

On a visit to Spain I discovered something else about Australia.

Brendon Stewart

Granada is a picturesque little city distinguished by its concentration of Tea and Kebab stalls. There is too the Alhambra paradise gardens and the 6000 visitors a day as well as other remnants of a Moorish past. And, of course, in a land fond of sacrifice, Granada has a famously martyred son: the poet and playwright Federico Garcia Lorca, killed in 1936 by Nationalists, during the opening, bloody confused days of what became a particularly dirty civil war. Lorca, a writer, died because of his art, because of his politics, because of his sexuality, because he had put himself in altogether the wrong place at entirely the wrong time. His murder satisfied the petty jealousies that might be found in any small town or province, the type of half ashamed, half self righteous sadism that seems to thrive under the absolution of a killing time.

Lorca grew up in Granada in the first decades of this most recent century. Like any young artist worth his salt, he left home for the capital, in this case cosmopolitan, permissive Madrid. He also went on mind expanding trips to pacy New York and racy Havana. But he always came back to his family and to the town that he loved for its tolerant, artistic, non-christian traditions and at the same time hated for its small-minded, viciously provincial community. Lorca, a man obsessed by death. On the night of 13th July 1936, against all advice he left Madrid and safety and caught the sleeper to Granada from Atocha station. For a few turbulent weeks he stayed relatively safe, though frightened in his home town. Then on 16th August Lorca was arrested while hiding at a friend's house, betrayed, some say by the friends brother in law, taken away as a Russian spy. Two or three days later he was executed by a nationalist death squad: dead at 38, his body abandoned in a gully in the hills beyond the town, a couple of extra bullets in his arse, just to show that certain fascist flair for symbolism. A teacher accused of left wing sympathies died beside him.

Alive and free to write about my life I watch suburban Sydney unfold while my car speeds along the M4. I acknowledge a certain gratefulness at my good fortune, because my voice has not been stolen, my future not destroyed. And, of course I think that if I had the backbone, the courage of conviction I would write about the race wars, the abandoned refugees and the revisionist history that would have us think that nothing like the fear, that must have hung heavy upon Lorca (he was no hero), ever consumed the lives of people here in Australia. So I'll continue to avoid the issue by unearthing more biographical parallels, I'll play at *compare and contrast*. Lorca was, for example an unhappy writer who spent much of his life contemplating the horrors, the fascinations and the strengths of death. He tended to love attractive but damaging men. His faith was sometimes over whelming, sometimes desolate, often overshadowed with confusion and guilt. He adored the theatre, acted a little, believed in the strength of words, of writing and speech and conversations, of telling stories. I find all of this sadly comforting.

The newer suburbs of western Sydney are home to so many who have fled or just walked out on other places, other lives. To walk away from a life, from a home, from parents and friends, lovers and enemies, I can't guess what kind of faith that might involve, very frail or impregnably certain. What ever, people have come dragging fragments of their pasts, stuffed in suitcases, held in memory and worn as language and custom. They arrive, flurried by disruption, unanchored; an uncertain mobility will always accompany a migrant's passage. Nowhere is familiar, there is no simple comparison. Their imagination is a whirlpool of potential. Some stay and make a new home, becoming attached to the local place, their experience adding to the glue around which the mystique of communal participation adheres.

Lorca's imagination returned again and again to his home, where he lived with his family, and his close friends nearby. In this home place Lorca redefined and explored the word *duende*, an indispensable word to any understanding of the passions for home. In the Oxford Spanish/English dictionary you will find *duende* given as *goblin, imp, malign spirit* or perhaps *poltergeist*, it carries also an apparently contradictory suggestion of being granted contact with either an earth spirit or a higher self.

For Lorca the word became shorthand for the source of any piece of art with 'dark notes'. It represents a melancholy moment conjured up by a creativity with roots in painful process, a loss or sacrifice. While Lorca was a great internationalist, he believed that *duende* was most 'there' in Andalucian Spain. He felt that the atmosphere, and especially the adoration and immortalisation of the dead to be deeply Spanish. He saw it at work strongly in the *cante jondo*, the deep songs of the flamenco and the dark bloodiness of the *corrida de toros*, what we call the bullfight. I first came across the word in an essay written here in Sydney, the author had attached this sense of a dark, sad, spiritual feeling, or presence, or numinous beauty with the remarkable and fatal experience of inventing modern Australia. But right now, as the car and M4 combine to smooth out the land once crissed and crossed by Dharuk dreaming tracks, or even more recently vineyards and orchards, *duende* is hard to touch.

It is quite easy to dismiss *duende* as a simple reflection of Lorca's personal grief, his life as a self-loathing sensualist, an incautious but easily damaged artist, a homosexual in conservative, Catholic Spain. I am alternatively bored and frustrated by the standard model of the artist as the tortured soul, too sensitive to live, or possibly just too sensitive to live with, nonetheless a concept like *duende* has its uses. It can be a reminder that destruction does have an intimate relationship with creativity, even if it's the destruction of once wild places, or earlier ways of being and doing. It can act as a description of the *soul in the world* which offers itself beautifully, and cruelly to specific humans at specific times. Another translation for *Duende* might be *fairy*, Lorca at another point refers to this flighty phenomenon as a mysterious power which everyone can sense and no philosopher explain. There is a dark discordant attendance when death is possible as one feels in the mournful rhythm of flamenco. The gypsy songs and poems about treachery, daring and loss, sung long through the night: the anthems for a southern Spain. Caught in little bars,

locals dance to guitars; love songs, and wine. It's a curious hybrid music, its roots far-flung in India, in Greece, in Arab North Africa. Perhaps it is by this mixing up of different stories, different ambitions that it conveys so well the tears we can shed over blood and sex. Basically it is not difficult to identify with the Flamenco's passion.

I recently spent time in southern Europe. Southern Europe, not so long ago the northern province of Africa, a countryside of arches and delicious gardens, irrigation systems winding up through valleys and over mountains encouraging the orange orchards and vineyards, olive groves and dense oak forests. For more than a thousand years the ways of a backward European community were refined and sophisticated by the scholarship and good manners of a genteel Islam. And before them ... well, it was the Romans and before them the Phoenicians.

In the streets and bars of Alora, a small hill-top village where we had unpacked our bags *Ole! Ole!* would often be called out, sometimes in admiration of a daring motorcyclist in the village plaza, or at the delight of the Flamenco dance and song performed by an old lady on a street corner, or during a particularly elegant exchange between the bull and the matador. *Ole! Ole!* was once *Allah! Allah!*

I'd come to Spain to think about what it's like to live in a place, amongst a people where the comings and goings of big human events is common enough. Does, what the Spanish call *convivencia* or living together continue to flourish here? I understand this is not the same as our modern multiculturalism, the cured pork legs hanging in almost every shop window makes it clear whose in charge; but the mingling of faiths, especially the Abrahamic sibling faiths, what of them today? Over many centuries these minglings were sometimes bitter, sometimes encouragingly harmonious but always complex.

Pride and beauty walk together here, superstition and spectacle, the continuity of living and belonging through the years, through the centuries, is timely to one whose home is now in the new world. In Southern Spain I am also reminded that from here, from Seville and later Cadiz ships set out to explore and exploit my part of the world. Spanish traders crossed the Pacific, they fantasized about a great south land, and searched for the mountains of gold hidden away for so long. And still they come. In the late 1950's the Australian Government set up a migrant recruiting office in Malaga, a provincial capital on the Mediterranean, on the *Costa del Sol*, Europe's Gold Coast. Sam's family live on the outskirts of Alora. *Some time or other, says Sam a guy came to our village, I wasn't born like, but my dad and mum tell me this, anyways, he came and lots of people, you know maybe even 50 people, most men but some girls too, all signed up. You know it was still during Franco's time, he was such a bastard. But my dad now, he reckons things would be better today if Franco was around; such a dick head. Yeah, but I wasn't born there you know, I was born in Wollongong, actually Port Kembla. My dad worked for BHP. When I was eight we came back here, can you imagine. My dad and mum, yeah, they're first cousins, both come from the country, you know, we say, the campo, wouldn't happen to day, no way. But back then, I suppose the church and all that shit, my dad*

wouldn't meet any girls, I don't know. But he hated Australia, came back to the campo. So I come back here every coupla years, holiday, see mum. We are all still Australians, mum and dad get an aussie pension.

Coming to live in Australia spreads out over thousands of years. Some call the recent times a period of invasion, others like Sam's family, an adventure. Most of the young men and women who migrated from Southern Spain thought of it in this way. I know the parochial Australian tale is that these poor southern Europeans came looking for work or to escape the desperate poverty of their homelands. But the people I spoke with in this small, particular part of Spain remembered it as an adventure. Their village was ravaged during the civil war, the crops did and continue to fail, the land is harsh and dry for much of the year, the villagers sing deep flamenco, they drink a lot and are provincial, but never desperate.

I do not mean here to excuse the excesses of inhumanity that took place across this land as Aboriginal tribes came across wondering Europeans. Still it is important to remind ourselves that along with the dispossession and murder there arrived and still continuing to arrive different art, co-operation, languages and culture. These qualities were present early on in our modern history. And yes, such qualities can prove discomfoting when we think of the stolen lands, the stolen generation, the stolen resources. Yet there is something in the migrant's story that helps me know we are meant for better things. A depth to our presence in this place takes on slowly, and holding on to it, living with and through it as an imaginative state of affairs calls us to engage here and now, with the blood on our hands and our feelings uncertain. Imagination isn't as its etymology would suggest, the faculty of forming images of reality; rather it is a gift that enables us to go beyond reality and to sing reality. Veronica Brady, in a recent ABC radio national broadcast, *The Wisdom Lectures*, speaks of her experience with friends in Southern Spain, of how despite the long and bloody turmoil that is their history, pleasure remains a principle, a matter of principle, in the way they identify as a people living in and with a place. These are a people who *mixed it* with the sword, with their blood and their spunk.

Grand schemes of history can only ever present a particular account of how it is that people, with all their individual ways of being and doing come to be in a place at a certain time. It is unclear, as lived experience how grand history plays out in the day to day goings on in a Sydney suburb or a small village like Alora. Plaza Baja, known too as the Gypsy quarter, was the place where the evening *paseo* would be at its most elegant. *Paseo* means to *walk about*, an event each evening, just as the shop keepers open for their evening trade. It is also the name given to the assassination squads who would walk the streets during the civil war summarily executing dissidents. Both sides, the Nationalist (Franco's mob) and the Republicans (the elected government) were answerable for their own murder squads. Many revenge murders took place secreted away behind claims to solidarity and military necessity. And a lot to die were Gypsies. Hitler executed half a million Gypsies. Still they are here in Plaza Baja, their dark skin and gold chains, their horses and donkeys shitting on the cobbles. Gypsy eyes, Gitanos, Gitanes Cigarettes. Are

these people the accursed descendents of Cain? Possibly they are the last survivors of Atlantis. Gitano/Gitan, it comes to us from the word, Egyptian! Did they come from India? In Spain Gypsies continue to have a strong cultural presence and identity, especially in Andalucia. They practice their own prejudices and culturally exclude non Gypsies, who they refer to as *payo*, which might translate as peasant or serf. They seem to understand themselves as free and wise beyond the ordinary, intuitively wise. At the same time others think of Gypsies in a mixed, somewhat romantic way, feelings of deep interest and deep antipathy; as thieves and bandits, horse traders and beautiful. The Andalucian Gypsy are also thought to be the unbroken cultural and genetic line with Spain's Moorish past. Gypsies certainly live more comfortably in the run down Morisco districts of any village or city. So it's a confused oriental mystery, the Gypsy, beautiful, proud characters: the Carmen fantasy.

Downstream the river sings:
flounces of sky and leaves.
The new light is crowning itself
with pumpkin blossoms.
Oh, pain of the Gypsies!
Pure pain, always alone,
Oh pain of the secret spring
and distant dawn!

Frederico Garcia Lorca
(in *Romancero Gitano* 1924 – 1927)

Yeah, well you see I'm gay. It really pisses my dad off, but lots of Spanish men are gay. Before I started to study in Sydney, I did a social science degree, I traveled around Australia a bit. When I was just a baby, maybe about 1970 my old man went with some uncles up to north Queensland, cutting cane, and that sort of thing. He even went over to Darwin. You know he's still got this hat, you know a base-ball cap with Darwin on the front. I went there too, with my friend. I'd like to live there, strange. You know there's lots of gays in Darwin. We went to this fantastic place, Mississippi Queen, it was like the deep south, but really it was the deep north. In Darwin there are lots of people just moving along, maybe they come from somewhere, even Spain. You know every Saturday this group of old Spanish guys meet in a cafe, I think it's call The Roma, or something like that, right in the middle of Darwin. They've been living there for years. Maybe my old man knew them.

I like the fluke of history that the most northern city on the Australian mainland is named after Charles Darwin. This city too is our most Asian in character. There is an inference in this naming that our country is a modern place, a place that starts as an experiment in social invention and continues, in the main, to be shared reasonably fairly among the few who come. Australia is a place, a complex nation whose immediate philosophical antecedents are those of the European enlightenment. This is the stimulus that gives us

our imagination. We are a people who have called on science as much as art to set the plot of our story of engagement with this place. We see and hear this creative unfolding all about us. It is a tale of increasing complexity and one I trust will lead us to greater sentience, understanding and reflection, that will lead us deeper into our home.

To identify as modern gives me an experiential sense of history, the wide-ranging colonial experiments of some European powers and the more recent post colonial discourse, and of course the unfolding of the colonial hegemony, are constituent with modernism. To empathize with Australia, with its history, with the people, with the landscape and biology, it is the modern tradition that provides the most sophisticated means. It is of course too the most honest, almost the only means through which we might observe and participate. Darwin brought our collective attention to the fact that to be alive, or to have lived on this earth means that we share in the continuous way of existence. And central in this is the dynamic of change, the energy and confusion of change, the unpredictability of change. In this sense, and contrary to what many have held since the Greeks, we are not alienated from, but rather built into the laws of nature; we are quintessentially beings tuned into its laws and qualities. The wish to relate to this grounding, through both understanding and sensual apprehension is our imaginative work. Hence the hold of science and art on our sensibilities.

It is the secular and humanist fundamentals of modernism that, I think, powerfully present the view that humans can redeem themselves, offering freedom from the bondage of more determined and dogmatic cultural narratives. The wonderful complexity of being-in-the-world is revealed daily and resolved through our living. Narratives fail us when they cannot provide the creative possibility of interpretative power and scope. By this I mean, the tale of our lives, our own biographical account of being alive, should be able to produce new understandings which we can apply across a wide range of circumstances. Living in Sydney involves me in continually re-assembling my presence here, it's not just about now, or then but more about the contemporary moment, a contingency with time and the simultaneous occurrence of things.

Evolution is constant and variable in the living world: chemical evolution, natural selection and random mutations, accidents of planetary motion and asteroid impacts, run away volcanic eruptions and tsunamis. As well, luck, genes, planning, self-organizing systems all play different roles. The laws of evolution, more accurately the laws of nature, have no intention, they may well be 'organised' but they are not designed with 'us' in mind. Tragedy strikes thousands of species with a meteor impact; or a tsunami swell, they are unlucky to be in the wrong place, but this allows a new set of species to flourish and to take over the territory. This is destructive creation once again, and occurs at every scale. The great civilizations and religions of our world emerged over time between 3000 BCE and 700 AD, from Egypt across the great lands of Asia Minor to China and India. Thousands of 'nations' have taken shape within these major civilizations. Peaceful social evolution, stasis and drift are then punctuated by competition, war and suppression. Civilizing processes gradually turned mystical

thinking into systematic religions, scripture and poetic dogma. The cosmic regularities of the seasons and the rhythms of the sun and moon are ‘contained’ symbolically and turned into calendars, sowing and harvest cycles and eventually banks and trade commodities. Triangular geometries are ‘seen’ and give rise to the structural stability of the pyramids and the regular geometry of Euclid, Pythagoras and Plato were assumed to underlie all nature. Architects crystallized the dome in India and Rome. The powerful gaze of civilization turned, what probably started as speculation, into form, doctrine and culture.

It seems to me that only through the lens of modernism can we truly appreciate the great insightfulness of the Aborigines, the magnificence of our biology and extraordinary geography. It wasn’t until the coming of a modern European sensibility that Australia was conceived of as a place in relation to other places, both because of the sea links to Europe and Asia, and also because of the way the new comers turned their minds and hands to creating a homeland for all. Individually and together our imagination can see this narrative, its ups and downs, its dreaming. I am immersed in the feeling of what this means, good luck has enabled me to structure these feelings in such a way as to make my life comfortable.

Songlines, Bruce Chatwin’s book about ancient Australia could only have been written from within this comfortable, modern imaginative sensibility. It is actually a book about modern Australia, written by a modern Englishman. The Songlines of today are traced and sung along a Toyota Dreaming. Toyota dreaming and Aussie rules. Still, Chatwin’s book causes me to reflect on the whole question of luck, on the luck of the draw that’s set me and my family down here, to live a sort of charmed life in the south Pacific. Was it good luck or good planning? A literary trope might construe my life as being “blessed by the stars”, or given to “the luck of the Irish”, or even that “the God’s looked kindly” upon me. Language leads us where it will, language like Chatwin’s helps me wonder about the accident of my life and all its blessings. But the luck in one’s life depends on an accident of birth, the local economies, the stability of government and global forces over which one has little control.

Frank was born in Fremantle, his mum still lives there. When he was eighteen he set off with mates to travel around Europe. He’d never been to Spain but he planned to visit his aunty in her little village. There he met Teresa, she was just sixteen, still at school, they fall in love. In 1990 she came out to visit Frank, and stayed on for eight years. When they decided to marry all of the Fremantle family came back to the village church in Alora, the same church that both his and Teresa’s parents were married in. *You know*, Frank says, *Australia’s a great place, I loved the life style, the beach, the food, especially all that Asian food, we had a great place there. When I was a kid I was always called a wog, sort of friendly like, but there was always some arse who’d go on about wogs and new Australians. But now I think, you know, identity is a big thing, I like Spain better although I also know that I’m just another sort of Australian. What I like about Spain, living here, working, you know is the humour. In Australia everyone thinks that Australians are bloody funny, you know, laid back, relaxed, always out for a laugh. But*

that's not what I reckon, in Australia I just worked flat out, I'm a welder and the boss would always be on ya back to get the job done. But here, we break in the middle of the day, there's always beer or wine with lunch, and the humour, I don't know it's just funny. Sure, people can do really well in Australia. Still I reckon people, maybe even the system, it's sort of more generous, don't know if you know what I mean.

Frank's stories about living in Australia, and returning to Spain reminds us that Australian life continues to be totally engaged in the subtle, shifting and often invisible patterns of historical movements. His sense of himself as *just another sort of Australian* doesn't mean that he, or community groups share in exactly the same vision of things. It doesn't mean that the 'cultural traits that cling to a being' and which identify people as Muslims, or Aborigines or gay or what ever disappear. Frank and the history of Spain, me and the history of Britain, the Aborigines of Tasmania, the plants and animals, the rivers and mountains are incorporated into the contemporariness of Australia.

Such incorporation doesn't automatically imply the dissolving away of uniqueness. What it does entail is rather more like what in the mathematical field of game theory is known as a nonzero-sum game. A zero-sum game is one like ping-pong or chess, where one player wins at the expense of the opponent. An example of a nonzero-sum game would be children playing house or cowboys and Indians: more than one player can 'win' or succeed, and more than one side can lose. The complexity of life is really far more a nonzero-sum game because to succeed, a process of cooperation and sharing in the contingencies that emerge, provides the most effective strategy. One of the great lessons of co-evolution is that the all-out victory of one species over another, and for that matter, at the scale of we humans, one society over another, is often a Pyrrhic victory. The history of life seems to favour a process of symbiotic relationships in which dissimilar individuals or community groups live together in mutual dependence and for mutual benefit while retaining certain particular characteristics.

It is a modern story that has invented Australia and made of it a place for me to live. We have evolved through economic transformations into a secular nation relatively stable in the global economy. We embrace international scientific processes as the engine of our development. While, at the same moment the success of these global economies have created systemic problems: global warming, the impoverishment of a billion people, and, at any one time about forty low intensity wars. Since the 1960's nearly 400 massive multinational corporations control about one third of the world's production and create environmental imbalances. The global economy strains the global ecology. Another mass extinction has started, this one caused ironically by success. As the economy grows by about 2 percent each year, 27,000 species are lost, one hundred a day, three each hour. But today more people live better and longer lives than ever before. Two billion people have a life expectancy of 75 years, while each one of us use up more domestic energy than any Roman Emperor could ever imagine. Spectacular inventions are enjoyed by billions; birth control and the automobile, television and antibiotics, and yet, a billion people or more cannot get adequate and clean drinking water.

Esther left Spain with 65 other young women in 1962. For six weeks before joining her ship in Naples, these women lived together in a Madrid convent. *You know, the nuns tried to teach us about Australia, we giggled so much because we wanted to come here, you know and find a husband. But the nuns they talked about Australia, they never, you know been anywhere but Madrid, and how to pray, for a husband, how to be good, for a husband, how to speak English, for a husband. And the nun always say 'be good girls', no problem for Spain. You know I get married in Sydney, yes, my prays must work and I am a good girl. In Australia I learnt to run in bare feet, that's not being a good girl, maybe the nuns wouldn't have like me. But Paco and me, we have four childrens, four boys, the eldest one still live there, in Greta, you know Greta, near Maitland. Now I miss him very so much.*

When Esther told me about them leaving Australia and how their children didn't want to come back to Spain I realised what a complicated world has come to pass with the creation of a place like Australia. Esther and her husband Paco became our good friends. Together we laughed at how language spoken is often language misunderstood. They told how in Australia they met and fell in love and together they went off on their adventure, free from the constraints of parents and Spain. How they drove an old Holden all the way from Canberra to Caines, picking and choosing when to work and when to play. They told the sad stories of leaving their children behind and of the pull of their elderly parents. What can all this mean? At the very least it suggests the unfathomable nature of reality and its enticing allure. It is as if the development of how we live together, how we live in a place, how we invent what matters is an expanding creativity. Most people continue to search and attempt to make sense of places lived in; it is sometimes spiritual, always cognitive and an inevitable journey. I discovered something important about Australia when I lived in Spain for a short time, like Esther I like to run in bare feet.