

Federico Garcia Lorca – Theory and play of the Duende



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Ladies and Gentlemen,

Between 1918 when I entered the Residencia de Estudiantes in Madrid, and 1928 when I left, having completed my study of Philosophy and Letters, I listened to around a thousand lectures, in that elegant salon where the old Spanish aristocracy went to do penance for its frivolity on French beaches.

Longing for air and sunlight, I was so bored I used to feel as though I was covered in fine ash, on the point of changing into peppery sneezes.

So, no, I don't want that terrible blowfly of boredom to enter this room, threading all your heads together on the slender necklace of sleep, and setting a tiny cluster of sharp needles in your, my listeners', eyes.

In a simple way, in the register that, in my poetic voice, holds neither the gleams of wood, nor the angles of hemlock, nor those sheep that suddenly become knives of irony, I want to see if I can give you a simple lesson on the buried spirit of saddened Spain.

Whoever travels the bull's hide that stretches between the Jucar, Guadalfeo, Sil and Pisuerga rivers (not to mention the tributaries that meet those waves, the colour of a lion's mane, that stir the Plata) frequently hears people say: 'This has much duende'. Manuel Torre, great artist of the Andalusian people, said to someone who sang for him: 'You have a voice, you understand style, but you'll never ever succeed because you have no duende.'

All through Andalusia, from the rock of Jaen to the snail's-shell of Cadiz, people constantly talk about the duende and recognise it wherever it appears with a fine instinct. That wonderful singer El Lebrijano, creator of the Debla, said: 'On days when I sing with duende no one can touch me.': the old Gypsy dancer La Malena once heard Brailowsky play a fragment of Bach, and exclaimed: 'Olé! That has duende!' but was bored by Gluck, Brahms and Milhaud. And Manuel Torre, a man who had more culture in his veins than anyone I've known, on hearing Falla play his own Nocturno del Generalife spoke this splendid sentence: 'All that has dark sounds has duende.' And there's no deeper truth than that.

Those dark sounds are the mystery, the roots that cling to the mire that we all know, that we all ignore, but from which comes the very substance of art. 'Dark sounds' said the man of the Spanish people, agreeing with Goethe, who in speaking of Paganini hit on a definition of the duende: 'A mysterious force that everyone feels and no philosopher has explained.'

So, then, the duende is a force not a labour, a struggle not a thought. I heard an old maestro of the guitar say: 'The duende is not in the throat: the duende surges up, inside, from the soles of the feet.' Meaning, it's not a question of skill, but of a style that's truly alive: meaning, it's in the veins: meaning, it's of the most ancient culture of immediate creation.

This 'mysterious force that everyone feels and no philosopher has explained' is, in sum, the spirit of the earth, the same duende that scorched Nietzsche's heart as he searched for its outer form on the Rialto Bridge and in Bizet's music, without finding it, and without seeing that the duende he pursued had leapt from the Greek mysteries to the dancers of Cadiz and the headless Dionysiac scream of Silverio's siguriya.

So, then, I don't want anyone to confuse the duende with the theological demon of doubt at whom Luther, with Bacchic feeling, hurled a pot of ink in Eisenach, nor the Catholic devil, destructive and of low intelligence, who disguised himself as a bitch to enter convents, nor the talking monkey carried by Cervantes' Malgesi in his comedy of jealousies in the Andalusian woods.

No. The duende I mean, secret and shuddering, is descended from that blithe daemon, all marble and salt, of Socrates, whom it scratched at indignantly on the day when he drank the hemlock,

and that other melancholy demon of Descartes, diminutive as a green almond, that, tired of lines and circles, fled along the canals to listen to the singing of drunken sailors.

For every man, every artist called Nietzsche or Cezanne, every step that he climbs in the tower of his perfection is at the expense of the struggle that he undergoes with his duende, not with an angel, as is often said, nor with his Muse. This is a precise and fundamental distinction at the root of their work.

The angel guides and grants, like St. Raphael: defends and spares, like St. Michael: proclaims and forewarns, like St. Gabriel.

The angel dazzles, but flies over a man's head, high above, shedding its grace, and the man realises his work, or his charm, or his dance effortlessly. The angel on the road to Damascus, and that which entered through the cracks in the little balcony at Assisi, or the one that followed in Heinrich Suso's footsteps, create order, and there is no way to oppose their light, since they beat their wings of steel in an atmosphere of predestination.

The Muse dictates, and occasionally prompts. She can do relatively little since she's distant and so tired (I've seen her twice) that you'd think her heart half marble. Muse poets hear voices and don't know where they're from, but they're from the Muse who inspires them and sometimes makes her meal of them, as in the case of Apollinaire, a great poet destroyed by the terrifying Muse, next to whom the divine angelic Rousseau once painted him.

The Muse stirs the intellect, bringing a landscape of columns and an illusory taste of laurel, and intellect is often poetry's enemy, since it limits too much, since it lifts the poet into the bondage of aristocratic fineness, where he forgets that he might be eaten, suddenly, by ants, or that a huge arsenical lobster might fall on his head. Things against which the Muses who inhabit monocles, or the roses of lukewarm lacquer in a tiny salon, have no power.

Angel and Muse come from outside us: the angel brings light, the Muse form (Hesiod learnt from her). Golden bread or fold of tunic, it is her norm that the poet receives in his laurel grove. While the duende has to be roused from the furthest habitations of the blood.

Reject the angel, and give the Muse a kick, and forget our fear of the scent of violets that eighteenth century poetry breathes out, and of the great telescope in whose lenses the Muse, made ill by limitation, sleeps. The true struggle is with the duende.

The roads where one searches for God are known, whether by the barbaric way of the hermit or the subtle one of the mystic: with a tower, like St. Teresa, or by the three paths of St. John of the Cross. And though we may have to cry out, in Isaiah's voice: 'Truly you are a hidden God,' finally, in the end, God sends his primal thorns of fire to those who seek Him.

Seeking the duende, there is neither map nor discipline. We only know it burns the blood like powdered glass, that it exhausts, rejects all the sweet geometry we understand, that it shatters styles and makes Goya, master of the greys, silvers and pinks of the finest English art, paint with his knees and fists in terrible bitumen blacks, or strips Mossen Cinto Verdager stark naked in the cold of the Pyrenees, or sends Jorge Manrique to wait for death in the wastes of Ocana, or clothes Rimbaud's delicate body in a saltimbanque's costume, or gives the Comte de Lautreamont the eyes of a dead fish, at dawn, on the boulevard.

The great artists of Southern Spain, Gypsy or flamenco, singers dancers, musicians, know that emotion is impossible without the arrival of the duende. They might deceive people into thinking they can communicate the sense of duende without possessing it, as authors, painters, and literary fashion-makers deceive us every day, without possessing duende: but we only have to attend a little, and not be full of indifference, to discover the fraud, and chase off that clumsy artifice.

Once, the Andalusian 'Flamenco singer' Pastora Pavon, La Nina de Los Peines, sombre Spanish genius, equal in power of fancy to Goya or Rafael el Gallo, was singing in a little tavern in Cadiz. She played with her voice of shadows, with her voice of beaten tin, with her mossy voice, she

tangled it in her hair, or soaked it in manzanilla or abandoned it to dark distant briars. But, there was nothing there: it was useless. The audience remained silent.

In the room was Ignacio Espeleta, handsome as a Roman tortoise, who was once asked: 'Why don't you work?' and who replied with a smile worthy of Argantonius: 'How should I work, if I'm from Cadiz?'

In the room was Elvira, fiery aristocrat, whose line from Seville, descended in line from Soledad Vargas, who in '30 didn't wish to marry with a Rothschild, because he wasn't her equal in blood. In the room were the Floridas, whom people think are butchers, but who in reality are millennial priests who still sacrifice bulls to Geryon, and in the corner was that formidable breeder of bulls, Don Pablo Murube, with the look of a Cretan mask. Pastora Pavon finished her song in silence. Only, a little man, one of those dancing midgets who leap up suddenly from behind brandy bottles, sarcastically, in a very soft voice, said: 'Viva, Paris!' as if to say: 'Here ability is not important, nor technique, nor skill. What matters here is something other.' Then La Nina de Los Peines got up like a madwoman, trembling like a medieval mourner, and drank, in one gulp, a huge glass of fiery spirits, and began to sing with a scorched throat, without voice, breath, colour, but...with duende. She managed to tear down the scaffolding of the song, but allow through a furious, burning duende, friend to those winds heavy with sand, that make listeners tear at their clothes with the same rhythm as the Negroes of the Antilles in their rite, huddled before the statue of Santa Barbara.

La Nina de Los Peines had to tear apart her voice, because she knew experts were listening, who demanded not form but the marrow of form, pure music with a body lean enough to float on air. She had to rob herself of skill and safety: that is to say, banish her Muse, and be helpless, so her duende might come, and deign to struggle with her at close quarters. And how she sang! Her voice no longer at play, her voice a jet of blood, worthy of her pain and her sincerity, opened like a ten-fingered hand as in the feet, nailed there but storm-filled, of a Christ by Juan de Juni. The arrival of the duende presupposes a radical change to all the old kinds of form, brings totally unknown and fresh sensations, with the qualities of a newly created rose, miraculous, generating an almost religious enthusiasm.

In all Arab music, dance, song or elegy, the arrival of duende is greeted with vigorous cries of 'Allah! Allah!' so close to the 'Ole!' of the bullfight, and who knows whether they are not the same? And in all the songs of Southern Spain, the appearance of the duende is followed by sincere cries of: 'Viva Dios!' deep, human, tender cries of communication with God through the five senses, thanks to the duende that shakes the voice and body of the dancer, a real, poetic escape from this world, as pure as that achieved by that rarest poet of the seventeenth century Pedro Soto de Rojas with his seven gardens, or John Climacus with his trembling ladder of tears.

Naturally when this escape is perfected, everyone feels the effect: the initiate in seeing style defeat inadequate content, and the novice in sensing authentic emotion. Years ago, an eighty year old woman came first in a dance contest in Jerez de la Frontera, against lovely women and girls with liquid waists, merely by raising her arms, throwing back her head, and stamping with her foot on the floor: but in that crowd of Muses and angels with lovely forms and smiles, who could earn the prize but her moribund duende sweeping the earth with its wings made of rusty knives. All the arts are capable of duende, but where it naturally creates most space, as in music, dance and spoken poetry, the living flesh is needed to interpret them, since they have forms that are born and die, perpetually, and raise their contours above the precise present.

Often the composer's duende fills the performers, and at other times, when a poet or composer is no such thing, the performer's duende, interestingly, creates a new wonder that has the appearance of, but is not, primitive form. This was the case with the duende-haunted Eleonara Duse, who searched out failed plays to make triumphs of them through her inventiveness, and

the case with Paganini, explained by Goethe, who made one hear profound melody in vulgar trifles, and the case of a delightful young girl in Port St. Marys, whom I saw singing and dancing that terrible Italian song 'O Mari!' with such rhythm, pauses and intensity that she turned Italian dross into a brave serpent of gold. What happened was that each effectively found something new that no one had seen before, that could give life and knowledge to bodies devoid of expression. Every art and every country is capable of duende, angel and Muse: and just as Germany owns to the Muse, with a few exceptions, and Italy the perennial angel, Spain is, at all times, stirred by the duende, country of ancient music and dance, where the duende squeezes out those lemons of dawn, a country of death, a country open to death.

In every other country death is an ending. It appears and they close the curtains. Not in Spain. In Spain they open them. Many Spaniards live indoors till the day they die and are carried into the sun. A dead man in Spain is more alive when dead than anywhere else on earth: his profile cuts like the edge of a barber's razor. Tales of death and the silent contemplation of it are familiar to Spaniards. From Quevedo's dream of skulls, to Valdes Leal's putrefying archbishop, and from Marbella in the seventeenth century, dying in childbirth, in the middle of the road, who says:

*"The blood of my womb covers the stallion.
The stallion's hooves throw off sparks of black pitch..."*

to the youth of Salamanca, recently killed by a bull, who cried out:

*"Friends, I am dying: Friends I am done for.
I've three scarves inside me And this one makes four..."*

stretches a rail of saltpetre flowers, where a nation goes to contemplate death, with on the side that's more bitter, the verses of Jeremiah, and on the more lyrical side with fragrant cypress: but a country where what is most important of all finds its ultimate metallic value in death.

The hut, the wheel of a cart, the razor, and the prickly beards of shepherds, the barren moon, the flies, the damp cupboards, the rubble, the lace-covered saints, the wounding lines of eaves and balconies, in Spain grow tiny weeds of death, allusions and voices, perceptible to an alert spirit, that fill the memory with the stale air of our own passing. It's no accident that all Spanish art is rooted in our soil, full of thistles and sharp stones: it's no isolated example that lamentation of Pleberio's, or the dances of that maestro Josef Maria de Valdivielso: it isn't chance that among all the ballads of Europe this Spanish one stands out:

*"If you're my pretty lover, why don't you gaze at me?
The eyes I gazed at you with I've given to the dark.
If you're my pretty lover why aren't you kissing me?
The lips I kissed you with I've given to earth below.
If you're my pretty lover, why aren't you hugging me?
The arms I hugged you with are covered with worms, you see."*

Nor is it strange that this song is heard at the dawn of our lyrical tradition:

*"In the garden I shall die, in the rose-tree they will kill me, Mother I went to gather roses, looking for death within the garden. Mother I went cutting roses, looking for death within the rose-tree.
In the garden I shall die.
In the rose-tree they'll kill me."*

Those moon-frozen heads that Zurbaran painted, the yellows of butter and lightning in El Greco, Father Siguenza's prose, the whole of Goya's work, the apse of the Escorial church, all polychrome sculpture, the crypt in the Duke of Osuna's house, the 'death with a guitar' in the Chapel of the Benaventés in Medina de Rioseco, equate culturally to the processions of San Andres de Teixido, in which the dead take their places: to the dirges that the women of Asturias sing, with their flame-bright torches, in the November night: to the dance and chanting of the Sibyl in the cathedrals of Mallorca and Toledo: to the dark In recort of Tortosa: and to the endless Good Friday rituals which with the highly refined festival of the bulls, form the popular 'triumph' of death in Spain. In all the world only Mexico can grasp my country's hand.

When the Muse sees death appear she closes the door, or builds a plinth, or displays an urn and writes an epitaph with her waxen hand, but afterwards she returns to tending her laurel in a silence that shivers between two breezes. Beneath the broken arch of the ode, she binds, in funereal harmony, the precise flowers painted by fifteenth century Italians and calls up Lucretius' faithful cockerel, by whom unforeseen shadows are dispelled.

When the angel sees death appear he flies in slow circles, and with tears of ice and narcissi weaves the elegy we see trembling in the hands of Keats, Villasandino, Herrera, Beacquer, and Juan Ramon Jimenez. But how it horrifies the angel if he feels a spider, however tiny, on his tender rosy foot!

The duende, by contrast, won't appear if he can't see the possibility of death, if he doesn't know he can haunt death's house, if he's not certain to shake those branches we all carry, that do not bring, can never bring, consolation.

With idea, sound, gesture, the duende delights in struggling freely with the creator on the edge of the pit. Angel and Muse flee, with violin and compasses, and the duende wounds, and in trying to heal that wound that never heals, lies the strangeness, the inventiveness of a man's work.

The magic power of a poem consists in it always being filled with duende, in its baptising all who gaze at it with dark water, since with duende it is easier to love, to understand, and be certain of being loved, and being understood, and this struggle for expression and the communication of that expression in poetry sometimes acquires a fatal character.

Remember the example of the flamenca, duende-filled St. Teresa. Flamenca not for entangling an angry bull, and passing it magnificently three times, which she did: not because she thought herself pretty before Brother Juan de la Miseria: nor for slapping His Holiness's Nuncio: but because she was one of those few creatures whose duende (not angel, for the angel never attacks anyone) pierced her with an arrow and wanted to kill her for having stolen his ultimate secret, the subtle link that joins the five senses to what is core to the living flesh, the living cloud, the living ocean of love liberated from time.

Most valiant vanquisher of the duende and the counter-example to Philip of Austria, who sought anxiously in Theology for Muse and angel, and was imprisoned by a duende of icy ardour in the Escorial Palace, where geometry borders on dream, and where the duende wears the mask of the Muse for the eternal punishment of that great king.

We have said that the duende loves the edge, the wound, and draws close to places where forms fuse in a yearning beyond visible expression.

In Spain (as among Oriental races, where the dance is religious expression) the duende has a limitless hold over the bodies of the dancers of Cadiz, praised by Martial, the breasts of those who sing, praised by Juvenal, and over all the liturgies of the bullring, an authentic religious drama, where in the same manner as in the Mass, a God is sacrificed to, and adored.

It seems as if all the duende of the Classical world is concentrated in this perfect festival, expounding the culture and the great sensibility of a nation that reveals the finest anger, bile and

tears of mankind. Neither in Spanish dance nor in the bullfight does anyone enjoy himself: the duende charges itself with creating suffering by means of a drama of living forms, and clears the way for an escape from the reality that surrounds us.

The duende works on the dancer's body like wind on sand. It changes a girl, by magic power, into a lunar paralytic, or covers the cheeks of a broken old man, begging for alms in the wine-shops, with adolescent blushes: gives a woman's hair the odour of a midnight sea-port: and at every instant works the arms with gestures that are the mothers of the dances of all the ages.

But it's impossible for it ever to repeat itself, and it's important to underscore this. The duende never repeats itself, any more than the waves of the sea do in a storm. Its most impressive effects appear in the bullring, since it must struggle on the one hand with death, which can destroy it, and on the other with geometry, measure, the fundamental basis of the festival.

The bull has its own orbit: the toreador his, and between orbit and orbit lies the point of danger, where the vertex of terrible play exists.

You can own to the Muse with the muleta, and to the angel with the banderillas, and pass for a good bullfighter, but in the work with the cape, while the bull is still free of wounds, and at the moment of the kill, the aid of the duende is required to drive home the nail of artistic truth.

The bullfighter who terrifies the public with his bravery in the ring is not fighting bulls, but has lowered himself to a ridiculous level, to doing what anyone can do, by playing with his life: but the toreador who is bitten by the duende gives a lesson in Pythagorean music and makes us forget that his is constantly throwing his heart at the horns.

Lagartijo, with his Roman duende, Joselito with his Jewish duende, Belmonte with his Baroque duende, and Cagancho with his Gypsy duende, showed, from the twilight of the bullring, poets, painters and composers the four great highways of Spanish tradition.

Spain is unique, a country where death is a national spectacle, where death sounds great bugle blasts on the arrival of Spring, and its art is always ruled by a shrewd duende which creates its different and inventive quality.

The duende who, for the first time in sculpture, stains with blood the cheeks of the saints of that master, Mateo de Compostela, is the same one who made St. John of the Cross groan, or burns naked nymphs in Lope's religious sonnets.

The duende that raises the towers of Sahagun or bakes hot bricks in Calatayud, or Teruel, is the same as he who tears apart El Greco's clouds, and kicks out at Quevedo's bailiffs, and Goya's chimeras, and drives them away.

When he rains he brings duende-haunted Velasquez, secretly, from behind his monarchic greys. When he snows he makes Herrera appear naked to show that cold does not kill: when he burns he pushes Berruguete into the flames and makes him invent new dimensions for sculpture.

Gongora's Muse and Garcilaso's angel must lose their laurel wreaths when St. John of the Cross's duende passes by, when:

"The wounded stag appears, over the hill."

Gonzalo de Berceo's Muse and the Archpriest of Hita's angel must depart to give way to Jorge Manrique, wounded to death at the door of the castle of Belmonte. Gregorio Hernandez' Muse, and José de Mora's angel must bow to the passage of de Mena's duende weeping tears of blood, and Martinez Montanez' duende with the head of an Assyrian bull, just as the melancholic Muse of Catalonia, and the damp angel of Galicia, gaze in loving wonder at the duende of Castile, so far from their warm bread and gentle grazing cattle, with its norms of sweeping sky and dry sierra. Quevedo's duende and Cervantes', the one with green anemones of phosphorus, the other with flowers of Ruidera gypsum, crown the altarpiece of Spain's duende. Each art, as is natural, has a

distinct mode and form of duende, but their roots unite at the point from which flow the dark sounds of Manuel Torre, the ultimate matter, and uncontrollable mutual depth and extremity of wood, sound, canvas, word.

Dark sounds, behind which in tender intimacy exist volcanoes, ants, zephyrs, and the vast night pressing its waist against the Milky Way.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I have raised three arches and with clumsy hands placed within them the Muse, the angel and the duende.

The Muse remains motionless: she can have a finely pleated tunic or cow eyes like those which gaze out in Pompeii, at the four-sided nose her great friend Picasso has painted her with. The angel can disturb Antonello da Messina's heads of hair, Lippi's tunics, or the violins of Masolino or Rousseau.

The duende.... Where is the duende? Through the empty archway a wind of the spirit enters, blowing insistently over the heads of the dead, in search of new landscapes and unknown accents: a wind with the odour of a child's saliva, crushed grass, and medusa's veil, announcing the endless baptism of freshly created things.

– Federico Garcia Lorca