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Larra's Danse Macabre

That the dance constitutes the original form through which magic ritual expresses itself does not automatically justify its application to the analysis of the broader aesthetic design of Larra's articles.[1] However, such an approach becomes more plausible when one remembers Larra's own preoccupation with the dance, and in particular, the *baile de máscaras*, a motif which surfaces repeatedly during the course of his work and which suggests that he conceives of life itself, including his own existence, as a dance (See "El mundo es todo máscaras. Todo el año es Carnaval"). A still more concrete justification is provided if one accepts Kenneth Burke's statement to the effect that "the symbolic act is *the dancing of an attitude*,"[2] a view which can be related to the rich allegorical profile of Larra's work. When one reads through the pages of Larra's articles, one may indeed get the impression that the author is going through the motions of a dance, a grotesque dance which involves vigorous gestures and contortions designed to give plastic expression to deep feelings and preoccupations, a circular dance which revolves within the round of Spanish society and incorporates quick sallies and retreats, a playful dance which entails the donning of masks and is designed to taunt, amuse and shock, an ecstatic dance which becomes gradually more and more dizzying, and which eventually turns into a delirious self-centered spiral and climaxes in death.

In effect, we are confronted with a type of *danse macabre* which contains elements of the traditional literary and artistic theme of the same name, as well as a personal morbid dimension. During the late Middle Ages the dance of death made its appearance as an aesthetic motif in the visual arts and literatures of most European countries, and in Spain, in two anonymous works—the *Dança General* (about 1400) and *La Dança de la Muerte* (about 1520). It consisted simply of a round or procession of people in rhythmic motion, from which Death—the principal dancer—whirled away his victims one by one. These victims came from all levels of society, including the church and secular hierarchies, leaving out neither Pope nor sexton, judge nor legal clerk, butcher not beggar. Death confronts them with their wrongdoings, pulling away their hypocritical façades, before he takes them away. Often he employs irony and sarcasm, always his attack is sudden and unexpected, and always he inspires terror. His weapons are the arrow and the scythe, enabling him to carry out his task quickly and efficiently. Everyone is equalized by his treatment, all human vanity collapses before him, the only remaining hope for the souls of the dead residing in the glorification of God.[3]

In his own dance, Larra plays the role of the grim reaper. Like death he selects his victims from the round of figures that passes before his eyes and confronts them with their vices, stripping away their pretentions. Lawyers, politicians, doctors, tavern keepers, coach drivers, the *trapera*, the *portero*—men from all walks of life—are cut down by his agile, biting tongue, suddenly, quickly and devastatingly, as if by a scythe. Like death he inspires awe among humans (Ismael Sánchez Estevan describes him as "el más temido crítico de entonces" and as "el terror de los cómicos"[4]), and like death he becomes the great leveller, eliminating the empty forms of Spanish society, preparing the way for a hopeful spiritual revival. In the end, Larra himself becomes a victim of this dance, over which he seems to lose control, and whose elements turn against him. As "Colombine" expresses it: "Parece que la existencia se precipitaba con intensidad sobre él, que giraba bailando en rededor suyo una danza macabra y aterradora, en la que se justifican plenamente sus delirios de Nochebuena y de Día de Difuntos."[5] No longer is Larra the one who dominates life, but it is now life which dominates the author, a cadaverous life which revolves around him grotesquely (see "El Día de difuntos 1836" where Larra is engulfed by the specters of Spain's institutions). It is this debased life which finally penetrates through his own façade, confronting him with his own pretentions (the servant who criticizes Fígaro's idealism in "La Nochebuena de 1836"), ultimately smothering his spirit. The traditional *danse macabre* has become Larra's own dance of death.

The rhythm of Larra's articles reinforces the idea of the *danse macabre*. Many of Larra's pieces are characterized by an episodic rhythm—especially those of the voodoo-ceremony type, in which Larra lines up his victims one by one and figuratively stabs them, and those having a picaresque format,

where he moves from scene to scene, attacking different aspects of society. Such arrangements remind one of Holbein's famous series of 16th century etchings depicting the *danse macabre*. The quick pulse of Larra's prose, produced by constant verbal and syntactic repetition and by sentences of extraordinary length into which are compressed a great variety of ideas, adds further motion to his articles. Ecstasy is suggested by a gradual acceleration of the narrative rhythm which resembles a feature of the dance named *stretta*, defined as "the intoxicating development of speed in the course of the dance, the increase of gesture from quiet and reserve at the beginning to the most reckless abandon."[6] This happens notably in "Día de difuntos 1836", which begins in a contemplative mood expressed in several leisurely paragraphs, then continues with the narrator's emotional arousal and physical wandering through the streets of Madrid—an action which is framed within much shorter phrases; the article culminates in the author's complete self-abandonment in the final paragraphs, which consist of a series of staccato exclamations. On the whole, the swiftness of Larra's rhythm adds to the compulsive, morbid air of his *danse macabre*, emphasizing its horrifying effect, particularly in his last pieces.

Larra's writings also may be said to reflect the choreographical patterns of the *danse macabre*. There are two patterns which appear in the traditional versions of this dance—the circular one of the round, and the linear one of the procession. In many of his pieces Larra starts out from his office or dwelling, makes the rounds of Madrid, so to speak, and having carried out his observations, returns to his original starting point. Thus the impression of a society which engulfs him is created, and specifically of a gallery of human types, which passes by his critical eye in rotation. This impression becomes particularly accentuated in "Día de difuntos 1836", owing to the peculiar setting of that piece, which in itself emphasizes the theme of death; Madrid, on this holiday, is devoid of its inhabitants, who have repaired to the cemetery; it becomes an empty stage on which the ghosts of past Spanish grandeur perform their circular dance, Larra in their middle. The linear pattern of the *danse macabre* finds expression in the form of the procession, and it, too, characterizes a good number of Larra's pieces, such as "Empeños y desempeños", where Larra stands in the shadow of a pawnshop and observes a series of types who enter one after another to strike, for the most part, sordid bargains, or "¿Entre qué gentes estamos?", where Larra, in the company of a friend, passes through a sequence of unsavory social situations, beginning in one location and ending in another. Notably the linear pattern occurs more often in Larra's earlier articles, which suggests a more detached, emotionally collected approach, while the round dance is particularly conspicuous in his final pieces ("Día de difuntos 1836" and "La Nochebuena de 1836"), suggesting frenzy and emotional abandon.

The fact that the *danse macabre* was originally a phenomenon of the waning Middle Ages is of no small significance in regard to Larra, for like that period of history, Larra's own epoch is a time of transition, marked by the crumbling of an established order, giving rise to violent contradictions between old and new values, and bringing with it spiritual disenchantment. Joël Saugnieux states in this regard: "Dans les *Danses macabres*, nous assistons à l'éclosion de ces états d'âme d'un genre jusque-là inconnu: d'un côté la mélancolie, la délectation morose qui pointent à l'intérieure même de toutes les joies terrestres; de l'autre l'ironie, la raillerie qui sont la preuve d'une désillusion, d'une peine profonde que la promesse de l'Au-delà ne peut plus soulager."[7] Larra displays the same complex of symptoms—disillusionment and habitual melancholy on the one hand, and mocking irony on the other—all of which are channelled into his own *danse macabre*. Death constituting the focus of this dance, it serves to underline the destructive orientation of Larra's ritual as a whole, also adding to it a special dynamic quality which transforms his articles into a vivid spectacle. Paradoxically Larra's dance of death also testifies to his creative drives: the very idea of dynamic action implies a will to change the world, to bring about renewal, a dimension which is accentuated by Larra's use of masks.[8] Andreas Lommel observes: "The effect of the mask lies in the deliberate opposition of a strict stylization and movement, often of a grotesque nature. That is to say, the 'mask-like' stiffness of the face is consciously opposed to the movements of the dance. In this way a creative moment from primaeval times is, as it were, relived. All forms of art among primitive peoples are attempts to recapture the creative impulse of primaeval days."[9] To recapture a creative impulse may also be said to lie at the heart of Larra's ritual, which represents

an attempt to stimulate a spiritual, social and cultural renewal of Spain, a Spain which is steeped in paralysis during Larra's time and in which creative vigor is sadly lacking.

Just as the traditional *danse macabre* was directed against the social establishment, and in particular the church, signifying the emergence of a popular pagan culture,[10] so Larra's dance adds to the subversive orientation of his ritual. Not only is this implied in the theme of destruction, but also in the idea of motion, which can be correlated with change and with a liberal-progressive ideology, whereas stasis and stagnation are linked to conservatism and an established order. Significantly also, the dance is usually associated with the young and rebellious and is considered sinful by the religious establishment, if not by the secular one. Concerning Larra's personal strife for spiritual transcendence, one may say that it is boldly underlined by the idea of the dance. Through symbolic gestures and motions, and through an ecstatic rhythm, Larra may be said to achieve a measure of liberation from a world which represents a prison. As we observe Larra whirling through his articles, wearing the masks of Duende, Bachiller and Fígaro, we indeed have the impression that he moves on an elevated plane, a level on which he communicates with higher spirits and enjoys a supernatural freedom, and although complete spiritual liberation is ultimately denied him, we feel that, through his dance, he achieves at least a temporary transport. This effect communicates itself to the reader and carries him along irresistibly. Besides this charismatic dimension which it adds to Larra's articles, the further function of the *danse macabre* is to impress the reader with the extremely serious purposes that underlie Larra's ritual, playful as it may sometimes seem. Larra is not merely a good-natured jester, as some might think—he is genuinely disillusioned, and the depth of this disillusionment can be measured by the death theme which becomes the focus of his dance.

Larra's *danse macabre* helps to distinguish him from the other *costumbristas*, with whom he is usually grouped. The dynamism and agitation which are concomittants of that dance are entirely lacking in such writers as Addison, Jouy, Feijoo, Cadalso, Mesonero Romanos, Estébanez Calderón and Miñano (although Feijoo speaks with great oratorical momentum). Death and disillusionment are furthermore absent in these authors—at least to the degree to which they are manifest in Larra (Cadalso's melancholy, although it foreshadows Larra's, is comparatively mild). Instead Larra's *danse macabre*, and the anguish which it reflects, brings him close to the romantic writers and to the *mal du siècle* from which they suffer, and which they often express in a similar form. Thus the climax of Espronceda's *El Estudiante de Salamanca* consists of a *danse macabre*, as does the beginning of *El Diablo Mundo*, expressing a vision of the world which in tenor and intensity parallels that of Larra. Rather than merely a chronicler, Larra is a poet—a man with profound insights which he expresses dynamically as is reflected in his *danse macabre*.

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FOOTNOTES

1. The present article is an excerpt from Reinhard Teichmann's doctoral dissertation "Larra: Satire as a Magical Purification of Spain", which interprets Larra's journalistic work in terms of magic ritual. By 'magic ritual' one may understand 'symbolic action' with a pragmatic purpose. In the case of Larra, this purpose is spiritual, social and political change. "Larra's Danse Macabre" deals, in particular, with the manner in which this symbolic action towards cultural change is expressed, that is to say, it deals with certain aspects of Larra's style.

2. *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1973), p. 9.

3. Information regarding the *danse macabre* has been drawn from Joel Saugnieux, *Les Danses Macabres de France et d'Espagne et leurs Prolongements Littéraires* (Paris: Société d'Édition "Les Belles Lettres", 1972).

4. *Mariano José de Larra (Fígaro)* (Madrid: Impresión de Lib. y casa edit. Hernando, 1934), p. 98.

5. Carmen de Burgos ("Colombine"), *"Fígaro." Revelaciones, "ella" descubierta, epistolario inédito* (Madrid: Imprenta de "Alrededor del Mundo", 1919), p. 224.

6. Curt Sachs, *World History of the Dance* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1937), p. 25.
7. Saugnieux, *op cit.*, p. 108.
8. References are made to his pseudonyms: Duende, Bachiller, and Fígaro.
9. *Masks: their Meaning and Function* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972), p. 219.
10. Saugnieux, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

A Laughing Matter

Le pregunto:
"¿Por qué no entierran las flores muertas?"

Responde el viejo afónico de tabaco:
"Pasan esas cosas cuando uno es joven."
Y se limpia la nariz en la manga.

Me pregunto:
"Frágiles flores muertas de vida, tiradas al azar,
Límpidas lámparas eclipsadas, descargadas al azar,
¿Peor no pensar en ellas?"

Y con las manos callosas y los labios secos
Me apresuro a beber la amiga cerveza para
No perder el próximo tren,
Rítmico relámpago engrasado,
Que anda hacia atrás,
Fáciles vagones en eclosión, eslabonados al mar.

Pero
¿Por qué no entierran las flores muertas?

Me pregunto . . .

Charles Driskell
Mayo de 1977,
Buenos Aires