

The Absent Self and The Broken Soul — Evoking the Lover's Body in Lorca's Poetry

by Marika Knowles

Introduction by Adrienne Janus, Instructor

As a freshman, Marika demonstrates a degree of intellectual engagement and enthusiasm that goes beyond such collegiate categorizations of status. In her writing, Marika shows a remarkable capacity to manage complexity with clarity, in a style that is both elegant and succinct. Her ideas, furthermore, are both original and insightful: she is not afraid to take risks, to work through and move beyond the material and framework she has been presented with. Marika directs her vibrant, inquisitive intellect most fruitfully towards examinations of visual imagery, whether in art, poetry, or prose, as her paper, "The Absent Self and the Broken Soul — Evoking the Lover's Body in Lorca's Poetry," admirably demonstrates. In this paper, Marika investigates the ways in which Lorca's poetry presents empty spaces in the poetic landscape as figurative correlatives of an absence in the poetic self. She then embarks on an elegant analysis of how the poet attempts to animate these voids by projecting upon them the sensual forms of a lover's body. As she moves from close readings of the images and structures of the poems to larger contextualisations of the poetry and the poet's life, Marika shows how Lorca's poetry must be appreciated in terms of a complex interaction between a poem's sensual and conceptual aspects, and between the poem as aesthetic object and the historical or personal conditions to which it may refer.

In the reader's aesthetic experience of Lorca's poetry, the ultimate loneliness and fragmentation arises when Lorca ceases to create images evocative of emotions and absent objects, in other words, when Lorca resorts to the techniques of the surreal. In "Poet in New York," Lorca creates a poetic persona significantly different from himself, at least as he represents himself in the letters he wrote to his parents at the time, touting his happiness. This poetic persona, whom I shall refer to as "the poet," continually finds, in the landscape of New York, voids and empty spaces, images of absence that reflect similar voids in the poet's own soul. To view the poet for a moment as a partial projection of Lorca's own soul, these voids could refer to the destruction wreaked upon Lorca's soul, immediately before he left Spain, by what he described as the "fire of love." As Lorca's poet struggles in the poems to animate, fill, and personify the void, the poet evokes, through poetic imagery, the spiritual, yet sensuous body of the lover, unfolding and filling the emptiness of the poet's broken soul. The evocation of the lover's body through poetic imagery and metaphor illustrates Lorca's departure from the surrealist free association of objects in space in order to create what Lorca called "sharp profiles and visible mystery. Form and sensuality."

The body that Lorca creates to animate the void, although sensual, is ultimately an emblem of spiritual, a-physical, Apollonian love. Lorca introduces the theme and

body of the Apollonian lover in one of his earlier poems on love: "Your Childhood in Menton." Early in the poem, the poet addresses his lover: "What I gave you, Apollonian man, was the standard of love" (ln. 10). In this passage, the poet refers to his lover as an incarnation of Nietzsche's Apollonian construction of love: a spiritual, intellectual and harmonious interaction of two kindred souls, as opposed to the rhapsodic physicality of Dionysian love. This standard, which the poet has given to his lover, presumably in the model of the poet's own actions, would indicate a love divorced from the sensual interaction of the body, and based instead upon intellectual and emotional companionship. Yet as Lorca's imagery demonstrates, the Apollonian relationship subsists along with an implicit suggestion of the sensual body, a suggestion and signification that fills the silences between lovers.

The Apollonian body that the poet evokes represents the perfect ideal of the human form, induced by the spiritual perfection of the soul permeating the physical body. Lorca creates this image through the poet's evocation of antique, ancient statues of Apollo, sculptural models of the physical perfection that Apollo was believed to possess. The image of the poet's "torso circumscribed by fire" (ln. 8), in conjunction with the mention of Apollo in the following line, creates an image of fragmented ancient sculpture, often reduced by wear and tear to the single torso. These sculptures, the most famous perhaps being The Apollo Belvedere, portray the perfected male physique caught in a moment of elegant relaxation. Yet the smooth, round, and cold quality of the marble used to sculpt these statues emphasizes the anti-sensuality, the anti-tactility of the bodies represented. The anti-tactile quality of the sculptural body emphasized that the poet's evocation of the lover's body was intended take a spiritual form, in which the mind of the poet caressed the spiritual contours of the lover's body-contours represented physically in the material surface of the statue.

Through an image of fragmentation, an initial void or lack of body, Lorca expresses the growth and unfolding of the lover's body. The torso, as a fragment and signifier of the entire human body, is singularly expressive, the possibilities of the chest and hips for contortion and the suggestion of movement — note the Belvedere torso — allowing a range of compelling expressions. In Lorca's image, the reader imagines the urgency and the agony of the torso, stretching desperately away from the ring-of-fire that surrounds it. Unable to stretch either to the right or the left, the fire coming from both sides, the torso stretches upwards and downwards, attempting to attenuate its waist to the point of non-existence, and transferring the flesh of the waist to the gradually forming outer limbs of the body. Lorca repeats this image of the transferral of material, from the waist outwards, in the image later in the poem of "a waist of restless sand" (ln. 15). This image evokes the narrow point of an hour-glass, through which the sand passes to the outer compartments of the glass. In both images, the reader finally visualizes a complete body emerging and unfolding from the fragmented torso, a body that in keeping with the original image of the sculptural torso, evokes the lithe and muscular physical perfection of ancient statues.

In "Your Childhood in Menton," Lorca uses the image of the Apollonian body to fill the emptiness inspired by the poet's loss of his lover's soul. The poetic imagery implies that neither the poet nor the lover know where the soul can be found, and that the ownership of the soul is in itself ambiguous — the lover's soul having been

“ripped from the emptied space of [the poet’s] veins” (ln. 30). In addition to the empty space of the poet’s veins, robbed of the soul of his lover, there exists the empty corners into which Lorca looks for his lover’s soul, as well as the absent body of the lover, who “has whittled [himself] to nothing” (ln. 11). Into this emptiness, Lorca projects the image of the Apollonian body: “with the sorrow of Apollo stopped in his tracks, the sorrow with which I shattered your mask” (ln. 19). The mask that the poet shatters refers to the “pure mask of another sign” (ln. 4), which the poet attributes to his lover. The mask, worn by the lover as a sign of his “shy loneliness in hotels” (ln. 3), indicates the covering, or negating of the lover’s identity and of the sense of shame and emptiness that accompanies this identity. By shattering the lover’s mask with the image of Apollo, the poet injects the physical presence of the unfolding Apollonian body into the emptiness of the lover’s soul beneath the mask. For the poet, to animate the void of the lover’s soul with the Apollonian body is to fill the void in his own body, created when the soul of his lover was torn from his veins.

In “Little Viennese Waltz,” one of the final poems of the collection, Lorca creates a death for the soul of his poet after a final, ecstatic evocation of the sensuous body of the lover. In the poem, the poet travels through Vienna, focusing on the empty apartment, a space which through poetic imagery, becomes filled with the body and presence of the lover. Lorca describes the space of the apartment as the lover had once traveled through it: “down the melancholy hallway, in the iris’s darkened garret, in our bed that is the moon’s bed” (ln. 14). Implicit in the mode of description — the poet describes the objects in the order they would appear to the lover walking down the hall — is the lover’s presence. Yet the objects themselves evoke voids that long to be filled — the darkened room, the empty bed and hallway. This initial creation of the void is echoed in the poem by the melancholy tone of the refrains, one of which exclaims: “take this broken-waisted waltz” (ln. 19). The waist, the image that in “Menton” had evoked the body of the lover, recurs in this instance as a broken, fragment of itself. In a gesture that mirrors the poet’s offer of the Apollonian standard to his lover in “Menton,” the poet offers the broken-waist to his lover, indicating his hope that the found body of the lover will patch the poet’s similarly broken soul.

In the final stanza of the poem, Lorca imagines the fulfillment of the poet’s fragmented soul, as it joins the soul of the lover in the dancing of the little waltz. In each successive refrain, the poet has compelled his lover to “take” the waltz that the poet offers him. At the beginning of the final stanza, the poet finally writes that “in Vienna I will dance with you” (ln. 36). In the various refrains, the waltz had taken on the identity of the lover and poet’s shared and fragmented soul: the “waltz that dies in my arms,” and the “I will always love your” waltz, and particularly the “broken-waisted waltz” discussed above. As the poet joins his lover in the waltz, the fragmented soul is essentially healed, the broken-waist patched, and the Apollonian body unfolded. In the language of the second half of the stanza, however, Lorca intimates that the meeting between the lover and the poet is essentially bodiless: “I will leave . . . my soul in photographs and lilies, and in the dark wake of your footsteps” (ln. 41).

In the images of fragmentation at the end of the final stanza, Lorca suggests the death, or re-fragmentation of the Apollonian, sensual soul created for the poet in the moment of the waltz with his lover. The poet leaves his lover, after their waltz, with

a photograph of his soul, an image that suggests the black, reflective surface of an exposed negative and the ghostly outline of the poet's profile. Scattered over the photograph are the lilies, also representative of the poet's soul, withering in the emptiness of the apartment. The poet's lover, in these images, also dematerializes, represented by "the dark wake of [his] footsteps" (ln. 42), an image evocative of the earlier passage, in which the implied body of the lover walks down the hallway. At the end of the stanza, the poet states that he wishes "to leave violin and grave, the ribbons of the waltz" (ln. 43). The death of the poet after such an ecstatic fulfillment of the fragmented soul subverts the ideal of the Apollonian body. In place of the physical consummation of love, the evocation of the sensuous spiritual body cannot quite satisfy the souls of the lovers, which remain embedded as ghostly profiles in the objects that they had touched. This ambiguity of fulfillment reappears in "Ode to Walt Whitman."

Lorca's rejection of the Apollonian consummation of love indicates to a certain extent his rejection of surrealism's impulse to dissolve the disjunction between self and world, and to interact freely in the world of objects. The construction of the Apollonian other represents in the first place a departure from surrealist aesthetics, in the evocation of the other through poetic association. Yet the idea of the Apollonian self, besides from the means through which it is evoked, represents a surrealist effort to fill and so to dissolve the gap between the self and the world. To refuse the Apollonian body its power to animate emptiness, as Lorca does in the last stanza of "Little Viennese Waltz," is to acknowledge the inevitability of the division between the self and the world outside the self. Although Lorca claims, in his lecture "A Poet in New York," that he writes from inside New York (a claim that fulfills the surrealist ideal of the artist), in his power to evoke associative images, he clearly sees New York from the outside in.

The material language of "Little Viennese Waltz" as well evokes the creation, and then the retraction, of the swelling and animate presence of the lover's body. The refrains, each which begins with the cry of "Ay, Ay, Ay, Ay," and ends with a line whose rhythm follows the pattern of a waltz — "toma esta vals con la boca cerrada" — swell in lyrical cadences, evocative of the presence of an animate, lyrical soul within the poetry. Music and lyricism, in this context, animate the void implied in the text of the refrains, which describes the broken-waist and the death of the little waltz. Yet the fragmentary nature of the refrains — scattered amongst the stanzas, they represent fragments of the entire, complete waltz — presents a dialectical image of fragmentation, subversive of the swelling body implied in the rhythm of the lines. This image is fulfilled in the dying rhythm of the final stanza, which trails off, in passages that lean towards weighty final images, to the final, sinking image of the "violin and grave, the ribbons of the waltz" (ln. 43). The sinking rhythm and imagery of the final stanza dissolves the musical rhythm that had animated the voids of the early verses, leaving the reader conscious of the empty, absent bodies that the poet evokes in these final images.

In "Little Viennese Waltz" Lorca's evocation of the body of the lover interrelates with his idealization of childhood and the body that Christopher Maurer, in the introduction to the collection, calls the "unengendered child." Maurer argues that Lorca "gives color and weight to the notion of annihilation itself," through the

creation in the void of “the child within, the child born into adulthood” — the child that Lorca could not father, because of his homosexuality. “Little Viennese Waltz” effectively presents the poet’s blurring of the identity of child and lover, as the empty spaces, the attic and the room with four mirrors, are filled with children. In one ecstatic epiphany of love, the poet cries: “because I love you, I love you, my love, in the attic where the children play” (ln. 29). In this image specifically, the poet links the presence of children to the same space in which he invokes the presence of the lover. In this image as well, the children animate the empty spaces of the poet’s soul. This image is especially relevant to Maurer’s statement that the ungendered child is born into adulthood. More specifically, I believe, the absent child is born into adulthood in the form of the lover — an equally elusive and childlike body whom the poet must care for: in “Menton,” the poet repeatedly states that he “must search” for his lover’s soul.

In “Ode to Walt Whitman,” Lorca gives a more explicit shape and form to the elusive and fragmentary body of the lover. Lorca’s opening description of Whitman reflects the model of the chaste Apollonian body that Lorca had hinted at in “Menton” and “Little Viennese Waltz.”

Not for a Moment Walt Whitman, lovely old man,
have I failed to see your beard full of butterflies,
nor your corduroy shoulders frayed by the moon,
nor your thighs as pure as Apollo’s

The reverence for Whitman’s age, as well as the image of the beard filled with butterflies, combine to present Whitman as a chaste philosopher. The presence of the beard — Marcus Aurelius, in order to present himself as a philosophical emperor, had a beard added to his equestrian statue in Rome — evokes ancient philosophers, and the butterflies in the beard evoke an enlightened concern with empiricism and naturalism. These antique and philosophical references invoke the presence of the Apollonian body, the classical form established by ancient philosophers. Lorca probably did not intend to make such specific references, and the tactile quality of the images themselves — the soft, woolly beard and the delicate, fluttering insects — inform the reader of a gentler, sensual body. Whitman’s soft, rounded body presents an implicit contrast to the tough bodies of the boys on the dock, “exposing their waists” (ln. 2) — an image suggestive of unrefined, unhidden sensuality.

As Lorca continues his description of Whitman, in the second two lines of the passage quoted above, he progressively evokes a more sensuous, yet still pure body. The fragmented shoulder, like the waist in “Menton,” evokes the unfolding body of the lover: in this case, the body of Whitman. The corduroy cloth covering Whitman’s shoulder connotes an additional level of philosophical intellectualism: the corduroy blazers associated with the intellectuals and professors that Lorca must have met at Columbia. The image of the moon directly following the image of the shoulder, however, evokes the white, round and sculptural flesh of the shoulder rubbing against the jacket and “fraying” the corduroy. The juxtaposition of sensuous with chaste and intellectual images enforces the poet’s fantasy of the Apollonian body: the sensuous form that contains the purest soul. This imagery continues in the last line of the passage, as Lorca describes Whitman’s thighs, a sensual physical image, but immediately counters this sensuality with the reference to Apollonian purity: “thighs

as pure as Apollo's." Lorca's choice of Whitman as his idol of the Apollonian body reflects the nature of that body as unapproachable, removed from the messiness of physical reality — by the time Lorca wrote this poem, Whitman was dead and physically unavailable.

The poet contrasts the search of the maricas for physical ecstasy with Whitman's search for the Apollonian, spiritual body. In line 68, the poet addresses Whitman:

You looked for a nude like a river.
Bull and dream who would join wheel with seaweed,
Father of your agony, camellia of your death,
Who would groan in the blaze of your hidden equator.

Unlike the maricas, Whitman channels his passion into the search for the non-tactile, river-like body that will grant him spiritual, rather than physical consummation. The image of the river and running water, combined with the image of Whitman's hidden equator, echoes the image of the "waist of restless sand" found in "Menton." The hidden equator echoes another image from Menton, that of the "torso circumscribed by fire." In both images, the effect of fire upon the fragmented torso is to create the image of the waist, indicating the interplay between passion, represented by fire, and the evocation of the sensuous, unfolding body. Yet the image of the "groan," emitted by the lover at the moment of reaching Whitman's hidden equator, evokes an element of physical sensuality that casts an ambiguous pall over Lorca's attitude towards Whitman's "chaste" body.

In his description of the maricas, Lorca uses Whitman's body to animate the darkness created in the wake of the marica's physical lust. The maricas, "emerging in bunches from the sewers . . . the faggots, Walt Whitman, point you out" (ln. 52). In this image, the chaste whiteness implied in Whitman's body creates, through the implicit contrast with the polluted sensuality of the maricas' bodies, the darkness and seething, animate void from which the maricas spring. For the poet, the maricas generate a sensuous, seductive, and fascinating darkness, "a trembling beneath the legs of chauffeurs" that echoes an image from "Little Viennese waltz, in which the poet told the lover: "I will leave my mouth between your legs." As discussed, this image from "Little Viennese Waltz," emerged at the end of the poem, in a passage suggestive of the poet's ultimate dissatisfaction with the solely spiritual evocation of the Apollonian body. The poet's rhymed passages, one expressed in a moment of tenuous ecstasy, the other in a moment of contempt, when placed side by side, indicate the poet's hidden desire to transgress the limits of the Apollonian body, to attain physical completeness in the body of another man.

At the end of the poem, the poet expresses his desire that while Whitman sleeps on the bank of the Hudson, his body "openhanded" and receptive towards the pole of the earth, the Apollonian self, the unengendered body, will be born in the body of a black child:

the powerful air from the deepest night
to blow away flowers and inscriptions from the arch where you sleep,
and a black child to inform the gold-craving whites
that the kingdom of grain has arrived

In this image, the night air blows away the signs of death-flowers and inscriptions — that litter Whitman's sleeping place — the arch evocative of the transition from life

to death, as well as Heidegger's concept of *gelassenheit*. In keeping with the life and death duality of the arch, as well as Heidegger's concept of the give and take between opposite states of existence, as the arch sheds of its emblems of death, a child is born. Whitman's Apollonian body, although existing in the poem as a suggestion of itself, like the poet's soul in the photographs, gives forth in this image a physical, tactile body. Lorca's connection of the physical body of the child to themes of social injustice — the child prophesizes to the whites the retribution of the blacks — indicates once again Lorca's break from the surreal in the evocation of the absent body. The birth of the child indicates the birth of Lorca's concern with and representation of the physical, exterior world, in which themes of social injustice are ever present.

It should be noted that Lorca, in his self-conscious creation and performance of the poetic persona of "Poet in New York," a fictitious identity that he appropriated for himself in his lectures on the collection, attempted to animate an emptiness in his own, "real" identity. In lectures given around the country on the book, Lorca often told involved stories in which he related events discussed in the poems of the collection, events that probably never took place. Lorca's performance of the poetic persona indicates the link between the real Lorca, writing cheerful letters home to his parents, and the meta-physical, poetic self evoked in the collection. As far as we can judge from biographers and primary sources, Lorca was deeply haunted, even in his happiest moments, by his homosexual identity. However, in the lecture that Lorca delivered across the country, entitled "A Poet in New York," Lorca never once alludes to the homosexual identity implicitly revealed in the collection's poetic imagery. Through the performance of the poetic persona, Lorca replicated the animation of the void he created in the collection itself, creating a chattering, animate body that filled the aching loneliness of a broken soul.