



Passwords

Teaching Federico Garcia Lorca's *Poet in New York*

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I've taught the writing of Federico Garcia Lorca for many years at many levels, from second and third grade through college. Lorca has much to offer to the teacher of poetry: a great sense of mystery, a great sense of language play. The imagery, especially in his surreal-like poems, is sometimes so over the top and inexplicable that it invites students to stretch, even abandon logic in their poetry, and to define and describe the world in ways that are fresh and inspiring.

In the fall of 2005, I found myself in the position of going beyond the poems I usually teach. As part of a new series of courses in our freshman year program at Eugene Lang College, The New School for the Liberal Arts, I designed and taught two sections of a seven-week poetry reading/writing course that would focus on ways to see and be in New York City, using Lorca's *Poet in New York* as our central text. And while my course would use New York City as an extension of the classroom, it became clear to me as the semester unfolded that this course could be adapted to any urban setting.

It was an intense experience. *Poet in New York* is a difficult and demanding book, both to read and to teach. Lorca came to New York in the summer of 1929 at the age of 31, ostensibly to study English at Columbia University. He left less than a year later and *Poet in New York* is a striking (and sometimes inaccurate) depiction of this time spent in the city (as well as in upstate New York and Vermont). The poems in this collection differ dramatically from his earlier work, which had brought him fame in Spain. There was less emphasis on nature imagery and song. Lorca's arrival barely preceded the start of the Great Depression and he responded to the gloom that followed with an (often) horrified, visionary surrealism that reflected both the attraction and the repulsion he felt for the city.

Poet in New York, in one sense, is organized with an underlying narrative that has at the center a journey that is physical, spiritual, and emotional; as such, the order in which the poems appear is not specifically chronological and has more to do with the poet's interior life than the life he was actually leading.¹ There are ten sections in all, beginning with *Poems of Solitude at Columbia University*, in which the poet reflects on both his present and past, followed by sections in which he reflects on the pain and spiritual emptiness he observes in the city and in himself. This is followed by an interlude

¹ For example, poems taking place in winter and about Christmas appear before poems taking place in August.

in Vermont and upstate New York. Returning from these rural surroundings, a somewhat revitalized Lorca is able to protest what he sees in and of the city, not simply as poet, but *Poet*, the voice becoming nearly prophetic in tone. Soon after, the poet leaves the city, a flight that takes him to Cuba and eventually home.

Poet in New York begins with a return from a walk:

Back from a Walk²

Murdered by the sky.
Among the forms that move to the snake
and the forms searching for crystal
I will let my hair grow.

With the limbless tree that cannot sing
and the boy with the white egg face.

With the broken-headed animals
and the ragged water of dry feet.

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

Coming into my face, different every day.
Murdered by the sky!

Here Lorca sets the tone for us: that sense in the city that one is under assault, surrounded by forms that are threatening and unfamiliar. Even his face, with glimpses caught in windows, in mirrors, is not the same. It is a perspective on the city that will rarely change. What will change, though, is how the poet responds.

Even before my students have read this poem, I ask them to think about the ways in which perspective influences perception. The first day of class, I ask them to leave and walk down 11th Street between Fifth and Sixth Avenues in Manhattan (where Lang College is located). Going in one direction, I ask them to observe the street as though they are walking down a street in Paradise and to write down what they notice. Then I ask them to walk back as though walking down a street in Hell and to write what they notice again. The results? In Paradise, they see the blue September sky, flowers in window boxes, hear birds, people flirting, and so on. In Hell, they see garbage, broken bottles, hear sirens, people shouting.

Lorca spends much of the first half of *Poet in New York* experiencing the city and one of the purposes of the course is to ask my students to do the same (hopefully they will have a much more positive experience!). Lorca goes to Harlem, where he

² In this article, all translations from Lorca are by my colleague Pablo Medina and myself. "Ode to Whitman" and "New York: Office and Denunciation" appear in their entirety in the Spring 2006 issue of *Tin House*.

expresses an empathy with and a sympathy for the Black community. He is moved by the beauty of the people and by the music he hears, is outraged by the oppressive conditions under which people live. He goes to the Battery in Lower Manhattan and describes a “multitude urinating.” Heading for the Brooklyn Bridge and then Brooklyn, he ends up at Coney Island and the “multitudes vomiting.” The images are fierce. The urban is anathema to Lorca’s sensibilities. The industrialized landscape holds little of the beauty of Andalusia.

I remind my students as we read *Poet in New York* that they should not read the poems as strictly autobiographical, and that the “I” of the poet of the book is not always necessarily the “I” of Lorca. We talk about how the poems can be seen as representing a metaphorical journey. Many of the students, in this sense, see themselves as connected to Lorca. In their first semester of college, most have left home for the first time, are living in New York City for the first time. They are learning to live and negotiate their lives in a way they’ve never had to before. One of the requirements of the course is that they too must experience the city. A weekend class field trip to Coney Island is a requirement, as are individual or small group trips to public spaces (Grand Central Station, Brooklyn Bridge, Bronx Botanical Garden, Central Park, for example). They visit different neighborhoods (from Little Italy, Chinatown, and Harlem to the heavily Russian parts of Brighton Beach), walking around, eating in restaurants. They are required to write poetry and/or prose responses to all.

College students, in particular freshmen, welcome the Thanksgiving break—it gives them a chance to go back to the familiar, to see old friends, see family. For Lorca, leaving the city to be in upstate New York and in Vermont, to be in the rural and with old friends from Spain, had a similar effect. This time sets the stage for a transformation in the underlying narrative of *Poet in New York*. If his first experiences have been overwhelming, he now has a chance to take stock.

Living Sky

I won't complain
 if I don't find what I looked for.
 Near the dried out stones and the empty insects
 I won't see the sun dueling with creatures of living flesh.

But I'll go to the first landscape
 of shocks, liquids and murmurs
 that smell of a newborn child
 and where all surface is avoided
 to understand what I seek has a target of joy
 when I fly in the midst of love and sand.

The frost of spent eyes doesn't reach there
 nor bellow of tree murdered by worm.
 All forms are interlaced there
 with the same frenetic expression of progress.

You can't advance through the swarms of corollas
 because the air dissolves your sugar teeth
 nor caress the fleeting fern leaf
 without feeling a certain ivory surprise.

There, under the roots in the medulla of air,
 one understands the truth of mistaken things.
 The chrome swimmer spies the finest wave
 and the flock of nocturnal cattle with the little red feet of a woman.

I won't complain
 if I don't find what I looked for
 but I'll go to the first landscape of dampness and pulse
 to understand what I seek has a target of joy
 when I fly in the midst of love and sand.

I fly in cool air over empty beds.
 Over collected breezes and ships run aground.
 I trip, waver, through hard, fixed eternity
 and a love at the end without dawn. Love. Visible love!

Eden Mills, Vermont
 August 24, 1929

Here, in "Eden Mills," there is a sense of release and relief, thoughts of what he hopes for, longs for. Lorca is able to write about love. This part of *Poet in New York*, which comprises sections 4, 5, and 6, is less surreal, more contemplative than sections 1–3 even as it moves, once again, through questions of solitude and death.

The poet's return to the city in section 7 shows him less uncertain of how to respond to the city. Rather than simply observe, he is ready to protest, to denounce. In the long poem, "New York: Office and Denunciation," he attacks commerce, in particular capitalism, as dehumanizing and immoral.

He begins with the office itself:

Under the multiplications
 there is a drop of duck's blood.
 Under the divisions
 there is a drop of sailor's blood.
 Under the sums, a river of tender blood;
 a river that sings its way
 through outlying bedrooms,
 and it is silver, cement or breeze
 in the false dawn of New York.
 The mountains exist, I know it.

And eyeglasses for wisdom,
 I know. But I haven't come to see the sky.
 I have come to see the muddled blood
 that sends machines to the waterfall
 and the spirit to the cobra's tongue.
 Every day in New York they slaughter
 four million ducks,
 five million pigs,
 two thousand doves for the pleasure of the dying,
 a million cows,
 a million lambs,
 and two million roosters
 that leave the sky in splinters . . .

But he knows that there are others, beyond those who take pleasure in the dying, and he writes to them and for them. It is the other half he speaks to, those who live in the city and are the city's victims though they do not need to be:

The other half listens to me,
 devouring, urinating, flying in its innocence
 like the boys in the doorways
 who place fragile sticks
 into holes where the antennae
 of insects rust.
 This isn't hell, it is the street.
 This isn't death, it is the fruit store.

The poet's voice has grown more and more confident. He does more here than observe. He now must act and he offers to sacrifice himself for those who are oppressed, for those he loves:

What can I do, bring order to the landscape?
 Bring order to the many loves
 who will, in time, turn to photographs
 and then pieces of wood and mouthfuls of blood?
 No, no. I denounce
 the conspiracy of those deserted offices
 swept clean of agony
 that erase the forest design,
 and I offer myself to be eaten by the crushed cows
 when their screams fill the valley
 where the Hudson gets drunk on oil.

The eighth section of *Poet in New York* has two poems, "Ode to Rome" and "Ode to Walt Whitman," and in these two we find the emotional and spiritual climax

of Lorca's journey. In the "Ode to Rome," which Lorca suggests is written (or spoken) from the top of the Chrysler Building (itself a symbol of commerce), the poet attacks both the Pope and the Catholic Church for having betrayed the faithful and the faith itself. Lorca is speaking now not only for himself and others, he is also speaking as one who rather than sacrifice himself for others has taken up the fight. He speaks to denounce, defend, and to attack on behalf of those who can't speak, of those who don't know how to. He also speaks with a courage that is impressive. Lorca was a religious Catholic. Here is the Poet become Prophet, willing to speak out passionately against the man considered God's representative on Earth.

The "Ode to Whitman" has Lorca in a similar position, with Whitman as the person he must defend (rather than faith). It begins with a setting that evokes Whitman's poetry, even as it suggests, with the conflict between nature and the urban, how the latter can leave us insensate to the former:

By the East River and the Bronx
 the young men sang, baring their waists
 with the wheel, the oil, the hide, and the hammer.
 Ninety thousand miners mined silver from the rocks
 and the children drew stairwells and perspectives.

But none fell asleep,
 none wished to be the river,
 none loved the large leaves,
 nor the beach's blue tongue.

...

When the moon sets
 the pulleys will turn to trouble the sky;
 a border of needles will circle memory
 and the coffins will be filled with those who won't work.

New York of filth,
 New York of wires and death.
 What angel do you carry hidden in your cheek?
 What perfect voice will speak the truths of the wheat?
 Who dreams the terrible dreams of your stained anemone?

This leads Lorca to Whitman. Lorca's interest in Whitman was not simply as a poet. While in New York he became familiar with Whitman's democratic ideals; these appealed to him greatly. Lorca's sense of Whitman as poet and man were highly idealized. He identified with Whitman, not only as a poet whose poetry could be seen to reflect a people, but as a visionary.

Not for one moment, beautiful old Walt Whitman,
 have I not seen your beard full of butterflies,
 nor your corduroy shoulders worn away by the moon,
 nor your virginal Apollo thighs,
 nor your voice like a column of ash;
 ancient beauty, like a mist . . .

For these very reasons, Lorca, himself a homosexual, was angered by homosexuals who claimed Whitman as their own in ways that Lorca felt debased the poet. Lorca is interested in a macho, Adamic Whitman, not one who could be seen as soft, as debauched.

Not for a single moment, macho Adam of blood,
 man alone at sea, beautiful old Walt Whitman
 because on rooftops,
 gathered in bars,
 leaving the sewers in bunches,
 trembling between the legs of chauffeurs,
 or spinning on platforms of absinthe,
 the queers, Walt Whitman, are pointing at you.

Lorca's Whitman would have found these men intolerable. Because Lorca was not out of the closet himself, he was highly disapproving of those who were:

And so, I don't raise my voice, old Walt Whitman,
 against the boy who writes
 the name of a girl on his pillow,
 nor against the young man who dresses like a bride
 in the darkness of his closet,
 nor against the solitary men in the casinos
 who drink with disgust the water of prostitution,
 nor against the men with green faces
 who love other men and burn their lips in silence.
 But I will against you, queers of the cities,
 of tumescent flesh and filthy thought.
 Mothers of mud. Harpies. Dreamless enemies
 of the Love that delivers crowns of joy.

Against these, Lorca would raise his voice, to protect Whitman and, by extension, himself:

And you, beautiful Walt Whitman, sleep on the shores of the Hudson
 with your beard pointed to the pole and your hands open.
 Soft clay or snow, your tongue is calling
 the comrades to watch over your bodiless gazelle.

Sleep: nothing remains.
 A dance of walls shakes the prairies
 and America dissolves into machines and tears.
 I want the strong airs of deepest night
 to remove the flowers and letters from the arch where you sleep
 and a black boy to announce to the white golden ones
 the arrival of the kingdom of grain.

Having arrived at the point where he can speak with such force, the poet is ready to leave New York. His flight finds him heading for Cuba, where he is scheduled to read and lecture. In Cuba, Lorca is at ease in a way that never seemed possible in the United States. Beyond the familiarity of language (he never really learned English), Lorca loved the people, the culture, the soft, warm Caribbean air. As a poet and musician, he was drawn to the Cuban *son*, the rumba-like dance and music. "Son of Blacks in Cuba" is the last poem of this masterful collection. The movement of the poem, with all the repetitions, mirrors that of *son*. Here we get a sense of Lorca's relief at his release from New York and his love for Cuba. In that relief though, one gets no sense of defeat; this is a victorious departure.

Son of Blacks in Cuba

When the full moon comes, I'll go to Santiago de Cuba.
 I'll go to Santiago.
 In a coach of black water.
 I'll go to Santiago.
 The palm roofs will sing.
 I'll go to Santiago.
 When the palm tree wants to be a stork.
 I'll go to Santiago.
 And when the plantain wants to be medusa.
 I'll go to Santiago.
 With the blond head of Fonseca.
 I'll go to Santiago.
 And the rose of Romeo and Juliet.
 I'll go to Santiago.
 Sea of paper and coins of silver.
 I'll go to Santiago.
 Oh, Cuba, oh rhythm of dry seeds!
 I'll go to Santiago.
 Oh hot waist and drop of wood!
 I'll go to Santiago.
 Harp of living trunks. Cayman. Flower of tobacco!
 I'll go to Santiago.
 I always said I would go to Santiago
 in a coach of black water.

I'll go to Santiago.
 Breeze and alcohol on the wheels.
 I'll go to Santiago.
 My coral in the gloom.
 I'll go to Santiago.
 The sea drowned in sand.
 I'll go to Santiago.
 White heat, dead fruit.
 I'll go to Santiago.
 Oh bovine freshness of the reeds!
 Oh Cuba! Oh curve of sighs and clay!
 I'll go to Santiago.

For their final portfolios for this course, my students turn in their poems, their responses to their field trips, as well as a written reflection on what it has meant for them to have been poets in New York. While all have had different experiences, there are numerous things they seem to have in common. Obviously, they've been reading Lorca and other writers and many have visited the same or similar places. Not one of the more than thirty students agrees with Lorca's final rejection of New York, his need for flight. They enjoy the city too much. For most of them, it's a place they want to remain for college and beyond. What strikes me, however, is that so many of them comment on the ways in which Lorca has taught them to see the city, to hear it, smell it, feel it. Lorca, too, has taught them not only ways in which to understand themselves, he's shown them the importance of understanding and speaking of and for others. In Lorca, they've found both a companion and guide who has deepened their own city journey.

Federico García Lorca (1898–1936) is the most influential Spanish poet of the 20th Century. In his short but prolific life he wrote many plays now considered classics, from The House of Bernarda Alba to Blood Wedding, essays on a great number of topics, from flamenco music to surrealist art, and approximately 1,120 pages of poetry. His better-known collections include Gypsy Ballads (1924–1927) and Diván del Tamarit (1936), but, written during a brief but intense visit to New York and Cuba during 1929–1930, it is A Poet in New York that embodies García Lorca's achievements as a poet.

Pablo Medina (who, along with Mark Statman, translated the poems in this article) is the author of nine books of poetry and prose, as well as a collection of translations from the poetry of Cuban dissident Tania Díaz Castro, Everyone Will Have to Listen (with Carolina Hospital). Most recently he has published The Cigar Roller: A Novel (Grove, 2005) and Points of Balance/Puntos de apoyo, a bilingual collection of poems (Four Way, 2005). His poetry, prose, and translations have been widely published in periodicals and anthologies in the United States and abroad. He is on the faculties of Eugene Lang College and the Warren Wilson MFA Program for Writers.