

THE FLAMENCO LETRA: Architecture of the Emotions

by  
Paco Mitchell  
Santa Fe, NM

*¿Pa' qué quieres más castigo  
Que vivir sin conocerte?  
—Letra flamenca*

Why should you want any greater punishment ...  
Than to live without knowing yourself?  
—Flamenco verse

In his book of memoirs, *The Wind Cried: An American Discovery of the World of Flamenco*, author Paul Hecht describes meeting an old, uneducated peasant in the mountains outside of Málaga. It was a hot afternoon, the air hardly stirred. Hecht and the peasant were walking in opposite directions along a path next to a small stream. They did not know each other, but stopped and talked for a while. At one point, in the reflective way of people who live close to the land, the old peasant looked at the stream and said: “*Los caños aman crecer a la lengua del agua.*” The canes love to grow at the tongue of the water.

Hecht’s observation was that this old man—who knew enough to use the poetic, courtly verb *amar*, to love, instead of the more prosaic verb *querer*, and who also knew enough to use the metaphor of the “tongue” of the water—may never have cracked a book in his life. Yet he exuded poetry and philosophy with the air he breathed. Or was it that the air itself exuded poetry and philosophy, and the old man simply “breathed it back” in return—*re-spirando*?

In a different context, a flamenco singer from Triana—the gypsy quarter across the Río Guadalquivir from Sevilla—sings about walking along the river at night. He looks down at the water and there, among the dark reeds, he sees the quivering moon.

Or take Cádiz, the flamenco city on the southern coast of Andalucía. For its inhabitants, Cádiz is a sparkling jewel, its beauty extolled in countless flamenco verses, mostly in the style of *alegrías de Cádiz* (*alegría* means joy or happiness). Anyone living in Cádiz will tell you that the city is “a little silver cup by the sea.” Again, poetry seems to roll off the tongue. And special status is conferred upon those fortunate enough just to live there.

*Como reluce mi Cáii  
Mira qué bonita está,*

*How my Cádiz sparkles,  
See how pretty she is,*

*Sobre un cachito de tierra  
Que le ha robaito al mar.*

*On a little bit of land  
That she stole from the sea.*

In flamenco poetry, it seems, everything is personal—rocks, trees, dirt, water, birds, fish, and so forth.

Southern Spain is not unique in this quality, this poetic pride-of-place. Go anywhere, and if you dig deep enough, past the historical layers of machine-age culture, past the dogmas and the power-structures, you will most likely find traces of oral traditions in which the living, breathing landscape comes alive in the imagination of the people. Places where the dove not only has a call, it has a *voice*. Furthermore, *it has something to say*. Places where the olive tree, which lives a thousand years, has seen it all—a knowing witness to the suffering of the one who seeks shelter there. The geraniums and jasmine on the balconies flourish or wither according to the singer's fortunes in love. The statue of the Virgin nods at the supplicant praying for mercy. This is a “pagan” sensitivity, to be sure—older than doctrine, old as the rocks.

*En aquel pocito inmediato  
Donde beben mis palomas  
Yo me siento, yo me siento  
Y me distraigo un rato  
Con ver el agua que toman.*

*By that little well over there,  
Where my doves are drinking,  
I sit down one day  
And distract myself for a moment  
Watching them satisfy their thirst.*

*El sol me da calor  
Y la luna claridad  
Las estrellas los pensamientos,  
Y tú—tú me das  
Qué pensar.*

*The sun gives me warmth,  
And the moon clarity,  
The stars thoughts,  
And you—you give me  
Something to think about.*

These poems depict an animated world, wherein the cosmos itself participates in the joy and suffering of the one who cries out in lament or ecstasy.

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As an expression of a particular landscape, its people and their cultures, then, the art of flamenco—native to and forever bonded with southern Spain—is a complex *mélange* of interwoven histories, tragedies, aspirations and fates. The verses—or *letras*—of flamenco song reveal the architecture of emotion in the Mediterranean soul—ancient and profound, extending from the deepest foundations to the highest spires. Flamenco *letras* express every emotion, every sentiment, every truth, every deception, every lust—from vengeance to benediction. Together, they constitute an encyclopedia of longing:

*Tengo celos de las flores  
Del espejo en que te miras,  
Del peine con que te peinas,  
Y del aire que respiras.*

*I am jealous of the flowers,  
Of the mirror you look into,  
Of the comb you comb your hair with  
Even jealous of the air you breathe.*

And of the suffering born of longing:

*Anhelaba vivir,  
Por verte y oírte;  
Ahora que no te veo ni te oigo,  
Prefiero morirme.*

*I longed to live,  
To see you and hear you;  
But now that I can do neither,  
I prefer to die.*

Of course, there is a degree of intellectual violence in removing the flamenco *letra*—it is, after all, intended to be *sung*—from its natural context among the voices, lives and cultures of the singers, the towns and villages where they live, the rhythms, melodies and scales through which the *letras*—and hence the singers’ embodied souls—are modulated. I extract the *letras* from their environment, as Victorian gentlemen once collected butterfly specimens with nets, chloroform and hatpins. But to me it’s worth the risk of damage, or artificiality, if in the process I can provoke an enlivened interest in these archaic poems—these gem-like polished pebbles from the commonest stream.

Categories are the life-blood of every flamencologist—and such stalwart intellectuals do exist—but categorical thinking may be the bane of flamenco, which tends to resist the dead hand, the *mano muerta*, of academia. Nevertheless, charts are erected, genealogies traced, lists compiled, endless analyses and explications carried out—including even this article I am writing. But, like Houdini, the spirit of flamenco defeats all such efforts in the end, for it will not be captured like the butterfly. You may as well try to grasp the wind in your hand, or put lightning in a bottle. Flamenco is rife with paradox, improvisation, reversals, surprises, the unexpected:

*Le pide sombra a una fuente  
Y agua al olivo;  
Que tanto me ha opuesto tu querer  
Que ya no sé ni lo que digo.*

*I asked the fountain for shade  
And I begged the olive tree for water;  
For your love has me so confused  
I don’t even know what I’m saying.*

In the midst of a solemn *juerga*, a flamenco gathering, someone may sing a dolorous *soleá*, one of the deepest flamenco forms, or *palos*, named for solitude, *la soledad* or *soleá*. The singer reaches for the deepest emotions:

*Si quieres ver si te quiero  
Vela mis sueños una noche  
Y verás en mi desvarío  
Como te llamo a voces.*

*If you want to see whether I love you  
Watch over my dreams some night,  
And you will see, in my delirium,  
How I shout out for you.*

Then, having drained the bitter cup, the singer might finish the song by shifting to an upbeat *remate* or finish, increasing the tempo and ending in the major key:

*¡Te quiero yo! ¡Te quiero yo!      I love you! How I love you,  
¡Más que a la madre                  More than the mother  
Que me parió!                              Who gave birth to me!*

Paradoxically, flamenco makes and breaks its own rules—though not without argument! But rules there are, nonetheless; in fact, there is a veritable *canon* regarding the structural aspects of the music—iron rules that encourage improvisation. There is another rule—unwritten, though more than a few have written about it—that manifests an integrity of the soul. I’m referring to a common experience: that the most emotionally demanding *palos* or styles are reserved for the wee hours, whereas the more superficial forms—festive and intricate forms like the *sevillanas*, *tanguillos*, *fandanguillos*, *bulerías*, etc.—are for the earlier hours, for warming up. This simple poem portrays the implicit spirit of the artistic sequence:

*At midnight, the fandanguillos:  
A clear and simple song  
For the outsiders;  
At one o’clock, the cartagenera:  
A frivolous little thing;  
At two o’clock, a playera:  
Now we have a more complete song;  
And at three o’clock in the morning,  
The gypsy siguiriya:  
Here the real singing begins—in earnest!*

There is an overburden in certain *letras*—those of the *siguiriyas*, for example—of tragic, bitter and despairing sentiments, which nevertheless stand alongside the joyous and festive. This “darkness” results from the fact that most flamenco *letras* derived from the combined experience, over centuries, of oppressed classes of people: the gypsies who migrated from India; the Jews and Moors who thrived and mingled during the 800-year-long Andalusian Caliphate—until the *Reconquista* by the armies (and treacheries!) of Ferdinand and Isabella; the renegade Christians resistant to the Catholic spur, *la espuela doctrinal*. All of these groups fell under the

oppressive heel of the Christian monarchs and of the Inquisition, which was *invited* into Spain by the pious Isabella! Punitive edicts, ghettos and other forms of oppression guaranteed an underclass, and much of flamenco music reflects this. Hence, the jail songs, the *carceleras*:

*Veinticinco calabozos  
Tiene la cárcel de Utrera;  
Veinticuatro he recorrido  
Y el más oscuro me queda.*

*Twenty-five cells,  
Has the jail of Utrera;  
I've been inside twenty-four of them  
And the darkest one of all awaits me.*

Or the grim *letras* of the mining regions of eastern Spain, sung by miners to the somber tones of the *mineras*:

*Como en una madriguera  
Pasa el minero la vida;  
Sale a respirar de noche  
Y adentro está por el día  
Como las liebres en el monte.*

*As if in a burrow  
The miner passes his life;  
He comes out to breathe at night  
And by day he goes back inside  
Like the rabbits in the mountains.*

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For decades I have pursued my *afición* for flamenco and the beauty of its *letras*. And I have learned that *the effect of bringing dark emotions into the light, and giving them creative form, is transformative and healing*. This process touches on a mystery: *What is the transformative agency or power?* To name it is perhaps impossible, or ill-advised. One might as well try to name God, but why risk the arrogance, the hubris, of presuming to name the Incomprehensible? All we can do, perhaps, is point our fingers toward the darkness of the mystery.

Flamenco does have *one name* for the mystery, but everyone understands its limitations. It is called the *duende*, a term reserved for an inspired, transformative effect that comes and goes of its own accord, like a ghost, independently of technique or knowledge. It would be fair to say that singers, dancers or guitarists who have experienced it, have been “possessed” by it. Few talk about it, for how could they? *Duende* is a Spanish word referring approximately to a “little ghost or spirit.” García Lorca wrote a famous essay on the “Theory and Play of the Duende,” a work which, if nothing else, has inspired many artists, poets and writers. The thing to remember about the *duende* is that it cannot be captured or faked. One can invite the *duende*, but one cannot summon it. One can only offer oneself to it, in submission, as if yielding to death, through *an abandonment of the ego*. Then—perhaps—the *duende* may appear. Such ego-abandonment or ego-loss is not for the faint of heart, however, which is why authentic flamenco, at its best, makes such demands on the artist. The old gypsy singer, Juan Talega, once said: “It’s like a

fever, like malaria. I had the *duende* only twice in my life, but afterwards they had to carry me out.”

Flamenco *letras* are hewn, crafted and rigged to withstand the tempestuous seas of the *cante jondo*, the deep song of flamenco. Part of their resiliency lies in the sheer simplicity and brevity of their structure. This may be a clue to their secret—there is no excess of moving parts! But I sometimes take my imagining further since, for me, words and language are *alive*.

Is it possible, I ask myself, that some genius or *genio*, some *autonomous spirit of language*, resides in the very words of the *letras* themselves? And is it further possible, I wonder, that the life in those words might resonate with some corresponding genius or *genio* within the soul of the artist? If so, might these two genii make contact on some level, permitting an electrical flow, as it were, akin to the “electrons of the soul”? In any event, something unorthodox, something Other, lays its claim upon, and animates, the artist, as well as any fortunate witnesses who happen to find themselves within the transformative field.

I personally believe that, whether we know it or not, we *all* sail, in our little boats, in the midst of such a transformative, electrifying field of mystery.

*La vela de mi barquilla,  
Tiene cuarenta remiendos  
Pero siempre llega a Galicia  
Ay, por el viento.*

*The sail of my little boat  
Has forty patches,  
But it always reaches Galicia  
By the wind.*