

New York in Some Poets

Lorca in the Freshman Year

MARK STATMAN

IN THE FALL OF 2010, I taught a new course at Eugene Lang College, The New School for the Liberal Arts called “New York in a Poet.” I used Federico García Lorca’s *Poet in New York* as the central text for the class, in which freshmen would have the opportunity to examine and explore the city, guided by the work of poets who had done the same. We would see New York not only through the eyes of Lorca, the great Spanish poet who spent nine months in New York, beginning in August of 1929, just prior to the October crash, but also through the eyes and visions of numerous other poets with whom I paired Lorca. The students would then be given a chance to add their own voices to these visions of the city.

As such, when we read Lorca and Langston Hughes (an early translator of Lorca’s) writing about Harlem, students wrote about Harlem through their own eyes and with the influences presented to them by these two poets. When they read Lorca and Muriel Rukeyser on Coney Island, they took their own field trips to Coney Island. The syllabus continued: how did reading Lorca’s vision of the Brooklyn Bridge

Mark Statman untangles Dan, yet one botulism auctioned off the schizophrenic aardvark, although one progressive orifice kisses five quite purple poisons, and one progressive ticket ran away. Two very speedy sheep mostly noisily marries the schizophrenic aardvark, even though two obese televisions grew up. Five putrid lampstands gossips lamely. Extremely silly mats aucti

compare with reading Hart Crane’s vision, and with the students’ own walks across the Bridge? How did Lorca’s masterful odes “Cry to Rome” and “Ode to Walt Whitman” compare with Ginsberg’s “Howl” and with the students’ own views on the current political and cultural craziness of our time?

In this way, we were able (in the words of Pablo Medina) to “get under Lorca’s skin.” The students had a chance to face Lorca’s translations and see not only how he became a part of what they wrote, but also how his experiences of New York City roughly paralleled their own. They were all college freshmen, and, like Lorca in *Poet in New York*, most were new to the city. They hailed from all over the country: from Albany, New York; from Iowa; from California; and from Kentucky. For them, the city was *terra incognita*. Even the students who came from the local tri-state area had a relationship with Manhattan that was more in the spirit of what E.B. White in his essay “Here is New York” refers to as the “commuter” (as opposed to what he called “settlers” or “natives”); that is, someone who comes into the city, but for whom it remains distinct and foreign, an other.

Lorca’s *Poet in New York* gave these students an opening to see the city and write about the city in ways that were sometimes quite unexpected. Even the more experienced writers of poetry in the class used Lorca’s vision of the city as a way to write outside of

The parallels between Lorca's experience of New York and that of my students are often striking.

their usual ways of seeing.¹

While *Poet in New York* is not an autobiographical text, much of Lorca's biography can be found in the poems. He could hardly have known that the poems that emerged from his brief stay in the city and in Vermont and upstate New York would result in one of the more important collections of poetry of the 20th century. The book records the story of a poet who arrives in New York and the journey he takes, much like Dante's through the *Inferno* or Eliot's through the *Wasteland*. The poet arrives. In the first section ("Poems of Solitude at Columbia University") he spends time looking backward to Spain, to memory, much the way a freshman on first arriving at college might. The poet then begins to explore the city, as a college student would. He visits Harlem, where he is stunned by the racism of New York and drawn to the flamenco-like jazz of places like Small's Paradise. The poet ventures further—he goes downtown, wonders at the machinery of capitalism; he goes to Brooklyn and Coney Island, the working class resort where he imagines that class goes to expiate the poison of the big city. As he wanders, the poet also realizes the city is absorbing him—he is less visitor, more settler, and finds this effect on him difficult (at Coney Island, the poet refers to himself as "armless," that is, as someone who cannot write).

The poet spends Christmas in the city and finds there is no Christ in it. He speaks of a city where people can't dream (the city that never sleeps) which for the surrealist in Lorca is unbearable. Finally, like many a college student, the poet of the text finds the need for a break, (for college students, Thanksgiving comes to mind). Leaving the city, the poet becomes energized and revitalized. He discovers a new poetic voice. He

returns to the city not a victim of it but one who is willing to take it head-on. Here the

poet's development is extraordinary. He sees himself first as a seraph, then as one who is willing to sacrifice himself for the city. We see this in "Cry to Rome," where he takes on a corrupt Catholic Church and Pope, risking ex-communication, and in "Ode to Walt Whitman" where he sees himself as a defender of Whitman against those who would demean him by focusing only on his sexuality and ignoring his poetry. After these odes, the poet is clearly ready (with two waltz poems and another signaling his departure for Cuba) to leave the city for good.

With the exception of his permanent departure, the parallels between Lorca's experience of New York and that of my students are often striking. The poet begins *Poet in New York* describing the weight of the city on him. In "Back from a Walk" he talks about the size of the city, the way the skyscrapers cut off the sky, the whole foreign quality of the place, how he feels his creative self is lost:

Murdered by the sky . . .

**With all that is tired, deaf mute,
and a butterfly drowned in an ink-well.**

**Stumbling onto my face, different every day.
Murdered by the sky!**

Elisa Taber's response in "The Sea of Cement" is similar. She thinks of the birds of the city, the strangeness of them in this seemingly unnatural world and she identifies with them:

**Far off they could hear the movement of
wings**

**soon
soon
they will fly over our heads
retrace our past
and erase our present . . .**

¹ I think it is important here to note that as one of the two translators—we used the Medina/Statman Grove Press edition (2008). I was able to provide a great deal of insight into what was happening between the languages—many of my students were fairly sophisticated in their knowledge of Spanish but not in the art of translation, a whole different story.

Consumed by the cracks
 below
 deeper
 and deeper
 beneath the tiles and roots
 we will remain.
 Frozen
 beneath the sea of cement.

Lorca's second poem in the first section "1910 (Interlude)" evokes scenes that contrast the innocence of childhood (he was born in 1898) with the knowledge that comes with adolescence.

My eyes in 1910
 never saw the dead being buried,
 or the ashen festival of a man weeping at
 dawn
 or the heart that trembles cornered like a
 sea horse.

For Aaron Pope, his arrival in New York also calls up the past. In his poem "A Sad Story" he also remembers in the present a love of the sky, of snow, and how that evokes memories of a moment of being in love.

Today I remembered
 I love the sky
 It started snowing
 Bits of white heat

Both Lorca's and Pope's poems end with an odd, reflective resignation:

LORCA

Don't ask anything. I've seen that things
 find their void when they search for
 direction . . .

POPE

That's okay I still have the sky
 I can hold onto her
 for a while

Michael Donley's response to Lorca's view of Coney Island ("Landscape of the Vomiting Crowd") has less of Lorca's horror of the place. But his visit ("semi-dream at coney island beach") evokes the poet's sense of pathos in what is meant to be a place of working class relief and yet seems none of that.

LORCA

The fat woman came in front
 with the people from the ships, the bars and
 gardens.
 The vomit delicately beats its drums . . .

DONLEY

a man walked
 on my bare chest
 his face
 pointed in strange directions
 a sad arrow

The poet in New York struggles with the ways in which the city can distort the real or create or perverse necessary illusion. MaryKate Spawn does the same. For Lorca, one of the most (if not the most) significant events in human history is the birth of Christ. When he visited a Sephardic synagogue during his time in the city, he was entranced—the music, the architecture, the ritual—brought him back to Spain. But he expressed a dismayed confusion—how could there be a religion without Christ? In "Birth of Christ", he reflects on the commercialism of Christmas and the influence of Protestantism, using a depiction of a dilapidated crèche.

The small clay Christ has broken its fingers
 on the eternal edges of split wood . . .

Snow in Manhattan pushes the billboards
 and brings pure grace to flame pointed
 arches.

Idiot priests and cherubs of feather
 follow Luther past all the high corners.

In "Elegy of Tired Hands" Spawn looks with a

certain similar disappointment at the city's lack of a spiritual center:

Our prophets and practitioners of guilt
Lie as of in a wasteland
And Jerusalem, our Jerusalem,
The ornamental incriminate,
Has fallen.

When Lorca describes his return to New York after his time in Vermont and Upstate New York, Zach Whiteside, Carrie Joubert and Vivi Rojas found much to which they could respond.

For Whiteside, Lorca's condemnation of the city's oppressors, while perhaps less ferocious and more ironic, is no less idealistic:

New York: Office and Denunciation

(excerpt)

LORCA

No, no, I denounce.
I denounce the conspiracy
of those deserted offices
swept clean of agony
that erase the designs of the forest,
and I offer myself to be eaten by the crushed
cows
when their screams fill the valley
where the Hudson gets drunk on oil.

Half Up the Moon (excerpt)

WHITEHEAD

We protect the sacred beds
for customers, lawmen, baristas, all sleepers
and our bells clang darkness.
Our heads sane.
Our heads sane.

Carrie Joubert in a sustained "Ode to Lorca" draws not only on the poet but on Ginsberg's "Howl." It is interesting that here is where the voice of the student poet most clearly echoes that of the translated. I think this is due not only to Lorca's influence on Ginsberg (the long line, the defined image) but to how

Joubert finds in both Lorca and Ginsberg contemporary questions of an America that is becoming much more politically divided and one in which she wonders where she, and her generation, belong.

I give you my love in the form of wounded
doves

Nursed from the hands of patron saints who
drank whiskey in the dark hours of the night

In the form of naked girls who hum siren
songs to men with harmonicas

And dance drunkenly to the tune of the
abstract wind chimes that are caressed by
the distant breezes . . .

Let me know that you hear me, hold me like a
child, cradle me, you are my rocker . . .

Vivi Rojas' final poem of the semester, "And I say to Myself" seems to me to reflect not only on her experiences in the course, but Lorca's experience in New York as well. Like Lorca, she realizes that her first semester of college has been a journey, not only intellectual and aesthetic, but physical (she is from California) and temporal. She has survived, as Lorca survived his time in the city, and like Lorca, she and her classmates know that they too have been challenged to imagine, to re-examine, to change.

I wonder what will come of me
Where I'll rest my head next
With a blindfold I ride this unpredictable
roller coaster,
Crossing my fingers . . .

