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The gypsy balladeer

by [Alexander Coleman](#)

A review of *Collected Poems*, by Federico Garcia Lorca.

The Chilean poet Pablo Neruda was once asked which were the best and worst language vehicles for his poetry in translation. After pondering the matter, the poet opined that he preferred Italian, since it “comes closest (to my original Spanish), because by keeping the values of the words, the sound helps reflect the sense.” English was deemed the worst for his purposes, “being so much more direct, [it] often expresses the meaning of my poetry but does not convey its atmosphere.” Indeed, the poet added, “the accuracy of the translation itself, of the meaning, may be what destroys the poem.” It should be noted that the French language did not fare well, either: “In many of the French translations . . . my poetry seems to me to vanish, nothing is left, yet one can’t complain because they express what one has written.” Translation is clearly a complex problem, best summarized by the impression that a whole range of poetic expression in Spanish has an emotional charge and a verbal power best realized by reading the poetry aloud, as most certainly is the case with both Neruda and Lorca—their verses take flight only with the spoken word, and their respective public triumphs were often in theaters, if not stadiums (as in Neruda’s case). English poetic expression is far more muted, *pace* Dylan Thomas, more for the eye than the ear. One only has to compare and contrast any of the recordings made by Neruda and T. S. Eliot to hear the most convincing testimony on this matter.

The poetry of Federico García Lorca has offered similar challenges to a translator from Spanish to English over the years. It cannot be just happenstance that Ted Hughes, exasperated after the near-impossible task of translating García Lorca’s stark tragedy *Bodas De Sangre* into *Blood Wedding*, pronounced in definitive fashion that “Lorca cannot be Englished.” All the more compliments and salutations are therefore due to the eminent Lorca scholar Christopher Maurer for bringing out this year, some sixty-six years after the poet’s gruesome assassination near his home in Granada, the first almost complete bilingual edition of the Lorca corpus, with many previously uncollected and unpublished poems translated here for the first time. The volume is “almost complete” due to the fact that the editor has thankfully given us only a brief selection from Lorca’s first collection, *The Book of Poems*, the poet’s lengthiest book and easily the worst, plain and simple. Indeed, it is difficult to glimpse the future in this mass of poetic mediocrity, but Lorca was soon to find his voice with *Poem of the Deep Song*, and after that, there was no stopping him—that is, until Franco’s goons rounded him up along with every other local free-thinking university professor, liberal town councilor, the odd Mason and the local Homais, doctors, teachers, humble workers, and trade unionists. Before Lorca was shot in late August 1936, some 280 citizens had suffered the same fate in the same place.

Professor Maurer has given us a short literary history of Lorca’s poetic development, and there are so many disparate elements synthesized therein that summary is well nigh impossible. Probably the

surest way to start is by realizing that Lorca, a good pianist, came to literature from music—a hovering presence over all of Lorca’s life is the saintly figure of Manuel de Falla, a mentor in every sense of the word. In 1922, just at the start of Lorca’s meteoric career, the poet and the composer organized a one-time only Festival of Cante Jondo, more popularly known as “flamenco,” where distinguished artists and instrumentalists were presented well away from smelly bars and dives—both poet and musician were arguing for the musical and poetic identity of Andalusia, a miniscule patch of land that reached out somehow to Bizet, Glinka, Rimsky-Korsakov, Ravel, and Debussy. The festival transformed a provinciality into a universality—gypsies, bullfighters, singers emblematic of everyman are known throughout the world today through Lorca’s poetic mythification.

In spite of the renown, ever since Bizet’s *Carmen*, of a generalized Andalusian atmosphere, it is important to emphasize how intensely Lorca fought against the cheapest and most touristic kind of folklore. He was nothing if not at all-embracing poet, fusing the past (going right back to the metaphorical daring evident in the Muslim poets of the Caliphate) and on to a complete re-evaluation of traditional folk poetry, as dramatized by the epochal researches and recordings made by Ramón Menéndez Pidal. But just as he was a devourer and assimilator of Andalusia’s past, and Granada’s past in particular, he had a thirst for the future of literature—his friendships with Pablo Neruda and, above all, to Salvador Dalí were emblematic—each successive book of Lorca was a new beginning, a break with the most recent innovation. The aesthetic and qualitative distance between the *Book of Poems* and the *Poem of the Deep Song* is stunning, inexplicable. But as he moves through the twenties, each book, the *Suites*, the *Songs*, and the culminating *Romancero gitano* (Gypsy Ballads) are each exercises in condensation, metaphorical daring, imposition of mystery, and, above all, avoidance of the abstract within a constant contemplation of death. Lorca prided himself on his instinctive imagination, his anti-academic poetic prowess, even though his literary essays, above all those on Gongora, children’s nursery songs, and imagination versus inspiration, are splendidly argued and carefully developed. He was a bear of a worker—dead at thirty-eight, he had written thirteen plays and nine books of verse, plus numerous other essays, interviews, and a rich varia.

Professor Maurer’s splendid edition is all the more treasured because we can finally take the measure of the poet, now well away from the circumstances of his death and his inevitable transfiguration into *the* tragic symbol of the death of the Spanish republic. In many ways, his death prevented a close reading of his complete achievement, and his flamboyant personality often got in the way too. For instance, Jorge Luis Borges met Lorca in 1933 in Buenos Aires; it was not a happy encounter. In a not atypical burst of savagery, Borges recalled Lorca only by saying that “I suppose he had the good luck to be executed, no? He struck me as a kind of play actor, no? Living up to a certain role, I mean being a professional Andalusian.” Borges, who by then was gradually transforming himself into an Eliotic, metaphysical poet, was appalled by the very gay flair of the lionized poet, along with the increasingly vanguardistic daring of Lorca’s work, evident above all in his *Poet in New York*, and he was pitiless in his estimation of Lorca, before and after his death.

Twelve translators have participated in this estimable effort, and in general I found the versions to be not only accurate but also attentive to the quality of the poem as a poem in English. The distance between Spanish poetic practice and the general tone of English poetry today demands a kind of associative and freely engaged reader. For a reader only familiar with Lorca’s “greatest hits,” many of the poems of the middle period have a Haiku-like intensity and economy that is not often associated with the Lorca of a more rhetorical thrust such as that typified by the *Gypsy Ballads* or *The Poet in New York*, the latter work finally published posthumously in 1940. Here is one of my favorites, a Haiku translated by Alan S. Trueblood from Lorca’s *Songs, 1921–1924*:

Despedida (Leave-taking)

If I die,
leave the balcony open.
The boy is eating oranges.
(From my balcony I can see him.)
The reaper is reaping the wheat.
(From my balcony I can hear him.)
If I die,
leave the balcony open!

Alexander Coleman was a long-time contributor to The New Criterion and a close friend of the editors. He died on June 17th, 2002.

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