REFLECTIONS ON LORCA, QUEVEDO AND THE SONETOS DEL AMOR OSCURO

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The idea for this essay came to me via the written comments of the anonymous reader who compiled the report on the draft version of my monograph, Federico García Lorca: The Poetics of Self-Consciousness. The reader suggested that my “observations on the devices and artifices of the late sonnets, in particular the creative and limiting function of rhyme words, invite a specific comparison with Golden Age poets if only as a note. The sonnet “El poeta pregunta por su amor por la ‘Ciudad Encantada’ de Cuenca,” they thought, from the collection entitled Sonetos del amor oscuro, “recalls love sonnets of Quevedo that are structured as a series of unanswered questions.” They wondered, moreover, “whether Quevedo may have been Lorca’s luminary in the mid 1930s, in the way that Góngora was Miguel Hernández’s.” “But that,” the reader acknowledged, “may be ‘for another occasion’.”

That other occasion has come, albeit some years after the comparison solicited by the reader entered the final version of my monograph by way of a footnote. The note, which owes much, as does this essay, to George Mariscal’s insights into Quevedo in his book on seventeenth-century Spanish culture entitled Contradictory Subjects, sought to approximate Lorca’s recourse to unanswered questions in his poem “El poeta pregunta por su amor...” to Quevedo’s own in poems 352 and especially 368, in terms of the way the lyric voice seems in the work of both poets to be constrained by the sonnet form. Importantly, the note moves beyond matters of style and expression to draw comparisons between the respective economies of literary production: on the one hand, the “perceived currency of the sonnet form amongst writers in 1930s Spain” (Bonaddio, Federico García Lorca, 193 n. 25); on the other, the currency of the same form in the economy of courtly literary production during Quevedo’s lifetime. This essay returns to those sonnets of Lorca and Quevedo in an attempt to gauge the extent to which we might begin to consider the former as having been the latter’s luminary in the final years of his life and career.

Amongst Quevedo’s predecessors and contemporaries, the sonnet was regarded as being a demanding form. Citing the poet Fernando de Herrera,
Mariscal (112) tells us that the sonnet “carried with it a wide range of expectations ‘in which any small error is a great fault and in which no license whatsoever is allowed, or anything that offends the ear; and its brevity cannot be laziness or one single vain word’.” It was perhaps for this reason, as Mariscal (111) notes, that “aristocratic tradition demanded that the successful man of letters exercise his hand at the sonnet form.” Significantly, Quevedo “produced his lyrics for fellow producers” (Mariscal 107), for courtiers like himself, with whom he was in competition for the rewards—whether they might be financial recompense, courtly favours or patronage—that literary success could bring. Ignacio Navarrete (237), writing of Quevedo and Góngora, explains that even though both men “satirized the court in verse, they were also ambitious courtiers who used their fame as poets to advance their careers.”

Some three centuries later, Lorca may not have been seeking favours at court or even monetary compensation, as his illustrious forefathers had been, but he was in a sense still producing for other producers, the rewards now being, above all, recognition by others in his field. Given that Lorca belonged to the most self-conscious of literary eras, with its proliferation of cultural journals and isms, not to mention modernism’s constant enquiry into the subject of art itself, it stands to reason that so many of his friends and close acquaintances should have been artists and critics too. Their opinion and support counted for so much at a time when editors and critics could make or break an artist. That Lorca was intensely aware of the field is evident in his correspondence with other artists, but we can detect it too in his work, understood in Bordelian terms to be “a manifestation of the field as a whole” inasmuch as it is marked by its powers and “the determinisms inherent in its structure and functioning” (Bourdieu 37). It is in this context that we may explain the uneasy tension throughout Lorca’s poetry (which I trace in my monograph) between impersonal art and the personality of the lyric voice. On the one hand, there is an aspect of Lorca’s work, perceptible even as early as Libro de poemas, which submits to the dominant theory of art of the first decades of the twentieth century—namely, dehumanization and what T. S. Eliot (58) called an escape from emotion and personality—, and which is motivated, no doubt, by the need to affiliate with, and be accepted by, the membership of the contemporary literary scene. On the other, the struggle with, and by, the lyric subject in the same work suggests that differentiation—that “by which the artist stakes his claim to the established and indispensable virtues of originality” (Bonaddio, “Introduction” 11)—was as great, if not greater, a motivation for the poet than the desire for affiliation or acceptance. Essentially, for Lorca, the recovery of the lyric voice was synonymous with finding his own, original voice, and this was the case whether the impediment was the impersonality of dehumanized art or even, after so much
experimentation with free verse, the constraints of form, as in the case of the sonnet.

Critics attending to the poems of Lorca’s *Sonetos del amor oscuro*, written towards the end of 1935, have noted how a number of younger poets in Spain had also turned their hand to the sonnet form in and around 1936 (Newton 143; Díez de Revenga 108; Anderson, *Lorca’s Late Poetry* 309-10), the year marking the four-hundredth anniversary of the death of Garcilaso who, as Anderson (*Lorca’s Late Poetry* 309) remarks, was “the poet most responsible for establishing the Italianate Petrarchist mode in Spain.” Indeed, “several of these younger poets,” Anderson (*Lorca’s Late Poetry* 309) continues, “became associated with a movement later baptized *garcilasismo*.” Lorca acknowledged the trend in an interview with Felipe Morales in 1936 (Anderson, *Lorca’s Late Poetry* 309; Bonaddio, *Federico García Lorca* 189), and it is possible, as I have suggested elsewhere (Bonaddio, *Federico García Lorca* 188), that Lorca’s interest in the sonnet may have been motivated, at least in part, by his desire to keep up with the latest trends. There is a strong possibility also that he was attracted by its formal challenges—an attraction which, of course, is not incompatible with the desire for recognition (or, for that matter, differentiation). “El libro de *Sonetos,*” Lorca explained in his interview with Morales, “significa la vuelta a las formas de preceptiva después del amplio y soleado paseo por la libertad de metro y rima,” adding that in Spain “el grupo de poetas jóvenes emprende hoy esta cruzada” (Lorca, *Obras completas* III 676). The challenge Lorca describes as a “crusade” was precisely the need to work within the rules of the form; a challenge with which, according to the poet Gabriel Celaya, Lorca and others were obsessed: “Federico […] estaba obsesionado, como otros muchos poetas del momento, por el retorno al soneto y, en general, al escrúpulo formal” (cit. Anderson, *Lorca’s Late Poetry* 309). Given the demands of the form, and the traditional expectations around it, it is perhaps significant that, years later, Lorca’s sonnets should have received a mixed reception, some critics emphasising their “pobreza literaria” (Díez de Revenga 107) and characterizing them as clichéd, “inseguros, experimentales, vacilantes en cuanto a su construcción e inconexos entre sí” (Díez de Revenga 106), although critics also remind us that, first published together as a set in 1984, the sonnets were only ever first drafts (Anderson, *Lorca’s Late Poetry* 308; Maurer 37; Díez de Revenga 114).

The challenge Lorca faced with the sonnet, in any case, was not, as we shall see, narrowly aesthetic, as indeed it had not been for Quevedo either. Mariscal (116-7), picking up on the “confident singularity” in Petrarch’s texts, explains how originally the Petrarchan sonnet had broken “with the traditional notions of a subject determined by the community of blood or by family clan relations” by objectively articulating “the idea of an autonomous
individual who posits virtue and interiority as the essential qualities.” After Petrarch, Garcilaso, with his cultivation of the idea of the alma bella—a figure “who stood apart from traditional hierarchies” (Mariscal 118)—, would also attempt “to individualize and privatize poetic subjectivity,” becoming the first in Spain to construct a speaker “relatively apart from discourses of blood and status” (Mariscal 117). But Quevedo’s Spain, by contrast, was not interested in abandoning such discourses, but rather in maintaining them, and for Mariscal (120) this explains why we find in Quevedo’s sonnets “the lack of a centre and the relative absence of a stable consciousness.” If Quevedo’s subjects are “hopelessly reduced to a solitude rooted in forms of social containment,” it is due to “the destructive effects of an aristocratic ideology that discredited any textual representations of individuality (singularidad) or of a strictly private sphere” (Mariscal 128-9). “Petrarch’s notion of a ‘free will’ and ‘virtuous individual’,,” Mariscal (129) continues, “now attempts to survive within a cultural context whose investment in the ideology of blood and status programmatically blocked the construction of such a figure.” Quevedo applied himself to the form that convention demanded that he master in order to demonstrate his prowess as a poet; but the subjectivity which it had embodied since Petrarch no longer had validity. For this reason, in Quevedo, as Mariscal (131) puts it, “the conventional anguish of the Petrarchan lover is rewritten as an ontological problem since suitable replacements for now unsuitable concepts of the subject are simply unavailable in the present context.” This is what gives rise to the tension in Quevedo’s texts, explaining in part what Navarrete (233) calls the “insistence on the meaninglessness of amatory rhetoric” in his work, along with Quevedo’s “violent anti-Petrachism [which] often takes the form of de-idealization of language, of love, and of the body” (Navarrete 236).

The idea that Quevedo is caught in his sonnets between the pressures of ideological and textual conformity and the limitations of that conformity for self-expression, informs Mariscal’s reading of poem 368, in which, according to him, “the poetic speaker seems to wander aimlessly within the bounds of a discourse utterly foreign to him” (Mariscal 110):

¿Qué imagen de la muerte rigurosa,  
qué sombra del infierno me maltrata?  
¿Qué tirano cruel me sigue y mata  
con vengativa mano licenciosa?

¿Qué fantasma, en la noche temerosa,  
el corazón del sueño me desata?  
¿Quién te venga de mí, divina ingrata,  
más por mi mal que por tu bien hermosa?
¿Quién, cuando, con dudoso pie y incierto,
piso la soledad de aquesta arena,
me puebla de cuidados el desierto?

¿Quién el antiguo son de mi cadena
a mis orejas vuelve, si es tan cierto,
que aun no te acuerdas tú de darme pena?

(Quevedo, OC, I 385-6)

For Mariscal (111), “the poem suggests a psychic state completely inhospitable to the construction of a subject premised on interiority and individual authority.” Indeed, it is clear that the speaker is wholly dependent on external forces for the construction of an emotional life. Nevertheless, the questions the speaker asks point to elements that have still to take form—“muerte,” “infierno,” “tirano,” “fantasma,” and so forth—, thus leaving him in a kind of limbo where the emotions that might have been provoked by the cruelty of his possible tormentors remain unrealised. In the first tercet, the desert (“desierto”) is made even more barren by the way in which the question renders the subject of poblar absent, leaving the speaker literally with no cares (“cuidados”). In the final tercet, there is no sound of chains (“cadena”) to be heard as the speaker is even denied the feeling of pain (“pena”), consigned instead to oblivion by the forgetfulness of his addressee (“tú”). The doubt and solitude that dominate the poem represent that psychic state to which Mariscal refers, but they also, in a self-reflexive turn, characterize the position of a poet at odds with the genre in which he is working. Certainly, the poet can replicate the structures, but he does so while emptying them of content, in the end producing only an image, a shadow, a ghost of a sonnet (perhaps the “imagen,” “sombra,” “fantasma” of the poem itself). The rhyme scheme abba abba cdc dcd, although confirming the poet’s poetic agility, brings together images and ideas that confirm his—and the speaker’s—constraints, occasionally evoking paradoxes in which negative and positive associations cancel each other out: “rigurosa”/“licenciosa”/“temerosa”/“Hermosa”; “maltrata”/“mata”/“desata”/“ingrata”, “incierto”/“desierto”/“cierto”;
“arena”/“cadena”/“pena.”

Ultimately, it is the poem that is a “desert,” and while its existence may prove that the poet has bent under the tyranny of form, the very lack of content—the speaker’s discontent—rescues it from meaninglessness. “Few subjects produced by the Petrarchan tradition,” Mariscal (111) writes of the speaker, “have been more estranged from the lyric situation that surrounds them and from which they attempt to speak.” And yet one wonders whether the articulation of estrangement in the poem is not itself an indication, however
bleak or oblique, of singularity—one that finds its voice in contradiction and paradox. Seen as an act of self-reflexive resistance, this articulation becomes the very inscription of the poet’s awareness of his constraints, of the incongruities of the genre, while also confirming his mastery of them.

While it is a sense of desolation that dominates poem 368, the questions posed in poem 352, entitled “A una dama hermosa y tiradora del vuelo, que mató un águila con un tiro,” are shot through with sarcasm:

¿Castigas en la águila el delito
de los celos de Juno vengadora,
porque en velocidad alta y sonora
llevó a Jove robado el catamito?

¿O juzgaste su osar por infinito
en atrever sus ojos a tu aurora,
confiada en la vista vencedora,
con que miran al Sol de hito en hito?

¿O porque sepa Jove que en el cielo,
cuando Venus fulminas, de tu rayo
ni el suyo está seguro, ni su vuelo?

¿O a César amenazas con desmayo,
derramando su emblema por el suelo,
honrando los leones de Pelayo?

(Quevedo, OC, I 375-6)

The questions work against a tradition of laudatory, courtly verse, rendering the mythological and historical scenarios that are represented adversely hyperbolic, so as to undermine the prowess and charm of the beautiful addressee who has downed an eagle with one shot. The production of these metaphorical scenarios is evidence of the poet’s rhetorical skill and wit and, as such, arguably deflects attention away from the object of derision and onto the devices used, not least because of their hyperbolic character and exaggerated metonyms (for example, “Sol” for the amada, “Venus” for love). In this sense, the sonnet is as much about what art says, and how it says it, as about the presumed arrogance of the eagle’s beautiful slayer. If we are to hear a singular voice, it is through words that speak through and about artifice, thus demonstrating the poet’s command, but also questioning—quite literally—the relevance of courtly rhetoric.

To fully appreciate the level of Quevedo’s denigration of amatory discourse and his lyric subject’s estrangement from the private sphere associated
with speaking of love, we need only compare the indirection in his poems with the first-person engagement in this sonnet by Garcilaso in which, as in the second quatrain of Quevedo’s “A una dama hermosa...”, there is an association between the addressee and the sun:

Si a vuestra voluntad yo soy de cera
y por sol tengo solo vuestra vista,
la cual a quien no inflama o no conquista
con su mirar es de sentido fuera,
¿de dó viene una cosa que, si fuera,
menos veces di mi probada y vista,
según parece que a razón resista,
a mi sentido mismo no creyera?
Y es que yo soy de lejos inflamado
de vuestra ardiente vista encendido
tanto que en vida me sostengo apenas;
mas si de cerca soy acometido
de vuestros ojos, luego siento helado
cuajárseme la sangre por las venas.

(Garcilaso, Poesías castellanas completas 60)

The discourse around the contradictions of love, expressed through a play on proximity and distance, is well-wrought: the lover is warmed by the thought of his loved one’s gaze when he is far away but paradoxically frozen by the same look when he is near. Nonetheless, despite the evidence of careful construction, the subject does seem to possess an earnest integrity and, with it, a pure voice and a purity of intention. By contrast, as Mariscal (129) argues, “Quevedo’s ‘lover’ sings [...] in a voice that is significantly off-key,” and it does so “precisely because the Petrarchan mode directly contradicts the hegemonic discourse of the ruling social groups to which the poet aspired and which constituted his public.” If the Quevedesque subject appears to be “lost within his own lyric situation” (Mariscal 130), it is because “the obligatory use of genres that lacked ideological foundation inhibited the representation of alternative subject positions,” giving rise instead—as we have seen in the two sonnets of Quevedo discussed—to “the exaggerated figures of hyperbole, metonymy, and what Dámaso Alonso once called an ‘affective boldness’ or ripping apart” (Mariscal 131).

Candelas Newton, amongst others, has noted how Lorca’s late sonnets contain allusions to Spain’s Golden Age poets. “Los Sonetos,” she writes “se escriben sobre el trasfondo de toda una tradición de autores como Quevedo, Góngora y, especialmente, San Juan de la Cruz, cuyos temas y motivos poéticos hallan eco constante en las composiciones de Lorca” (143).
Anderson (“García Lorca” 513) also identifies San Juan, and his reworking of Petrarchan themes, as a source, not only in the late sonnets, but also in *Diván del Tamarit*. Anderson (“García Lorca” 497) sets out those themes which, according to him, enable us to place Lorca within the Petrarchist tradition: namely, “la naturaleza del amor, la vida amorosa, las relaciones íntimas y la muerte.” “Esa visión,” Anderson (“García Lorca” 497-8) continues, “o descripción de la naturaleza (de la experiencia) del amor humano que la define sobre todo en términos de lo eternamente contradictorio y conflictivo es quizá la característica más común y básica del amor petrarquista.” For Anderson (“García Lorca” 513), the connection with San Juan manifests itself in echoes, reminiscences and resonances, as with—and these are Anderson’s examples—the “llama lenta de amor” of “Soneto gongrino...” (Lorca, *Obras completas*, I 946), which recalls the first line of “Llama de amor viva” (San Juan, *Poesías* 117), or the idea in the line “porque duermes en mí y estás dormido” from “El amor duerme en el pecho del poeta” (Lorca, *Obras completas*, I 948), which evokes elements of the sixth stanza of “La noche oscura”: “En mi pecho floro, / que entero para él solo se guardáu, / allí quedó dormido” (San Juan, *Poesías* 116). For Newton, the connections run deeper, Lorca embarking in his sonnets on a mystical journey only to find that for him, unlike for the mystics, “la trascendencia es imposible, y el dolor y la muerte son la realidad inescapable que acompaña a la vida” (157).

In “El poeta pregunta por su amor...,” which like poems 352 and 368 consists entirely of questions, the voice bears similarities with Quevedo’s as does, I hope to show, that which echoes throughout Lorca’s “sonnets of dark love,” despite the debt or allusions of individual poems to other Golden Age poets. The place alluded to in Lorca’s sonnet is the geological site in Cuenca, known as “Ciudad Encantada,” where rocks have been formed into distinctive shapes as a result of the corrosive forces of nature:

¿Te gustó la ciudad que gota a gota
labró el agua en el centro de los pinos?
¿Viste sueños y rostros y caminos
y muros de dolor que el aire azota?

¿Viste la grieta azul de luna rota
que el Júcar moja de cristal y trinos?
¿Han besado tus dedos los espinos
que coronan de amor piedra remota?

¿Te acordaste de mí cuando subías
al silencio que sufre la serpiente,
prisionera de grillos y de umbrías?
¿No viste por el aire transparente
una dalia de penas y alegrías
que te mandó mi corazón caliente?

(García Lorca, OC, I 945)

The allusions to the corrosive processes and their outcome seem to be evident in, for example, “la ciudad que gota a gota / labró el agua” or “la grieta azul de luna rota.” Yet despite the efforts of some to see precise topographical references in the sonnet (see the account by Anderson, Lorca’s Late Poetry 358, of Julio Huélamo Kosma’s reading), it is not easy to be certain of topographical markers in a poem where literality gives way too readily to figuration and physical states become confused with emotional ones, thus replicating not so much the specific rocks themselves, as the manner in which the stones of “Ciudad Encantada” are both concrete geological fact and shapely figurative allusion. Indeed, “luna rota” has metaphorical possibilities, just as “muros de dolor” do, or “espinos,” or “serpiente prisionera de grillos y de umbriás” and “dalia de penas y alegrías.” Above all one wonders whether, amidst the questions, each tinged with bitterness and irony, the point is rather that it is the speaker who has been formed, worn down, by the negative experience of the forces of love. If so, then all that is left of love is the trace, the scarring, in the form of words which, through constant interrogation and attention to metaphorical play, keep emotions at bay. There is no lyrical outpouring; instead, personality is contained by, and in, irony and rhetorical device. While the speaker admits to having a warm heart, or perhaps even a heart inflamed (“corazón caliente”), the impact is undermined by its place within the question, the emphasis being on whether or not the message which the heart has sent has been seen (“¿No viste...?”), rather than on the message itself (elusive, in any case, by virtue of its figurative character: “dalia de penas y alegrías”) or even the sender. The line “¿Te acordaste de mí cuando subías / al silencio que sufre la serpiente?” recalls Quevedo’s “¿…aun no te acuerdas tú de darme pena?” inasmuch as the speaker places himself in an inferior position, prey to, or victim of, another’s forgetting or indifference. Above all, it is the indirection in the construction of the subject that is striking. Once again, as in Quevedo, the speaking subject defers to external forces, foregrounding not what the he feels but rather what the other—the loved one—may or may not have felt, remembered or seen.

Interestingly, the effect is quite different in the following sonnet by Germán Bleiberg, from his Sonetos amorosos, published in 1936, where the speaking subject also seems to defer to the loved one:

Tú ves el cielo de Toledo herido
por la continua luz del vivo ocaso,
tú ves este paisaje tan escaso
al fecundo crepúsculo ofrecido.

Tú ves este dolor no merecido
en que tan firmemente fiel me abraso,
tú ves este sonido y este paso
que vibra en ti y en el amor transido.

Tú ves, tranquila, el cántico ya mudo
que en su mudez la eternidad mantiene,
tú ves esta inquietud en mí segura
de la distancia en el azul desnudo,
tú ves qué plena y dulcemente viene
la intensidad de tu esperanza pura.

(Bleiberg, Antología poética 17)

The difference between Bleiberg’s and Lorca’s poems, however, is in Bleiberg’s speaker’s use of the affirmative (“Tú ves”), casting the loved one as a witness to what the speaker is actually feeling. Bleiberg’s poem conveys emotional realities by dealing in painful certainties, even if it is often via metaphor: “Toledo herido”; “dolor no merecido”; “firmemente fiel me abrazo”; “el amor transido”; “esta inquietud en mi segura”; “la intensidad de tu esperanza pura.” The lyric voice is unambiguous, locating and displaying its pain clearly in a poem whose diction is self-assured and whose adherence to the rhyme scheme, though unremarkable, is at least unobtrusive. Compare, also, these lines from another of his sonnets, in which this time the speaker uses the imperative to similar effect: “Comprende tú, mi amada, el vivo intento / de estar contigo en la memoria amante”; “Comprende este dolor que ahora siento viendo tu grata plenitud distante” (Bleiberg, Antología poética, 20).

In “El poeta pregunta a su amor…,” the mostly unconnected relation between the stressed rhyming words of its abba abba cdc dcd scheme seems, more than anything else, to be emblematic of the text’s emotional distance, lyrical tidiness and restraint: “gota”/“azota”/“rota”/“remota”; “pinos”/“caminos”/“trinos”/“espinos”; “subías”/“umbrias”/“alegrías”; “serpiente”/“transparente”/“caliente”. This sonnet, as is the case with arguably most, if not all, of the others in the set of eleven, diligently abides by the rules of the rhyme scheme, but seems rather more bound by it than in control. Take, for the sake of comparison, the echoes running across the rhyme scheme (abba acca ded ede) of the following sonnet by Juan Gil-Albert, from his 1936 collection...
Misteriosa presencia, which also describes loss and absence with reference to a physical location:

Esta ciudad que encuentro desolada
perla infeliz sin ecos de tu paso,
inconmovible altiva está en el raso
yerta envuelve su flor embalsamada.

Aparece en sus muros gobernada
por inmenso vacío que aun caliente,
hiela de horror la ausencia que se siente
toda piedra al pasar abandonada.

Qué cuencos ¡ay amigo! reservados
me emboscará el salir para no verte
los donde amor te tuvo allí dejados.

Qué ciudad lastimosa de quererte
fria en el lecho está para mis hados
sin que abrasarte pueda ni dolerte.

(Gil Albert, *Obra poética completa* 43)

There is something plainly more cohesive and semantically relevant about the rhyming of “desolada,” “embalsamada,” “gobernada” and “abandonada,” or “caliente” and “siente,” or in the consistently active “verte,” “quererte” and “dolerte.” There appears to be more method, including in the use of halting rhythms and hyperbaton, all of which indicates a less slavish approach to the form than Lorca’s.

Exceptionally, Lorca’s “Soneto gongorino en que el poeta manda a su amor una paloma,” which is imitative of Góngora both at a stylistic level and in terms of its construction of an elaborate conceit around a single image (here a dove), provides not only greater variety at the level of diction and rhythm, but also, perhaps because of its evident constructedness, transmits a wherewithal that is lacking in other poems:

Este pichón del Turia que te mando,
de dulces ojos y de blanca pluma,
sobre laurel de Grecia vierte y suma
llama lenta de amor do estoy parando.

Su cándida virtud, su cuello blando,
en limo doble de caliente espuma,
con un temblor de escarcha, perla y bruma
la ausencia de tu boca está marcando.

Pasa la mano sobre su blancura
y verás qué nevada melodía
esparce en copos sobre tu hermosura.

Así mi corazón de noche y día,
preso en la cárcel del amor oscura
llora sin verte su melancolía.

(García Lorca, OC, I 946),

Arguably, though, this constructedness—the pursuit of style and attention to device—comes at the expense of the expression of personality, of a subjectivity that speaks from the interior. The sonnet seems focussed, above all, on fully exploiting the symbolic potential of the dove—the speaker’s gift—, in terms of its associations with virtue and purity, its colour and shape, all of which leads to the veiled phallic and erotic connotations of the first tercet, noted also by Anderson (Lorca’s Late Poetry 369) in his reading. Yet the development of a conceit in the Gongorine manner, around a single object, is not incompatible with the expression of emotion on a personal level, as Miguel Hernández demonstrates with the following sonnet from El rayo que no cesa, written between 1934 and 1935:

¿Recuerdas aquel cuello, haces memoria
del privilegio aquel, de aquel aquello
que era, almenadamente blanco y bello,
una almena de nata giratoria?

Recuerdo y no recuerdo aquella historia
de marfil expirado en un cabello,
donde aprendió a ceñir el cisne cuello
y a vocear la nieve transitoria.

Recuerdo y no recuerdo aquel cogollo
de estrangulable hielo feminino
como una lacteada y breve vía.

Y recuerdo aquel beso sin apoyo
que quedó entre mi boca y el camino
de aquel cuello, aquel beso y aquel día.

(Hernández, Poesías completas 377)
However wavering the memory may be, there is a strong emotional connection throughout Hernández’s poem between the speaker and the woman he has in mind, for whom the neck (“cuello”) acts synecdochically, returning the subject to the day and moment of a kiss. In Lorca’s sonnet, it is only in the final tercet that the poet’s emotional state comes into play, but even here it does so through a metonymical third-person subject (“mi corazón”), to which are attributed the tears provoked by the loved one’s absence. The hyperbaton in the final line—the transposition of “sin verte” and “melancolía”—is designed, no doubt, to have a dramatic effect by placing stress on the “not seeing.” However, it reads awkwardly, unlike Hernández’s tripartite ending (“de aquel cuello, aquel beso y aquel día”), reminiscent of Góngora’s own aptitude for numerical balance, as in the following pattern of four: “goza cuello, cabello, labio y frente” (Góngora, Sonetos completos 222). In total contrast, the faltering rhythm in Lorca’s verse serves only to foreground artifice as well as the pressures of the rhyme scheme, reminding us that the transposition was in any case required in order to find a match for “día.”

None of this is to say that there is no emotion in Lorca’s sonnets, but what cannot go unnoticed is that so much of it is indirect or even articulated in self-reflexive terms. It is interesting that Anderson (Lorca’s Late Poetry 307) should conclude that the sonnets “are above all about the tormented experience of love, passion and suffering, and only secondarily about the dynamics of being in a love affair.” Here Anderson is responding to the shortcomings and limitations of biographical readings but, in doing so, he also points to how, through generalization, the poet has distanced himself from the origin and source. We might go further than Anderson and say that Lorca’s sonnets are also about writing (or speaking) about the experience of love, and about doing so in the sonnet form. In this respect, they are not once but twice removed from that world from which some kind of authentic personality might speak. It is for this reason that the anxieties which the sonnets convey seem often, in a characteristically modernist and self-conscious manner, to be about the difficulties or urgency of expression:

¡Esa guirnalda! ¡pronto! ¡que me muero!
¡Teje deprisa! ¡canta! ¡gime! ¡canta!
que la sombra me enturbia la garganta
y otra vez y mil la luz de enero.

(García Lorca, OC, I 939)

Este llanto de sangre que decora
lira sin pulso ya, lúbrica tea.

(García Lorca, OC, I 941)
Quiero llorar mi pena y te lo digo
para que tú me quieras y me llores
en un anochecer de ruiseñores,
con un puñal, con besos y contigo.

(García Lorca, OC, I 943)

¡Ay voz secreta del amor oscuro!
¡ay balido sin lanas! ¡ay herido!

[...]

¡Ay perro en corazón, voz perseguida.
silencio sin confín, lirio maduro!

(García Lorca, OC, I 947)

In “El poeta pregunta por su amor...,” but also elsewhere, Lorca’s speaker distances himself from the potentially raw emotion of the lyric situation. In “Llagas de amor,” for example, the speaker’s affliction is couched in impersonal terms, ascribed to objects that are external despite the proximity which the use of the demonstrative adjective seeks to denote:

Esta luz, este fuego que devora.
Este paisaje gris que me rodea.
Este dolor por una sola idea.
Esta angustia de cielo, mundo y hora.

(García Lorca, OC, I 941)

In “El poeta habla por teléfono con el amor,” on the other hand, the emphasis is on describing the other’s voice which, though “sweet” is also “distant”—appropriately so for a poem that does not allow emotion free rein. The impact of the voice on the speaker can only be inferred in the epithets and metaphorical images which the speaker constructs. What is more, the reader is effectively excluded from whatever the speaker and his loved one have said:

Dulce y lejana voz por mí vertida.
Dulce y lejana voz por mí gustada.
Lejana y dulce voz amortecida.

Lejana como oscura corza herida.
Dulce como un sollozo en la nevada.
¡Lejana y dulce en tuétano metida!

(García Lorca, OC, I 944)
Another sonnet, “Noche del amor insomne,” for all its emotional clarity, essentially reads as a third-person account—and this despite the occasional use of first-person or second-person pronouns or adjectives. The final tercet leaves us with a scene that has a degree of intimacy, but it ends with an image that unwittingly calls to mind the limitations which the poet has imposed on the heart: “Y el sol entró por el balcón cerrado / y el coral de la vida abrió su rama / sobre mi corazón amortajado” (García Lorca, OC, I 949).

This shrouded heart marks a definitive, and perhaps inevitable, end to the collection. Given the nature of the love to which the speaker is bound (“¡Ay voz secreta del amor oscuro!”), the limitations marking Lorca’s sonnets more generally could also be considered to be just as inevitable. Yet the nature of this love does not entirely explain the indirection, the emotional restraint, or the formal tensions in the poetry. To some extent, the sonnets have not ventured much further than Lorca’s New York poems (written some six years earlier), not only in terms of the similarity of their surrealistic images, which Díez de Revenga has noted in his essay on the theme, or their essentially modernist preoccupations (art, modernity, self-consciousness, and so forth), but also the way in which the subject in the New York context is equally at odds with its circumstances to the detriment of the lyric voice. This leads, at times, to creative paralysis; at others, to the excesses of unbridled expressionism—literally a vomiting forth: “yo, poeta sin brazos, perdido / entre la multitud que vomita” (García Lorca, OC, I 474). This said, what rescues Lorca’s sonnets, despite the criticism of their quality in some circles, is still their self-reflexive aspect, because this at least reveals a genuine awareness on the part of the poet that he is unable, for whatever reason, to apply himself wholly to the task; an awareness that is, perhaps, tantamount to what Newton reads in existential terms as the realization that “transcendence is impossible.” Ironically, though, this self-conscious awareness is also what limits the sonnets, condemning the lyric voice—personality, emotion, interiority—to a secondary role.

In the end, what we have with Lorca’s sonnets is evidence of the poet’s desire to engage with a form that was in vogue. Like Quevedo, Lorca may have turned his hand to the sonnet because of the specific pressures of the economy of production in his field. Yet, also like Quevedo, he showed himself, quite self-consciously, to be at variance with the form and unable, or unwilling, to construct a subject that could speak through it with confidence and belief. It would be an exaggeration, particularly on the basis of what are, in effect, just drafts, to talk of Quevedo as being Lorca’s luminary. But what we might say is that Lorca, in both tone and approach, was closer to Quevedo than to Garcilaso. Given that he was writing in the year approaching the four-hundredth anniversary of Garcilaso’s death, and against the background of an emergent garcilasismo, one wonders whether this possibility might indicate
that he was motivated rather more by a desire to distinguish himself than by a need to affiliate.
WORKS CITED


