorca's own "*hechos poéticos*" almost always suggest violence and tragedy, not humor or diversion. The example Lorca himself gives from "Romance sonámbulo" hints at this violence: "Mil panderos de cristal / herían la madrugada" (*Obras* 285). The crystal of the tambourines and the hour of the early morning suggest light, making daybreak a tragic event in its wounding. Just as Unamuno looked toward the divine wounding of Christ as a foundational act that gives rise to life, Lorca imagines the light of morning, usually an optimistic image of renewed life, as a wounding. Unfortunately, the reports of Lorca's talks do not give more examples of "*hechos poéticos*," but the tragic nature of these "poetic events" can be clearly seen in the experimental images in *Poeta en Nueva York* – both Lorca's most tragic and most irrational book of poetry.

DEFORMED FIGURES AND PERFECT ARCHITECTURE: LORCA'S ARRIVAL IN NEW YORK CITY

Following the publication of the *Romancero gitano* in 1928, Lorca seems to have entered into a period of meditation on Catholicism. During this time, he began work on "Oda al Santísimo Sacramento del Altar," a long poem contemplating the miracle of Christ made Flesh through the Eucharist. Eric Southworth notes that Lorca did not finish the poem until at least a year later in New York (141), which I believe suggests that the mysteries of Catholicism were still on Lorca's mind as he traveled to the United States. Though the "Oda" represents his most overt reflection on Catholicism, it is in *Poeta en Nueva York* where we see an existential struggle with Lorca's own Catholic heritage, brought into relief by its contrast with the American Protestants.

In Lorca's letters from the United States to his family in Spain, he frequently remarks on a diverse yet pallid religious culture in the United

States, noting that even American Catholicism has been "minado por el protestantismo" and no longer has "cordialidad ... [y] solemnidad, es decir, calor humano" (*Epistolario* 626-27).[8] This lack of solemnity in life, lack of warmth toward others, and the uncanny absence of the human spirit – despite the overabundance of human bodies – stand at the heart of the tragedy of *Poeta en Nueva York*. Lorca's shock and resignation at the marked otherness of the world that he has entered colors much of the work's early poems.

The brief, first poem, "Vuelta de paseo," employs several "*hechos poéticos*" that express the hopelessness Lorca felt after a walk through the city:

Asesinado por el cielo.
Entre las formas que van hacia la sierpe
y las formas que buscan el cristal,
dejaré crecer mis cabellos.

Con el árbol de muñones que no canta
y el niño con el blanco rostro de huevo.

Con los animalitos de cabeza rota
y el agua harapienta de los pies secos.

Con todo lo que tiene cansancio sordomudo
y mariposa ahogada en el tintero.

Tropezando con mi rostro distinto de cada día.
¡Asesinado por el cielo! (*Poeta* 165)

Within this strange world the poet encounters a number of images he can only describe through irrational means: the "árbol de muñones que no canta" and the child with seemingly no facial features described as a "blanco rostro de huevo." We also find here the particularly difficult "*hecho poético*," "el agua harapienta de los pies secos." The image invokes water as tatters: a spraying out of water, as if from a puddle stepped in by a shoe, and hence the dry feet. Perhaps Lorca means to suggest a disconnection between life (feet, human bodies) and nature (water), but this remains indeterminate at best. Nevertheless, the image of tatters invokes homelessness, and the dry feet do not seem to express any kind of comfort. As this appears in a series of frightful images – the amputated tree, the faceless child, the smashed

heads of small animals – its context further suggests the tragedy of New York City: oppressive reason and wounded beings crying out for care.

These beings in New York seem to have little possibility for redemption in their present state, since Lorca names them as only vague "*formas*" that move either down toward the "snake," a symbol involving the subway system, or up toward "*cristal*" (glass), a synecdoche for the towering skyscrapers and the suspicious ideals of progress they represent. Though downward may be infernal, the upward direction seems equally undesirable, especially once we see that rigid forms and fixed lines, such as the "*cristal*," are coded negatively throughout *Poeta en Nueva York*. The precise geometry of the modern architecture is constantly juxtaposed with the fluidity and freedom of life, such as in "Panorama ciego de Nueva York," another poem early in the volume expressing the "blinding" tragedy Lorca witnessed: "Pero el verdadero dolor estaba en otras plazas / donde los peces cristalizados agonizaban dentro de los troncos" (*Poeta* 207). Here, Lorca relates true pain to the crystallization of the fluid forms of fish, traditionally a fertility symbol. The poet thus portrays life as a desire for movement beyond the rigid forms of New York City.

This reaction against the fixation of life in glass and other rigid figures connects with Unamuno's idea that the rational mind can only operate with definite, dead forms: "La mente busca lo muerto, pues lo vivo se le escapa; quiere cuajar en témpanos la corriente fugitiva, quiere fijarla …" (Unamuno, *Sentimiento* 73). As this rigidity is closely linked with Protestant rationality in Unamuno, it is not surprising that Lorca describes the neatly geometric architecture of New York City as lacking life and spirituality. In his lecture he states: "Las aristas suben al cielo sin voluntad de nube ni voluntad de Gloria … éstas ascienden frías con una belleza sin raíces ni ansia final, torpemente seguras, sin lograr vencer y superar, como en la arquitectura espiritual sucede, la intención siempre inferior del arquitecto" (*Obras* 525). In a clever oxymoron, Lorca describes the structures as "torpemente seguras": they may be sound engineering, but they lack spiritual grace.

In the poems themselves, Lorca also relates New York's architectural forms directly to the fixedness of Protestant thought, which, for Lorca, favors the dead forms of economic progress and is ignorant of vitality. We examined one of these examples from "Nacimiento de Cristo" above, where Luther himself guides a ghastly procession through the skies, around the "falsas ojivas," "anuncios," and "altas esquinas" (208). In next poem in the volume, "La aurora," we find a similar emphasis on rigid forms and a lack of spirituality in the city, such as "La aurora de Nueva York gime / por las inmensas escaleras" and "La luz es sepultada por cadenas y ruidos / en impúdico reto de ciencia sin raíces" (210). The poem's position directly after

"Nacimiento de Cristo" suggests that this is the "aurora" of Christmas Day. This is further corroborated by the line "La aurora llega y nadie la recibe en su boca," evoking the traditional symbolism of Christ as the sun, as well as an image of receiving the Eucharist. Though the dawn offers spiritual liberation through Holy Communion, images of empty materialist progress such as "cuatro columnas de cieno," "monedas en enjambres," and "el cieno de números y leyes" impede the fluidity of such salvation (210). Though New York may be the pinnacle of modern engineering and architecture, Lorca, as a poet, bears witness to the chaotic tragedy underlying these superficially perfect forms.

"VOZ DE MI ABIERTO COSTADO": THE RECONCILIATION OF LORCA'S POETIC VOCATION

While at first oppressed and disheartened by these forms, Lorca eventually begins to recuperate, acquiring a more active and critical voice. The poet's brief sojourn to visit an American family in rural Vermont, chronicled in the section "Poemas del Lago Eden Mills," functions as a turning point as he escapes from the "*arquitectura extrahumana*" of New York and connects with the regenerative power of nature. Though Lorca connects with the water, hills, and forests, the perfection of this natural world leads him to consider the fallen state of humanity, becoming aware of his role as a poet who will take his ultimate inspiration from the conflicts and tragedies of human life.

In the opening lines of the first poem in this section, "Poema doble del lago Eden," Lorca depicts an image of the regenerative capacities of nature while also introducing a motif of bodily suffering, "voz de mi abierto costado":

Era mi voz antigua,
ignorante de los densos jugos amargos,
la que vino lamiendo mis pies
bajo los frágiles helechos mojados.

¡Ay voz antigua de mi amor!
Ay voz de mi verdad.
Ay voz de mi abierto costado,
cuando todas las rosas manaban de mi lengua
y el césped no conocía la impasible dentadura del caballo. (*Poeta* 215)

Lorca senses the presence of this ancient voice in the natural world, "bajo los frágiles helechos mojados," an ideal setting evoked by the utopian place name of Lake Eden. However, in the following stanza, we see that Lorca does

not find his ancient voice in nature, but rather in his own wounded body, figured in parallel to the dead body of Christ. The image of the "abierto costado" recalls the last wound inflicted upon Christ's body, as a soldier pierces Christ's rib with a spear, creating a wound from which blood and water flow (John 19.33-4). Lorca here looks to the body of Christ with its promise of death, not to the natural world with its promise of life.

The poem's epigram from Garcilaso de la Vega's "Égloga II" – "Nuestro ganado pace, el viento espira" (line 1146) – also cues us in to Lorca's skepticism toward nature. While at first these lines seem to reinforce the rustic and pristine setting of Lake Eden, reading them in their context reveals Lorca's attunement to a long history in Spanish poetry of skepticism toward the *beatus ille* as an antidote to human suffering. In Garcilaso's pastoral poem, the shepherd Salicio speaks this verse to evoke the simple bliss of country life, yet his declaration comes in the midst of a strange and unsettling scene: Salicio and fellow shepherd Nemoroso have just resorted to tying up their companion Albanio, who has gone insane and assaulted Nemoroso after he is rejected by his beloved, the nymph Camila (Garcilaso 86). Though Albanio's disturbed mental state may appear to contrast the harmony of the *beatus ille*, Dustin Griffin notes that even in the inauguration of this trope in Horace's *Epode 2*, the Latin poet employs a subtle irony (66). Here, Alfius, who proclaims the *beatus ille*, has recently renounced his business ventures, yet we learn later that he continues to practice usury. Griffin warns that this should not be read as an outright repudiation of country living as escapist fantasy; rather, the epode comments on the irony that such praise of nature often arises from city dwellers who are reticent to abandon their urban lives (66).[9] While none of the characters in Garcilaso's eclogue are from the city, his use of the *beatus ille* still emphasizes the naivety of believing wholeheartedly in the purifying powers of nature.

In the context of "Poema doble," Lorca evokes the *beatus ille* with similar ironic intent. Like Garcilaso's Albanio, Lorca is also under emotional duress following personal crises at home and his confrontation with the chaos of New York City. He is also presented with the possibility of renewal through the direct experience of nature. Yet Lorca, like Garcilaso, portrays a deep skepticism toward such idealized and facile solutions to psychological trauma. Lorca continues to be tormented by the "voces de los borrachos" and the "voz de hojalata y de talco" (215) that still cry out from the city; even if the poet momentarily finds himself in an Edenic sanctuary, he knows that he will soon fall back into the world of suffering.

As Lorca reflects upon Garcilaso's verses, he finds that even pristine beauty offers no solace for his psychological troubles and no solution for the

inhumanity of the city. Yet in the "voz de mi abierto costado," with its expression of the fundamental wounding of existence – the very basis for the rift between man and nature – Lorca comes to understand his position as a poet who must directly confront the suffering of humanity in order to care for it. Reflecting on this difficult mission to investigate and decry suffering, where his body "flota … entre equilibrios contrarios," Lorca comes to assert his precarious existence in some of the most memorable lines from the book: "…yo no soy un hombre, ni un poeta, ni una hoja, / pero sí un pulso herido que sonda las cosas del otro lado" (*Poeta* 216). Through his understanding of the fundamental instability and tragedy that constitutes life, Lorca rejects his identity as a human, as an artist, and as even a part of the natural world, asserting that he is only a wounded flow of blood meant to investigate the death always present just on the other side of life.

As Lorca returns to the city, we find his most aggressive denunciations of the urban tragedy. While there are still expressions of horror at the perils of modern city life, Lorca speaks with renewed vigor, actively calling for attention to suffering instead of the resigned shock seen in the first sections of the book. The most intense moment of Lorca's active denunciation utilizing his newfound strength comes in the section "Dos odas," consisting of one poem that looks back toward the spiritual center of Rome in a cry for help, and another that criticizes the poetics of the United States through an apostrophe to Walt Whitman, a poet Lorca had recently read in translation.

The first of these two odes, "Grito hacia Roma, desde la torre del Chrysler Building," represents for critic Paul Binding the emotional climax of the work (18), and it is the book's most direct reflection on the Catholic Church. Figuratively exclaimed from atop the then tallest building in the world, these verses look back with both hope and distress toward the center of the Catholic world in a wish to re-substantiate the vitality of suffering in New York and the United States. As Eric Southworth notes, the poem harshly criticizes the institutions of Catholicism: Lorca aligns the oppressive architecture of New York with that of St. Peter's Basilica and the suits and rings of Wall Street businessmen with the fine fabrics and jewelry of corrupt priests (*Poeta* 263). The poem also ends with a rewriting of the Lord's Prayer which reads as an accusation of the Church's hypocritical distribution of wealth: "porque queremos que se cumpla la voluntad de la Tierra / que da sus frutos para todos" (265). Furthermore, Federico Bonaddio notes that this poem comes at an important historical juncture for the Catholic Church, as it was written shortly after Pope Pius XI's pact with Mussolini and the Fascist Italian state (160 *Companion*). With this in mind, some of the poem's ambiguous references, such as the "*viejo*" whose lips turn to a moneyed-silver, become clear criticisms of the Papacy. Like Unamuno, Lorca's

Catholicism is not a broad acceptance of institutionalized religion but rather a critical reworking of specific redeeming qualities.

Despite these criticisms, the poem is as much a call for a Christian spiritual revival as it is an accusation of corruption. Aside from the direct references to Christian redemption ("Porque ya no hay quien reparta el pan y el vino" and "... el hombre vestido de blanco ... / ignora que Cristo puede dar agua todavía") there is a strong presence of Unamunian Spanish Catholic themes throughout the entire poem. For example, in the second section of the poem Lorca proclaims the need for an expression of pain and weakness rather than a focus on the fleeting states of wealth:

El hombre que desprecia la paloma debía hablar,
debía gritar desnudo entre las columnas,
y ponerse una inyección para adquirir la lepra
y llorar un llanto tan terrible
que disolviera sus anillos y sus teléfonos de diamante.
Pero el hombre vestido de blanco
ignora el misterio de la espiga,
ignora el gemido de la parturienta,
ignora que Cristo puede dar agua todavía,
ignora que la moneda quema el beso de prodigio ... (*Poeta* 263-64)

The man who scorns the dove (the Holy Spirit) would have done better to shout so that his tears could dissolve the rings and the rigid, diamond telephones that imprison him. The man dressed in white – a reference to the en vogue white suits of Wall Street businessman (Binding 130) – ignores the pain of the woman giving birth, the suffering that, very directly in this case, gives life. Unamuno similarly discusses the importance of crying and lament: "Y estoy convencido de que resolveríamos muchas cosas si, saliendo a la calle y poniendo a luz nuestras penas, que acaso resultasen una sola pena común, nos pusiéramos en común a llorarla, y a dar gritos al cielo, y a llamar a Dios" (*Sentimiento* 26). Perhaps with Unamuno's proposition for collective lamentation in mind, Lorca ends his poem with a call for just such an act:

los negros que sacan las escupideras,
los muchachos que tiemblan bajo el terror pálido de los directores,
las mujeres ahogadas en aceites minerales,
la muchedumbre de martillo, de violín o de nube,
ha de gritar aunque le estrellen los sesos en el muro,
ha de gritar frente a las cúpulas,
ha de gritar loca de fuego,
ha de gritar loca de nieve,

ha de gritar con la cabeza llena de excremento,
ha de gritar como todas las noches juntas … (*Poeta* 264-65)

While Unamuno suggests the possibility of such an event in a philosophical work, Lorca attempts to enact such a collective lamentation through a series of "*hechos poéticos*" that realize language's potential to express the tragic irrationality of humankind's suffering. As the poet "[que] sonda las cosas del otro lado," Lorca's lament strives to be collective in its attunement to the suffering he witnesses.

After appealing to Rome, the next poem turns back to the New World to address what Lorca sees as a lack of the *sentimiento trágico* in the aesthetic culture of the United States. He does this through a lengthy apostrophe to Walt Whitman, which illustrates Lorca's ambiguous view of the American poet and the mark that he has left on United States culture. "Oda a Walt Whitman" has largely been read as a celebration of Whitman, and to a certain extent it is: we know Lorca greatly admired his poetry, and he seems to look to Whitman as a possible model for an ideal gay poet, devoid of the perverse connotations often conflated with homosexuality at that time.[10] In the opening stanza of the poem, Lorca imagines Whitman as an "ángel oculto" who speaks with a "voz perfecta" that might redeem the downfall of New York into filth:

Nueva York de cieno,
Nueva York de alambres y de muerte.
¿Qué ángel llevas oculto en la mejilla?
¿Qué voz perfecta dirá las verdades del trigo? (*Poeta* 266-67)

In the next stanza, Lorca names Whitman as the subject of his address, and asserts that he has vigorously maintained Whitman in his poetic vision:

Ni un solo momento, viejo hermoso Walt Whitman,
he dejado de ver tu barba llena de mariposas,
ni tus hombros de pana gastados por la luna,
ni tus muslos de Apolo virginal … (267)

Despite the praise of Whitman as America's bard in the opening lines of the poem, Paul Binding keenly notes that Lorca is also quite critical of him for two important reasons related to the dangers of Protestant progressivism and the lack of tragic vitality in the United States: "Lorca is rebuking Whitman ... on two accounts: that he didn't anticipate ... the direction in which his society with its pioneering acquisitions and industry was moving; that he didn't properly acknowledge the wickedness and suffering that are a part of life" (138). Lorca criticizes, in a word, Whitman's lack of attunement

to the "sentimiento trágico de la vida," which recognizes the limitations of progress and understands the need for awareness of human suffering.

In the opening lines of the ode, even before Lorca sings the praises of Whitman, the poetic voice presents young men hard at work and busy schoolchildren learning the rigid forms that have already begun to imprison them, demonstrating the pitfalls of industry and progress:

Por el East River y el Bronx
los muchachos cantaban enseñando sus cinturas,
con la rueda, el aceite, el cuero y el martillo.
Noventa mil mineros sacaban la plata de las rocas
Y los niños dibujaban escaleras y perspectivas. (*Poeta* 266)

Lorca describes these figures strongly and directly, especially as they reference the presentation of the virile workers in Section 12 of "Song of Myself" (Whitman 98); but given what we have observed with rigid forms and money, we can already see that these images also have negative implications. The workers do not attain any kind of self-satisfaction or spiritual development; they must work continuously and remain separate from nature:

Pero ninguno se dormía,
ninguno quería ser el río,
....
Pero ninguno se detenía,
ninguno quería ser nube ... (*Poeta* 266)

Eventually, torture and death come to those who can no longer bear to work: "un límite de agujas cercará la memoria / y los ataúdes se llevarán a los que no trabajaban" (266). These lines recall Lorca's comments on Wall Street that I cited earlier, where he specifically impugns the continual, endless nature of work in a capitalist society. The economic pragmatics of Protestantism only enslaves workers, overvaluing the "this-worldliness" of spiritually fruitless work and progress.

After the presentation of the oppressed workers, Lorca invokes Whitman as a possible redeemer of the city: he is associated with nature ("tu barba, llena de mariposas"), with chaste deities ("tus muslos de Apolo virginal"), and also with the mysterious and poetic moon ("hombros de pana gastados por la luna"). But the potential of Whitman's America is not fulfilled – a failure epitomized, as Binding notes, by an apple tainted with gasoline, attributed as belonging to Whitman himself: "tu manzana / con un leve sabor de gasolina" (Binding 130). Eventually, Lorca comes to openly criticize

Whitman for his lack of vision of the negative side of industry, urban development, and life in general:

Pero tú no buscabas los ojos arañados,
ni el pantano oscurísimo donde sumergen los niños,
ni la saliva helada,
ni las curvas heridas como panza de sapo ... (*Poeta* 268)

While the verb *buscar* could imply Whitman simply was not hoping or longing for these violent scenes, I follow Binding's reading of these lines as a criticism of Whitman's tendency to avoid addressing the tragic aspects urbanization; that is, he did not bother to "look for" the suffering that is always present (151).[11] Whitman, then, as the poet-prophet of the United States, represents in part the empty optimism and lack of attunement to tragedy that have corrupted the potential of the United States. The horrors that Lorca tries desperately to represent are conceived as consequences of reason and progress not kept in check by the basic needs of life.

Lorca's criticism of Whitman reflects his broader concerns with Protestantism with which we began. As an "español típico, a Dios gracias," (*Obras* 348) Lorca sees himself as having a natural aversion to the supposed overvaluation of reason and progress that have taken hold of so much of the non-Catholic Western world. More than just a Spaniard, however, Lorca is also a poet; because of this he is not just in tune with suffering but also has the ability to express in language the irrational paradox of life. In his lecture on the New York poems, Lorca remarks that "he dicho *Un Poeta en Nueva York* y he debido decir *Nueva York en un Poeta*" (*Obras* 343), suggesting that he sees his book as the natural and inevitable result of a true poet's encounter with the chaotic and destitute metropolis. Rather than a celebratory exclamation of progress that eschews the grave social conditions of the city in the style of Whitman, the most purely poetic version is Lorca's tragic lament that serves as a call to compassionate action.

While Lorca was clearly in part responding to Bretonian surrealism and other avant-garde movements in the creation of his experimental verse in *Poeta en Nueva York*, both the form and content of Lorca's critique must be considered a blend between the iconoclastic attitudes of the era and Spanish religious and aesthetic tradition. In this sense, *Poeta en Nueva York* does not represent as dramatic a break from Lorca's earlier work as critics have often noted. The chaotic verse of *Poeta* resembles experimentations of Surrealism and other avant-gardes, yet the irrational juxtapositions and fantastical imagery of the work clearly evoke the history of Spanish literature, including the tortuous syntax of baroque works like Góngora's *Soledades*, or the phantasmagoria of works like Espronceda's *El estudiante de Salamanca*.

Similarly, the invective against bourgeois ideologies of progress is common to both avant-gardes and Lorca, but in the latter's case, this critique follows a centuries-old tradition of Spanish resistance against materialism and rationality.

Though the role of tradition in even the most iconoclastic and revolutionary avant-gardes has long been recognized, the relationship between tradition and experimentation in Spain is closely linked to complicated issues of national and international identity. As discussed in the introduction, the nation's supposedly belated and archaic culture has often caused a problematic marginalization of Spanish culture, yet these stereotypes are also associated with Spain's long history of creative genius. Rather than simply suggest that we must appreciate tradition within Spanish experimentation, the present study demonstrates that artistic production often presents two seemingly opposing views. In the case of Lorca, he resists intelligibility and rationalism as an ethical stance against the failures of capitalist modernism, yet he still maintains the view that true poetry will be understood as "una especie de estado de gracia" (*Obras* 285). Even as Lorca challenges tradition with his experimental forms and socially progressive ethics, the ultimate truth of his poetry, in his own terms, is still inseparable from a deeply rooted, belief-laden mysticism that fits uncomfortably within the liberal, social political agenda to which he aspires. As seen from his self-description above, Lorca fully embraced his contradictory nature; as readers we should strive to recognize him as such.

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NOTES

1 For a thorough analysis of the "Oda al Santísimo Sacramento del Altar," see Cavanaugh 1995. Though Cavanaugh elaborates on the Catholic themes in the poem, the discussion is mostly framed in terms of Lorca's drawings *vis-à-vis* the book's focus on Lorca's plastic art.

2 Lorca quotes the line "sube por la noche la tierra al cielo" from the poem "Un cementerio de lugar castellano" by Unamuno (1952). This poem discusses the irrationality of life through the celebration and veneration of death within a Christian framework where Christ, living in the sky (*cielo*), collects and reincarnates the dead as stars. As Lorca reflects on the United States where he saw as an egregious disregard for the weakness of human life, he recalls this scene of care for the those passed as a reminder of the fragility of human life, a sentiment still active for Lorca in Spanish culture.

3 Geist and Monleón (1999) challenge what they see as a prevailing but misleading center/periphery model of modernism by which new aesthetic models proceed from geographical centers such as London and Paris toward more marginal loci such as Spain, Italy, and Eastern Europe. Mary Lee Bretz (2001) takes a similar approach by challenging the "persistent 'othering'" of Spain that has impeded the integration of Spanish contributions into broader discussions of turn of the century art and literature. Works by Christopher Soufas (2007, 2015), Michael Iarocci (2009), and Gayle Rogers (2012) also work to connect Spain to the broader currents of modernism by challenging the common place of Spain's cultural difference and isolation. Iarocci's work studies these problems in Spanish romanticism and the nineteenth century, while Soufas and Rogers focus on the first several decades of the twentieth century

4 For a recent summary and discussion of the history of analyzing Lorca's work as surrealist, see the introduction to David Richter's *García Lorca at the Edge of Surrealism* (2014). In general, I agree with Jonathan Mayhew's analysis in *Apocryphal Lorca* (2009), that Lorca was largely "apocryphally" classified as a surrealist by critics from outside of Spain following World War II. I find Richter's approach through the lens of Georges Bataille particularly illuminating, though it does not address the Catholic origins of many of Lorca's ideas, as I do here.

5 For some analysis regarding the differences between Dalí's and Lorca's approach to art, see Christopher Maurer's prologue to *Sebastian's Arrows* (Dalí and Lorca 2004). There are also several interesting anecdotes of Dalí criticizing Lorca's attachment to Catholicism (14-18).

6 The most detailed approach to Lorca and San Juan de la Cruz is that of Matas Caballero (1999-2000). His article focuses on the *Sonetos de amor oscuro*, and identifies linguistic and imagistic parallelisms between the two poets. There are two further studies that demonstrate Lorca's debt to Christianity, though they do not focus specifically on Catholicism. The first is Dennis Costa's 2008 article on resonances of the Biblical apocalypse in Lorca's work. The second study is Robert Havard's 2001 book *The Crucified Mind: Rafael Alberti and the Surrealist Ethos in Spain*. Though primarily focusing on Alberti, the first section of Chapter 4, "Lorca's mantic poet in New York" focuses on Lorca's imitations of Old Testament prophets. Havard proposes that what is unique about Spanish surrealism is the influence of the Catholic Church, yet he tends to focus on the "repressive and neurosis-inducing" effects of religion, especially in regards to Alberti (7).

7 It is worth noting here that Unamuno had important debts to several heterodox Protestant theologians, a topic thoroughly explored in Nelson Orringer's *Unamuno y los protestantes liberals.* While it is important to

recognize these influences, this hardly indicates, in my view, that Unamuno is "Protestant" in any sense, because 1) *Del sentimiento trágico* is largely an apology of Catholicism over and against Protestantism, and 2) the "liberal" theologians that influenced Unamuno – including Schleiermacher, Ritschl, and Harnack – were controversial and heterodox figures within Protestant theology.

8 For an illuminating discussion of the apparent contradiction between Lorca's praise of Catholicism in his letters to his family and the anti-clericalism of poems like "Oda hacia Roma," which we will examine later, see Terrence McMullan (172-73).

9 For a more detailed account of this irony and its relation to other classical literature, see David Mankin's notes in Horace's *Epodes* (62-64).

10 For other discussions of this poem, all of which code Whitman as generally positive, see, Ilie 1968, Laguardia 1978, Flint 1988, Nandorfy 2003, Havard 2000, and Bonaddio 2010. For an excellent, recent queer studies reading of the poem, see Mayhew 2018, Chapter 6.

11 Ian Gibson is another scholar who argues that Lorca sees Whitman as not fully appreciating the complexity and the often "sordid" nature of life, particularly in regards to sexuality (117).

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