

J E R O M E R O T H E N B E R G



THE  
LORCA  
VARIATIONS



A POSTFACE TO *THE LORCA VARIATIONS*

I was recently involved in an extensive Lorca translation work, which brought me full circle to the first translations I ever attempted: some Lorca *romances* worked out and never published, when I was still in my teens back in the later 1940s. It was shortly after first word had come to me of Lorca, circa 1947, from Tom Riggs, who was my brother's English teacher at NYU. I was fifteen at the time, and Lorca had been dead for some eleven years—nearly three-quarters of my life. Time of course seemed longer then.

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 & 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 make what he/they called a *cante hondo* (deep song). Or “The Lament for the Death of a Bullfighter,” with its repetitive tollings & its flow of deep images. And the final discovery of all that that might lead to in *Poet in New York*: for me a first entry to surrealism & the crucified marvelous (the crucified word-&-image of a Dada poet such as Hugo Ball) as it erupted, beyond recognition, in a city that we thought we knew.

Lorca was the first, and it was from Lorca more than anyone else that I brought away the idea of a composition through images (through charged conjunctions & disjunctions) that I later named “deep image.” By that naming—circa 1960—I found myself positioned between poets like Robert Kelly & Diane Wakoski on the one hand, James Wright & Robert Bly on the other. The field of course had opened by then beyond Lorca and in Lorca's work itself had moved from image as such to what Lorca in one of the great examples of a twentieth-century poetics had called

*duende*. As an *active* poetics—opening like Antonin Artaud’s theater-of-cruelty to ideas of possession, of struggle, of those “black sounds” that make of art “a power, not a construct”—this concept of *duende* as an “earth-force” made of Lorca a major precursor for the revolutions in poetry & life erupting again in the 1950s. (His political and, as we were to find out later, *sexual* martyrdom at the hands of Spanish fascists contributed to this too.) Entering into that maelstrom, then, I found that Lorca’s glamor had similarly touched poets like Jack Spicer, Robert Duncan, Paul Blackburn, Amiri Baraka, Allen Ginsberg, Robert Creeley, among the many I was soon to meet—a whole generation in fact, not easily bounded by even those groupings with which I later sensed myself to share a common cause. Blackburn it was who defined our search as one for an “American *duende*.”

Time has not diminished Lorca for me in that sense, though it has clearly set his work against that of a wide range of other poets, other poetries, works that in their vastness seemed at some point to open nearly limitless possibilities for our modern & “post”modernist concerns with language & reality. With all the changes from his time to ours, Lorca has remained a beacon—a poet, as I read him, who can be rediscovered & can turn out differently at each point of recovery. A number of years ago, coming across a series of scattered & early poems of his called “*suites* [Suites],” 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 & music, that I found instantly attractive. The full run of his Suites—first brought together & published posthumously in the 1980s—shows other Lorca characteristics as well, but my attempt, as far as I could, was to stress the more playful ones, as if to pay homage by so doing to this most graceful & elegant of twentieth-century poets.

Beyond the Suites, however, which were commissioned as part of a large collected Lorca translated by a variety of

hands, I felt a frustration in not being able to publish my own translations independently, thus diluting whatever sense I had of doing a Lorca homage, etc. With that in mind, 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. I don’t know how important this information is for a reading of the poems, but I mention it to explain the way in which these poems both are & aren’t mine, both are & aren’t Lorca. The methods used resemble chance operations but with a margin of flexibility, with total freedom in the case of verbs & adverbs, with occasional addresses to Lorca himself imbedded in them. The result isn’t translation or imitation in any narrow sense, but yet another way of making poetry—& for me at least, a way of coming full circle into a discovery that began with Lorca and for which he has stood with certain others as a guide and constant fellow-traveler.

Jerome Rothenberg  
Encinitas, California  
1992/1993

As poet and experimental translator, pioneer in performance poetry and ethnopoetics, Jerome Rothenberg for over three decades has been a literary radical and prominent influence in the American avant-garde. Among his own earliest sources was the Spanish poet Federico García Lorca, whose “composition through images . . . opened my mind to the contemporary poetry of Europe & of something possibly older & deeper that would surface for us in America as well.” Having recently returned to translating Lorca, Rothenberg began to appropriate and rearrange items of Lorca’s vocabulary and to compose a series of poems of his own that “both are & aren’t mine, both are & aren’t Lorca.” As an original work, *The Lorca Variations* are, as he describes them, “a way of coming full circle into a discovery that began with Lorca & for which he has stood with certain others as a guide & constant fellow-traveler.”