

SPANISH CRADLE SONGS
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ULTRAMARINOS DE LUCAS



Federico García Lorca gave the lecture Spanish Cradle songs on the 13th of December 1928, at Residencia de Estudiantes, in Madrid.

Ladies and gentlemen

In this lecture, I do not wish, as in previous ones, to illustrate, but rather to intimate. Enliven in the precise sense of the word, strike somnolent birds. Wherever there is a dark corner, cast the reflection of a long cloud, and present the ladies in attendance with compact mirrors.

I have chosen to go down to the rushy riverbank. Beneath the yellow roof tiles, on the way out of villages, where the tiger eats up the children.

At this moment, I am a long way from the poet who checks his watch; a long way from the poet who does battle with the statue, who does battle with sleep, who does battle with anatomy.

I have run away from all of my friends and today I go off with that boy who eats his fruit green and watches as the ants devour the bird flattened by the automobile.

On the purest streets of the village you will find me; on the virgin air and the drawn out light of melodies. Anywhere there opens the tender pink ear of a boy, or the white ear of a girl who fearfully awaits the pin that will open up the hole for an earring.

On every trip I have made through Spain, grown tired of cathedrals of dead stone, and soulful landscapes, I set about seeking living, lasting elements, in which the moment is not frozen, which live in the tremulous present. Of the countless in existence, I have followed two: sweets and songs. While a cathedral remains fixed in its age, offering up a continuous expression of yesterday to the ever-moving landscape, a song suddenly leaps from that yesterday into our moment in time, alive and filled with pulsing, like a frog, bringing the living light of ancient hours through the breath of melody.

All of these fine people who travel are most bunglingly confused. In order to understand Granada's Alhambra, for example, rather than touring its courtyards and rooms, it is much more useful, more pedagogical, to eat the delicious cakes: alfajores of Zafra or the tortas alajú made by the nuns of Santiago, which capture the fragrance and the flavour, the true climate of the palace when it was alive, as well as the ancient light and the sensual spirit of its court.

In melody, as in sweets, the emotion of history takes refuge, the permanent light, free of dates or events. Love and the breeze of our country are carried in the music or the delicious nougat of turrón, bringing living life from dead ages, unlike stones, bells, and even the language.

A ballad is most certainly not perfect until it has acquired its own melody, which lends it blood and palpitation, and the severe or erotic air within which the characters move.

Latent melody, with its structure of nerve centres and blood vessels, brings the living warmth of history

to words, which can sometimes be empty and other times have no more value than that of simple evocations.

Some years ago, walking in the vicinity of Granada, I heard a village woman singing her child to sleep. I had always been aware of the keen sadness of our country's lullabies, but I had never felt that truth so tangibly as I did then. When I approached the singer to note down the song, I observed that she was a pretty happy Andalusian woman, without the least hint of melancholy, but a living tradition was acting within her and she executed the command faithfully, as if listening to the old imperious voices that slid through her blood.

Since then, I have tried to collect lullabies from every part of Spain. I wanted to know how the women of my country got their kids to sleep, and after some time, I gained the impression that Spain uses her most strikingly sad melodies and most melancholy lyrics to colour the early sleep of the children. This is not a question of one model, or a single song in a region, no. Every region accentuates its poetic nature and reservoir of sadness in this type of song form, from Asturias and Galicia to Andalusia and Murcia, with the saffron and recumbent style of Castile in between.

Among us, the Basques strike a European chord in their lullabies, with an identical lyricism to those of the northern region, and full of tenderness and kind simplicity.

There is a type of gentle and monotone European lullaby to which the child can delightedly surrender, deploying all his aptitude for sleep. France and Germany offer typical examples

The European lullaby has no other object than to get the child to sleep, without, like the Spanish, seeking at the same time to wound his sensibilities.

The rhythm and monotone of these lullabies I label as "European" can make them appear melancholic, but they are not so in themselves. They are melancholic by chance, like a jet of water or the trembling leaves at a given moment. We should not mistake monotone for melancholy. And so the heart of Europe hangs long grey curtains before the children so that they will sleep peacefully. Twin virtues of wool and sheep's bell. With the greatest tact.

Even the Russian lullabies I know, which bear the oblique and sad Slavic undertone -cheekbones and distance- of all their music, do not have the cloudless clarity of the Spanish songs, our deep strokes, our moving simplicity.

The sadness of the Russian lullabies can be endured by the child, as one endures a foggy day beyond the windows.

---*Baiuski Baiu*---

The sadness of the Russian lullabies can be endured by the child, as one endures a foggy day beyond the windows.

But not in Spain. Spain is a country of sharp outlines. There are no blurred boundaries across which one can flee to the other world. Everything is drawn and marked out in the most precise manner. A corpse is more a corpse in Spain than anywhere else the world. And anyone who wants to make the leap into sleep will injure his feet on the razor's edge.

Please do not think that I have come to speak of 'black' Spain, tragic Spain, a far too hackneyed cliché. But the landscape of the regions that most typically represent it, which are those where Castilian is spoken, has the same hard tone, and the same lean air of the songs that spring from it.

We will always have to acknowledge that Spain's beauty is not serene, sweet, collected, but rather ardent, scorched, excessive, some times sightless; beauty without the light of an intelligent schema to support it and which, blinded by its own brilliance, bangs its head against the walls.

Yet even within this sober sadness and rhythmic fury, Spain has cheerful singing, jokes, songs of delicate erotism and delightful madrigals.

How is that the cruellest, the least suitable for delicate sensibilities has been reserved to lull the children to sleep?

Let us not forget that the lullaby was invented –and its words express this- by poor women whose children are a burden to them, a heavy cross which they often cannot bear. Each child, rather than being a joy, is a sorrow, and naturally, they cannot help but sing to them, even in spite of their love, of their apathy towards life.

There are literal examples of this situation, of this resentment of the child, although desired by the mother, who has come at a time when he should absolutely not have come. In Asturias, they sing this in the village of Navia.

*This little boy clinging so
is from a lover, Vitorio
May God, who gave him, end my woe
take this Vitorio clinging so*

And the melancholy with which it is sung is in keeping with the wretched sadness of the verses.

It is the poor women who feed this melancholic bread to their children and it is they who carry it with them to the houses of the wealthy.

The wealthy child gets the poor woman's lullaby, at the same time as she gives him her simple rustic milk, marrow of the land.

These wet nurses, along with maids, have long been performing the extremely important task of bringing ballad, song and story into the homes of the aristocracy and bourgeoisie. The children of the wealthy know of Gerineldo, of Don Bernardo, of Tamar and of the lovers of Teruel thanks to these

admirable maids and wet nurses who come down from the hills or along our rivers to give us our first lesson in the history of Spain, and brand our flesh with the bitter motto of Iberia:

“Alone you are, and alone you shall live”.

These are several important factors involved in getting the child to sleep. If of course, we have the consent of the fairies. It is the fairies who provide the anemones and the temperature. The mother and the song supply the rest.

All of us who feel the child to be nature’s supreme spectacle, those of us who believe that there is no flower, number or silence comparable to him, have often observed how on falling asleep, without anything or anyone demanding his attention, he turns his face from the starched breast of the wet nurse (that small trembling volcanic mountain of milk and blue veins) and gazes with staring eyes out at the room hushed for his sleep. “She’s here” I always say, and sure enough, she is.

In 1917, I was fortunate enough to see a fairy in the bedroom of a small boy, a cousin of mine. It was one hundredth of a second, but I saw her. I mean, I saw her... as one sees pure things situated on the fringes of our circulating blood, out of the corner of the eye, like the great poet Juan Ramón Jiménez saw mermaids on his return from America. He saw them as they were just submerging.

This fairy was perched on the curtain, resplendent, as if dressed in a partridge eye outfit, but I find it impossible to recall her size or her expression. Nothing would be easier for me than to invent her myself; but that would be poetic deceit of the highest order, never poetic creation, and I do not wish to deceive anyone.

I speak with neither humour nor irony, I speak with the deep-rooted faith only possessed by the poet, the child and the utter fool.

When fairies have created the atmosphere, two rhythms are needed: the physical rhythm of the cradle or chair and the intellectual rhythm of the melody. The mother joins these two rhythms for the body and for the ear, using different beats and rests she combines them until she achieves that exact tone to delight the child.

There is no need for the song to have words. Sleep comes with the rhythm alone and the vibration of the voice. The perfect lullaby would be the repetition of two combined notes, elongating their duration and tone.

But the mother does not seek to be a snake charmer, although she essentially employs the same technique.

She needs words to keep the child focused on her lips, and she not only enjoys communicating pleasant things as sleep comes, but takes him directly into the harshest reality, instilling him with the drama of the world.

And thus, the song lyrics counter to sleep and its riverlike calmness. The words elicit emotions in the child, states of doubt, of terror, against which the hazy hand of melody must fight, brushing and taming the rearing little horses stirring in the baby's eyes.

We should not forget that it is the fundamental object of the lullaby to get the child who is not sleepy to sleep. They are songs for the day, and at the time when child feels like playing.

In Tamames, Salamanca, they sing

Sleep, sleep my child

I have things to do

wash your clothes

sit me down and sew

And sometimes the mother engages in a real battle, which ends in swats, crying and finally sleep.

Note how the new born child is almost never sung a lullaby. The newborn is entertained with a hint of a mumbled melody, and in contrast, much more importance is placed on the physical rhythm, the rocking.

The lullaby requires a listener who intelligently follows its ups and downs and is entertained by the anecdote, or evocation of landscape.

The child being sung is already talking, starting to walk, knows the meaning of the words and often sings along.

There is an extremely delicate relationship between the child and the mother at the quiet moment of singing. The child remains alert to protest against the words or liven up a monotone rhythm. The mother adopts the position of one leaning over the water, feeling herself under surveillance by the sharp critic of her voice.

All we know that the boogey man, the Coco in Spain, is used to frighten children all over Europe in different ways. Along with the Bute and the Marimanta of Andalusia, it forms part of that strange childhood world, filled with hazy figures that rise like elephants in the amusing fauna of homespun spirits that still breathe in some parts of Spain.

Sleep pretty baby. The Coco is coming

The Coco eats up babies who don't fall asleep

The magical power of the Coco lies precisely in its haziness. It can never fully appear, although it patrols the bedrooms, and the delightful thing is that it remains hazy for everyone. This is a poetic

abstraction, and thus, the fear that it produces is a cosmic fear, a fear upon which the senses cannot impose their objective walls to defend, because it has no possible explanation.

But there is no doubt that the child struggles to depict this abstraction for himself, and it is very common for him to refer to the outlandish shapes he finds in nature as 'Cocos'. In the end, the child is free to be able to imagine it for himself. The fear he feels depends on his fever of fantasy and he may even find it to be likeable.

But Spain has no fondness for the Coco. Spain prefers to frighten using real beings.

In the south, the bull and the Moorish queen are the threats; in the north of Burgos there is a marvellous substitution in which Dawn takes the place of the Coco. In Castile, they frighten with the gypsy woman and the she-wolf.

*Hush little baby, baby go to sleep
As the She-wolf is coming this way
who is the baby that weeps
That's what she's asking herself*

The concentration and fleeing to the other world, longing for shelter and longing for a safe boundary, entailed by the appearance of these real or imaginary beings lead to sleep, although achieved in an imprudent manner.

But this fear-based technique is not very common in Spain. There are other more refined ways, some more cruel.

Often, in the song the mother constructs a scene of an abstract landscape, almost always at night, and she places one or two characters who perform very simple actions, with a melancholic effect of the greatest beauty one could possibly achieve.

Across this tiny stage pass the figures the child must sketch, who grow large in the warm fog of wakefulness.

To this category belong the gentlest and most tranquil lyrics through which the child may roam relatively free of fear.

In Salamanca they sing:

*Those cows of Juana's.
They don't want to eat
Take them to the water.
Drinking's what they need*

This would be the most rational type of lullabies. But melodies are always dramatic, incomprehensibly dramatic given the function they perform.

The mother takes the child out of himself, into the far distance, and returns him to her side, tired, to rest. It is a little initiation into poetic adventure. These are his first steps into the world of intellectual representation.

In this lullaby, the most popular one from the kingdom of Granada, the child engages in a lyrical game of pure beauty before giving himself up to sleep.

*Lulla, lulla, lullaby,
a song of the rider
who led his horse to water
but wouldn't let him drink*

That he and his horse move away along the dark-branched path towards the river, only to set off again when the singing begins, over and over, always in a silent and renewed manner.

The child will never see them face to face.

He will always imagine the dark suit he wears and the gleaming hindquarters of the horse in the half-light. No character in these songs ever shows the face. It is essential for them to move on and clear the way to places where the water is deeper and the bird has forever given up its wings. Towards the simplest stiliness.

But in this case, the melody lends an extremely dramatic tone to the he, the horse and the unusual fact of not giving the horse water, a rare mysterious anguish.

In this type of song, the child recognises the character and, based on his visual experience, which is always more than we suppose, traces the figure. He is required to be both viewer and creator. And what a marvellous creator.

A creator in possession of a first-rate poetic sense.

We need only study children's early games before they are muddled by intelligence, to notice what worldly beauty enlivens them, what perfect simplicity and what mysterious relationships they discover between things and objects that Minerva will never manage to decipher.

With a button, a spool of thread, a feather and the five fingers of his hand, the child constructs a challenging world, criss-crossed by unknown echoes that sing and collide in an unsettling manner, with the joy that they do not have to be analysed.

The child comprehends much more than we think. He is inside an inaccessible poetic world to which neither rhetoric, nor that go-between imagination, nor fantasy can gain entry.

A flatland, nerve centres exposed, of horror and keen beauty, where a snow white horse, half nickel, half smoke, suddenly falls wounded with a swarm of bees furiously fixed to its eyes .

Quite unlike us, the child retains his creative faith intact, and does not yet possess the seed of destructive reason. He is innocent, therefore wise, and he certainly comprehends much better than we do the ineffable key to poetic substance.

On other occasions, the mother also goes out adventuring with her child in the song. In the Guadix region, Granada, they sing:

*Lullaby for my child Lullaby, we shall make
a hut in the countryside
and a rest there we shall take*

The two of them head off. Danger is near. We must reduce our size, make ourselves smaller, for the walls of the little hut to touch our bodies. Outside they lie in wait. We must live in a very small place. If we could, we would live inside an orange. You and I. Better inside a grape!

Here sleep comes, attracted by the opposite method to that of creating distance.

This method of withdrawal into the self is sweeter. It has the joy of already being safe on a tree branch during a turbulent flood.

There are examples in Salamanca and Murcia, in which the mother becomes the child and says:

*I'm sleepy, I'm sleepy
how I'd love to slumber
One eye is droopy
half closed the other*

She usurps the child's position in an authoritarian way and as the child lacks any defences, of course he must go to sleep.

But the most comprehensive group of lullabies throughout the country is made up of those songs in which the child is forced to be the sole actor in his own lullaby.

He is thrust into the song, he is put in costume and placed in roles or situations that are always unpleasant.

The child is mistreated, mocked most tenderly: "Get out of here, You're not my child, Your mother is a gipsy, Your mother is not here, You have no cot, You're poor, as our Lord".

And so on, always in this same tone.

It is no longer a matter of threatening, frightening or constructing a scene. Instead, the child is cast into the song, alone and unarmed, a defenceless knight facing the mother's reality.

His response to this category of lullabies is almost always to protest, more or less strongly, depending on his sensitivity.

I have witnessed countless cases in my large family in which the child has emphatically brought the song to a halt. He cried, he kicked about until the wet nurse broke into another song in which the child's sleep is compared to the bovine blush of the rose.

In Trubia, Asturias, they sing this lullaby to children, a lesson in disappointment.

*Happy with my mother I was at night
"You'll be a marquis, a count, a knight".
But I wove baskets through January
That's weaver's life, nothing but misery.*

Now listen to this lullaby of rare melodic purity sung in Cáceres. It seems made to be sung to children who have no mother. It seems more like a song for dying than a song for childhood sleep:

*Sleep now, my child, have no fear,
your mother's no longer here,
the Virgin took her far away
to be her mate.*

There are several of this type in northern and western Spain, which is where the lullaby takes on harder and more wretched tones. In Orense, Galicia, there is another lullaby, sung by a maiden whose still blind breasts await the slippery undertone of her split apple:

*Now, now, now, my child;
who will give you their tete?
your daddy's gathering wood
your mum is in the mill*

These two lullabies bear some resemblance.

The melody seems to have travelled from north down to south. The venerable age of both songs is quite clear. Their simplicity and pure design make them songs without equal in any songbook.

The women of Burgos sing this one, of inferior melodic beauty:

*Sleep, baby, sleep so,
your daddy's digging coal,
your mammy churns away,*

she can't suckle you today.

The lullaby with which the gypsies of Seville sing their children to sleep is particularly sad.

It is the only type I present here, influenced by songs of the northern mountains. We constantly see that northern influence by way of Granada in all the gypsy songs.

It is a sad lullaby in which the child is left alone, amidst the greatest tenderness:

*This little turtle
hasn't got a mother,
a Gipsy woman bore him
and left him in the gutter.*

There is no doubt about its tone from Granada, a song type with which I am familiar because I have collected it, and where, as in its landscape, the snow is shaped to the fountain and the fern to the orange .

Granada has a strong core of songs with a Galician and Asturian tonality. But there are countless other influences which are difficult to detect due to that terrible mask, which covers everything, known as "regional character".

In all Spanish musical folklore, there is perpetual confusion regarding the transcription of melodies. There is nothing more difficult than a voice of the people that adds to these melodies one-third tones and even quarter tones, for which there is no symbol on the staves of constructed music.

In Bejar, they sing the most ardent lullaby, more representative of Castile. A song that would sound like a gold coin if we were to fling it onto stony ground:

Sleep, little boy, I'll watch over you;

May God give you good luck in this world so untrue.

Darkest of women, Virgin of Castañar

on the day of our death, she will aid us from afar

In Asturias they sing this other lullaby, in which the mother complains about her husband out loud within earshot of the child. The husband comes banging on the door, circled by drunken men, in the dark, rainy night. The woman rocks the child with wounded feet, staining the boats' cruel ropes with blood.

*All the work is done by women, waiting in the dark for their men to come. Some arrive drunken.
Others call out: 'Boys, let's kill all the women'.
They cry to be fed, their wives have naught to give them
Where's the money gone? What a house you keep woman*

It is difficult to find a sadder and more harshly sober song in all of Spain. However, we have not yet looked at a truly extraordinary type of lullaby. It circulates throughout the northern and central areas of the peninsula. It is the lullaby of an adulterous woman who communicates with her lover by singing to her child.

Its mysterious and ironic double entendre surprises every time you listen. The mother frightens the child with a man at the door who must not enter. The father is home and would not allow it. The variant from Asturias goes:

*The one at the door cannot come in,
the baby who cries his daddy's within.
Lullay, my child, not now, my dear,
lullay, my child, his daddy's here.
The one at the door tomorrow must come,
the little one's father to the mountain gone.*

It is a beautiful woman who sings these songs. Goddess Flora of the sleepless breast, suited to the viper's head. Greedy for fruit and free from melancholy. This is the only lullaby in which the child carries no importance of any kind. He is a pretext, nothing more. I do not mean to say that all of the women who sing it are adulteresses, but rather that, even without realizing it, they enter the realm of adultery. After all, that mysterious man at the door who must not enter is the man whose face is hidden under a large hat, of whom every true and unrestrained woman dreams.

The adulteress's song from Alba de Tormes is more lyrical than the Asturian version and has a more veiled sentiment.

*Little white dove come too early,
the child that cries here's his daddy.
Little black dove with snow-white wings,
his daddy's here the child that sings.*

I have tried to present to you various types of songs that reflect a characteristic regional style in melodic terms. Songs that are free from influence, fixed melodies that can never travel.

The songs that travel are songs whose sentiment maintains a peaceful equilibrium and have a certain universal air. They are sceptical songs, skilled at changing the mathematical cloak of rhythm, flexible in tone and neutral in lyric temperature.

Each region has a fixed and incorruptible melodic core and a true army of aggressive, wandering songs that travel wherever they can and will fade into death at the furthest limits of their influence.

There is a group of Asturian and Galician songs, moist and tinged with green, that descend into Castile, where take on rhythmic structure, and continue on to Andalusia.

The gypsy *seguriya* of *cante jondo*, the purest expression of Andalusian lyrical poetry is unable to leave Jerez or Córdoba, and in contrast, the *bolero*, a neutral melody, is danced in Castile and even in Asturias.

The *alalás* sung in Galicia pound upon the walls of Zamora's night and day without ever managing to penetrate them, and in contrast, many tones of the *muñeira* run through the melodies of certain ritual dances and songs of the southern gypsies.

Sevillanas, which travelled as far as Tunis intact brought by the Moors of Granada, undergo a complete change of rhythm and character when they reach La Mancha, and are unable to move beyond.

In the very lullabies of which I speak, Andalusia exerted her influence by sea, and in contrast, is unable to reach the north.

The Andalusian lullaby style permeates the lower central Mediterranean coast, even taking in the Balearic *vou veri vou*, and via Cádiz extends to the Canary islands, whose delightful lullaby bears the unmistakable Andalusian tone.

We could map out the melodies of Spain, and in doing so we would notice a blending of regions, an exchange of blood and juices that we would see change with the systole and diastole of the Years seasons.

We would clearly see the framework of unbreakable air that unites the regions of the peninsula, a framework suspended above the rain, with the naked sensitivity of a mollusc, gathering up in its centre the least invasion from the outside world to once again, free from danger, flow with the ancient and complex essence from Spain.

Federico García Lorca was executed by firing squad on the 18th August 1936