



8 JEROME ROTHENBERG

The Lorca Variations

As the driving force behind the original deep image school, Jerome Rothenberg was an indispensable figure in American Lorquismo in the late 1950s and early 1960s, but in subsequent decades Lorca makes only sporadic appearances in his work. As Rothenberg left the deep image behind him, he also stopped following developments in Spanish poetry *after* Lorca. There are no contemporary peninsular poets, for example, in the second volume of *Poems for the Millennium*, a massive anthology of international poetry he edited with the poet and translator Pierre Joris. As was the case with Kenneth Koch, Rothenberg's devotion to Lorca does not imply a sustained interest in the Spanish poetic tradition as a whole, although he did go on much later to translate Picasso's poetry (also in collaboration with Joris).¹

Rothenberg's major accomplishment of the late 1960s and 1970s was to found the discipline of *ethnopoetics*, which can be defined as the study of archaic and tribal poetry and poetics with a sensibility informed by the avant-garde movements of the twentieth century. While developing this field, he was also reshaping the genre of the anthology with innovative collections like *Technicians of the Sacred* (1967) and *America: A Prophecy* (1973). Rothenberg's anthologies do not merely present adjustments of an already existing canon; their aim, rather, is to produce imaginative revisionings of oral and literary traditions through imaginative juxtapositions of disparate texts.

Ethnopoetics emerges from Rothenberg's intuition that avant-garde poetry can shed light on archaic and tribal traditions—and vice versa. It is easy to see, then, why Lorca, heir to the folkloric tradition of Antonio Machado y Álvarez as well as a key figure of the historical avant-garde in Europe, might be the prototypical *ethnopoet*. He collected popular lullabies and investigated the *cante jondo*, but was also an intimate friend of Salvador Dalí. What other poet could be so modern and so archaic, so metropolitan and so peripheral within European culture, so *foreign* and yet so adaptable to the *domestic* agenda of U.S. poetics? Rothenberg, who first attempted to translate some of the *Romancero gitano* at the age of fifteen, acknowledges that reading Lorca gave him his first glimpse of this particular juxtaposition of the *old* and the *new*:

Lorca for me was the first poet to open my mind to the contemporary poetry of Europe and of something possibly older and deeper that would surface for us later in America as well. Reading his poetry then, the words and what they seemed to fuse in combination hit me like electric charges. Romances, coplas, gacelas, casidas, llantos: old forms that came together in old/new patterns to form what he/they called *cante hondo* (deep song).²

Rothenberg's 1993 book *The Lorca Variations*, then, represents a return to a major influence after a long hiatus. After translating the *Suites* for Christopher Maurer's authoritative 1991 edition of Lorca's collected poetry in English, Rothenberg went on to create a kind of Lorquian pastiche by recombining images taken from this book (and from elsewhere in Lorca's work): "I began to compose a series of poems of my own ('variations') that draw on vocabulary, especially nouns & adjectives, from my translations of the *Suites* (later from *Poet in New York* as well) but rearrange them in a variety of ways."³

To my mind, Rothenberg's translation of the *Suites*, the principal source of *The Lorca Variations*, is a dominating presence within Maurer's bilingual edition of Lorca's *Collected Poems*. It accounts for 244 out of a total of 786 pages of poetry—nearly a third of the total.⁴ Among the contributors to this book, Rothenberg is unique in having been

a major American poet active during the apogee of North American Lorquismo in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Rothenberg also contributes a one-page preface to his translation for this edition—the only contributor afforded this luxury. While all the translators chosen for *The Collected Poems of Federico García Lorca* acquit themselves reasonably well, Rothenberg stands out from the others in a few significant respects: he puts the stamp of his own poetic personality on Lorca's work, experimenting with colloquial and archaic registers and introducing his signature ampersand (&) in place of the word *and*. This graphic sign, like a watermark appearing on page after page, signals the translation as his own as well as harking back to Paul Blackburn's Lorca translations. Maurer, unlike Donald Allen and Francisco García Lorca in the 1955 *Selected Poems*, commissioned new translations rather than making a selection from already existing versions. The earlier *Selected Poems* was a palimpsest of English-language Lorquismo from 1939 to 1955: Lloyd, Spender, Campbell, Hughes, Honig, and Merwin were among the contributors. Maurer's *Collected Poems*, in contrast, is a contemporary scholarly edition with no pretensions to retrace the reception of Lorca during the postwar period:

Few Spanish poets mean as much to American writers as Lorca, and over the past fifty years, gifted poets too numerous to mention have published hundreds of admirable translations, which ought to be collected and reissued. Obviously, this new volume cannot be two things at once: a careful new translation, in light of recent scholarship, of the entire body of poetry, and an anthology of previously published work.⁵

The inclusion of Rothenberg's translation of the *Suites* in such a dominant position, however, reminds the informed reader of Rothenberg's pivotal role in this history. Maurer himself, needless to say, has been one of the key figures in the reception of Lorca from the 1980s through the first decade of the twenty-first century. In addition to the *Collected Poems* of 1991, he has published several other volumes selecting Lorca's

prose and verse, including a revised and expanded version of the *Collected Poems* in 2002.

Rothenberg's *Suites* is also, significantly, the first complete translation of this work into English. Since *Suites* did not appear as a book until André Belamich's scholarly reconstruction of 1983—more than forty years after the poet's death—it did not feed into the first several waves of English-language and North American Lorquismo. By the time *The Collected Poems of Federico García Lorca* appeared, in fact, the image of Lorca had become somewhat fossilized. The availability of a virtually complete Lorca in English, and of the *Suites* in particular, should allow for a less clichéd vision of Lorca among English-language writers. Nevertheless, it remains to be seen whether Lorca will inspire other poetic projects *not* linked to the cultural imaginary that has already taken root in American soil. Rothenberg himself, as we shall see below, only partially avoids reinscribing Lorca into preestablished patterns of reception.

The Spanish text of the *Suites* reprinted in the *Collected Poems*, and translated by Rothenberg, is not a transcription of Belamich's edition, but rather Maurer's editorially improved version. There will probably never be a definitive edition of this work of poetry. The textual history and reconstruction of the *Suites* is still a fertile area for scholarly investigation, but this investigation is likely to confirm rather than resolve textual uncertainties. Melissa Dinverno is the scholar who has devoted the most sustained attention to this problem. She describes the work as follows: "Written between 1920 and 1923, heavily revised in 1926 and in the 1930s, published in pieces in avant-garde journals, and intended for publication as a collection at least seven times, *Suites* is a fragmented, complex, and materially-rich text that defies conventional editorial practices."⁶ The *Suites*, then, can only exist as an editorial construction, a version or a compendium of alternate versions, given that "Lorca's creative process is one of material mobility, chronological flexibility, and textual instability."⁷ There is not even an "extant running manuscript for the work," a manuscript in which all the poems in this series appear ordered from start to finish.⁸

For my own analysis of Rothenberg's textual transformations of Lorca's poetry I will rely on Maurer's 1991 text—the versos facing Rothenberg's rectos in the *Collected Poems*—since that is the version that Rothenberg himself used. Dinverno's richly detailed discussion of the problematic status of the text of Lorca's *Suites* is pertinent, though, since Rothenberg's translation and subsequent adaptation of the *Suites* takes these principles of textual transformation one step further. Dinverno suggests that the ideal approach to Lorca's work might be “versioning”: “an editorial approach theorized by textual scholars of Germanic and Anglo-American literatures and grounded in the representation of multiple versions of the text of a work.”⁹ I find the concept of “versioning” quite suggestive as an approach to English translations of Lorca as well. Rather than attempting to arrive at a definitive or authoritative translation, designed to represent this poetry in English once and for all, wouldn't it be better to provide the reader with multiple versions of the same text in order to lay bare the erratic history of Lorca in English and the contingent nature of translation itself? In such a representation of Lorca in English, eccentric and awkward translations (Belitt, Bly), historically unique ones (Hughes's *Gypsy Ballads*), free textual adaptations (Spicer, Rothenberg), and even Lorquian apocrypha (Spicer, Creeley) would have their place alongside more conventional practices.

The *Suites* lends itself quite well to the Rothenberg's recombinatorial method, not only because of its textual instability, but also because Lorca's work already follows a similar procedure of recombining words and images in a theme and variation structure. Each of Lorca's *Suites* is a series of variations on a word or image, usually provided in the title. The idea of “writing through” Lorca, using the nouns, adjectives, and images of Rothenberg's own translation of the *Suites* as building blocks for the creation of new poems, then, is a potentially productive one.

While Lorca's name is usually associated with notions of *depth*, Rothenberg's approach in *The Lorca Variations* is to stay surprisingly close to the surface, recombining images from Lorca's texts in an amiable pastiche rather than searching for the daimonic power of the duende. It is to Rothenberg's credit, I think, that he opts *not* to revisit the original

deep image mode, that of his own *White Sun Black Sun*: it would have been anachronistic to resurrect this poetic mode in the 1990s, given the enormous success of the “mainstream” style of pseudo-Spanish pseudosurrealism in the 1970s and 1980s. Rothenberg was without a doubt aware that the deep image had become a cliché. The *Suites*, as he himself notes, represents a more elegant, ludic side of Lorca’s poetry: “they struck me as a different kind of Lorca from what I had known before—still characteristically his but with a coolness & (sometimes) quirkiness, a playfulness of mind and music, that I found instantly attractive.”¹⁰ In exploring these previously hidden aspects of Lorca’s work, Rothenberg is able to return to Lorca without incurring in an anachronistic deep image poetics.

The first poem of *The Lorca Variations* is “Lorca’s Spain: A Homage,” a poem that actually predates his translation of the *Suites* by at least two decades, since it is also found in the 1971 *Poems for the Game of Silence*, a selection of Rothenberg’s work from the 1960s. The poem opens like this:

Beginning with olive trees	Shadows.
Beginning with roosters	Crystal.
Beginning with castanets & almonds	Fishes.
This is a homage to Spain. ¹¹	

This text, then, serves as a bridge between the earlier period and Rothenberg’s later return to Lorca, anticipating the practice of paying homage to Lorca through a recombination of typically Lorquian imagery.

Most of the subsequent poems in *The Lorca Variations* have an easily identifiable source in one of Lorca’s *Suites* or in a poem from *Poeta en Nueva York*. More often than not, the title of the variation will lead us back to Rothenberg’s own translation of one of the *Suites*. Unlike Jack Spicer, Rothenberg does not challenge the reader to distinguish between what is or is not authentically Lorquian: while *all* the texts

are derivative of Lorca, none purports to be a faithful translation, so there is not a meaningful distinction to be drawn between genuine and apocryphal Lorquiana.

A typical example of Rothenberg's procedure is "Federico, Newton, Adam," which is based on Lorca's suite "Newton." Here is the first section of Rothenberg's poem, followed by the corresponding section of his translation from Lorca's original:

Federico in Paris writing about Newton's soul without a clue to what it is.

Federico bites into a pippin, rotten to the core, the symbol of himself as Adam.

Federico with an orange & a pomegranate that the virgin hands him from a bowl of fruit.

With his childlike innocence Federico raises age-old questions of the meaning of the apple.¹²

. . .

Why was it the apple
& not
the orange
or the polyhedral
pomegranate?
Why this virgin fruit
to clue them in,
this smooth & gentle
pippin?
What admirable symbol
lies dormant at its core?
Adam, Paris, Newton
carry it inside their souls
& fondle it without a clue
to what it is.¹³

Rothenberg's variation is clearly an adaptation of this faithful translation.¹⁴ The main visual images are already present in both Lorca's

original and Rothenberg's translation, so what the *third* poem supplies is a metapoetic interpretative context: the image of Federico, in his "child-like innocence," writing a poem about the apple of Adam and Newton, naively posing "age-old questions."

The introduction of this extraneous material raises aesthetic questions. In the first place, what is the effect of imputing "child-like innocence" to the figure of "Federico"? The use of the poet's first name, along with this phrase, activates a well-known Lorquian cliché: that of Federico García Lorca's supposed personal and artistic immaturity. Rothenberg attributes the naiveté that Lorca finds in both Adam and Newton to Lorca himself. Stock phrases like "child-like innocence," "rotten to the core," and "age-old questions" are also aesthetically problematic, especially since there does not seem to be any ironic intent behind their use.

Rothenberg's free poetic adaptation of this fragment, then, is arguably less satisfying than his first translation. Such judgments, of course, are necessarily subjective. What is significant to my mind, though, is that the unconvincing quality of the writing here has a fairly obvious explanation: the interpretative frame derives from received ideas about Lorca rather than from the truly imaginative revisioning we would expect from a figure of Rothenberg's stature. Weak writing, in this particular case, derives from a weak conceptualization of the project of writing through the *Suites*. This is how Rothenberg envisions the process of creating his own poetry out of Lorca's raw material in the first section of the poem "The Return":

To write through Lorca, to come back on Lorca's wings, to return to where you're feeling empty, like dying sweetly after love, to where a rose has left you wounded, the shadow of your childhood like a flower inside your heart, where Lorca's road trails off into a garden, in which the morning star drops colors onto a faded dress, like paint.¹⁵

Here, too, Rothenberg relies too heavily on hackneyed, "poetic" phrases and similes: "dying sweetly after love" and "the shadow of your childhood like a flower inside your heart." The final phrase, "like paint,"

does not add all that much to the whimsical quasi-surrealist image of the morning star dripping colors unto a faded dress. While evoking *color*, the image remains visually indistinct: Lorca would probably have been more concrete—*negra*, *amarilla*, *verde*. The probable source for this poem is “The Return,” a simple poem with more direct, unpretentious images: “I’m coming back / for my wings. // O let me come back.”¹⁶ As in the poems of *White Sun Black Sun*, written some forty years earlier, there is a noticeable gap in quality between the source of inspiration and Rothenberg’s adaptation.

Fortunately, Rothenberg is capable of much stronger writing. Here is the first section of his variation VII, “Water,” based on the first two sections of Lorca’s “Water Suite”:

Under the spring
a silver tremor—
as of oxen trampling
daisies,

memory a lake,
a dead tree floating
on the mountain water

mind & heart
a single highway here,
dark tree in middle of
a black field

nightingales and poppies
hurtling home.¹⁷

These are the two poems from which Rothenberg drew his inspiration:

Homeland

Trees laid out
in black water,

daisies &
poppies.

Down the dead highway
come three oxen.

Nightingales
aloft,
heart of the tree.

. . .

Tremor

Dark to my mind,
with just a memory of silver,
a stone of dew.

In that field no mountain.
Only a clear lake,
a snuffed out spring.¹⁸

Rothenberg collapses these two consecutive sections into one, combining their images to create a short, condensed, imagistic poem in the best Pound/Williams tradition. By having the oxen *trampling* the daisies, he makes explicit something that is only implicit in Lorca's text: the contrast between the delicate flowers and the heavy oxen.

A look at further selections from *The Lorca Variations* would show that Rothenberg's rewriting of "Water Suite" is quite typical of his method. Rothenberg's rewriting of "Cementerio judío," a poem from *Poeta en Nueva York*, in "Jewish Cemetery 1" and "Jewish Cemetery 2," makes more of an impact than the rewriting of the *Suites* that dominate the book. This is the first section of "Jewish Cemetery One":

Daylight like hospitals
where corpses burn where gloves
are cast aside
the women's anguish buried deeper
than our hearts, the children
crying in that fire
like a million herons, children
who have lost their way,
hang there from ropes

with pains down to their feet
& blood that spurts out
from their eyes cut through
like scissors.¹⁹

In this case, too, most of the images derive from Lorca's poem, although here we do not have access to Rothenberg's *first* translation, if any exists. Lorca's original is a problematic poem, an evocation of a Jewish cemetery that features a contrast between "Christ's children" ("niños de Cristo" / "niñas de Cristo") and Jews who between them have only "a single dove's heart" ("un solo corazón de paloma") and "a pheasant's solitary eye" ("un solo ojo de faisán"). In contrast to the Christian children, the Jews in their cemetery seem pitiable. The Jews are represented as prisoners, passengers on a ship, and cadavers in a hospital.²⁰

Since the images of "Cementerio judío" do not necessarily converge into a coherent vision, it is difficult to arrive at a univocal interpretation. Both Glass and Nordlund read it as a denunciation of the historical persecution of the Jews, and specifically on the expulsion of the Sephardim from Spain in 1492 and their subsequent sea voyages.²¹ Nevertheless, the attitude toward the Jews implicit in the imagery of the poem is difficult to pin down. Some of the imagery has pejorative implications: the Jew who appears in the opening line has "el pudor helado del interior de una lechuga" [the chilly shame of the inside of a lettuce-head].²² The overall mood is one of pity and lamentation, not contempt, but I cannot confidently ascribe a positive attitude toward the Jews to the speaker of the poem.

Rothenberg's rewriting of "Cementerio judío" inevitably evokes the holocaust, an historical event that occurred after Lorca's poem was written on January 18, 1930. The Jewish dead in Rothenberg's poem are the victims of Hitler's genocide, not those of a Jewish burial ground in Manhattan visited by the Spanish poet many years earlier. Rothenberg's evocation of Christ and his contrast between Jews and Christians sound very different from those of Lorca, even though the actual imagery is very close:

It is girls and doves who fly here,
Christ who guards this prison,
who hides this gate Christ's
joys & fevers
see—they say—that dove
there in the center
no bigger than a hummingbird
& see it leap! it flies
over your walls
like Christ good pheasant
ah! good doctor,
crouches at your table
who wears a surgeon's coat
beckons the buried dead
with brightness²³

The second part of Rothenberg's poem, "Jewish Cemetery (2)," is a moving threnody based on further images from "Cementerio judío":

Let them cover her eyes with rags when the dusk begins to gnaw her joints
& let the donkeys pass her by let them crack down hard against the marble
& let the fevers cut across her like a claw
or a boot assault her with the terrors Jews feel in their cemeteries.²⁴

Virtually all the words in both of these passages can be traced back to Lorca's poems, but we interpret the same image rather differently when we attribute it to Jerome Rothenberg, the Jewish author of *Poland, 1931*, the anthologist of *The Big Jewish Book*, an early translator of Celan and a close friend and collaborator with Pierre Joris, the major translator of Celan into English. Rothenberg, in short, is a writer for whom the holocaust has been a central concern.²⁵ Lorca was deeply appreciative of the Jewish contribution to the culture of Spain, especially his native Andalusia, but his perspective on Judaism as a religion is unmistakably that of one raised a Spanish Roman Catholic. Writing to his family during his stay in New York, he remarks on the aridity of Protestant ritual and the unconvincing character of Judaism. He describes his

visit to the Shearith Israel synagogue, where the “Cementerio judío” was located, in the following terms: “I was doing my best not to laugh. There was a very solemn, beautiful ceremony, but I found it meaningless. To me the figure of Christ seems too strong to deny.”²⁶

Rothenberg’s poem, then, is subject to the Borgesian “Pierre Menard effect,” when the reader adjusts his or her perceptions of the attitudes expressed in a literary work according to preconceived notions of its author’s ideology.²⁷ Even if we see García Lorca as fundamentally sympathetic to the Jews, his imagery takes on a different cast if we read it as the personal expression of a postwar American Jewish poet. The inherent difficulty in interpreting Lorca’s original poem allows for a productive distance between the perspectives of the two authors. The implicit tension between Lorca and Rothenberg gives “Jewish Cemetery” a certain resonance as a Holocaust poem, even though it was written with images derived from a text written by an author in a very different historical situation. There is added poignancy in the fact that Lorca wrote his poem only three years before Hitler came to power in Germany, and six years before he himself fell victim to right-wing violence in Spain, at the onset of a civil conflict that was a prelude to the Second World War.

Rothenberg’s rearrangement of the imagery from Lorca’s *Suites*, in contrast, usually produces acceptable but not striking poems. One problem might be the lack of tension between the original texts and their retranslations. A side-by-side comparison between Rothenberg’s original/derivative poems and Lorca’s originals is difficult to avoid, given the ease of finding the original sources. Since many fragments from Lorca’s *Suites* are relatively slight in the first place, Rothenberg is able to weave variations on Lorquian themes without producing discordant results. Since his poems are not necessarily more compelling than his own previous translations of the source texts, however, it is sometimes difficult to see what is gained in these adaptations. His textual strategy is a legitimate one, in the venerable tradition of American poets rewriting Lorca’s work, but the results can feel inconsequential.²⁸

One reason why Rothenberg's project is sometimes unconvincing may be its belatedness: Rothenberg's presentation of *The Lorca Variations* conveys the feeling of a nostalgic return to the heroic enterprise of Rothenberg's youth, the search for an "American *duende*," in the words of Paul Blackburn that Rothenberg quotes in his postface to the book.²⁹ Lorca was a living presence in American poetry in the 1950s and 1960s, when Rothenberg discovered that "Lorca's glamour had similarly touched poets like Jack Spicer, Robert Duncan, Amiri Baraka, Allen Ginsberg, Robert Creeley."³⁰ By the last decade of the twentieth century, however, Lorca's influence had become a matter of historical record. A kind of fossilization has set in: invocations of the *duende* or "Lorca's Spain" now convey a sort of period flavor, evoking the aesthetic experimentation of thirty or forty years earlier rather than the excitement of a vitally new project. In a sense, Rothenberg is the victim of his own success, since it was partially through his early efforts that Lorca's poetry was assimilated into American poetry.

Rothenberg's book might be seen, in part, as an attempt to capture the aesthetic excitement of Jack Spicer's *After Lorca*. Rothenberg himself sees the *Suites* as a precursor to Spicer's work, although, of course, Spicer himself never knew this particular work: "As a type of 'serial poetry' (Robin Blaser and Jack Spicer's term), the 'suites' come early in Lorca's career but already show a connection with the montage & vernacular methods of early European modernism."³¹ *The Lorca Variations*, then, is also a serial poem indebted to both Lorca and Spicer, to both modern and postmodern textual practices.

Rothenberg's rearrangement of images from Lorca's poems is similar in some ways to Spicer's *After Lorca*: both works of apocryphal Lorquiana create a hybrid voice and test the limit between translation and pastiche. Nevertheless, the two books are radically different in their historical situation. *After Lorca* was so radical a work for the 1950s that its textual practices could not be understood until a much later date. Spicer was a relatively unknown figure in 1957; *The Collected Books of Jack Spicer* did not appear until 1975, and Spicer's influence on contemporary American poetry is most strongly felt in the 1980s with the

rise of language poetry. *The Lorca Variations*, in contrast, appears at a moment when such sophisticated postmodern textual practices could be accepted as relatively normal, and when Lorca has already been fully integrated into North American poetics. Rothenberg's revisioning of Lorca's *Suites*, then, is not likely to have the historical significance of Spicer's earlier and more radical work.