

*The Ingenious
Gentleman and Poet
Federico García Lorca
Ascends to Hell*

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CARLOS ROJAS

TRANSLATED BY EDITH GROSSMAN

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For Marina and Sandro Vasari, with the gratitude of C.R.

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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

The road to this translation of Carlos Rojas's *The Ingenious Gentleman and Poet Federico García Lorca Ascends to Hell* was a circuitous one. I first read the novel about thirty years ago, not long after its 1980 publication in Spanish. I was a fairly new translator then, and I kept thinking how wonderful it would be to translate the book and bring it to the attention of an English-speaking readership. As it turned out, I had to wait three decades for that hope to become a reality, but it did, finally, thanks to the Margellos World Republic of Letters and Yale University Press. During all that time I never forgot this extraordinary novel: its breathtaking originality, devastating evocation of historical figures, and sharp-eyed re-creation of the period preceding the Spanish Civil War. The constant explosive violence led to the murder in 1936, soon after the right-wing military coup that started the war, of Federico García Lorca, one of Spain's leading poets and playwrights. He became Spain's best-known martyr, a victim of history run amok.

Rojas has many talents, but one of his great gifts as a novelist is his seamless blending of a meticulously researched historical background (all the characters, with the exception of Sandro and Marina Vasari, are based on actual people) with a highly inventive view of the possibilities of fiction. The novel is filled with figures who walk off the stage of history and into the pages of the book: Antonio Machado, the exceptional poet of the generation just before Lorca's; Rafael Alberti, Lorca's contemporary and fellow member of the Generation of 1927; Salvador Dalí, the great surrealist painter; José Antonio Primo de Rivera, founder of the Falange, the Spanish imitation of

Mussolini's Fascist Party. I've cited only a very few of the literary, artistic, and political personalities who populate this variation on the life of García Lorca and the catastrophe of Spain.

Rojas's debt to Cervantes, the forebear of European fiction, is deep, and it is clearly acknowledged: "ingenious gentleman" is the phrase Cervantes used to describe his protagonist in the title of his genre-defining work. It was in Part Two of *Don Quixote*, published in 1615, ten years after Part One, and just a year after the appearance of an anonymous, bogus continuation of the knight's adventures—what has come to be known as the "false *Quixote*"—that Cervantes took a kind of metaphysical leap through the novelistic looking glass he himself had created and gave obviously fictional characters (Quixote and Sancho) the presence and dimensionality of those other personages who *seem* to be real and are intended to help create verisimilitude, the appearance of truth that was, for Cervantes, the goal of fiction. Since the landscape of *Don Quixote* evokes a contemporary reality and a good number of historically factual people and events, it doesn't require much for the reader to suspend disbelief and accept the actuality of the nobles, peasants, innkeepers, servants, friars, travelers, soldiers, ladies, and outlaws the knight and his squire encounter on their travels. In one of the uncommon inns that stud this seventeenth-century countryside, two gentlemen are reading and discussing the sham continuation, but the "real" Quixote and Sancho, who know, remarkably, of the existence of Part One, which recounts their adventures, overhear their conversation and disabuse them of the false *Quixote's* authenticity. The profound ambiguity created here is the legitimate forerunner not only of Rojas's novelistic creation but of most, if not all, of the experimental fiction in our own time.

In *The Ingenious Gentleman* we encounter a unique vision of hell and eternity; heaven doesn't enter into the equation, unless it's the reward of total unconsciousness and loss of self-awareness that may be the outcome of each damned soul's impending trial. In the the-

aters of the damned lining a corridor that ascends the spiral, we discover two alternative endings to García Lorca's life. These variations are physically embodied as aged versions of the younger poet (Lorca was thirty-eight when he was killed), who materialize in his theater and assert their reality. In the second decade of the twentieth century, Luigi Pirandello (*Six Characters in Search of an Author*) and Miguel de Unamuno (*Mist*) walked this path as well, giving imagined characters the status of those who imagine them, but I think Rojas's foray into hyperspeculation is more extensive and closer to the Cervantean imagination. He novelizes himself and slowly becomes a significant presence in the action. The creation of a fictionalized version of the real author also has its roots in *Don Quixote*, where Cervantes's prologue to Part One involves an imagined version of himself and a friend who helps him write the dreaded, obligatory introduction to the novel. Rojas's alter ego (C.R. in *The Ingenious Gentleman*) isn't more solid than the characters in the novel and, in fact, almost begins to blur as Marina and Sandro Vasari come to the realization that they are his creation.

In a recent e-mail, Carlos Rojas described his book in a characteristically enigmatic manner. His remarks foreshadow the fiction you are about to read and are a kind of preview of his sharp, direct style and stunning imagination:

In death's eternal curvature of space time there is no absolute certainty. In the small hours of either August 18th or August 19th, 1936, a fascist firing squad shot Federico García Lorca between the villages of Viznar and Alfacar, some six miles northwest of Granada. . . .

Needless to add, the proven mortal remains of any of the three Lorcas have never been disinterred in the historical present. Moreover, toward the end of the book, two new characters vainly try to decline its authorship with fictitious arguments. Meanwhile, an unusual hoarfrost and menacing hailstorm as-

sail Atlanta, Georgia, of all places. François Villon, another poet who lived five centuries before Lorca and also vanished from earth without a trace, would have said that poetry, or for that matter narratives, are but lost snows that once covered a vanished past.

You are about to discover a wonderful writer who will take you to places you've never imagined in ways you never dreamed possible. Enjoy the trip.

EDITH GROSSMAN
New York

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THE SPIRAL

I thought the dead were blind, like the ghost of that Gypsy girl in one of my poems, who peered into the cistern in the garden and didn't see things when they were looking at her.

I was wrong. For the dead everything is unanimous presence at a perpetually unreachable distance. All you lived, all you thought, any chimera fantasized on earth becomes at once possible and inaccessible in hell. It's enough to evoke an event or a dream for it to be immediately represented, with perfect precision, in this almost darkened theater where I suffer alone, perhaps for eternity.

Imagine a solitude that is perhaps interminable in a large orchestra section I share with no one. Through two transoms on the tapestry-covered walls comes a very cold light, between amber and alabaster. It barely outlines the backs of the empty seats, covered in turn in ash-colored velvet. With time and in this almost total gloom, I grew accustomed to making out the stage with its long arch and deep proscenium. There the front curtain and backdrop are always raised or perhaps do not exist. On the boards—real boards—the absent becomes present when my desire conjures up mirages of memories, readings, or reveries. If I were to tell you everything I have seen again, and you could hear me, you'd believe that we who are dead are mad.

Right now I see, because I wanted to, the aurora borealis over the Edem Mills lake, lighting up schools of red fish at the bottom of a stand of bulrushes snowy with minute white snails, just as I contemplated it in the summer of 1928 or 1929, in mid-August. I see that caveman, the same one who painted the bison at Altamira and in

our world was the Nazi sculptor Arno Breker, after Jules Verne found him in the middle of one of his novels and at the center of the earth. Still in the brilliance of the aurora that sets the night and the fish ablaze with its most fiery red, I see Julius Caesar (a Julius Caesar whom I always imagined resembling Ignacio Sánchez Mejías) reciting unrhymed couplets of satanic pride: “I’d rather be first in a village / than second in Rome.”

In the same mix of resuscitated memories, visions of other reveries of mine appear at the edge of the lake and in the middle of the stage. I see Achilles the swift-footed, a pederast too for love of Patrocles. Centuries before Caesar was conceived and in some reading of my adolescence, I learned what he said to Ulysses when he went down to visit him in hell: “Don’t try to console me for my death. It’s better to serve a beggar than rule over all the dead.”

Only now, dead and in this theater, do I understand Caesar’s source when he plagiarized that unrhymed couplet after deforming it to the bombastic measure of his pride. In the final analysis, I suppose that power on earth is always reduced to this: to plagiarism. In other words, which are those of the learned men of the Royal Academy of the Castilian Language, to the subjugation of free men into slaves or the abduction of other men’s servants to make them one’s own. Nothing more but nothing less either. Know this.

With a voice that comes from the obscure roots of a scream and from this corner of eternity, I would like to shriek at you the despair of Achilles in the kingdom of shades. To tell you in a shout, even though you might not be able to hear me, that it is better to be the lowest of men, a beggar, a hangman’s apprentice, a lackey, or an all-powerful despot, than to be king of the dead. A monarch preceding time, light, space, and silence itself, an absolute sovereign as eternal as the void, the master and creator of hell, who must reign over all the dead even though we don’t know his name and his face.

Any instant of my fleeting, precipitate life, any of the moments now present and impossible on the stage in this theater, is better than

immortality in hell. Even if the dead have nothing and aren't anyone, I'd give everything to really relive the simplest or most terrible of those hours that have fled, even the moment of my own death at the hands of my fellow men. To tread again with my own footsteps, the measure of my liberty for I could take them or not, the rainbow on the asphalt of Manhattan after the last summer rains, while the street burns in long gleaming striations that resemble agate in the twilight. Dazzling streams at the feet of the line of unemployed waiting for Al Capone's charity soup at Saint Patrick's refectory. To return to the Café Alameda, where I saw Ignacio Sánchez Mejías for the first time on earth, before people and pride separated us. To hear him say again: "Do you know what Pepe-Hillo replied, when he was fat, old, and suffering from gout and they advised him to abandon bullfighting? I'LL LEAVE HERE ON MY OWN TWO FEET, THROUGH THE MAIN GATE, HOLDING MY GUTS IN MY HANDS."

The magic of free will in hell incarnates those memories on stage. Still, the flashes from the past are always painted, not live. If I go up on the boards, so often confused by their apparent veracity, they vanish immediately at my approach. As a *fata morgana* flees before you tread on it, or vampires turn to ash at dawn. The proscenium and set are empty beneath the arch and raised curtains. The light from the transoms, which recalls amber or alabaster, illuminates only my shadow on stage. The useless shadow of a dead man, alone in eternity with the mirage of his memories.

In reality there was no encounter between Ulysses and Achilles in Hades either. A blind man merely dreamed it for us. Death is a solitary confinement where each of the dead has an empty theater along the spiral of hell. That is the tragedy of immortality before the spectacle of what has been lived: not ever being able to share it with anyone, as if I were the only man who has lived in vain on earth. Or just the opposite, as if I were the only dead man in the world. Imagine Robinson Crusoe on his island, or better yet, imagine him on the head of a pin, suddenly realizing that in the middle of the

night and the universe he is completely alone, as if he were the guilty conscience of all creation. That is the fate of each of us.

You who are alive, who caress the back of a cat or a woman and see the sparks from the stroke of your hand, you fear death because you think it means the loss of consciousness. This may be the greatest irony of human reason in the void of an irrational firmament. You will never be able to imagine the martyrdom of living eternally awake. All I want now is to renounce immortality. To sleep at last and to sleep forever, free of words, memories, even dreams. "Now I shall go to sleep," said Byron in his agony, as he turned to the side his profile worthy of a Roman coin on a cot in Misolonghi, where he died in vain for the freedom of Greece. DORMEZ read the stone on a mass grave of those guillotined in the name of reason and the rights of man.

Vanity of vanities of a species that has not always been human and perhaps is destined to cease being human! Chosen from a time before all times, to be transformed the day after tomorrow into the fish in the Edem Mills lake lit by the aurora borealis in the Vermont night! You are condemned to be immortal. To endure awake, insomniac, and alone forever because this void where you dissolve and come to an end does not exist. It has never existed and this is the greatest irony of our fate! Know this!

"Death terrifies me," I once told Rafael Alberti and María Teresa León, I don't know if it was years or centuries ago. The three of us were standing in a field of flowering teasel before the Castle of Maqueda. In their luminous youth, in the sun of a resplendent Sunday, they both seemed to have come from a Florentine altarpiece. Alberti shook that profile of his, which like Byron's you would say had been minted into imperial sesterces. He replied that he could not decide when he thought about which would be the greater of two horrors, the uncertainty of our fate in death or its interminable eternity. I interrupted him and said that whatever might happen to me after I was dead, whether it was nothingness, the lucid bliss anticipated by

Fray Luis de León, or a medieval hell, didn't matter to me. My panic, my absolute terror was simply the loss of my self: the inevitable renunciation of all I had been and who I had been until then. I never could have imagined, as perhaps no one in the world ever has, that death was in fact a sentence to be precisely who we were, fully conscious of ourselves, through all of time and perhaps beyond days and centuries.

That night, thinking perhaps about Rafael and María Teresa in the middle of the field, I wrote one of my sonnets of dark love. I learned afterward that it was interpreted as a poem of love for a man, because in my country nothing and no one has ever been judged correctly. In reality it was the expression of my old terror, just as I had stated it before the Castle of Maqueda. Desperation at the certainty I felt then that one day I would cease to be who I was among my fellow humans. In the long run, the poem was about irrevocable love though the loved one was me: that poor creature with his burning consciousness, like a match lit at the center of the world, condemned to disappear and be negated. That is what I believed then, though in hell I laugh when I remember it.

And I laugh at and am ashamed of the poem, which like others of mine I could recite from memory. It said that if the coolness of linen and ivy ruled the mortal body, the one that would be snatched from me along with life, my profile would become the long unashamed silence of a crocodile on the sands of eternity. Its irrational expression, the only one adequate to the senselessness of my human fate, withdrew into apparently more intelligible forms in the final tercets. Rhyming *llama* (flame) with *retama* (flowering broom), I declared that my kisses numb with cold would not be made of fire in death but of dry, frozen broom. Free of meters and unities (with a touch of fairly insincere resignation), I foretold that I would be invisible, divided between glacial branches and grieving dahlias.

In reality, hell is a desert very different from the one sketched in that sonnet. It is a spiral, perhaps interminable, in which each of the

dead has an empty theater with its curtains raised. I can leave mine whenever I choose through the paneled door that opens with a touch of my hand at one end of the auditorium. Outside, a corridor about ten paces wide slopes upward, which I have walked to the point of exhaustion and which forms part of an arc whose radius I cannot imagine, for the slope of the ground, though real, is almost unnoticeable. From the gradient curve I deduced that an infinite number of turns followed one another around the same center. On the walls of the corridor the transoms of the theater are repeated, fairly far apart but equidistant. The same chrysoberyl light, emanating from I don't know where, keeps the orchestra section and the covered passage in identical semidarkness.

At times I stopped to think about the dimensions of hell. It must grow indefinitely, in constantly opening turns, adding new theaters for each new arrival. And it probably won't close until the last human being comes here, and by then the spiral will be the size of the universe. Don't ask me why or how I've come up with this calculation. I never went past adding on my fingers or multiplying next to the sign of X, but I'd swear I had the dimensions of hell right. Concluded and closed off, it would be as high and vast as the firmament. You could even say that then it would represent another firmament, invisible and parallel to our skies and constellations, empty of humans.

Like the transoms in the passage, the theaters on this spiral are equidistant. Farther along the corridor, a few hundred paces from my orchestra, is another identical one with the same stage opened at the back. I was there on several occasions but never could detect anyone in the auditorium, before I became certain that each of the dead is invisible to the eyes of all the others in hell. Whoever is there, for I sense that someone is being punished in that place, probably doesn't evoke his life or his dreams too frequently, for the boards, beyond the proscenium and above the orchestra, are always empty. Even though we cannot see one another, perhaps by virtue of the design that subjects us to this solitude, the visions of our

memories or the memories of our illusions are in fact visible when presented on stage.

The next theater, a replica of the previous one and of mine, just as one tear duplicates another, does serve as the setting for representations. Someone consumes eternity there, devoting himself to strange memories. Through the uncurtained arch, behind the proscenium, a northern city appears. One of those Baltic cities redolent of salt and sun, its light so brilliant and unreal it hurts your eyes beneath the lazy flight of seagulls. Towers, windows, trees, and clouds gleam like precious stones at the heart of a delirium. The houses have red tile roofs onto which discouraged gulls descend, shrieking, while in the distance a flock of storks flies south. On a frozen pond, children wearing caps of scarlet wool glide in ice skates. Gentlemen stroll in top hats along the shore, monocles attached to their lapels, escorting blonde, white-skinned women with blue eyes, their hands hidden in fur muffs. Lights begin to go on in garrets under sloping roofs. Sleepy goblins unwillingly rush to hide under beds and at the bottoms of cedar chests. In large cases of carved wood displaying cornucopias and gilded inlays, all the clocks strike the same hour, while a smiling old man roasts chestnuts at the fireplace in a drawing room. In another room, a lank-haired, extremely thin student in a frock coat and spats cuts out paper dolls with a tailor's scissors for a little girl, while the scent of elderberry fills the air. Behind the windows of a shop, a cobbler polishes a pair of boots and sings as he works. His is a sad, languid melody that tells of the loves of roots formed by the mandrake in southern lands where men don't believe in Satan. In the distance a herd of reindeer passes, their horns twisted, their lips pink with cold, their fur covered in frost. In a cabin two hunters warm their frozen hands over a pot where eucalyptus seeds are boiling. The brilliance of many snows has darkened their faces, and they wear sheepskin jackets with curved knives hanging from the waist. In a tavern at the port, fishermen with green eyes and black beards drink dark beer. They are broad shouldered though somewhat hunch-

backed, and long scars crisscross their palms. The mounted head of a polar bear looks at them from the wall with its pink glass eyes. In the same living retable an elf in a nightshirt that is too long climbs the stairs of a bell tower, while the back of his shirt trails along the treads and risers of the steps. He carries a lit candle in one hand and a gold umbrella in the other. Brushes and brooms on his shoulder, a chimney sweep crosses the street paved with polished round stones. He is dressed all in black, and his very high top hat of German patent leather is pulled around his ears, like Raskolnikov before his crimes. He passes in front of a bronze statue of a king and queen whose endless shadow extends across the ice to the center of the lake. The monarchs are wrapped in ermine beneath the ruff of their collars and hold scepters in hands crossed on their chests, like the recumbent figures of other sovereigns lying on their tombs. Gulls rest on their shoulders and the wind from the Baltic whips their impassive faces, while evening descends across an amber sky.

Now everything suddenly changes on stage. The city has been transformed into an Italian villa, perhaps from the Renaissance. Next to a large window, a gentleman contemplates the dusk and sips distractedly from a glass of port. His trimmed, graying beard gives him a certain similarity to a figure by Veronese in *The Wedding Feast at Cana*. Perhaps to Aretino, who looks up to the heavens after the miracle is complete. In a darkened leather baroque chair with carved armrests sits an old woman in mourning who may be his mother, to judge by their vague resemblance. Through lace cuffs one can catch glimpses of her tiny white hands, furrowed with blue veins. In her right hand she squeezes a Mechelen handkerchief as she reprimands the nobleman in a German I don't understand. The same salmon-pink late afternoon shines through the windows of a painter's studio where a cardinal is posing. His mouth has the implacable expression of one who has seen the ghosts of poisoned popes slipping at Advent through the labyrinths of the Vatican rose garden. Very soon, in the semidarkness, his habits will flame like embers