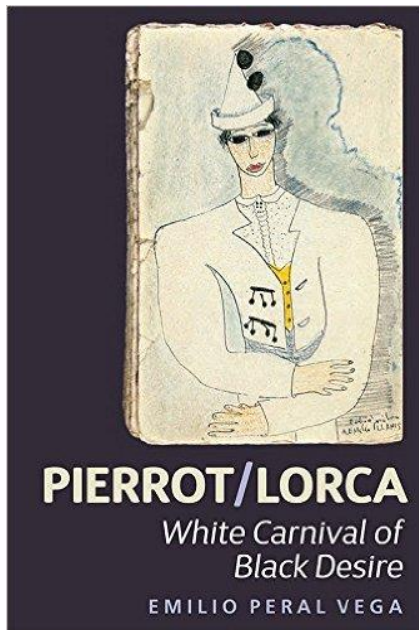


Pierrot/Lorca: White Carnival of Black Desire
by Emilio Peral Vega¹

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One of the major challenges that García Lorca presents to those who critically analyse it rests in the interdisciplinary aspect of his production, since his artistic career, short and fierce as it was, kept questioning the very limits of art. In general, Lorca problematizes the boundaries between tradition and avant-garde, tragic and comic, theatre and poetry, prose and epistle, performance and fine arts. In such a context, where shape and substance are impossible to separate, Lorca's interpreters are supposed to deal with the plurality of references (both inter-textual and inter-mediatic) that constitutes

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the aesthetical labyrinth of Federico García Lorca. There is no doubt that Emilio Peral Vega, in his book *Pierrot/Lorca: White Carnival of Black Desire*, provides the reader with an excellent approach to the aesthetical and psychological complexity that shapes the Andalusian's works. The study performed by the Professor of Spanish Literature at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid makes the difference mainly in two aspects: (1) the semiotic interpretation of a less-explored character among Lorquian studies – the archetypal Pierrot from the Italian *commedia dell'arte* (the same one that was reframed by European modernisms) – and (2) the study of that character's ability to be an expression of autobiography in the entire literary and pictorial production of Lorca.

Peral Vega's research follows, in a sense, the same cyclical way of Pierrot among Lorca's imagery. Starting by the oldest ancestor of modern circus mask (Petrolino from the Italian comedy) – mostly in relation to his metamorphosis in popular French theatre from the mid-nineteenth century –, it ends also in the dramatic field, by analysing the very singular expressions of such a classical mask in Lorca's more experimental plays (*Amor de don Perlimplín con Belisa en su jardín*, *El público* e *Así que pasen cinco años*). In another words, argumentation dissects the analysed character mostly in its dramatic potentiality, even if through the entire book the author also considers the multifaceted nature of a mask that still claims for a strict pictorial contemplation. Chapter one focus in Modern French stage, departing from the reinvention of the Italian Pierrot performed by Jean-Gaspard Debureau, himself the heir of a familiar tradition of 'artistes d'agilité'. His performances at the 'Théâtre des Funambules' inspired a series of records about a Pierrot with a new meaning and a new complexity, especially when compared with the secondary role of the its Italian pattern, fated to defeat in the love triangle completed by Harlequin and Columbine. In the Author's words, this «gave the pale-faced buffoon a new dimension, midway between comedy and tragedy, and above all granted him a versatile dramatic presence that went against the current of a tradition in thrall to preordained structures, and which



had not been able to tap his full potential» (p. 11). From this point on, Peral Vega frames the vast context of classical mask in the French *fin-de-siècle* (especially in relation to Symbolist and Decadent movements), reinforcing the leading role of this Romantic Pierrot among the Modernisms that irradiate from Paris (Huysmans, Verlaine, Lautréamont, etc.) and portraying a dissemination of the mask only comparable to the one of the Shakespearian Ophelia in similar British movements (as it is the case of the pre-Raphaelites). This reconfiguration of the mask will find literary parallels beyond the French context (Benavente, Darío and Lugones), trigger some Cubist exercises (Picasso and Gris) and, moreover, indorse its dramatic dimension in the experiments of Craig, Maerterlinck and Chaplin. The baroque and tragicomic dialectic between the white carnival and the black desire that constitute Pierrot seems to be mainly shaped within the frames of mute cinema, and that is why in Lorca's works this character is also to be developed in its filmic looks (*El paseo de Buster Keaton* and *Viaje a la luna* being the examples).

By now, the reader must have realised that the Pierrot studied by Peral Vega is, above all, a metamorphic character, both for its artificial nature of a mask and the very creativity imposed to arts by the first Modernist movements. In fact, the search for novelty and disruption with tradition demanded Modern artists, from the many artistic fields, the need to approach the archetype by the imprint of subjectivity. In between Verlaine and Wilde, Chapter 2 focus on the primaries European sources of the Lorquian Pierrot, dealing with the authors that approached the tragicomic mask to the homoerotic and sexual-ambiguous imagery. At this psychic context, the dialectical nature of the mask is reinforced, characterised as it is by the «expression for the unspeakable (liberation) and at the same time an imperfect protection (castrating)» (p. 36) or by the contrast between «lyricism and irony», thus providing the foundations to a «portrayal of a homoerotic reading of the clown» (pp. 38-39). Several of these authors are part of the young Lorca's readings, and that is why their echoes can be felt from his first artistic stage. Such is the case of «Pierrot. Poema íntimo», written in 1918, trigger to



Peral Vega's insight (in Chapter 3) on the biographical mirror of Lorca's poetry.

«Pierrot. Poema íntimo» is, as the Author, «an essential text in spite of the lack of aesthetic definition that it reveals. This is so because it reveals Federico García Lorca who, rather than knowing himself in the fullest sense, intuitively that he is a split being impelled by two very different opposed forces» (pp. 50-51). Furthermore, the dialectic between what is occult and what is revealed is to be developed in Lorca's works by means of identification between the Lorquian self and the several mythologies that inform his particular understanding of the Al-Andalus. Among them, one must mention the Judaic-Christian mythology (mainly the passion of Christ and the erotic symbolization of Saint Sebastian) and the Greek-Roman mythology (especially Platonic love and Narcissus' myth).

Chapter 4 focuses on interpreting the Lorquian universe of Pierrot, in between painting and theatre. Peral Vega poignantly analyses what can be a new metaphorical movement, in a sense that Lorca's concern with questioning the boundaries between artistic disciplines will imply a deeply plastic theatre and, at the other hand, a pictorial production pregnant of theatricality. Lorca's pictorial production is therefore reshaped as self-confessional expression, being, in most cases, a kind of para-literature, as in the case of poems' illustration or the letters sent to his most close friends. Therefore, next Chapter shall focus on the carnival iconography of the correspondence between Lorca and Dalí.

Chapter five is, I must say, the less interesting of the book. Peral Vega does not actually provide any novelty to the love game between the two Spanish avant-gardes, an issue exhaustively developed in the literary and biographical works of the last decades. Furthermore, the Author bypasses an important issue in the dialogue between Lorca and Dalí: the former's taking of stand in face of the latest's Surrealism. Being so, the correspondence between them clarifies Lorca's departure from the unconscious and the Freudian confrontation as sources of creation, and that is why a huge part of



his prose testifies his commitment to avant-garde aesthetics, which prefer to rely on phenomenological formalism and the very poetization of political speech, most of the times unsuitable to Surrealist poetics. García Posada [1989: 7–9] and Richard Cardwell [2005: 47–80], among others, problematized the concept of Lorca's 'impossible theatre' as 'Surrealist theatre', the category used by Peral Vega, in the last two chapters, when referring to avant-garde plays such as *El público* or *Así que pasen cinco años*.

Nonetheless, Chapters 6 and 7 provide the most pregnant pages of the book, namely by replacing *Amor de don Perlimplín* and *Así que pasen cinco años* among the global context of Lorquian studies. Overshadowed as they usually are by the rural plays (examples of Lorca's rewriting of Attic tragedy) and *El público* (the paradigm of his most radical experimentalism, both dramatic and philosophical), Peral Vega underlines the symbolic strength of two of the most well-accomplished plays of Lorca. *Perlimplín and the Young Man*, made both the poet's alter ego, expose all the complexity of Lorca's theatre, continuously related, as it is, with the expression of eternal feminine. On these characters, always dialoguing with the archetype of the Modernist Pierrot, Peral Vega dissects the Lorquian proposal of manhood as an alternative to the vertebrate hero (El Cid, Don Juan, etc.), portrayed by Ortega y Gasset [2014] as constitutive of the national Spanish spirit.

While one could expect for a deeper conceptual questioning in what concerns the identity issues and the subjectivity informing the connections between life and work – mostly considering the fictional and dynamic dimension of the carnival mask, which many times refuses an unitary understanding of the self, rather than revealing it –, Emilio Peral's book stands as a mandatory reading for those interested in carnival representation of both the poetic self and the dramatic character in Federico García Lorca's works.



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