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“¡Silencio, he dicho!” Space, Language, and Characterization as Agents of Social Protest in Lorca’s Rural Tragedies¹

BILHA BLUM

“The art of our time,” said Susan Sontag, “is noisy with appeals for silence” (12). Although originally meant as an assessment of the cultural function of modern art, Sontag’s juxtaposition of such antithetical terms as “noise” and “silence” places the work of art at a stylistic and thematic crossroads where the explicit and the implicit, the visible and the invisible, text and subtext or, indeed, what is said, shown, or done (and therefore “noisy”) and what is not, can meet and interact. Each one of these levels constitutes an integral part of the work of art and, as such, it equally affects the construction of its meaning, in perfect accordance with the artist’s intentionality. The additional task of the noisy elements, however, functioning as “appeals for silence,” is to raise the addressee’s awareness of those elements that were silenced, tacitly granting them primacy while foregrounding their position as the thematic core of the work. That is, from Sontag’s angle, it would seem that in modern art, meaning is generated not only by a work of art’s explicit components but also by those very elements the artist deliberately excluded precisely because he or she considers them highly important and meaningful. Choosing to silence whatever social or behavioural issues are silenced by cultural norms, taboos, and conventions, the artist can thus intentionally point to them and underscore their importance. With this strategy, commonly used by nineteenth-century artists such as Courbet, Ibsen, Zola, or Balzac in works informed by the “slice-of-life” principle of representation, a critical and even subversive attitude toward reality develops, while those features of society the artist wishes to criticize, remain explicit, visible, or, in Sontag’s words, “noisy.”

From a theatrical perspective, the tension that emerges between what is included and what is excluded from a dramatic artwork can also be viewed as an artistic technique for extending the significance of what seems to be a merely formal differentiation between stage (what the spectators are able to see) and offstage (what is withheld from their sight). In the dramatic work of

Federico García Lorca this differentiation is particularly significant, as it matches the stark contrast between an authentically portrayed reality, typical of many of his plays (which he infused with a rich Catholic scent often verging on folklorism), functioning as a “signo icónico de extraordinaria coherencia” (an iconic sign of extraordinary coherence; Fernández Cifuentes 15),² and an alternative, rather imaginary existential sphere, implied by the text. The latter, paralleling the silenced aspects of society, Lorca either completely banishes from the stage (as in *The House of Bernarda Alba*) or relegates to only one part of the play (as in *Blood Wedding*), using an abrupt stylistic shift from prose to poetry to set it apart from all the rest. Given Lorca’s unique use of dramatic language, in both the above plays, as well as in *Yerma*, which completes what is known as the “rural tragic trilogy” he wrote in the 1930s, this imaginative alternative world is further created through the evocative power of his poetry and rich metaphoric formulations. As he himself stated in 1927 in a lecture on the Spanish poet Góngora, only the language of poetry can express this two-pronged perception, which constitutes one of its most outstanding generic features:

Para que una metáfora tenga vida necesita dos condiciones esenciales, forma y radio de acción. Su núcleo central y una redonda perspectiva en torno de él. El núcleo se abre como una flor que nos sorprende por lo desconocido, pero en el radio de luz que lo rodea hallamos el nombre de la flor y conocemos su perfume. (“La Imagen Poética,” 3: 230)

For a metaphor to prevail, two essential conditions are required: form and radius of action; its central core and a circular perspective surrounding it. Its nucleus opens up like a flower that surprises us because we don’t recognize it, but in the circle of light that surrounds it we will find the flower’s name and also recognize its perfume. (my translation)

Used by Lorca to describe the nature of metaphor, this mysterious flower suggests the link between the known and the unknown that is required to produce a chain of associations that travel from solid ground to the much more fragile, ideal, and mysterious level of existence, which Lorca believes should be reality, but isn’t. This dialectical outlook prompted Lorca to create onstage a world with such components as characters, sets, costumes, and social hierarchies, chosen primarily according to their resemblance to reality, while the audience is also offered, subversively enough, an entirely different world, accessible only through an associative chain of thought.

As in other dramatic works focused on staging a realistic representation of the world, the social implications suggested by Lorca’s rural tragedies manifest themselves in his manipulation of two of the most basic structural components of drama: space and language. The thematic factor added to both the formal

division of space between stage and offstage and the shift between prose and poetry, meant to encourage the audience to move between the real and the ideal, sets Lorca's plays beyond the limits of realism. The need arises for a different critical approach underpinned by a theoretical confrontation between the constituents of these two binaries – stage/offstage and prose/poetry – as implied by the text itself, further reinforced by yet a third binary – life/death – also deeply implanted in the dramatic text. Moreover, as a result of death's intimate relation with silence (being, as it is, the result of its counterpart's exclusion just like offstage and poetry),³ and its exclusively abstract nature determined mainly by cultural paradigms and contextual beliefs, the life/death binary, as we shall presently see, is made to fulfill a most important role in deciphering the meaning of Lorca's plays from a synchronic perspective. Given my concern with characterization as a substantial structural component of drama, I refer to this binary as the central parameter of my analysis of these plays.

I believe that such an analytical approach offers a new contextual reading of Lorca's rural tragedies, commonly regarded as his most mature plays, especially because, borrowing Baz Kershaw's phrase, they should indeed be considered "as a cultural construct and as a means of cultural production" (5). Functioning as such, Lorca's plays not only respond and react to their social entourage by artistically embodying society's features and content, but they also create a world of their own.⁴ They become what Elin Diamond refers to as "cultural practices." In this sense, although my methodology is based essentially on play analysis, I will follow her assessment that performances, as reconstructions of their cultural milieu, are not only "reinscriptions" that "passionately reinvent the ideas, symbols, and gestures that shape social life" but are also the outcome of "negotiations with regimes of power, be they proscriptional conventions of gender and bodily display [...] or racist conventions sanctioned by state power" (2).

SPACE: STAGE VERSUS OFFSTAGE

The differentiation between the real and the ideal characteristic of Lorca's tragedies, in both its literal and figurative meanings (stage versus offstage and real world versus its idealistic alternative, respectively), is most tangible in *The House of Bernarda Alba*, a play imbued with silence and set in the house of a rural family inhabited only by females after the father's death. In this play, where a widowed mother wields inexorable power over her five daughters, Lorca draws a neat dividing line between the visible and the invisible, as perceived by the audience. Set onstage, the former corresponds to traditional norms and takes the concrete form of the public rooms of the house where the dramatic action takes place, including its furniture and mundane objects, which Lorca's Spanish audience of the 1930s, albeit urban and middle class, could easily identify as reflecting the peasant population's milieu, then considered

the most genuinely loyal to tradition.⁵ On the other hand, hidden from the spectators' eyes, the invisible is meant to seep into their consciousness through the carefully constructed implications of the events onstage. Placed in the offstage area, it primarily echoes the transgression of the social rules so meticulously obeyed onstage, and materializes mainly in the private rooms of the house to which the characters withdraw in their flight from social disapproval. Having banished privacy to the offstage area, the playwright additionally suggests that intimacy, feelings, and even poetry remain off-limits as well.

This unseen realm, which includes a place "a la orilla del mar" (2: 1004) (by the shore of the sea; 168) where María Josefa, the lunatic grandmother, wants to get married, is filled with the disturbing results of disobeying social norms: children born out of wedlock and forbidden relationships, as well as several amorous encounters, the most notorious of which are Adela's clandestine meetings with Pepe el Romano, her older sister's betrothed. Adela's erotic liaison with Pepe is screened off from both the spectators and the other characters in the play. It is precisely this secretiveness that, besides defining passion as sinful and repulsive, also echoes Lorca's well-designed differentiation between the two levels of reality he wishes to forge: one obedient to the dictates of tradition and the other, favoured by him despite its tragic results, centred on freedom of the self.

The lack of expression of human feelings in the society depicted onstage becomes especially poignant as one follows Bernarda's relationship with her daughters, marked by her unremitting efforts to silence them and suppress their ability to feel and express both happiness and grief. Even after their father's funeral she orders one of the girls to be quiet, advising her to crawl under her bed, obviously placed offstage in her private room, if she wishes to cry: "Si quieres llorar te metes debajo de la cama" (2: 980) ("If you want to cry, get under your bed"; 155). Obsessed with the fear of public opinion and swayed by prejudice, Bernarda, who functions here as the executor of the playwright's dramatic strategy, also swears her daughters to silence even when forced to confront her youngest daughter's suicide, committed because she had mistaken her mother for her lover's murderer:

Y no quiero llantos. La muerte hay que mirarla cara a cara. ¡Silencio! ¡A callar he dicho! ¡Las lágrimas cuando estés sola! ¡Nos hundiremos todas en un mar de luto! [...] ¡Me habéis oído? Silencio, silencio, he dicho! ¡Silencio! (2: 1066)

And I want no weeping. Death must be looked at face to face. Silence! Be still, I said! Tears when you're alone! We'll drown ourselves in a sea of mourning [...] Did you hear me? Silence, silence, I said, Silence! (201)

Society's grip on the characters' privacy is so tight, however, that not only the harsh characterization of Bernarda as a despot ruling over her daughters'

lives enhances the differentiation between stage and offstage. The utter exclusion of feelings from the theatrical stage, which she so cruelly inflicts upon the other characters, is also self-inflicted, as suggested on various occasions by the daughters' reluctance to speak their hearts because they either fear punishment or feel uneasy about breaking traditional norms. Indeed, in most encounters that take place in the public rooms in front of the audience, they refrain from expressing their true feelings. The dialogue between Martirio and Amelia, which vaguely hints at Adela's illicit relationship with Pepe, is but one example of Lorca's tacit and explicit recourse to silence as a kind of offstage, in which he transfers the characters' intentions from text to subtext (or from stage to offstage) and at the same time interweaves speech with silence:

MARTIRIO. No. No. No digas nada, puede ser un barrunto mío.

AMELIA. Quizá. (*Pausa. Amelia inicia el mutis.*)

MARTIRIO. Amelia.

AMELIA. (*en la puerta*) ¿Qué? (*Pausa*)

MARTIRIO. Nada. (*Pausa*)

AMELIA. ¿Por qué me llamaste? (*Pausa*)

MARTIRIO. Se me escapó. Fue sin darme cuenta. (*Pausa*) (2: 1023–24)

[MARTIRIO. No. No. Don't say anything. It may be I've just imagined it.

AMELIA. Maybe. (*Pause. Amelia starts to go.*)

MARTIRIO. Amelia!

AMELIA. (*at the door*): What? (*Pause*)

MARTIRIO. Nothing. (*Pause*)

AMELIA. Why did you call me? (*Pause*)

MARTIRIO. It just came out. I didn't mean to. (*Pause*)] (178)

A theatre artist, Lorca must have been well aware of the effect staged silence would have on the audience. The absence of sound is at once visual and auditory, and is certain to cause those sitting in the theatre, as well as the characters themselves, some embarrassment or, at the very least, slight discomfort. Some of Chekhov's plays and certainly those of Beckett, both by modern playwrights who question the effectiveness of language as a means of human genuine communication, corroborate this assumption. In this dialogue, text and subtext are clearly enmeshed, with the words themselves covering up the hidden message alluding to Adela's love affair, too slanderous for overt references.⁶ Moreover, the numerous pauses between the lines reveal Martirio's inner struggle between her fear of revealing her sister's outrageous behaviour and her growing inclination to hurt her out of jealousy. It should be noted that Martirio, depicted as an ugly, slightly deformed young woman, is also secretly as well as hopelessly in love with Pepe. The passionate, albeit illicit, relationship between a woman and a man, as hinted at in the recurring

pauses, the veiled subtext, and the awkwardness of the audience caused by the use of silence where noise is expected, place the spectators in the rather difficult position of having to test their loyalty to the prevailing value system. Putting passion and natural needs side by side with emotional restraint and honourable behaviour, both strongly damaging to the soul is, I believe, one of Lorca's ways of questioning the moral validity of prevalent values while suggesting that living according to the rules may be destructive.

LANGUAGE: PROSE VERSUS POETRY

Blood Wedding, a story of love, betrayal, and revenge taking place in an Andalusian village, also examines social and personal priorities and their effect on both the characters and the audience. The transition from the painstaking representation of reality of the two first acts in the play, to the alternative world that Lorca exalted, is conveyed by a radical change of scenery and by an abrupt stylistic passage from prose to poetry.⁷ At the end of the second of the three acts that compose the play, the dramatic action indeed shifts from a suffocating barren desert where the villagers live in houses whose walls "echan fuego" (2: 736) (give off heat; 53), to a poetic forest, described as a dark, damp, and cool place, whose denizens are the personification of the moon, three woodcutters, and death, which appears on stage as a beggar. All of these speak poetry, as do the "sinful" lovers, Leonardo and the Bride, who, by eloping on the day of her wedding to the Bridegroom, foiled the consummation of marital vows. Carried away by their mutual physical attraction and having broken the rules of normative conduct, the two lovers are the only realistic characters allowed to become an integral part of the forest. All the others, such as the Bridegroom, the Mother, or the Father, who are overpowered by social forces, speak prose, the only language used in the realm of reality. Moreover, it seems that Lorca chose the forest as it is the only place where the lovers can find shelter from persecution by those villagers in charge of enforcing the social contract. Home to fantastic figures impelled solely by instinct and passions, the wild forest is naturally the place furthest from civilization and closest to poetry and creation, and thus the most suitable to shield the illicit lovers against harm.

In *Blood Wedding*, the two different levels of existence suggested by the play thus emerge through the stylistic shift from prose to poetry. In *The House of Bernarda Alba*, written in 1936, four years after the completion of *Blood Wedding*, the same result was achieved through a different dramatic technique, one that often ranks the play with realistic works: the suspension of poetry altogether. This move and the chronological order of these two plays, with *Yerma* in between both stylistically and chronologically, point to a development in Lorca's artistic and social attitude. It seems that by 1936, Franco's Falangist forces of reaction were steadily eroding Lorca's dreams of social change, spur-

ring him to offer his audience an accurate picture of society, free of illusions, “un documental fotográfico” (2: 973) (a photographic document; 150), as he himself defined it. In both plays, however, the visible realistic level, the most familiar to the spectators, is regulated by the normative codes set by society, while the invisible, silent, non-realistic, and poetic level is generated by the creative power of imagination, as well as by instinct, passion, and freedom of thought. In Lorca's hands, Sontag's “silence” has thus become an artistic tool used to express the inexpressible, that is, to create a meaningful encounter between the spectator and what is impossible, socially forbidden, or traditionally ignored because of cultural taboos and social norms calling for compliance. In this sense, it is the highly mimetic emphasis of Lorca's plays that clamours for social change: offered a replica of its own way of life and surroundings, both visually and in content, the audience immediately identifies with the familiar elements onstage, yet is forced, at the same time, to face the fatal consequences of its blind submission to the social order with which it has just identified.

The wake ceremony at the beginning of *The House of Bernarda Alba* underscores Lorca's sense of reality, as it was certainly inspired by similar ceremonies taking place in Spain at that time. The same is true of the scene depicting the ritual mourning for the two men, Leonardo and the Bridegroom, who kill each other in the forest in the closing act of *Blood Wedding*. Highly realistic too are the time-honoured black dresses worn by many of Lorca's female characters and the extreme loyalty to the dead displayed by the various widows, such as Bernarda, the Mother, and the Neighbour Woman. The wedding celebrations in *Blood Wedding*, the colourful and graceful “lavanderas” (laundresses) in *Yerma*, and even the rather orgiastic fertility rituals at the end of this latter play, are all deeply entrenched in Spanish tradition and were thus familiar to the plays' synchronic audience. As the effect of familiarity on an audience is usually confirmation of the world represented onstage, it could be argued that as a result, the spectators are tempted passively to accept the legitimacy of prevailing social conventions. Following the string of grim events in these plays, however, this faithful representation of reality eventually turns their acceptance into rejection until the normative values of society are at last completely overturned. That is, the reversal in the spectators' attitude that Lorca obviously wishes to achieve stems mainly from the severe damage the social rules have inflicted on the characters, with some doomed to live and some to die. I argue that this radical change ensues from the reversal of the concept of life and death embedded in the plays, which parallels Sontag's “noise/silence” antithesis and tacitly privileges death in its modern conception.

CHARACTERIZATION: LIFE VERSUS DEATH

Although it has garnered frequent changes in attitude spawned by cultural and religious developments, modernity regards death mainly as the irreversible

and enigmatic end of earthly life and as a unique phenomenon in human perception, whose most eminent characteristic is that it cannot be experienced and then described. Alan Warren Friedman claims that death, now viewed as “distant, other, abstract, a mythical construct” (3), is actually unreal. “[U]nlike all other experiences,” he rightly argues, “death is fictional even when closest because it is always vicarious, never truly our own” (3), and though it may occur in our immediate vicinity, to our most beloved, it is still difficult to comprehend, as it has no familiar, agreed on, or proven referent in the real world to which we can relate. In fact, death has no palpable existence beyond the images created in our minds and souls by its various representations common within the cultural and social group we belong to, such as religious rituals or ceremonies, secular traditions, legends and stories, verbal clichés, or even certain dress codes that members of the same community tend to easily recognize. Yet, as Freud noted, most obscure of all is the concept of death when it concerns us personally. “It is indeed impossible to imagine our own death,” he wrote, “and whenever we attempt to do so we can perceive that we are in fact still present as spectators” (77).

In this sense, a certain analogy can be drawn between death as an abstract entity, described by Friedman as a “mythical construct,” and the unreal or fictional world usually connected with theatre as an art, to which we indeed generally relate as “spectators.” It seems quite natural then that Lorca, like Freud, saw death as detached from daily reality and associated it with that same ideal reality he created in his plays and presented to his audience as a substitute for the prosaic world in which they all lived. Furthermore, death in these plays is so intimately intertwined with the ideal that only those characters who reject or are rejected by society are “allowed” to die. On the other hand, those who do not die reflect normative conduct when judged by the behavioural parameters of synchronic Spanish society. The Mother and the Bride in *Blood Wedding*, Yerma in *Yerma*, and Bernarda and her daughters (except Adela) in *The House of Bernarda Alba*, all display an almost obsessive loyalty to the norms and are willing to forgo their personal freedom for the sake of complying with them, just as the theatre audience would. The Mother is probably the most extreme case of normative conduct, as she is the one to pay the highest price. She literally sacrifices her only son’s life by sending him to pursue Leonardo in the forest after his escape with the Bride, simply because saving his honour (clearly a socially conditioned principle) is more important than saving his life. Likewise, the Bride, by agreeing to marry the Bridegroom, gives up her overwhelming passion for Leonardo, whose presence, she admits, makes her feel intoxicated with love: “Es como si me bebiera una botella de anís y me durmiera en una colcha de rosas” (2: 743) (“It’s as though I’d drunk a bottle of anise and fallen asleep wrapped in a quilt of roses” [57–58]). Despite her undeniable desire, she acts as she does to preserve her seeming decency.

Faced with the imperative choice between appearances and motherhood,

both Yerma and Bernarda opt for the former. In Yerma's case, even her obsessive yearning for a child, depicted in the play as the very core of her existence, seems to be modulated by her inordinate sense of honour rather than by love and affection.⁸ For her, motherhood is more a woman's primary social obligation than the road to happiness and self-fulfillment rooted in love. This stance is implied by her description of her imaginary son, whose unusual verbal images elicit feelings of sheer coldness and pain rather than the tenderness that might be expected. Alone in her house, with a sewing basket dutifully placed at her feet, she sings to her non-existent son, pleading with him to come, while revealing to the spectators her true attitude:

¿De dónde vienes, amor, mi niño?,
 ¿De la cresta del duro frío,
 Qué necesitas, amor, mi niño?
 La tibia tela de tu vestido.
 [...]
 Te diré, niño mío, que sí,
 Tronchada y rota soy para ti.
 ¡Cómo me duele esta cintura
 Donde tendrás primera cuna!
 ¿Cuándo, mi niño, vas a venir?
 Cuando tu carne huela a jazmín. (2: 807–808)

[From where do you come, my love, my baby?
 "From the mountains of icy cold."
 What do you lack, sweet love, my baby?
 "The woven warmth in your dress."
 [...]
 I shall say to you, child, yes,
 for you I'll torn and broken be.
 How painful is this belly now,
 where first you shall be cradled!
 When, boy, when will you come to me?
 "When sweet your flesh of jasmine smells."]

(101–102)

What does Lorca mean when he lets Yerma's potential child decree that her dream of motherhood will come true only when her flesh is redolent of the scent of jasmine? If we put aside the literal meaning of these lines, it would seem that such a direct link between Yerma's motherhood and the delicate perfume of the small white flower is meant to highlight the profound gap that separates her prosaic world from its poetic alternative. In terms of plot, Lorca is actually sentencing his protagonist, already at this early stage, to eternal sterility, as it transpires gradually from her successive actions, which show that

no intimate encounter is possible between Yerma, a distinct member of the real world, and the jasmine, an obvious element of the poetic one. Indeed, under no circumstances will Yerma consent to give up her “honra” (honour) and follow her instincts, even for the sake of the child she yearns for. Therefore, to avoid violating her duties as Juan’s lawful wife, she obstinately refuses to overcome her sterility by either taking a lover, as the Old Woman suggested to her, or yielding to her repressed love for Víctor, the only man who has ever made her flesh shiver:

Una vez ... Víctor ... [...] Me cogió de la cintura y no pude decirle nada porque no podía hablar. Otra vez el mismo Víctor, teniendo yo catorce años (él era un zagalón), me cogió en sus brazos para saltar una acequia y me entró un temblor que me sonaron los dientes. Pero es que yo he sido vergonzosa. (2: 819)

[Perhaps ... one time ... with Victor... [...] He took me by the waist and I couldn’t say a word to him, because I couldn’t talk. Another time this same Víctor, when I was fourteen years old – he was a husky boy – took me in his arms to leap a ditch and I started shaking so hard my teeth chattered. But I’ve always been shy.] (109)

As to the surviving characters, the denouement of the three plays points to a common denominator running through them, their differences notwithstanding. To retain their safe and honourable social position, the Bride, the Mother, Bernarda, and Yerma are prepared to waive their natural right to happiness engendered by filial love, passion, or motherhood. As a result, despite their obedience to social norms, they are all severely punished for their self-betrayal; yet life, not death, is their punishment at the end of each play. As they belong exclusively to the real world, by being kept alive they are condemned to lifelong spiritual and emotional sterility, as well as to mental stagnation. All doors to salvation are closed before them by the very rules they have tried so hard to abide by: as a sinner, the Bride will not love or be loved ever again; the Mother, who lost eternity along with her only son, will never have grandchildren; Bernarda is doomed to perennial mourning after losing not only her daughter but also her family’s honour; and Yerma, who strangled to death both her husband and her ability to love, will never experience motherhood.

A rather different fate is in store for the characters who are allowed to die, namely, Leonardo and the Bridegroom in *Blood Wedding* and Adela in *The House of Bernarda Alba*, as they have balked at the restrictive, life-regulating rules. Leonardo, the passionate lover who defies social authority by running away with the Bride on her wedding day, and the Bridegroom, an innocent victim of society’s sinister plotting, driven to death by his own mother’s obsession with rules, kill each other in the forest and are thus eternally submerged, so to speak, in the imaginary realm of passion. Adela, the sensuous young woman who would not let society waste away her youth, puts an end to

her life in the same invisible barn, from which, at the beginning of Act Three, the family's stallion, in desperate want of a mare, shakes the walls of the house with its pounding hooves. Spanish tradition considers Leonardo's and Adela's unnatural deaths a well-deserved punishment for their sins, while the death of the Bridegroom is deemed a noble sacrifice: he is killed as it were while rightfully trying to mend matters and restore social order by avenging Leonardo's offence. Lorca views all three as fugitives, however, trying to escape through death the pitiless world of the living, which has thwarted their ability to love. For them, dying is, paradoxically, tantamount to salvation.

At first glance, Lorca's intimate and almost obsessive artistic involvement with death, with plays where it not only occurs but is also feared, talked about, and even impersonated (as in *Blood Wedding*), could be considered as a way of reflecting accepted Spanish social attitudes.⁹ Particularly in the author's time, Spain's relationship with death exceeded by far strict compliance with the rituals of religious canons, which was (and still is) prevalent in most cultures. For the pious Catholic Spanish society of Lorca's time, death was a terrifying component of life, a potent element that determined human conduct, and an important incentive for people's actions, manifested not only in each individual's daily behaviour but also in the spiritual and philosophical premises underlying the very fabric of society. From the most basic up to the highest level of everyday life, where values and moral norms were shaped, death constituted an integral part of Spanish life, whose expression covered all walks of human existence. An obvious example, illustrated in Lorca's plays, is the code of behaviour imposed on widows, who were condemned to be loyal to their dead husbands and wear widow's weeds to the end of their lives. Other examples include the persistent demand for capital punishment for any transgression of family honour, the prohibition of any overt expression of sentiment, and the blind obedience to the dictates of the Church and its representatives, even if they were clearly meant to strangle individual freedom.

This attitude toward death, which thrived in Spain in the 1930s but had its roots much further back (it is already depicted in the plays by Lope de Vega and Calderón de la Barca) seems unique when pitted against the background of Europe as a whole. By then, most European societies were making steady efforts to remove death from the domain of the living. As Philippe Ariès remarks, the complete physical and spiritual banishment of death from the proximity of the living (cemeteries began to be built on the outskirts of cities already toward the end of the eighteenth century), stimulated by the simultaneous decline of religion, is typical of the rise of modernism (580). On the eve of the twentieth century this led to an entirely new approach to death, which, according to Friedman, ceased to be tragic or heroic and became rather incoherent and even unexpected (23–24). Spain, however, remained ideologically faithful to its medieval cultural heritage, despite the effects of modernism as indicated by its devotion to the past. Julian Marias indeed remarks,

In Spain balladry, the classical theatre, and the novel of the Golden Age have been the great instruments that have made Spaniards understand and project themselves as Spaniards, and have contributed decisively toward the establishment of Spain as a society, as a nation. (30–31)

Most Spaniards consequently retained a keen awareness of death intermingled with the loss of the joy of life and a strong sense of death as punishment, despite the changes afflicted by modern thought. Lorca himself, as stated by Pedro Salinas, his fellow poet, could certainly feel the presence of death and the depth of its impact on Spanish life everywhere around him,

in the native air that gives him breath, in the singing of the servants in his house, in books written in his tongue, in the churches of his city; he finds [death] in all of his individual personality that has to do with people, with the inheritance of the past. Lorca was born in a country that for centuries has been living out a special kind of culture that I call the “culture of death.” (277)

As in Christian belief, in Lorca’s view too, Leonardo’s, the Bridegroom’s, and Adela’s deaths signal their assimilation into an enchanted, poetic world free of any constraining rules, just like the world of the imaginary forest in *Blood Wedding*. However, while Christianity promises eternal bliss after death only to those who have followed its strict dictates, in Lorca’s alternative world bliss is granted solely to those brave enough to defy them. In his plays, death always occurs in the fantastic, imaginary, poetic world placed offstage, far from the prosaic reality depicted on it. As a result, those who die conceive of death as enchanting rather than threatening, as a safe haven rather than a means of punishment, and as a genuine promised land accessible to those faithful to their own feelings. This is how Lorca’s plays ensure the primacy of “silence” over “noise” or, in fact, of death over life.

CONCLUSION

The structure and content of *The House of Bernarda Alba*, *Yerma*, and *Blood Wedding* suggest that in the eyes of the synchronic spectators, exposed through Lorca’s creative imagination to the beauty of death and, conversely, to the ugliness of life, the moral superiority of the alternative world staged for their sake was asserted. By using exclusion and relegation, or indeed silencing, as dramatic tools that generate meaning, along with the construction of a renewed concept of death, Lorca sought to raise the spectators’ awareness of their lives, urging them to acknowledge the possibility of living according to a different social order. In the process, he wielded three pairs of antithetical elements that are among the basic components of the theatrical medium – space,

language, and characterization – and systematically blocked the validity of one element in each pair in favour of the other.

As the plays are the direct outcome of their cultural background, Lorca's artistic choices are regulated mostly by his own world view: the spatial design directs the spectators to what is concealed in the offstage area; poetry, as the language of artistic creation whose "external and internal form acquire a weight and value of their own instead of referring indifferently to reality" (Jakobson 174), is connected both with the illusory invisible (in *The House of Bernarda Alba*) and the fantastic visible (in *Blood Wedding*); and the characters, defined by their actions and fate, live or die by their recognition of the supremacy of both his original arrangement of the theatrical space and his choice of language. As for the plays' style, it would seem that Lorca's dramatic technique in the rural tragic trilogy places them in a stylistic twilight zone swinging between realistic and poetic drama, which has fitted well into Spain's theatrical tradition since the Golden Age and also echoes its people's idiosyncratic character. The mixture of styles in Lorca's plays parallels the fusion of tragedy and comedy, singing and dancing, typical of the works of Lope de Vega or Calderón de la Barca, in whose plays, said Lorca, "está todo el ámbito de la escena y todas las posibilidades teatrales habidas y por haber" ("Alocución Previa" I: 1192) ("the entire spectrum of the stage and all the theatrical possibilities of past and future can be found"; my translation). Similarity can be noticed also in the plays' content, as both Lorca and the Golden Age playwrights equally deal profusely with the doings and undoings of Spanish "honra" and its privileged position within the local set of values, not too drastically changed since then.

Despite their intrinsic local hue, however, Lorca's plays have acquired great universal value, and to date most of them, and his rural tragedies in particular, are produced and studied all over the Western world. Entrenched as they are in Spanish tradition, this may seem quite an intriguing accomplishment. Their relevance exceeds the boundaries of time and place, I suggest, precisely because in these plays the traditional elements of dramatic structure such as space, language, and characterization were geared toward the substitution of the tangible and concrete, embodying the "noisy" elements of the work of art, with the invisible and abstract, or, indeed, with silence itself. As a result, what seems to be the strictly local quality of the plays becomes the excluded, relegated, or enhanced antithesis of that same quality, granting the plays universal value, as illustrated by the relation of stage to offstage, prose to poetry, and life to death. Thus, Lorca's noisy "appeals for silence," used to proclaim his critical attitude toward his fellow countrymen, were able to become significant and relevant to societies and cultures other than 1930s Spain, and will probably remain so for years to come.

NOTES

- 1 "Silence, I said!" (201). These are Bernarda Alba's words in the closing scene of *The House of Bernarda Alba*. Subsequent quotations will be cited parenthetically. Translation into English is from *Three Tragedies*, translated by James Graham-Luján and Richard L. O'Connell. The Spanish version of all plays cited is from *Obras Completas*, Vol. 2.
- 2 Translation mine. On the subject of realism in the works of Lorca, view also C. Christopher Soufas' *Audience and Authority in the Modernist Theater of Federico Garcia Lorca*. Soufas refers here to the difficulty theatre critics have found in defining Lorca's plays as realistic, despite their traditional emphasis. "A frequent strategy," he argues, "is to ascribe those elements that are not easily assimilable into a realist format (e.g., symbolic figures and even the motivations of specific characters) to the intrusion of the dramatist's personality in the work" (9). Antonio Sánchez Trigueros solves the problem by referring to Lorca's dramatic style as "realismo poético, un realismo voluntariamente alejado de la mimesis pura, con claras intenciones de trascender la representación plana de la vida" (185) [poetic realism, a kind of realism voluntarily distanced from pure mimesis, whose intention is to transcend a simple representation of life].
- 3 On the role of silence and its relation with death in Lorca's *The House of Bernarda Alba*, view also Bilha Blum and Liora Malka's "The Poetics of Silence: Dancing Lorca." For a thorough discussion of the function of silence in Lorca's drama in general, view Drew Dougherty's "El Lenguaje del Silencio en el Teatro de García Lorca."
- 4 José Ortega, in "Conciencia Social en las Tres Dramas Rurales de Lorca," in which he offers an extensive analysis of these plays, refers to them as "una recreación de conflictos humanos que expresan una situación social" (147) (a re-creation of human conflicts that expresses a social situation; translation mine).
- 5 On realism applied to *The House of Bernarda Alba*, view José Rubia Barcia's "El Realismo Mágico de *La Casa de Bernarda Alba*." By defining Lorca's realism as "magic," Rubia Barcia too is actually questioning the effectiveness of the term when trying to categorize Lorca's plays.
- 6 Although dealing with voices and sounds and not with silence, C. Brian Morris in his "Voices in a Void: Speech in *La Casa de Bernarda Alba*" chose to quote this same dialogue between Amelia and Martirio, about which he states, "The five pauses specified by Lorca, apart from decelerating the conversation, create an interplay of speech and silence in which silences generate more tensions than words." Besides, he argues, sounds (or actually words) "relieve the visual flatness of the play and punctuate its claustrophobic setting with a soundtrack in which a series of pauses constitute little pockets of suspense." (501)
- 7 The use of poetry in dramatic works has been widely discussed by T. S. Eliot, among others, who, in his *Poetry and Drama* insisted that in order to be effective, "[i]t must justify itself dramatically" (12). Two opposite opinions about the effec-

tiveness of Lorca's use of poetry in his plays, especially in *Blood Wedding*, are the one sustained by Robert Barnes in "The Fusion of Poetry and Drama in *Blood Wedding*," who claims it enriches and widens the scope of the play, and the one supported by William I. Oliver in "The Trouble with Lorca," who accuses the playwright of "placing style before content" (6). Oliver believes that stylistic shifts in a play "must represent changes in the very subject and substance of the art work" and that in *Blood Wedding* "they are in no way justified by the characters, action, and theme" (6).

8 See Carlos Feal, "La Idea del Honor en las Tragedias de Lorca."

9 For a broader view of twentieth-century Spanish history and society, see Herr, Tuñón de Larra, Nash, Pierson, Gies, and Carr. On the influence of Andalucía on Lorca's work, see C. Brian Morris' *Son of Andalucía*.

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