Federico García Lorca’s The Public, Levinas’s Philosophy and the Question of the Other

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Abstract:
This paper will discuss the problematization of the Otherness in The Public (El Público), by the Spanish poet, playwright and theatre director Federico García Lorca and Totality and Infinity. An Essay on Exteriority (Totalité et Infini: Essai Sur l’Extériorité), by the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. The essay embraces the nuances of Lorca’s and Levinas’s persona as a fundamental component of their creations regarding the Other. It establishes a dialog between Levinas and Lorca regarding categories such as violence, language, and communication. Taking the body as an axis, García Lorca and Levinas organize their discourse around two key concepts that, somehow, epitomize in only one word the gesture towards the other: “mask,” and “face,” respectively. As the “mask” is a device preceding the “face,” opposed to the “face” both in a physical and symbolical sense, the “violence” contained in the “mask” will become an antonym related to the “face.”

Keywords: Federico García Lorca, Emmanuel Levinas, Spanish literature, Otherness, Other, Spanish theater

It is the exiled person who today best incarnates, though warping it from its original meaning, the ideal of Hugh of St. Victor, who formulated it this way in the 12th century: “The man who finds his country sweet is only a raw beginner; the man for whom the whole world is as a foreign country is
Emmanuel Levinas was born in Lithuania in 1906, only eight years after the birthday of Federico García Lorca in Granada, Spain. Their biographies and work will be marked by the events that affected Europe in the first half of the 20th century. Despite being from a wealthy social class, both Levinas and García Lorca inherited centuries of pain and exclusion in the Western World that reached their peak in the 20th century. This paper will discuss the problematization of the Otherness in two of their works. However, the persona of García Lorca and Levinas, and the discourse around them, are critical to comprehend their ideas about the Other.

García Lorca’s authorship is commonly associated with Catholicism, communism, and queerness, although these three terms may be somewhat excluding, and their particular presence in Lorca needs to be qualified. The Spanish artist had a Catholic upbringing, and his creations frequently comment on Christian imaginary, which is also a constituent part of the Iberian culture. His homosexuality is even more problematic as a subject and raises more questions than answers: To what extent does his sexual orientation become a queer discourse? How do his writings reflect or evade it? Although García Lorca cannot be considered apolitical, it is difficult to determine his involvement with Spanish socialist groups. He defended socialist ideas in interviews during the last years of his life, and this probably caused his death, but was he a militant? In the essay “Lorca and Foucault,” Paul Smith rejects the frequent question “Who is Lorca” to embrace a Foucauldian inquiry: “What is Lorca?” This “what” is underpinned by the thesis that “Lorca” is not just the body that writes nor the texts that he wrote. Lorca is also a discourse himself, and in that sense, he is not the only “originator” of his own work. He is created, as well as his œuvre, by the reader and ultimately by the critics. The purpose of this paper is to embrace the nuances and doubts about Lorca as a fundamental component of his persona. As I will argue, his play The Public addresses the Otherness as an issue of concealment and misconceptions.

Emmanuel Levinas’s biography and philosophy are also problematic to situate but in a different sense. Levinas’s persona entails the problem of origin. He was born into a middle-class Jewish family that relocated many times because of World War I. During his lifetime, Levinas lived in
Lithuania, Ukraine, Germany, and France. He published his book originally in French, which was not his mother tongue. Martin Heidegger, whom he met at the University of Freiburg, had a significant influence on his thought, even though the German phenomenologist was a Nazi supporter. His writings also revolve in the complex and sometimes antagonizing traditions of Western philosophy and Jewish theology. The Nazis imprisoned Levinas during World War II. His wife and daughter remained in a monastery, which protected them from the concentration camps. However, the Schutzstaffel killed his father and brother. The many roots of his thought, his origins, languages, philosophical and theological influences, and his life contributed to his conception of ethics as “first philosophy,” which was in his regard the philosophy of the Other (Totality and Infinity. An Essay on Exteriory 47).

It is not surprising that Levinas's philosophy and García Lorca's art received the influence of their own condition, and that their embodied otherness became a zone of recurring deliberation for them. Both Levinas's and García Lorca's work are milestones regarding the study and fight for the recognition of their respective otherness. These biographical, thematic and historical influences of García Lorca and Levinas inspire the present research about the points of contact and divergence between them regarding the question of the other.

In the case of García Lorca, I have chosen the play The Public as the backbone of the analysis. He finished the first draft of The Public in 1930, but it was published posthumously, in 1976. During his lifetime, García Lorca developed different artistic expressions, among them poetry, painting, and cinema. As Federico Bonaddio states, his political insights, his way of living and conceiving homosexuality, are a matter of constant debate (1-16). The inclusion of The Public and other dramatic writings, all called "impossible theater," challenge the construction of García Lorca's image as an author. They also reshape the interpretations attributed to his art, which, as Paul Julian Smith argues, “remain disturbingly consistent, if internally contradictory, from one period and one place to another (9).”

The cornerstone of The Public's challenge to the tamed image of García Lorca lies precisely in its "impossibility." This condition differentiates it from a corpus of "rural tragedies," his most known writings: Yerma (1934), The House of Bernarda Alba (1945) and Blood Wedding (1933). If García Lorca (Obras Completas 674) recognized that his first "comedies" reflect his "true purpose" as an author, why does he conceive them as "impossible"? The Public’s impossibility, as José Antonio
Giménez Micó (353) argues, does not lie in the difficulty of playing it but in García Lorca’s awareness that the spectators of his time would have barged in the theater to stop the performance. This second instance of its “impossibility” is due to the topics that The Public starkly tackles: tragedies of love, death, and theater (Monegal 205); the theater as imago mundi (Huélamo Kosma 152); the truth in the theater and love (Clementa Millán 401-2). Those topics are related to the nature of a human relationship and the difficulties of representing it. In the text, the development of these issues unleashes a “revolution”¹ in the drama when the “audience”² “censure”³ that “Romeo was a man thirty years old and Juliet a boy of fifteen”⁴ (García Lorca 38). That is, seemingly abstract topics embody the characters-actors’ homoerotic relationship. As Carlos Jérez Farrán (728) states, *El público* should be read […] as a dramatization of the author's frustration within a social system that reacted to queer subjectivity with a bizarre mixture of censure, ignorance, and denial. Otherness becomes, therefore, both the departure and arrival point of questions linked to what truth, language, body, and affects are in The Public; because García Lorca “sees homosexuality no longer as a censurable individual difference but as a political, social, and human phenomenon” (Jerez Farrán 742).

This study aims to place The Public among the discourses about otherness without, however, disregarding its relevance to either queer or metatheatrical discourse. It is in the former zone where García Lorca’s The Public can meet Emmanuel Levinas's philosophy, in particular, his book *Totality and infinity* (1961). According to Levinas’s introduction to the Spanish version, *Totality and infinity* "describes the epiphany of the face as an un-bewitchment of the word"⁵ (*Totalidad e Infinito* 12), that is to say, the quest for the other's truth. This theoretical displacement is not only legitimate but also ethically necessary in Levinas’s sense. Smith presented this imperative two decades ago:

¹ “revolución” (García Lorca, El público 20).
² “público” (García Lorca 20).
³ “denuncia” (García Lorca 20).
⁴ “Romeo era un hombre de treinta años y Julieta un muchacho de quince” (García Lorca 20).
⁵ “describe la epifanía del rostro como un deshechizamiento del mundo” (Levinas, Totalidad e infinito 12).
If the "impossible" theater was, as García Lorca declared, destined for the future, we are now the audience, and we have an ethical responsibility to respond to its challenge, a responsibility denied to earlier generations of scholars and theatergoers. Such burden cannot leave us indifferent, intellectually or aesthetically (Smith).

**Body: “a Cluster of Wounds and an Absolute Disorientation”**

Both *The Public* and Levinas’s understanding of “infinite” suggest a journey for the self that starts in his/her own body, although they take it in opposite directions. Having taken the “first step” (García Lorca 26) “so the truth about the tombs be known”, Gonzalo (or Man 1) reveals: “I know positively that three of you are hiding, that three of you are still swimming on the surface [...] While accustomed to the coachman’s whip and the blacksmith’s tong, you’re still afraid of the truth”. This statement alludes to the three White Horses, who then “nervously crowd together.” The encounter with the "truth" requires, then, to plunge. The body is, in the first instance, a "hiding" and uncovering its inside causes "fright," "nerve." The quest of the truth means "come in" (García Lorca 7). The Director is afraid only to imagine it: “the audience is going to see me” (García Lorca 7), he complains because he would be exposed to the gaze of the other.

For Levinas, the body in its first nature results in a sort of prison, enchainment that demands an outpouring, a transcendence. Unlike García Lorca, who in *The Public* encourages to unveil the inside of the body, Levinas proposes an escape outside of it. According to Varakukalayil (283), Emmanuel Levinas in *On Escape* elucidates that existence within a body is "a kind of malaise of being. The dire need to escape the pure fact of one's being is more than a lack; it is the quest for transcendence." "The notion of finite being is a tautology" (Levinas, On Escape 69), states the

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6 “un racimo de heridas y una desorientación absoluta” (García Lorca 20)
7 “el primer paso” (García Lorca 13)
8 "para que se sepa la verdad de las sepulturas" (García Lorca 3)
9 Hombre 1
10 “yo sé positivamente que tres de vosotros se ocultan, que tres de vosotros nidan todavía en la superficie [...] Acostumbrados al látigo de los cocheros y a las tenazas de los herradores tenéis miedo de la verdad” (García Lorca 13)
11 “se agrusan inquietos” (García Lorca 13)
12 “pasar adentro” (García Lorca 4)
13 “Me ha de ver el público” (García Lorca 4)
philosopher in this essay, for the word “being” carries the tacit meaning of “finitude” and the imperative of overcoming it (Levinas, On Escape 69).

In *The Public*, the characters are urged to undress to “find the ultimate self, the one who is defenseless, free to love”14 (Harretche 1817) [translation mine].

MAN 1 [to the director]. My struggle was with the mask, until I succeed in seeing you naked [He embraces him.]

WHITE HORSE 1 [mockingly]. A lake is a surface.

MAN 1 [irritated]. Or a volume!

WHITE HORSE 1 [laughing] A volume is a thousand surfaces (García Lorca 27).15

The body has volume. The truth is behind the ultimate unveiling, but its volume made of a “thousand surfaces” postpones this arrival to the infinite. Antonio Monegal have noticed that the play established an impossible goal in this quest for truthfulness. According to Monegal (208), “Lorca […] multiplies the layers, the outfits, and displays them simultaneously on stage until it is no longer possible to identify the ultimate nudity”. When the spectators murdered the horses and “the true Juliet, who was moaning underneath the seats” (García Lorca 38),16 they did it “out of pure curiosity, just to see what they had inside of them.”17 However, they have brought nothing "to light," just "a cluster of wounds and an absolute disorientation" (García Lorca 39).18

Nakedness is associated with shame in Levinas’s perspective, and as such, he does not merely understand the nakedness of the body. “This preoccupation with dressing to hide ourselves concerns every manifestation of our lives, our acts, and our thoughts” (Levinas, On Escape 64). García Lorca’s ideas seem to converge here with the philosopher’s perspective, for they both find in the

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14 “encontrar el yo último, el que queda sin defensas, libre para el amor”
15 HOMBRE 1.° (Al Director.) Mi lucha ha sido con la máscara hasta conseguir verte desnudo. (Lo abraza.)
CABALLO BLANCO 1.° (Burlón.) Un lago es una superficie.
HOMBRE 1.° (Irritado.) ¡O un volumen!
CABALLO BLANCO 1.° (Riendo.) Un volumen son mil superficies (García Lorca, El público 11).
16 “la verdadera Julieta que gemía debajo de las butacas” (García Lorca, El público 20).
17 “por pura curiosidad, para ver lo que tenía dentro” (García Lorca, El público 20).
18 “¿Y qué han sacado en claro? Un racimo de heridas y una desorientación absoluta.” (García Lorca, El público 20)
act of dressing up the urge of concealing from the other’s gaze certain instances of the self. Nevertheless, nakedness is at the end of the journey proposed in The Public, while in On Escape the shame of nudity is just the symptom of a deprivation.

The necessity of fleeing to hide oneself is put in check by the impossibility of fleeing oneself. What appears in shame is thus precisely the fact of being riveted to oneself (Levinas, On Escape 64).

Following Varakukalayil (288), becoming the subject of our own existence, that is, being entangled in our body, is the genesis of two types of emotions: indolence and fatigue. The two of them announce the displeasure of the self with his/her materiality, they are both "a site of beginning," they are "[the] being's irresistible urge to begin anew" (Varakukalayil 287). To this extent, the purpose of self-existence will be reaching for another one. Other philosophers in the twentieth century have given this purpose an existential accent, as they understand it from the perspective of the self. However, Levinas’s point of reference is always the other. Therefore, as Daniel Guillot (19) argues in his philosophy, this quest can only be ethical. The self can only feel released from its prison by a journey towards the other in an ethical sense.

But Levinas’s subject, as García Lorca's, will find out that the quest for truth and love, the escape from prison cannot overcome its performance; it is endless. Either as García Lorca’s unveiling or as Levinas’s transcendence, it is impossible for the subject to run away from the boundaries of his/her body. “The very body is presented [in The Public] as an overlaying of customs up to an irreducible limit of the senses”¹⁹ (Basso 4).

Simply put, the body is the starting point in the quest for truth both for Levinas and for García Lorca. The Spanish playwright presents a journey towards the inside of the body to find that truth, while Levinas aims it towards the outside. This inner unveiling entails the encounter with a dimension of the self that has remained hidden for the subject, and systematic acts of undressing now glimpse it. This is what I call an inner otherness of the self. For Levinas, truth, always an outward movement, is in what I call an external otherness.

For the two authors, the ultimate encounter with absolute alterity —either internal or external— is impossible, for the body becomes a sort of prison. This imprisonment is reached in García Lorca’s

¹⁹ “El cuerpo mismo se presenta [en El público] como superposición de trajes hasta un límite irreductible de sentidos”
by excess: the body is an endless space, a “thousand-surface volume” that always covers the ultimate truth. Meanwhile, in Levinas’s philosophy, the subject’s imprisonment is given by deficiency: the finitude of the body constrains the subject’s demands to experience in his/her own flesh the Other’s furthest zones. Nevertheless, the gesture towards either the outside or the inside of the body results in a liberating experience in both cases, for it projects the traces of the experience with the alterity.

The Face Under the Mask: “It’ll Hang Us from a Tree”

Taking the body as an axis, García Lorca and Levinas organize their discourse around two concepts that, somehow, epitomize in only one word the gesture towards the other: “mask” and “face,” respectively. Consequently, many authors have argued that the “mask,” and the “face” are key concepts to comprehend The Public and Totality and Infinity. For example, Harretche recognizes in “the mask” an “essential and necessary [instance] to understand the play in its sense” (Harretche 1815) [translation mine]. For Antonio Monegal, the mask and the public are agents of violence, “two faces of the same monster, since the public becomes the agent of the destruction” (Monegal 206). The “mask” is a device preceding the “face”, opposed to the “face” both in a physical and symbolical sense. Thus, the “violence” contained in the “mask” will become an antonym related to the “face.”

Authors like Bornhauser and Jaume or Varakukalayil when discussing Levinas’s “face,” associate the term with certain words that, being transformed into its opposite notion, complete the understanding of Lorca’s “mask.” “Face” is the face of the other in its absolute nakedness, it is the “Other’s Otherness” (Bornhauser and Jaume 46) [translation mine], which exists in a state of absolute fragility. Subsequently, the “absolute nakedness” of the “face” suggests the violent concealment of the “mask.”

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20 “esta nos colgará de un árbol”
21 “máscara”
22 “face” [in French].
24 “la Otredad del Otro”
To emphasize this extreme helplessness of the other expressed in its face, Levinas makes use of a metonymy: "face" is "the gaze of the stranger, the widow, and the orphan" (Levinas 77) commanding that "you shall not commit murder" (Levinas 199). As Jojo Varakukalayil (293) mentions, this "you shall not commit murder" is perceived by the subject in its double nature: as an appeal to transcendence and as an exhortation to violence, to murder. The "face" agrees with the "mask" in the latter sense given the aggressive bond with the other that the two authors mean.

The other is systematically ravished in *The Public* not just in the figurative sense. The other can also be skinned to death, as in the case of Juliet moaning underneath the seats. The nakedness is not offered or suggested by the other’s body, but it is gotten as in molestation. Gonzalo commands the crying director: "you, pass behind the screen" (García Lorca 7). Only then, the director turns into the man Gonzalo was looking for behind his clothes: into Enrique. However, Enrique is not going to find any longer in Gonzalo what he was pursuing: love. Instead, he will discover violence: "Gonzalo, I’ve got to spit on you a lot. I want to spit on you and cut your tails up with some nice little scissors," says the Director (García Lorca 7).

As Levinas explains, uncovering the other either because "I think" or because “I can” “would unchain an inevitable violence” and would “leave interrupted the relationship” with the other (Guillot 37) [translation mine]. Throughout the play, Gonzalo will claim the presence of an Enrique who is already gone, who never really existed. Enrique is a creation of Gonzalo carved violently over the body of another, of the director. Meeting not the body but one of the Director’s “costume” instead, a shadow of a body, Gonzalo (Man 1) gets carried away by the mirage that his own self projects:

> MAN 1. Tell me, tell me that you’ve come back for me!

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25 “tú, pasa por detrás del biombo” (García Lorca, *El público* 4).
26 “Gonzalo, te he de escupir mucho. Quiero escupirte y romperte el frac con unas tijeritas” (García Lorca, *El público* 4).
27 “Yo pienso.”
28 “Yo puedo.”
29 “desencadenaría una violencia que sería inevitable.”
30 “dejaría como interrumpida la relación.”
THE HARLEQUIN COSTUME [in a weak voice]. I'm cold. Electric light. Bread. They were burning rubber.

MAN 1 [violently embracing the Harlequin Costume]. Enrique!

THE HARLEQUIN COSTUME [in an ever weaker voice]. Enrique...

THE BALLET COSTUME [in a tenuous voice]. Guillermina...

MAN 1 [throwing the Harlequin Costume to the ground and climbing the steps]. Enriqueeee!

THE HARLEQUIN COSTUME [on the ground]. Enriqueeeeee… (García Lorca 31).31

Here, Gonzalo does not meet the "face," the other's otherness. He meets the "mask," the alterity of his own self —as Levinas (37) puts it—, "precisely because it is but the play of the same: the negation of the I by the self is precisely one of the modes of identification of the I". With that in mind, the mask is not only an invitation to destroy the external other, but it also entails the urge to annihilate the other that we carry inside our own selves. The director says: "I once saw a man devoured by the mask. The strongest youths in the city rammed large balls of thrown-away newspapers up his rear with bloodied pickaxes; and once in America, there was a boy whom the mask hung by his own intestines" (Levinas 5-6).32 Every story contains the two reactions above mentioned. In the first one, the suspicion before the otherness of the "man," his potential homosexuality suggested by "large balls of thrown-away newspapers up his rear" causes "the strongest youths in the city" to unmask him. The gaze of this individual commands "you shall not commit murder," but the message is ignored. In the second story, a "boy" probably opts for suicide when recognizing the otherness of his own self. García Lorca’s assassination is a reaction towards the provocation of his gaze of poet, of intellectual, of homosexual.

31 HOMBRE 1.° ¡Dime, dime que has vuelto por mí!
HOMBRE 1.° (Abrazándolo con violencia.) ¡Enrique!
EL TRAJE DE ARLEQUÍN. (Con voz cada vez más débil.) Enrique.
EL TRAJE DE BAILARINA. (Con voz tenue.) Guillermina.
HOMBRE 1.° (Arrojando el Traje al suelo y subiendo por las escaleras.) ¡Enriqueeee!
EL TRAJE DE ARLEQUÍN. (En el suelo.) Enriqueeeeee. (García Lorca, El público 16)

32 “Yo vi una vez a un hombre devorado por la máscara. Los jóvenes más fuertes de la ciudad, con pica ensangrentadas, le hundían por el trasero grandes bolas de periódicos abandonados, y en América hubo una vez un muchacho a quien la máscara ahorcó colgado de sus propios intestinos” (García Lorca, El público 3).
Violence and love finally merge in a single gesture both for Levinas and for García Lorca. “What do they want from each other?”—Harretche asks (1821) regarding the characters of The Public. And, what is it this other cannot surrender?”33 [Translation mine]. Given any possible direction, the answer is located in the zone of their most intimate otherness, their face that love pretends to undress. If what "they want" is "their conciliation in the same," then, in Levinas's logic, they will only find "the resistance of beings to totalization" (Levinas 294). In García Lorca’s interpretation, “to arrive at the consummation of love, it is necessary to go through the naked truth, so naked that it will burn the eyes” (Harretche 1823) [translation mine].34 In other words, love becomes impossible, for it demands a nakedness that, as shown, is unreachable in The Public.

On more than one occasion, the characters discuss the possibility and the capacity of words to be the mask of a hollow reality. “Me, I don’t care about their arguments concerning love or the theater. What I want is to love” (García Lorca 21).35 confesses Julieta. However, her love with Romeo is questioned from the very beginning. “Well … I’m not inside …” (García Lorca 5)36, The director replies when asked about the veracity of Shakespearian characters’ passion. Later on, Student 4 confirms that “The rioting started when they saw that Romeo and Juliet really loved each other” (García Lorca 34)37; but Student 2° makes clear to him: “It happened for precisely the opposite reason. The rioting started when they observed that they didn’t love each other, that they could never love each other” (García Lorca 34).38

Levinas problematizes the common understanding of the word “love,” the way that this term defines the relationship between two individuals.

The neutralization of the other who becomes a theme or an object—appearing, that is, taking its place in the light—is precisely his reduction to the same. To know ontologically is to surprise in an existent confronted that by which it is not this existent, this stranger, that

33 “¿Qué es lo que desea uno del otro? ¿Y qué es lo que ese otro no puede dar?"
34 “Para llegar a la consumación amorosa es necesario pasar por la verdad desnuda, tan desnuda que quema los ojos.”
35 “A mí no me importan las discusiones sobre el amor ni el teatro. Yo lo que quiero es amar” (García Lorca, El público 10)
36 “Hombre… yo no estoy dentro...” (García Lorca, El público 3)
37 “El tumulto comenzó cuando vieron que Romeo y Julieta se amaban de verdad” (García Lorca, El público 18).
38 “Precisamente fue por todo lo contrario. El tumulto comenzó cuando observaron que no se amaban, que no podían amarse nunca” (García Lorca, El público 18).
by which it is somehow betrayed, surrenders, is given in the horizon in which it loses itself and appears, lays itself open to grasp, becomes a concept” (Levinas, Totality and Infinity. An Essay on Exteriority 43-44).

Could the audience understand if Romeo and Julieta love each other? It would be necessary “to be inside,” an impossible operation both for García Lorca and for Levinas. Unlike the Spanish playwright, Levinas finds in love—not the concept but the performance—, the deviation of a genuine necessity to answer the other's command. For Levinas, love is not a "pure" desire because it demands, by giving, a satisfaction in return. We love for we recognize the self in the other, that is, love is a type of egoism that does not pursue the otherness of the other (Levinas, Totality and Infinity. An Essay on Exteriority 34). In The Public, during the love play of transformations between Character in Vine Leaves and Character in Bells, when the latter answers to the latter with an image that Character in Bells cannot match, the second stops dancing and reacts sharply:

CHARACTER IN BELLS [stopping his dancing]. But why? Why are you tormenting me? Why won’t you come along with me, if you love me, to wherever I take you? If I turned into a moon-fish, you’d turn into a wave upon the sea, or into seaweed; and if you desire something very far away, because you don’t want to kiss me, you’d turn into a full moon… but into a knife! You delight in interrupting my dance, and dancing is the only way I have of loving you (García Lorca, The Public and Play without a Title. Two Posthumous Plays 11). 39

Love, symbolized in the dance and the back and forth of both character’s transformations, loses its meaning if one of them cannot identify with the other’s word. Meanwhile, to Levinas, the metaphysical desire becomes the rapprochement par excellence for it is on the border where the self cannot meet with himself. “Desire is absolute if the desiring being is mortal and the Desired invisible. Invisibility does not denote an absence of relation; it implies relations with what is not given, of which there is no idea” (Levinas, Totality and Infinity. An Essay on Exteriority 34).

39 FIGURA DE CASCABELES. (Dejando de danzar.) Pero ¿por qué?, ¿por qué me atormentas? ¿Cómo no vienes conmigo, si meamas, hasta donde yo te lleve? Si yo me convirtiera en ola de mar, o en alga, y si quieres algo muy lejano, porque no desees besarme, tú te convertirías en luna llena, ¡pero en cuchillo! Te gozas en interrumpir mi danza. Y danzando es la única manera que tengo de amarte (García Lorca, El público 6).
The love of Character in Bells and Character in Vine Leaves is within the ranges of what Levinas understands by totality because the subjective sharing always manage to conceive a higher category that embraces it. As a matter of fact, María Estela Harretche demonstrates how “the loving dialog [in The Public] inhabits the space between a word and another one” (Harretche 1822) [translation mine] and she exemplifies it the fragment mentioned above between Character in Vine Leaves and Character in Bells:

“If I turned into a cloud” corresponds to “I’d turn into an eye” (the idea behind this example is: to look at you).

“If I [...] an apple” corresponds to “a kiss” (to kiss you).

“breast” — to “white sheet” (to cover you).

“moon-fish” — to “knife” (to penetrate you and to kill you) (Harretche 1822) [translation mine].

The metaphysical desire, as conceived by Levinas, do not drive to violence because it is beyond the pursue of the self-satisfaction. It is linked to the notion of infinity, that he opposes to totality because it cannot be reduced: “it consists in surpassing permanently all content” and “it contains more than what can be contained” (Guillot 25).

To sum up, the turn to the inside of the body proposed by García Lorca and the shift to the outside of the body proposed by Levinas are contained in the images of the mask and the face, respectively. The mask always promises a truth at the end of the individual’s eventual unmasking (his/her most inner otherness), while the face is presented as the most external other’s naked truth.

Likewise, both the face and the mask are symbols of the impossibility to achieve the ultimate encounter with the truth. The former is unreachable, and the latter is impregnable. Nevertheless,
they both are presented as the promise of an encounter. At the same time, the mask and the face result in an invitation to destroy and annihilate otherness, for the subject is offered here in the most superlative vulnerability.

The impulse suggested by the uncovering in *The Public* is love, which is presented either as a disguise or as the possibility of the most intimate surrender. Love is primarily elaborated in the play as a rhetoric of lie, that is, of the mask; yet, the possibility of an absolute submission of the most intimate, that is, the otherness of the self is scarcely manifested as the anguish caused by its pursue.

What Levinas considers as metaphysical desire overlaps some zones of García Lorca’s concept of love, for both are goals of the self and convey the willingness of approaching the truth as it is understood here. However, his metaphysical desire does not pursue any satisfaction, unlike García Lorca’s love, for it implies the impossibility of being fulfilled in an object.

According to Levinas, by suppressing the pursuit of satisfaction in the other, the desire for the other is free from its violence, and under that reasoning, he condemns love as a legitimate way of an encounter with the other. To him, love is a totalitarian feeling for the self just intends to recognize in the other not his/her otherness but what he/she has in common with the self. The metaphysical desire, on the contrary, is insatiable for it arises just where the other becomes unexplainable to the self.

García Lorca's love is tied to an anguish for it needs to come about in an unattainable subject's nakedness, while Levinas's metaphysical love rejects the satisfaction retaining the approaching gesture, which is projected towards infinity being also unreachable.

**Language: "It Is Terrible to Get Lost in a Theater and Not Find the Exit"**

Given that the most secluded zone of the other, the face, is withheld from the self, language is the only possible way to achieve proximity. As Katarzyna Beilin (293) explains, language itself contains the past effort towards an encounter between the self and the other.

For language accomplishes a relation such that the terms are not limitrophe within this relation, such that the other, despite the relationship with the same, remains transcendent to the same (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity. An Essay on Exteriority* 39).
This circumstance summed up by Levinas’s term of “face to face” becomes the privileged means to answer the other’s command. The “face to face” suggests a less violent relationship in which the listener is interested in rescuing what the speaker wanted to put in common (Guillot 38). However, Levinas is aware that language also represents a zone of power and rhetoric, and he invites to a communicative practice that fights against “the linguistic system to which it is subordinated” (Beilin 293) [translation mine]. For The Lithuanian philosopher recognizes that:

The subject, when he/she risks taking the floor, sees himself facing the fact that he/she can only speak in compliance with what the tradition allows —and imposes—. The subject can only express what he/she was taught: a given rhetoric, a given syntax, a given grammar, and some given tropes, already established; surrounded and embroiled by a relentless whisper: a huge repository of signs, quotes, and references from diverse cultural origins. In that sense, the language establishes, assigns and loads a tradition, some uses, some practices and some rules that the speaking subject must accept, reducing his/her contribution to a minimum input, an inappreciable one (Bornhauser and Jaume 47).  

By assuming theater is a language among the thematic nucleus of The Public, García Lorca addresses issues that Levinas describes. The artist has before him/her two communicative possibilities: to satisfy the audience’s demands or to unearth what he names “the truth about the tombs.” The image of “the tombs” points out an “inside” that, as stated above, condenses the journey to the truth proposed by García Lorca, but it also contains the pain and sacrifice that requires that journey, a journey with no return like the death itself. Like María Clementa Millán (401) claims, “Lorca establishes an opposition between the ‘theater in the open air’ and the ‘theater beneath the sand’, meaning, the earlier one, the conventional theater, against the latter one, which represents the true theater.”

43 “el sistema lingüístico a la que está subordinada.”
44 El sujeto, a partir del instante en el que se arriesga a tomar la palabra, se ve enfrentado al hecho de que únicamente puede hablar según lo permite —o impone— la tradición, tal como le han enseñado, es decir, con una retórica, una sintaxis, una gramática y unos tropos determinados, ya fijados; rodeado y envuelto por un murmullo incesante: un gran depósito de signos, citas y referencias de diversos orígenes culturales. En ese sentido, el lenguaje establece, asigna y carga una tradición, unos usos, unas prácticas y unas leyes que el sujeto hablante debe aceptar, reduciéndose su contribución a un aporte mínimo, inapreciable.
45 Lorca construye una oposición entre el ‘teatro al aire libre’ y el ‘teatro bajo la arena’, significando, el primero de ello, la escena convencional, frente al segundo, que representa el verdadero teatro.
The “theater in the open air” in *The Public* is “aligned with the tradition” in the sense that Levinas understands language. It is the representation of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* claimed by the audience for its fixed grammar, rhetoric, and syntax. The “theater beneath the sand” offers an alternative in the play. Here the gesture of placing it under the surface invites an uncovering, an unmasking which goal is the encounter with the ultimate truth, “the hidden truths that are unacceptable to the audience” (Monegal 206). The Director is troubled by the sole possibility of this type of theater: “what would I do with the audience. What would I do with the audience if I remove the handrails from the bridge?” (García Lorca, The Public and Play without a Title. Two Posthumous Plays 5). These handrails separate the audience from the stage and the theater from real life. The theater beneath the sand not only blur these limits but also unveil that life is a convention, a mask, a volume made of thousand surfaces.

Both Levinas and García Lorca reveal that language entails a real impossibility of communication with the other, the failure of expressing the ultimate otherness of the self; however, language also constitutes the best tool for the individual to show up his/her inner truth. This paradox is tightened towards its limit in *The Public* at different levels. The suffering of the Red Nude, a character related to the figure of Jesus Christ, his immolation, his limitless love, is presented as “true”; but the theater and the language transform it in

a pantomime, a farce that is acceptable insofar as the artifices with which the drama is surrounded (the actor’s use of wigs, false beards, special effects such as air or chimes) provokes a reassuring distancing in this audience (Huélamo Kosma 5) [translation mine].

At a higher level, García Lorca's quest for truth as the author in *The Public* is also presented as legitimate and contrived at the same time.

His play reveals the working of the mask by being itself ‘dressed up’ in a multilayered poetic fabric [...]. The naked body of *El público* is never exposed; underneath each disguised, there is always another disguise (Monegal 211).

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46 “¿qué hago con el público? ¿Qué hago con el público si quito las barandas al puente?” (García Lorca, El público 3)

47 “pantomima, una farsa que es aceptable en la medida en que los artificios con que se rodea el drama (uso de peluca en los actores, barbas postizas, efectos especiales como el aire o las campanadas) provocan en este público un distanciamiento tranquilizador”
On the whole, language for Levinas and theater for García Lorca become the means par excellence to explain the possibility of an encounter between the self and the other. Language and theater are represented as a battlefield to communicate truths that result ineffable. Levinas and García Lorca tackle this second nature similarly.

Language presents the barrier of its conventions that normalizes the otherness of the other, while the theater in the open air, as well as the theater beneath the sand, and transforms the pain and the love in a pantomime, neutralizing the most inner truths that the artist surrenders to the public. However, the theater beneath the sand, in its performance to descend into the most intimate, like the face to face in its urge to overgrow beyond the self, contains what cannot be held, and it allows to foresee the silhouette of a naked otherness.

García Lorca wrote *The Public* during a fruitful but also painful situation being an alien not only because he was in the United States and Cuba during those days, but also because his sexual and aesthetical identity made him another for the hegemonic taste and moral. Emmanuel Levinas left his hometown in Lithuania at a very young age following his family for Ukraine, France, and Germany. In these last two countries, he consecrated as a philosopher and ended up writing in the French language. Outsider by nature, Levinas lived his childhood in the vortex of one of the most distressful times for the Jewish people. The otherness in Levinas’s philosophy like in García Lorca’s impossible theater do not result from an abstract concern but from a preoccupation carried by in their own body.

This physical dimension and the complex otherness that they shared allow us to find convergence points: the body as a genesis, the face and the mask as the cornerstone, love, and desire as the force, and language as the bridge. Just before many Western artist and thinkers surrendered to the relativity of point of views and forms, Federico García Lorca and Emmanuel Levinas shared the commitment to find the breath of truth behind the pantomime.

**Bibliography**


