

THE HAIKU OF FEDERICO GARCIA LORCA

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As a student in Madrid in the early 1920s, Federico García Lorca discovered the haiku, a genre then experiencing growing prominence in Hispanic literary circles. At the time Lorca discovered haiku, he was also deeply immersed in his study of the *copla*, the rural Andalusian folk lyric. For Lorca, the appeal of both forms was their power of poetic concentration. In a reaction to what he described as the “overluxuriant lyrical tree”¹ inherited from Romanticism, Lorca developed an appreciation for the ways in which the authors of these forms could “condense all the highest emotional moments of life into a three- or four-line stanza.”² “New Songs,” a poem from Lorca’s first collection, provides an insight into the aspirations he had for his poetry at this time. In the poem, Lorca longs for “a luminous and tranquil song,” “a song to go to the soul of things,” “a song without lyrical flesh,” and “a flock of blind doves tossed into mystery.”

In 1921 he composed a ten-poem haiku sequence, which he dedicated to his mother and sent to her as a gift for her birthday. Never intended for publication, this “little box of lyrical chocolates,” as he described the poems in a letter to his brother, were intended to celebrate his mother’s birthday in “the most modern and most exquisite way.” Though these haiku contain many stylistic features that may seem out of place today, it is important to remember that a proper, critical understanding of haiku technique had not yet been developed in Europe. It is also important to note that, for Lorca, it was not the distinctive compositional techniques of the haiku poem that he sought to harness, but the power of its lyric concentration. As with his experimentation in other literary forms, such as the lyrics of flamenco deep song (in his 1922 collection, *Poem of the Cante Jondo*) and the Arabic ghazal (in his *Tamarit Divan*, a collection of poems composed between 1931–34), Lorca’s approach to haiku composition was that of assimilation, rather than duplication. What he sought

was an equivalence of the effect, or essence, of a haiku poem, rather than a direct imitation of the form itself.

As well as the lyric potential of the individual poem, Lorca's experimentation with haiku also revealed the possibilities of the poetic sequence; of capturing a particular phenomenon through a series of moments, vignettes, or "etchings." Around the time Lorca composed his haiku, he was also developing the poetic sequences that would later be published as the *Suites* (1983). Though not published until long after his death, the *Suites* are the work of Lorca's most permeated by the haiku spirit. Compared to the birthday haiku, the wistful poems of the *Suites* contain passages that much more closely resemble the haiku form as we recognise it today:

The bullock
slowly
shuts his eyes.
Heat in the stable.

Only a single bird
is singing.
The air multiplies it.

Far off,
pink coloured herons
and the spent volcano.

The poetic sequences in the collection are composed with a concision and structural simplicity that is true to both the tradition of the haiku and that of the "miniature" he thought characteristic of his home city of Granada. Critical to an appreciation of Lorca's haiku, and of his experimentation in short verse forms, is the aesthetic of the diminutive in the art, music, and poetry of his city; a diminutive "without rhythm, almost without grace and charm," a diminutive which "opens secret chambers of feeling," and whose mission is to "place in our hands objects and ideas which seem too large: time and space, the sea, the moon, distances."³ For it is the poetic concentration of the diminutive verse, where the lyrical tremor reaches "a point that is inaccessible to any but a few poets,"⁴ that gives both the haiku and the *copla* their power.

In 1932, Lorca would deliver a lecture on the *duende*, the elemental spirit embodying irrationality, darkness, and an awareness of death, that

seizes and battles with the most profound interpreters of flamenco deep song. For Lorca, the appearance of the duende was not a question of technical ability, but of “true, living style, of blood, of the most ancient culture, of spontaneous creation.”⁵ And it is this profound authenticity which resonates in the finest examples of haiku verse. For, like the *copla*, a haiku is “a momentary burst of inspiration, the blush of all that is truly alive ... the trembling of the moment and then a long silence.”⁶

HAI-KAIS DE FELICITACIÓN DE MAMÁ

1.

*Sea para ti
mi corazón.
La luna sobre el agua
y el cerezo en flor.*

May my heart
be yours.
The moon on the water
and the cherry tree in flower.

2.

*Hay una estrella,
sobre tu casa
hay una estrella.
.....
¡Oh noche infinita!*

There is a star,
over your house
there is a star.
.....
Oh infinite night!

3.

*Cuando yo era niño
ibas y venías.
Cuando fui mayor
ibas y venías.
.....
Luego ...
saltarás de un lucero
a otro.*

When I was a boy
you came and you went.
When I grew older
you came and you went.
.....
Some day ...
you will leap from one star
to another.

4.

*Guárdame
todas las risas que puedas
en el cajón
del trinchero.*

Save me
all the laughter you can
in the drawer
of the carving table.

5.

EVOCACIÓN

*Sean para ti
mis lagrimitas,
las que lloré de niño
— al marchar a Almería.*

EVOCATION

May my tears
be yours,
the ones I cried as a boy
— when I left for Almería.

6.

*Guárdame
esas campanadas
del amanecer.*

Save me
those bell strokes
of dawn.

7.

*Rosa, clavel
y grano de ajonjolí
sean para ti.*

These are for you:
rose, carnation
and sesame seed.

8.

*Di a Isabelita
que quite a estos hai-kais
su cáscara lírica.*

Tell Isabelita
to remove these hai-kais
from their lyrical shell.

9.

*En este hai-kai va
un beso que me acabo
de cortar.*

Enclosed in this hai-kai
a kiss, newly
cut.

Y 10. (RITORNELLO)

*Sean para ti
mi corazón,
la luna sobre el agua
y el cerezo
en flor.*

& 10. (RITORNELLO)

May my heart
be yours,
the moon on the water
and the cherry tree
in flower.

NOTES

¹ Lorca, Federico García. *In Search of Duende*. New York: New Directions, 2010.

² Ibid.

³ Lorca, Federico García. *A Season in Granada*. London: Anvil Press, 1998.

⁴ Lorca, Federico García. *In Search of Duende*.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.