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The Chorus in Early Twentieth-Century Spanish Theatre

Abstract

The presence of the chorus in contemporary Spanish theatre is a still largely unexplored subject. Its recurrent use by Spanish playwrights from the 1920s and 1930s, and almost uninterruptedly on to the 1970s, has been probably perceived as so widespread, functional and naturally tied to the text as to be taken for granted and not worth a specific critical investigation; suffice it to say that even the works of famous authors, such as Federico García Lorca, have not been thoroughly examined in this respect. The writing style adopted by the leading authors of the early twentieth-century Spanish theatrical new wave is deeply engrained in the classic and baroque traditions: I refer in particular to Ramón del Valle-Inclan, Miguel de Unamuno, Ramón Gomez de la Serna, José Bergamín, Federico García Lorca, Rafael Alberti, just to mention some main exponents of that happy cultural season known as *Etad de Plata*. Their work offers interesting examples of chorus; indeed, the aim of this article is to point out an essential line of investigation of the presence of the chorus in early twentieth-century Spanish drama by restraining the analysis to a few meaningful texts by Bergamín, Lorca and Alberti, and by especially exploring its performative potentialities.

The presence of the chorus in contemporary Spanish theatre is a still largely unexplored subject.[1] Its recurrent use by Spanish playwrights from the 1920s and 1930s, and almost uninterruptedly on to the 1970s, has been probably perceived as so widespread, functional and naturally tied to the text as to be taken for granted and not worth a specific critical investigation; suffice it to

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1. This subject is dealt with in a still unpublished Ph.D. dissertation by García-Ramos Merlo which, starting form a European perspective, focuses on the presence of the chorus as a renovating dramatic element in early twentieth-century Spanish theatre; thus, the analysis does not go beyond the years of the Spanish Civil War (García-Ramos Merlo 2011). It is worth noting that even the best studies giving an international overview of the chorus fall short of examining the Spanish theatre (see, for instance, Billings, Budelmann, and McIntosh 2013).

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say that even the works of famous authors, such as Federico García Lorca, have not been thoroughly examined in this respect.

The writing style adopted by the leading authors of the early twentieth-century Spanish theatrical new wave is deeply engrained in the classic and baroque traditions: I refer in particular to Ramón del Valle-Inclan, Miguel de Unamuno, Ramón Gomez de la Serna, José Bergamín, Federico García Lorca, Rafael Alberti, just to mention some main exponents of that happy cultural season known as *Etad de Plata*. In their being sophisticated heirs to an outstanding poetic tradition, these prominent figures of the renewal of Spanish theatre act both as protagonists of the European avant-garde and keen witnesses of the social and political changes of the early twentieth century. Their work offers interesting examples of the inclusion of the chorus in *pièces* that belong in their own right to a widely shared European cultural tendency. This classic pattern interacts with the innovative trend of the period as various studies of the last decade[2] and this article aims indeed at pointing out an essential line of investigation of the presence of the chorus by restraining the analysis to a few meaningful texts by Bergamín, Lorca and Alberti written between 1924 and 1934, with a brief excursion into the Fifties.

The profound and wide-ranging cultural influences of many of these extraordinary artists (poets, playwrights, painters, musicians), mostly belonging to the so-called *generación del '27*, encouraged them to interweave avant-garde techniques with consolidated classical forms, such as, in the case of the theatre, the chorus. Given its multipurpose nature, almost unaffected by the course of the centuries, the chorus presented these playwrights with solutions intended to innovate the theatrical structure of the text, starting from its relationship with the audience. Among its many functions, the chorus's role of mediation between onstage action and offstage reception offered the possibility of reshaping the otherwise rigid and univocal relationship with the bourgeois audience who, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, cheered the success of the *benaventina* or *alta comedia*. Conversely, we could reckon that the drying up of that kind of comedy, based upon the clash of individuals, prompted a renewed reflection on collective destinies.

From a historical viewpoint, the considerable presence that the masses were conquering in society was reflected in the European dramatic production. The same phenomenon would be clearly noticeable in Spain, albeit differently. That is to say, in those years Spanish theatre conveyed this widely felt urgency in two ways: by attracting larger audiences from every social class, as in its

2. For an overview of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth century theatre (from Pérez Galdós to Valle Inclan) see Ayuso (2014); on the Spanish avant-gardes see Floriana Di Gesù (2006), Muñoz and López's introductive essay to *Teatro español de Vanguardia* (2003), and Montesa's edited collection on experimental avant-garde theatre (2002).

Golden Age, and by restoring traditional poetic forms closely connected with its enormous folk heritage, the recuperation of which was then under way. Thus the chorus became a practice responding, even in a social dimension, to this collective civic, religious and artistic impulse to give visibility to the masses.

Contemporary critics stressed the importance of texts such as *La batalla teatral* [*The theatrical Battle*] by Luís Araquistáin (1930), *El teatro de masa* [*Theatre of Masses*] by Ramón José Sender (1931), or the famous essay by Ortega y Gasset *La rebelión de las masas* (1930) [*The Revolt of the Masses*] that, from the early paragraphs on, underlines that "The multitude has suddenly become visible, positioning itself in the preferential places of society. Before, if it existed, it passed unnoticed, occupying the background of the social stage; now it has advanced to the footlights and is the main character. There are no longer protagonists; there is only the chorus" ("La muchedumbre, de pronto se ha hecho visible, se ha instalado en los lugares preferentes de la sociedad. Antes, sí existía, ocupaba el fondo del escenario social; ahora se ha adelantado a las baterías, es ella el personaje principal. Ya no hay protagonistas: sólo hay coro", 1969: 39).[3] García Lorca had already stated that "to write for those in the best seats is the saddest thing imaginable" ("escribir para el patio principal es lo más triste del mundo"). and that it would have been sufficient to have the gallery occupants sit in the pit to operate an inevitable and much needed change in the contemporary stage. In his *Charla sobre teatro* [*Talk on Theatre*] he also claims his support for a socially active theatre arguing that

> un teatro sensible y bien orientado en todas sus ramas, desde la tragedia al vodevil puede cambiar en pocos años la sensibilidad de un pueblo … El teatro es una escuela de llanto y de risa y una tribuna libre donde los hombres pueden poner en evidencia morales viejas o equívocas y explicar con ejemplos vivos normas eternas del corazón y del sentimiento del hombre. (García Lorca 1977: 1215).
>
> [a theatre which is sensitive and constructively directed in all its forms, from tragedy to vaudeville, is capable of altering in a few years the sensibility of a country … the theatre is a school of tears and laughter, and an open arena where some individuals can expose old or faulty morals and illustrate with living examples the eternal principles ruling the hearth and feelings of all men].

Many years before, Unamuno, a staunch advocate of an authentic popular theatre, had anticipated that theatre would go back to the chorus, pointing out that while the ancient chorus was a "verdadera masa homogénea" (1916: 85) ["truly homogenous mass"], the modern one emerged as "diferenciado" (86, n.

3. The author refers here to concepts he already expressed in both *España invertebrada* [*Spineless Spain*] (1921) and in a 1922 article entitled "Patología nacional. I. Imperio de las masas" ["National Pathology. I. The Empire of the Masses"]. See also Ortega y Gasset (1969: 37, n. 1).

1) ["differentiated"]. "In the contrast between the ancient chorus and the one present in contemporary plays such as Hauptmann's [*The Weavers*] we can appreciate the difference between past socialism and that yet to come, integrated with the different individualistic stances" ("En ese carácter del coro antiguo en oposición al coro que se esboza en obras como la de Hauptmann se ve la diferencia del socialismo antiguo al venidero, integración de la diferenciación individualista", ibid.).

In order to evaluate the chorus properly in relation to the complex dynamics of transformation in early twentieth-century theatre, one has firstly and necessarily to keep in mind the popular element enshrined in Spanish culture, language, and literature of all centuries: this feature has so deeply affected high culture as to become inseparable from it, also surfacing unmistakably in an age of avant-gardes with the *romanceril* poetry, the *coplas*, the proverbs and, above all, the spirit of the folk festivities pervading even this experimental kind of theatre and its choruses. This popular quality is a factor of continuity between traditional and avant-garde theatre, in that it perfectly intermingles with the contemporary innovative search for a universal trait; the representations of popular spaces, circumstances, and characters are embedded into a renovated theatrical context thus gaining a fresh artistic value. This is particularly evident in many dance librettos which include a chorus; a few titles are sufficient to prove their strong ties with tradition: *Don Lindo de Almería* by Bergamín, *Lola, la comedianta* [*Lola the Actress*] by Lorca, *La romería de los cornudos* [*The Cuckolds' Fair*] by Lorca and Rivas Cherif, *La pájara pinta* [*The Coloured She-Bird*] and *Colorín Colorado* by Rafael Alberti. It is worth mentioning that these are, nevertheless, quite provocative and avant-garde works, despite their links with tradition (Ambrosi 2010).

Music and dance were the leading arts of the historical European avant-gardes and the development of the chorus in this context certainly influenced the theatre, thanks to its structuring potential and choreographic implications. Its presence imposed balance and harmony among all the elements involved in the staging, while often furthering an approach to a ritual dimension: in this respect the influence of the Wagnerian oeuvre was crucial.[4]

The reading of Aristophanes's comedies prompted by Menéndez y Pelayo's introduction to the 1908 edition of his works undoubtedly played a central role in the theatrical education of various early twentieth-century young writers. Aristophanes's popularity among them was further enhanced by the new 1916 translation which inspired an Aristophanic quality in their critical spirit and ironic approach to social problems.[5] Aristophanes's influence was particularly

4. For Wagner's influence on playwriting, see Sánchez (1994: 19-28).
5. A new edition of Aristophanes's comedies, translated from the Greek by Federico Baraibar y

evident and explicit on some texts by José Bergamín, Federico García Lorca and Rafael Alberti.

— 1 — Aristophanes's Influence on Bergamín's Chorus

In the 1920s (especially between 1924 and 1926), José Bergamín made use of the chorus in some very interesting plays, following the trend of the best European avant-garde. Sometimes this presence was explicitly acknowledged; sometimes its role was assigned to groups of characters, usually with a generic name, who played the chorus's part without being formally recognised as such in the *dramatis personae*. In these *pièces* the choruses explored a wide range of expressive possibilities, hinting also at a possible musical execution with the passages entitled "variación y fuga" ["variation and fugue"] and "cantata a tres voces" ["cantata for three voices"].

The comedy *Los filólogos* [*The Philologists*] ends with a sort of colophon classifying it as an Aristophanic farce: *Fin del acto III / y de la / farsa aristofanesca* / 16 de enero de 1925 [*End of act III and of the Aristophanic farce, 16 January 1925*]. The chorus is introduced in the list of character as follows:

> El Coro
> Coro de Pájaros
> Coro de Monos
> Coro de Sátiro
> Coro de Fichas
>
> [The Chorus // Chorus of Birds // Chorus of monkeys // Chorus of Satyrs // Chorus of Cards]

The aforementioned subtitle clearly asserts the ties with the classical tradition of satyr plays, comedies and tragedies; this tradition is also evoked by the presence of the animal choruses (Birds and Monkeys) and of the ones composed of mythological creatures (the Satyrs). These choruses are joined by a distinctly avant-garde one, composed of personified objects: the catalogue Cards of the library in which the first act is set. They are anthropomorphic Cards which, in order to exalt the place (a fictional Study Centre alluding to

Zumarraga (first edition 1875, Madrid, Libreria de Perlado, Páez y C. Sucesores de Herando) was reprinted in 1908, while in 1916 a new translation was published by R. Martínez Lafuente (Valencia: Prometeo). The introduction to the 1908 edition, entitled "Acerca del teatro griego en España" ["On the Greek theatre in Spain"] was written by M. Menéndez y Pelayo. It should be noted that the Aristophanic tradition in the years following this early twentieth-century revival of interest has been surprisingly neglected by Spanish scholars.

the Centro de Estudios Históricos which Ramón Menéndez Pidal founded in 1910),[6] enter the stage with goddess-like dignity, moving and talking to the rhythm of the March of the Knights from Wagner's *Parsifal*.[7] One has to listen carefully to the bars of this musical passage to realise the exact tempo to be adopted by the members of this chorus in their movements and in the long speech partially quoted here:

> Nosotras somos blancas y castas diosas protectoras. Somos el principio y el fin de la sabiduría. El que nos ama, ama la Palabra … La Palabra se concibió en nuestra pureza, y de nuestra virginidad, desnuda, nació la Poesía. Antes de nosotras nada ha existido. (Bergamín 2004: 272)[8]

> [We are white, chaste tutelary goddesses. We are the beginning and the end of knowledge. He who loves us, loves the Word … In our purity the Word was conceived, and from our naked virginity Poetry was born. Nothing existed before us.]

The solemnity of the moment is enhanced by the following exchanges which acquire a distinct ritual quality, with the chorus becoming antiphonal and their repeated lines sounding increasingly like an ejaculatory prayer:

El Doctor Américus, El profesor Doble, El Neófito	[*Golpeándose el pecho devotamente.*] Filólogus sunt, Filólogus sunt, Filólogus sunt.
La primera mitad del Coro	Si queréis salvaros, ya lo sabéis: una sola cosa importa.
La segunda mitad del Coro	El amor a nosotras sólo. Bien lo decís: una sola cosa importa.
El Doctor Américus, El profesor Doble, El Neófito	La filología, la filología, la filología. (ibid.)

> [Doctor Américus, Professor Double, The Neophyte (*Devoutly beating their breast*) Filologus sunt, filologus sunt, filologus sunt. // First Semi-Chorus: If you want to be saved, you know it already, there's just one thing that matters. // Second Semi-Chorus: Your love to us. You said it well: that's all that matters. // Doctor Américus, Professor Double, The Neophyte: Philology, philology, philology]

6. The Centro de Estudios Históricos took on the task of reviving the immense heritage of *cantares de gesta*, *romances*, *villancicos*, and *coplas* which until then had been scattered and left to collective memory.
7. Unamuno, who, for chronological reasons, would not know Bergamín's and Alberti's works here quoted, nonetheless considered Wagner to be a master in theatre, as regards the rituality and the integration of different forms of art: "Wagner's importance has not yet received its due recognition outside the musical field" ("Aún no ha influido Wagner lo que debiera fuera de la música", 1916: 87).
8. The precise stage directions, provided by the author himself, were experimented in the first and only representation of this farce by a group of students at the University of Verona on 2 April 1998 under the direction of Roberto Totola and Eugenio Chicano, with the collaboration of Guillermo Heras. The performance was occasioned by the first international symposium on José Bergamín.

Each chorus play a definite role in different moments of the *pièce*, which is based upon the clash between poetic and philological languages: the first is represented by the singing of the Birds and the second by the wild gesticulating of the Monkeys. The latter have been indoctrinated by the Parrot (Cacatúa) which, like a benevolent spirit, alights on the head of Master Ramón Menéndez (as does the dove with Parsifal in the final scene of the Wagnerian opera) while he is escorted by a group of students: the Neophyte, Doctor Americus, Professor Double, the last two caricaturing the famous scholars Américo Castro and Tomás Navarro Tomás. The chorus address all three both in unison and antiphonally (first semi-chorus; second semi-chorus). Two singing masters stand out among the Birds: the Nightingale, embodying the spirit of Juan Ramón Jiménez, poet-prophet of the '27 group, and the Blackbird, prologue character and alter ego of the same Bergamín.

From a formal viewpoint, the chorus of Birds always performs as a whole, while the Monkeys separate into two sections, like the Cards in the first act: "First semi-chorus" and "Second semi-chorus". The semi-choruses' alternating lines aim at a comic purpose, in that they ridicule well-known contemporary intellectuals such as Ortega y Gasset and Menéndez Pidal with gossips and vulgar innuendoes. On their part the chorus of Satyrs welcomes Ortega's entrance in hunting gear, as a hunted hunter Parsifal, with bow and arrow and wearing a feathered trilby hat visibly showing a "Made in Germany" label as if he were a hero: "¡Alegría! ¡Alegría! Le hemos cazado. ¡Victoria!" ["Cheers, cheers! We caught him. Victory!"]; and exit, carrying their prey with equal rejoicing: "[*Se lo llevan entre gritos de júbilo y cabriolas, como a la entrada. Ortega sale arrastrado por ellos … todo el cuerpo desmadejado, como una bacante de friso clásico*" (Bergamín 2004: 280, 282) ["*They carry him and exit with exultant cries and somersaulting as they had entered. Ortega is dragged out of the scene, … his body flabby as a bacchante from a classical frieze*"]. At this particular point, the chorus, only for one line, divide into "First semi-chorus" and "Second semi-chorus".

In the third act, the responsorial form is extensively employed in a long dialogue between the Master (the soloist, Menéndez Pidal himself) and the chorus of Monkeys (the collective part) and between the Nightingale or the Owl (personification of Miguel de Unamuno, wisdom incarnated) and the chorus of Birds. The chorus of Monkeys enters in the last scene of the third and final act accompanying the Master. He is very pleased with them, who grasp his teaching best: also in their pose, they perfectly imitate the stiff posture in profile characterising Menéndez y Pidal from his entrance on stage, a posture that caricatures Nijinsky's geometries, plastic expression of Pascal's "*esprit de géométrie*" as opposed to "*l'esprit de finesse*". When the Master, dejected by the birds' killing of Cacatúa, loses his hieratical attitude in profile and cries, the

Monkeys, who until then have played a solemn ceremonial role, climb back up the trees and pelt him with coconuts:

Coro de monos	Nos ha engañado. Nos ha traicionado. Es un hombre, no es un filólogo. ¡Muera! ¡muera! ¡muera!.
	…
Coro de Pájaros	[*con júbilo*] Eso, muera, muera el filólogo. ¡Victoria! ¡victoria!.
Coro de monos	El filólogo sí; la filología no; la filología no puede morir, es ya cosa muerta. (Bergamín 2004: 295)

[Chorus of Monkeys He deceived us. He betrayed us. He is a man, not a philologist. Death, death, death. // … Chorus of Birds (*exultantly*) Yes, to death, to death the philologist. Victory! Victory! // Chorus of Monkeys Death to the philologist, not to philology. Philology cannot die, it's already dead]

This thematic emphasis by the chorus of Monkeys in the finale of the farce is both textually remarkable and choreographically fundamental. Indeed, the intention to exploit all the stage potentials is quite clear here, as it was obviously an essential part of Bergamín's theatrical concept: it is worth noting that, at the time, he was also writing *Don Lindo de Almería* (the dance libretto he submitted to Picasso and De Falla).[9]

The experimental attitude in *Las risas en los huesos* [*Laughter in the bones*] (1973) is widely different. The choruses present in the complex structure of this work, which includes various texts written by Bergamín many years before (between 1924 and 1927), differ in style and length. The unitary cast of this collection makes for a more coherent and comprehensive reading, and underlines the themes that the author considered most meaningful. The fragments that interest us, due to the originality in their use of the chorus, occupy the central part of *Enemigo que huye* [*A fleeting enemy*]: *Variación y fuga del fantasma* [*Variation and Fugue of the Ghost*], where the ghost is Hamlet, *Variación y fuga de una sombra* [*Variation and Fugue of a Shadow*], where the shadow is Don Juan, and *Intermedio* [*Interlude*] which could be considered a legacy of the ancient *Entremés*.

Variación y fuga del fantasma [*Variation and Fugue of the Ghost*] is divided into three parts numbered 1, 2, and 3. In the second, the chorus accompany the entrance of Ophelia who, after a brief exchange with Hamlet in which she reveals her intention to take the veil, throws herself from a balcony. She is followed by Hamlet himself; however, the other characters on stage stop him. The iconographic import of the Chorus's cues is suggested by their graphic arrangement on the page; we can consider it a manifestation of avant-garde

9. For a discussion of this work see Ambrosi 2010.

experimentalism, although its significance mostly lies in its implicit performative possibilities, pointing to the expressive tradition of the chorus (both in its musical and choreographic aspects):

Coro [*Con tono monótono de suave salmodia*]
Eva,
evasiva,
fugitiva
esposa
terrenal
– provisional –
caprichosa:
consensual
bilateral
conmutativa
y onerosa.
Tentación
en capuchón
rosa.
Inocencia.
Preparación
para la penitencia.
[*Hamlet se echa atrás y mira estupefacto.*]

Coro [*Como antes*]
Eva,
evasiva;
disyuntiva.
Rosa
irreal,
inmaterial
– milagrosa –.
Ignorada
pignorada
y delictiva.
Locura
oscura
y conjunción
copulativa.
Misteriosa
aparición
en capuchón
rosa.
Inconsecuencia.
Preparación
para la penitencia.
(Bergamín 2004: 177-8)

[Chorus (*in a sweet, monotonous psalmody*) Eve, / evasive, / fugitive, / earthly / – provisional – / moody / bride: / consensual / bilateral / commutative / and onerous.

/ Pink / hooded / temptation. / Innocence. / Preparation / to penitence. (*Hamlet, bewildered, backs off and stares*) // Chorus (*as before*) Eve, / evasive; / disjunctive. / Rose / unreal / ethereal / prodigious / Ignored / pawned / and illicit. / Dark / madness / and copulative / conjunction. / Mysterious / pink / hooded / apparition. / Inconsequence. / Preparation / to penitence.]

The image of flowing water reinforces the idea of escape from death and the murmur and music of the lines pronounced by the chorus both reveals and accompanies this image; the rhetorical repetitions and alliterations amplify the sense of rituality, as does the proverbial conclusion ("for a fleeing enemy make a silver bridge"):

Coro [*Muy lentamente, murmurándolo como un rezo*]
Huyendo de la muerte, cuerpo frío
– frío, frío, frío, como el agua del río –,
Te lleva su corriente y te delata.
A enemiga fugaz, puente de plata.

[*Entra el cuerpo muerto de Ofelia, ceñido por el mallot negro, con la cabeza descubierta, coronada de bucles rubios, y lo visten, como de un hábito, con el capuchón rosa.*] (Bergamín 2004: 179)

[Chorus (*very slowly, murmuring prayer-like*) Cold body escaping death / Cold, cold as the water of the stream / Its flow both carries and betrays you. / A silver bridge is for a fleeing she-foe. (*Enters Ophelia's dead body, squeezed into a black vest, her head bare and crowned with fair curls; they dress her with the pink hooded cloak*)]

In the third part the members of the Chorus attending Ophelia's funeral wear pink-hooded cloaks identical to the one covering her dead body:

[*Entra el cortejo fúnebre de Ofelia, con antorchas encendidas; viene descubierto el ataúd y el cuerpo negro de Fantomás envuelto en el capuchón rosa; lo traen enmascaradas en capuchón rosa y antifaz negro.*]

Hamlet y el cortejo fúnebre de Ofelia
Coro de penitentes en capuchón rosa

[*Rezando*]
Ni tuyo,
ni mío,
ni nuestro,
ni vuestro;
- huida inútil,
imposible encuentro -:
lo mismo que antes,
que siempre
que nunca.
¿Está vivo o está muerto?

Lo tuyo,
lo mío,
lo nuestro,
lo vuestro;
- huida imposible
inútil encuentro -:
ahora y nunca
– ¡siempre! –
persiguiéndolo;
persiguiéndonos.
(Bergamín 2004: 182-3)

[(*Enter Ophelia's funeral with burning torches; the coffin containing Fantomas's black body, dressed in the same pink hooded cloak, is uncovered; the mourners, wearing black masks and pink hooded cloaks, raise it*) Hamlet and Ophelia's funeral chorus of mourners in pink hooded cloak (*praying*) It's not mine, / nor yours, / nor ours, / nor yours; / it's a pointless flight / An impossible encounter –: / the same as before, / as ever / as never / Is it dead or is alive? / My own, / your own, / our own, / your own; / – it's an impossible flight / a pointless encounter –: / now and never / – forever! – / Chasing him; / chased by him.]

The rhythmic and graphic progression of these lines, by no means contrapuntal, is clearly influenced by the new tendencies brought forward by the historical avant-gardes of those years. This seems to suggest a relation with a sculpture kept in the Bauhaus Archive in Berlin, especially if one imagines it in horizontal section. This work (Figure 1) was realised in 1928 by the Rumanian artist and musician Henrik Neugeboren (better known as Henri Nouveau, 1901-1959) as a plastic representation of the *Fugue in E flat minor* by Johann Sebastian Bach; Nouveau was influenced by the discussions on the concept of synaesthesia (especially between Vasilij Kandinsky and Paul Klee) then under way in the Bauhaus School, a leading artistic circle well-known to Bergamín himself. What I wish to stress is the importance that in the 1920s and 1930s was attributed to the musical form of the Fugue as a structuring model affecting also other forms of art: Bergamín here seems to allude to this extremely suggestive, yet little used, device that aroused a certain interest in the artistic avant-gardes for its capacity to interweave musical, structural and plastic effects within an overall synaesthetic choreography. This fugue-like choral structure can suggest a polyphonic performance even if the stage direction indicates a monotonous psalmody: this may also apply to other choral lines, thanks to their brevity, musicality and popular playfulness, as, for example, in the *Intermedio*, where the insects make up a chorus. They enter the stage divided into entomologically distinctive groups (Ladybirds, Scarab Beetles, Red Ants, Bees, and many more) and then utter their lines in turns, thus providing a highly varied dramaturgical effect.

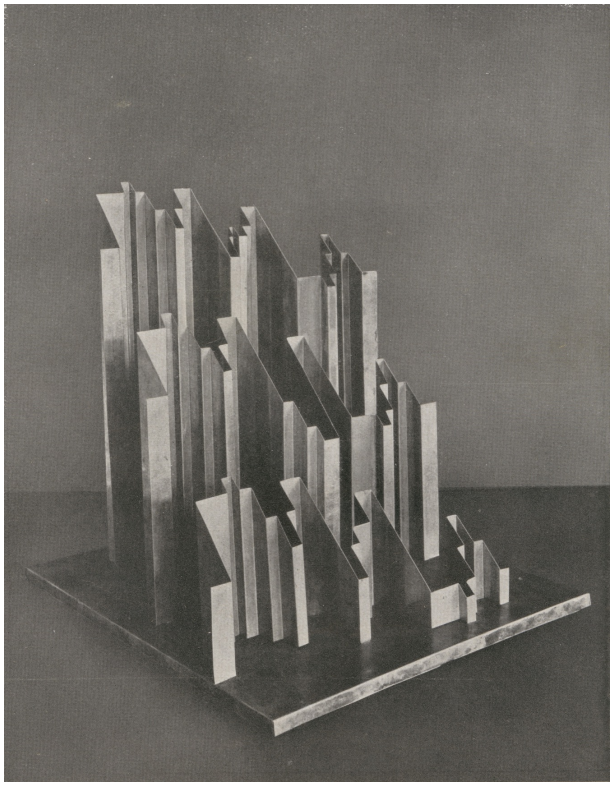

Figure 1: Henrik Neugeboren (Henri Nouveau), *Plastic representation of the Fugue in E Flat Minor* by J.S. Bach, 1928. Bauhaus-Archiv Berlin

[*Entran las Cochinillas*]
Cochinilla …
Una Cochinilla …
Otra …
Otra …
Otra …
Otra …
[*Entran los Escarabajos*]
El Escarabajo Sagrado …
Los Escarabajos …
Un Escarabajo …
Otro …
Otro …
Otro …
Otro …
Otro …
El Escarabajo sagrado …
Los Escarabajos …
(Bergamín 2004: 223-6)

> [(Enter *the Ladybirds*) // The Ladybirds … // one ladybird … // another … // another … // another … // another … (*Enter the Scarab Beetles*) The Sacred Scarab Beetle … // The Scarab Beetles … // One Scarab Beetle … // Another … // Another … // Another … // Another … // Another … // The Sacred Scarab Beetle … // The Scarab Beetles …].

In Bergamín's second "Variation", the element of the Fugue (Bergamín plays upon the homophony between "Fuga" [Fugue] and "fuga" [escape]) is recognisable in two moments. The first, "Fuga de los ángeles del espectro solar a través de la nube rota" ["The flight of the angels of the solar spectrum through the cracked cloud"], is divided into ten poetic sequences of different lengths, each attributed to an angel carrying the name of a colour of the solar spectrum; the second, "Fuga de los animales del arca" ["The flight of the animals from the ark"], is divided into twelve parts; the first two are composed by short lines ("La oruga / es una arruga / que se fuga / La mitad del coco / es una piragua / que hace agua / y asusta un poco", ["The grub / is a wrinkle / that flees / Half a coconut / is a pirogue / leaking water / getting scary"]), and the others are written in aphoristic prose ("El progreso generaliza una idea de humanidad evolutiva", "la parálisis general también es progresiva" ["Progress spreads an evolutionary idea of mankind", "A general paralysis is progressive too"]). All of them are pronounced by animals: the Flamingo, the Monkey, the Bear, the Squirrel, the Duck, the Turtle, the Snake, the Mouse, the Dromedary, the Goldfish, the Pelican, the West Indian Parrot.

In the *Intermedio* [*Interlude*] following the two "Variations", the function of the chorus seems to be assumed by the *Cantata a tres voces* [*Cantata for three voices*], consisting of six stanzas of various length interpreted in succession (as stated in the stage direction), by Ligia Oceánica, Diógenes Pugilator and Asterias Glacialis, in addition to a tercet that the three members of the chorus perform together.

Just as interesting, even if not as surprising, is the chorus in *La Sangre de Antígona* [*Antigone's Blood*], commissioned by Roberto Rossellini for a young Ingrid Bergman. The original idea had come to the musician Salvador Bacarisse, exiled in France like his friend Bergamín. In the early months of 1955 the two of them committed themselves enthusiastically to this work, originally intended to be partly sung and partly recited: a classically structured tragedy, with two choruses (Chorus 1 and Chorus 2) and two coryphaeus (Coryphaeus 1 and Coryphaeus 2). I mention this *pièce*, though distant from the period of the historical avant-gardes, in order to stress a particular aspect: the many disquieting questions which the chorus can pose directly. This is a characteristic they share with Lorca's choruses of Woodcutters in *Bodas de sangre* and Washerwomen in *Yerma*, and with similar collective presences in other classically structured dramas of the 1920s and 1930s. In Bergamín's *Antígona*,

however, the chorus's queries clearly regard the "évolution de l'interrogation tragique" as defined by Roland Barthes in his study on Greek theatre (1965: 531).

Of all the questions posed by the chorus, three leave a lasting impression on the listener: "¿Por qué muere Antígona? / ¿Por quién muere? / ¿Para qué muere?", ["Why does Antigone die? / Whom does she die for? / To what end does she die?"] (Bergamín 2003: 48). This is what Tiresias asks the Thebans, and the same question is insistently repeated by the chorus in the finale of the tragedy, prompting the audience to confront the problems raised by the myth while trying to answer them. This makes clear how the presence of the chorus constantly spurs the spectators to ponder over the meaning of life.

— 2 — The Classical Chorus in Lorca's Tragedies

The chorus forms a defining feature of genre in Lorca's plays. This opinion is held by García Posada, who distinguishes between tragedies, *Bodas de sangre*, *Yerma* [*Blood Wedding*] and dramas, *Doña Rosita la soltera* [*Miss Rose the Spinster*], *La casa de Bernarda Alba* [*The House of Bernarda Alba*]. According to him, the former can be characterised by a classical structure with few characters, a fairly straightforward plot, a solemn use of poetry and the presence of the chorus, while the latter is marked by a stronger emphasis on plots situated in ordinary urban environments (García Posada: 24-7).

In *Bodas de sangre. Tragedia en tres actos y siete cuadros* (1933) [*Blood Wedding, a tragedy in three acts and seven scenes*] the chorus of Woodcutters (Woodcutter 1. 2. 3) open the first scene of the third act. This chorus employ metaphorical and repetitive language, enriched by a masterly use of alliterations and anaphoras and fulfil various functions. They evoke the event that closed the preceding act, underline the gravity of the flight of the bride (Novia) with her former lover (Leonardo) on her wedding day, and consequently disclose the real reason behind this act: the irresistible power of blood:

Leñador 1	Se estaban engañando uno a otro y al final la sangre pudo más.
Leñador 3	¡La sangre!
Leñador 1	Hay que seguir el camino de la sangre.
Leñador 2	Pero sangre que ve la luz se la bebe la tierra.
Leñador 1	¿Y qué? Vale más ser muerto desangrado que vivo con ella podrida. (García Lorca 1977: 637)

[Woodcutter 1 They were deceiving each other and, at the end, blood proved stronger. // Woodcutter 3 Blood. // Woodcutter 1. One must follow the urge of the blood. //

> Woodcutter 2 But when blood sees the light, it is drunk by the earth. // Woodcutter 1 So what? It is better to bleed to death than to live with rotten blood.]

The chorus anticipate the inevitability of the impending tragedy (the Bridegroom will kill Leonardo). Woodcutter 1 says: "Cuando salga la luna los verán" ["When the moon rises, they will see them"]. Here, as always in Lorca, the moon is a messenger of death and is personified as a white-faced young woodcutter, who has a privileged conversation with the Beggar Woman, the embodiment of death itself, as openly stated in the dramatis personae.

The opening of the subsequent "Last Scene" is in choral form with the lines of the Girls, 1 and 2, alternating with the voice of the Little Girl. During this dialogue of short, closely woven verses, the members of the chorus unwind a red skein ("*Dos muchachas vestidas de azul oscuro están devanando una madeja roja*"; "*two girls dressed in dark blue unwind a red skein*"), uncoiling a premonitory thread of blood which connects them symbolically. The ritual quality of the action is stressed by the stage direction, which strictly imposes a completely white interior, including the floor, intended to transmit a sense of ecclesiastical monumentality: "*No habrá ni un gris, ni una sombra, ni siquiera lo preciso para la perspectiva* (ibid. 402) ["*There should be not a hint of gray, or a shadow, not even for perspective's sake*"].

In *Yerma. Poema tragico en tres actos y seis cuadros* [*Tragic poem in three acts and six scenes*], the second play of a planned, but never concluded, trilogy, the collective characters prevail: six Washerwomen, two Sisters-in-law, two Girls, three Men. All of these clearly act as a chorus, yet they are not acknowledged as such in the text. Girl 1 and Girl 2 are not even mentioned in the list of characters, even though their importance is evident in distinctive scenes. For instance, in the second scene, they perform a countermelody to Yerma's obsession with maternity. Their voices relate what goes unsaid but is common knowledge. Girl 2, who is uneasy in the conventional role of wife, expresses an eccentric opinion: "Cuánto mejor se está en medio de la calle. Ya voy al arroyo, ya subo a tocar las campanas, ya me tomo un refresco de anís" ["How good it feels to be outside one's house. One can go for a walk to the stream, or ring the bells of the church tower, or have a chilled drink"]. And then, when she must go back home to fix dinner for her husband, she says: "Qué lástima no poder decir mi novio ¿verdad?" (García Lorca 1977: 688-9) ["It's a pity I can't call him my fiancé anymore, isn't it?"].

The chorus, in their role as witnesses to and commentators on the dramatic action and its consequences, reflect the impassioned voice of the author, whose aim was to promote a socially active theatre spreading a strong ideal of freedom. Moreover, his musical education (he was an appreciated pianist) is certainly evident in the rhythm and balance between realism and lyricism.

The chorus of Washerwomen, which occupy the entire first scene of act 2, start and finish their performance with a song. In the stage directions the author precisely defines their position and their movements, as if they were choreographed: "*Las lavanderas están situadas en varios planos*" and "*Cantan todas a coro*", "*Mueven los paños a ritmo y los golpean*" (ibid. 694, 704) ["*The washerwomen are positioned at different levels*", "*They sing all together*", "*They turn and beat the clothes rhythmically*"]. This is in fact a long choral scene in which the women from the village, doing their laundry at the stream, reaffirm the central theme of the tragedy (the sterility afflicting the main character, Yerma). On one hand, they play a narrative role, by lyrically illustrating the subject in metaphorical terms easily interpretable in Lorca's poetics: "En el arroyo frío / lavo tu cinta, / como un jazmín caliente / tienes la risa" ["In a cool stream / I wash your waistband / hot as a jasmine / resounds your laughter"] (ibid. 700) and on the other, they suggest the possibility of a different point of view. Their hymn to life and maternity:

> Lavandera 5 ¡Alegría, alegría, alegría,
> del vientre redondo, bajo la camisa!
> Lavandera 2 ¡Alegría, alegría, alegría
> ombligo, cáliz tierno de maravilla!
> (1977: 703)
>
> [Washerwoman 5 Oh joy, oh joy, oh joy / a rounded belly beneath the dress! // Washewoman 2 Oh joy, oh joy, oh joy / the navel, a wonderful tender chalice.]

dialectically clashes with the menace of sterility, "¡Pero, ay de la casada seca! / ¡Ay de la que tiene los pechos de arena!" ["But wretched the woman who's married and barren / wretched the woman who has breasts made of sand"], the cause of which is also discussed: "Y los hombres avanzan / como ciervos heridos" (ibid.) ["And the men come forth / as the wounded stags do"]. Washerwoman 4 also reports the point of view of Victor, Yerma's husband: "Quiero vivir en la nevada chica / de este jazmín" (ibid. 700) ["I want to live / in the little snowfall / of this jasmine"]. Water, a fecund element, is as cold as the snow that freezes the jasmine, Lorca's symbol of femininity.

Just like a classical chorus, the Washerwomen synthesise the terms of the tragedy; the various alternating voices explain the situation to the audience and underline its inherent dangers. Their attitude is uncompromising towards Yerma's prospective actions: they anticipate the impossibility of a positive outcome and belittle other feasible solutions, like bearing the child of another man or raising one of her nephews. At the same time, the different members of the chorus hint at alternative reasons and points of view recognisable to the audience.

In a famous interview with Juan Chabás in 1934, García Lorca summarised his concept of tragedy: "Four main characters and the chorus, this is the way a tragedy has to be" (1977: 1027), and in a lecture he reasserted the importance of the chorus:

> *Yerma* no tiene argumento. *Yerma* es un carácter que se va desarrollando en el transcurso de los seis cuadros de que consta la obra. Tal como conviene a una tragedia he introducido en *Yerma* unos coros que comentan los hechos, o el tema de la tragedia, que es el mismo constantemente. Fíjese que digo 'tema'. Repito que *Yerma* no tiene argumento alguno. (García Lorca 1977: 1060)

> [*Yerma* has no subject. *Yerma* is a character who evolves during the six scenes of the play. As it is proper for a tragedy, I introduced in *Yerma* some choruses that comment on the events, or the theme of the tragedy, which is always the same. Mind, I say 'theme'. I repeat that *Yerma* has no subject.]

From the perspective delineated by García Posada, one particular moment in *La casa di Bernarda Alba* [*The House of Bernarda Alba*] is especially interesting because it alludes to the presence of a real chorus – a 'quotation' of it, as it were –, which is surprising since this drama is mainly choral in its staging. The action takes place in the interior of a house, after the death of the father of the family. The four daughters, women already, are not allowed to go out of the house and must wear black for eight years, under the constant gaze of the mother-mistress, who torments them so much as to drive the youngest to suicide. In fact, the chorus is not included in the list of characters and remains outside the action. It is only present in a scene that the daughters of Bernarda cannot see, since they are not given permission to look out of the windows: they can only hear the song filtering through the walls:

Magdalena	Y ni nuestros ojos siquiera nos pertenecen. [*Se oye un cantar lejano que se va acercando*]
La Poncia	Son ellos. Traen unos cantos preciosos.
Amelia	Ahora salen a segar.
Coro	Ya salen los segadores en busca de las espigas; se llevan los corazones de las muchachas que miran. (García Lorca 1977: 884)

> [Magdalena: Not even our eyes are really our own. // (*A song is heard in the distance, drawing nearer*) Poncia: It's them. They have beautiful songs.// Amelia: They're off to the reaping. // Chorus: The reapers are leaving / They're off to fields; / They take with them the hearts / Of all the girls who're watching.]

Once again, the chorus lay bare the underlying tragedy, implicitly pointing at a possible solution when they sing "Open your window": a token of

rustic common sense wholly remote from the middle class values of the main characters:

> Abrir puertas y ventanas
> las que vivís en el pueblo,
> el segador pide rosas
> para adornar su sombrero.
> (García Lorca 1977: 885)
>
> [Open your doors and windows / Girls who live in this village / The reaper asks for roses / To embellish his sombrero.]

— 3 — The Chorus in Rafael Alberti's Plays

The strong tie with classical tradition, expressed in the innovative forms of the Spanish literary production of the 1920s and 1930s, is strongly evident in the plays of the youngest among the poets of '27, Rafael Alberti; Alberti both befriended the authors of this group and shared their creative experience.

For instance, in the eight scenes (numbered from I to VIII) of *La Pájara pinta, Guirigay lírico-bufo-bailable, en un prólogo y tres actos* (1926) [*The Coloured She-Bird, a Lyric-Comic-Musical Pastiche in one Prologue and three Acts*], Alberti includes the Coro de personajes anónimos [Chorus of anonymous characters] in the *dramatis personae*, although the long and detailed initial stage direction clearly states that the chorus do not take part in the main action of the farce. This deals with the birthday party of the eponymous heroine and the love affairs of other characters, whose folk descent is apparent: "*Rodeando el árbol, todos los personajes de la farsa, a excepción del* Coro *y* Pipirigallo*, jugando al corro*" (Alberti 2003: 7) ["*All the characters of the farce play Ring-A-Ring o' Roses round the tree, except the Chorus and Pipirigallo*"].

Indeed, the chorus are active in the last two scenes, and are described as follows in the final stage direction of the sixth scene:

> *Por detrás de las tapias, de improviso, asoma la cabeza el* Coro de personajes anónimos. *Los seis hombres llevan la misma máscara: una careta plana, sin ojos y sin nariz, solamente con boca y grandes bigotes ladeados. Las seis mujeres, todas las máscaras iguales, planas, solamente con bocas inmensas, como rajas de sandía.* (Alberti 2003: 38)
>
> [*Behind the wall, the* Chorus of anonymous characters *suddenly raise their heads. The six men all wear the same mask, a plain one, without eyes or nostrils, only with a mouth and handlebar moustaches. The six women also wear plain masks, with enormous mouths resembling watermelon slices.*]

There are twelve characters, six men and six women, wearing identical masks, with big pointed moustaches to denote male figures and huge red

mouths, as big as watermelon slices, for feminine ones. The function of this chorus, in the finale of the farce, is to celebrate and reinforce the distinctive traits of a character whose popularity has lasted through time:

Coro ¡La Pájara pinta,
La Pájara pinta,
La Pájara pinta!
¡Verde salvadora
¡Verde bienhechora,
verde protectora!
Todos ¡Vivaaaaaaaaaaa!
(Alberti 2003: 43-4)

[Chorus The coloured She-Bird / The coloured She-Bird / The coloured She-Bird / Green[10] saviouress / Green benefactress / Green protectress! // Everybody Hooooooorayyyyyyyy!]

The brief seventh scene is entirely occupied by the Chorus, who talks with all the other characters, Todos [Everybody], exalting the immortality of the Coloured She-Bird, her gift of premonition and her redeeming role, celebrated in many playful folk *coplas* [ditties]:

Coro ¡Inmortal, como la tinta
de la mora del moral!
¡Gloria a la Pájara pinta!
Todos ¡Pinta, Pinta, Pinta, Pinta!
Coro ¡Tierna madre salvadora
y al sol, en el limonar,
cantaora adivinadora!
Todos ¡Dora, dora, dora, dora!
Coro ¡Cantemos su amor, cantemos,
¡Y de laureles y olivas
doce coronas bordemos!
Todos: ¡Viva, viva, viva, viva!
¡Giremos, aire, giremos!
(Alberti 2003: 38-39)

[Chorus Everlasting as the colour / Of blackberries in their bramble / Cheer the Coloured She-bird! // Everybody Bird, bird, bird, bird! // Chorus Tender loving helping mother / Our Songstress and Prophetess / Up the lemon tree in the sunshine! // Everybody Shine, shine, shine, shine! // Chorus Let us sing a song of love / Laurel twigs and olive branches / Let us twist into twelve wreaths! // Everybody Hooray, Hooray, Hooray, Hooray / Let's turn, let's turn, let's turn in the air!]

10. In Spanish the adjective 'verde' [green] applies to someone bold, especially sexually, and therefore it is ironically paired by antiphrasis with the terms "salvadora, bienhechora, protectora" ["saviouress, benefactress, protectress"].

In *Auto*[11] *de fe. Dividido en un gargajo y cuatro cazcarrias* [*Act of faith. Divided into a phlegm spit and four mud stains*] the author includes the chorus in the list of characters: Coro de cinco damas paralíticas [Chorus of five paralytic dames]. This *Auto de fe* is actually divided into "Primer Vómito e Segundo Vómito" ["First vomit and Second vomit"]. In my opinion the choice of this term, quite unusual in playwriting, must be ascribed to the rebellious nature of the young poets of this group, who never missed an opportunity to target their venerable masters (that is, the older generation of intellectuals, here symbolically shamed and burnt). In this play we find again the Parrot, as in Bergamín's *Farsa de los filólogos,* and also the doubles of Ortega y Gasset, Gómez de la Serna, Fernando Vela and other intellectuals and artists of the time; along with them we meet the Coro de cinco damas paralíticas, devoted fans of the Master (Ortega), from whom they eagerly expect a word of wisdom: "¡Maestro! Esperamos su palabra como un manjar divino" ["Master, we wait for your word as if it were bread from heaven"]. Unfortunately, "*Don Ortega y Gasset acaba de escapársele un grande y ruidosísimo pedo*" ["*Don Ortega y Gasset lets out an extremely noisy fart*"] at which "*La fina, alta y alegre Dama hace mutis llena de* vergüenza" (Alberti 2003: 159) ["*The tall, elegant and jolly Lady exits the stage, embarrassed*"].

This chorus do not speak or dance but simply perform characteristic actions, and never cease to suck their thumbs: "*se chupan el dedo*" ["*they suck their thumbs*"]. Their gestures effectively comment on the action and assist in filling the stage: for instance, in response to a "*coquetuela sonrisa del maestro*" ["*coquettish smile of the Master*"] the Ladies "*Sus labios se contraen en forma de culito de pollo. Su mano izquierda oprime el corazón. Sus ojos se amortiguan en éxtasis. Su boca vuelve a atirantarse*" (Alberti 2003: 179) ["*They pucker up their lips. They bring the left hand to their hearth. Their eyes turn ecstatic. They stretch their mouth again*"].[12]

In *Santa Casilda, Misterio en tres actos y un epílogo* [*Saint Casilda, Mystery play in three Acts and an Epilogue*], set in the eleventh century, there are many characters, listed before each act. The Chorus is never mentioned as such, but we can assume that its role is played by the united voices of characters who, in expressionist fashion, carry a generic name: soldier 1, soldier 2, soldier

11. The *auto* is a religious play of medieval origin, which later became an allegorical drama. The most famous and frequently staged examples are those from the Baroque Age, and especially the ones by Calderón de la Barca. In the years of avant-gardes, this theatrical form was reintroduced by various authors after centuries of neglect. This is not the only *auto* by Alberti; his most famous one is *El hombre deshabitado* [*The Uninhabited Man*].
12. The graphic and rhythmic effect of this chorus reminds of the characters of Bergamín's *Don Lindo* (1926): "tres curas vestidos de verde con exagerados sombreros de tejas, también verdes" ["three priests wearing green with enormous saturno hats, also green"].

3, PRISONER 1, PRISONER 2, PRISONER 3, SENTINEL 1, SENTINEL 2, SENTINEL 3, OR FIRST VOICE OF AN UNSEEN PRISONER AND SECOND VOICE OF AN UNSEEN PRISONER. The group of angels (ANGEL 1, ANGEL 2, ANGEL 3, ANGEL 4, ANGELS OF THE WALLS) acts as a declamatory or imploring chorus. This mode is repeated in many other plays by Alberti, such as, for instance, *La farsa de los Reyes Magos* [*The Farce of the Three Wise Men*].

In Spanish twentieth-century drama, the chorus is employed in many different ways which are not to be found in the contemporary European tradition. I refer, for example, to the peculiar instances present in the previously examined texts such as the object-characters (Coro de Fichas [Chorus of Cards]) or the countless animals in Bergamín's work, an actual 'zoo', worth of being looked at in its own right.

The strong influence exercised by music and dance (Sánchez 1994; Mateos 2002; Ambrosi 2010; Nommick and Álvarez Cañibano 2000) is apparent in the use of the chorus by Alberti and Bergamín, who were particularly concerned with the distribution in space of all the stage elements. The chorus achieved an important metatheatrical role of reflection on the forms in use in the early decades of the century, but, more than anything, it came to the fore as performing and rhythmical element (think of the chorus who do not sing nor speak in the *Auto de Fé* by Alberti) also with regard to its musical potential and capacity to contribute substantially to the organization of scenic space.

During the years that witnessed the blossoming of the artistic Avant-gardes in Europe, Spanish playwriting mirrored, on one hand, the playful, innovative and experimental aspects of the choral presence on stage, and on the other hand, the authors' deep-rooted determination to preserve their ties with the traditional forms they were studying, renovating and re-proposing. Besides, the chorus reinforced its crucial function of establishing a connection with the audience, while also giving a theatrical evidence of the increasingly prominent role of the mass, one of the most remarkable aspects of the social reality of the twentieth century.

Basically, the chorus keep performing their classical function, even though in more flexible forms than those typical of the rigorously structured ancient tragedy. They do not merely tell the background of the story, nor simply talk to the main character, but take on a more structural role while consistently witnessing to and commenting upon the action, with a typical ritual and ceremonial function.

In the farces the chorus exaggerate the comic elements, underlining faults or telling what other characters would like to pass over in silence. The chorus also emphasise the presence of a character on stage, or a particular situation

or issue, they express individual or collective feelings, and act as both epic and ethical commentator.

As we have seen, in Lorca's *pièces*, though no less innovative or choreographic, the choruses maintain a classical frame and help to create the balance of lyricism and realism typical of his poetics.

These twentieth-century choruses take part in and explain the action, but, above all, they dynamically connect events and characters, and, by posing often implicit and unanswered questions, they provide a link between the action on stage and the audience, thus taking over a metatheatrical function typical of the prologue (Ambrosi 1999). Future investigations into Lorca's theatre might usefully focus on the transfer of metatheatricality from the prologic paratext to text proper, prompting new research possibilities into the works of other contemporary playwrights. The use of the chorus led them to reflect upon the nature of drama, whether classical or experimental, and upon the scenic relevance of the chorus itself, which exploited to its full potential.

English translation by Carlo Vareschi

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