LANGSTON HUGHES AND FEDERICO GARCIA LORCA

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In "Langston Hughes as Translator," John F. Matheus ranks Hughes among the best translators of poetry because of his ability to sympathize with the poem he is translating to the point that he could have written the poem himself[1]. Matheus proceeds to praise Hughes' translation of Federico García Lorca's[2] *Gypsy Ballads (Romancero gitano)* for its adaptation to English of the ballad stanza and imagery of the Spanish poet. Considering Hughes' successful emulation of the Spanish poet's genius, the reader of Hughes' original poetry is tempted to look for traces of García Lorca's style. Hughes wrote a few poems about gypsies, some using tha ballad stanza. He wrote some other ballads and some poems about Spain that may also reflect a debt to García Lorca.

Hughes' first poem about a gypsy appeared in 1927 *Fine Clothes to the Jew.* Considering that *Gypsy Ballads* was not published until 1928, one may read this poem without suspecting García Lorca's influence. Furthermore, the poem's form and subject matter are distinctively American. "Gypsy Man" consists of four strict blues stanzas. The blues are a thoroughly American musical form. The blues stanza adheres to the following formula: the phrase in the first line is repeated with little or no variation in the second line, which is followed by a different phrase in the third line. The speaker is a woman lamenting her amorous disappointments, one having occurred in Memphis.

1 John F. Matheus, "Langston Hughes as Translator," in *Langston Hughes: Black Genius,* ed. Therman B. O'Daniel (New York: Wm. Morrow and Co., Inc., 1971), p. 157.

2 Federico García Lorca, "Death of little Tony Camborio," in *Gypsy Ballads,* trans. Rolfe Humphries (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1954), p. 44.

Hughes didn't write another poem about gypsies until 1942, after he had become familiar with García Lorca's *Gypsy Ballads*, which he began translating in 1937 and published in 1951 (Matheus, p. 158); and as the title of Hughes' poem suggests, "Ballad of the Gypsy" incorporates the ballad stanza used by García Lorca. In content, however, Hughes' poem resembles none of García Lorca's in particular. Hughes' gypsy, here as in his 1927 poem, is not the literal Spanish gypsy, but the vagrant who does not fit into American society ("Gypsy man") or the resourceful fortune teller ("Ballad of the Gypsy").

Hughes' only other poem specifically about gypsies —"Gypsy Melodies," also written in 1942— also adheres roughly to the ballad stanza; but even more reminiscent of *Gypsy Ballads* is Hughes' impressionistic image of the moon in this poem. The first selection in the *Gypsy Ballads* is "The moon, the moon" ("Romance de la luna"), which established the mystical tone for the rest of the collection. The moon is one of García Lorca's most distinctive images in *Gypsy Ballads* and in *Blood Wedding (Bodas de sangre)*, which Hughes also translated; but it would be wrong to ascribe Hughes' moon imagery to García Lorca's influence because, as early as 1926, Hughes had published "Winter Moon" and "March Moon," both as spare and subjective as anything in the Spaniard's works.

In general, however, García Lorca's poems about gypsies are much more impressionistic than Hughes', which present a clearer narrative than García Lorca's. If Hughes was indeed influenced by *Gypsy Ballads* in his own writing, the influence is more evident in his use of the ballad stanza and in his choice of dramatic situations than in his style, which remains fairly mundane as he adapts the ballad to the plight of the poor American black. Even though Hughes didn't write many poems about gypsies, he wrote other ballads that may be grouped together and which, individually, resemble some of the poems in *Gypsy Ballads*, which themselves are related only loosely. Whether or not Hughes' ballads have definite counterparts in *Gypsy Ballads*, Hughes did recognize the similar racial and social predicaments of Spain's gypsies and America's blacks.

Shakespeare in Harlem contains a sequence of poems with the word *ballad* in their titles, and most of them deal with social outcasts. Among the titles are "Ballad of the Sinner," "Ballad of the Killer Boy," "Ballad of the Fortune Teller," and "Ballad of the Pawnbroker." Two poems in particular resemble selections in *Gypsy Ballads*. "Ballad of the Girl Whose Name is Mud" portrays

a girl who sacrifices her reputation for a "no-good" man, but who feels no remorse, even after he leaves her. In "The unfaithful married woman" ("La casada infiel"), García Lorca creates a similar female character who shamelesly takes a lover without acknowledging to him that she is married. The characters in both poems practice a code of honor distinct from generally accepted practices.

Hughes' "Ballad of the Man Who's Gone" may also have antecedents in *Gypsy Ballads.* This poem describes a woman who must borrow money in order to bury her husband. The prohibitive fees for the undertaker and even the preacher allow her to buy only a few flowers for the funeral. There are frequent images of death in *Gypsy Ballads,* and the ensuing funerals resemble the one in Hughes' poem both in their austerity and dignity.

For example, in García Loca's "Death of little Tony Camborio" ("Muerte de Antoñito el Camborio"), a proud but unemotional angel places the victim's head no a pillow while four other angels —whose blushes are not radiant but faded— light candles. Both the ceremony and those who officiate it are characterized by restraint. "The man who was summoned" ("Romance del emplazado") ends with a funeral image of comparable sobriety and dignity. A sheet draped over the dead body assumes the physical stature and eternal significance of a Roman sarcophagus. *Shakespeare in Harlem* was published in 1942 while Hughes was still working on his translation of *Gypsy Ballads,* so the possibility of García Lorca's influence on Hughes' ballads is not unlikely.

Also before publishing his translation of *Gypsy Ballads* in 1951, Hughes produced *One Way Ticket* (1949), which contains the "Madam to You" sequence - another group of ballads that, collectively and individually, vaguely resembles *Gypsy Ballads.* "Madam's Past History" may be Hughes' attempt to match the historical context that García Lorca provides for his reader in the three historical ballads at the end of his collection. But instead of the romanticized tales of St. Eulalie, Don Pedro the knight, and Thamar and Amnon ("Martirio de Santa Olalla," "Burla de don Pedro a caballo," and "Thamar y Amnón"), Hughes' points of reference include a hair-dressing parlor, a barbecue stand, and the Work Projects Administration of the Great Depression.

Most of the "Madam" ballads depict the protagonist's somewhat comical struggles against some authority: the woman whose house she cleans, her landlord, the telephone company, the juvenile court, and the census bureau. These authorities all recall the more oppressive and deadly Civil Guard (Guardia Civil) that

persecutes the gypsies in several of García Lorca's poems. "Madam and the Wrong Visitor" depicts a humorous confrontation with personified death. Whenever García Lorca personifies death, the image is much more sinister. Hughes was surely familiar with the character Death in *Blood Wedding* and the character Solitude in "Black Trouble" ("Romance de la pena negra"), another of the *Gypsy Ballads*.

Just as García Lorca mingles gypsy folklore with Catholicism in "The gypsy nun" ("La monja gitana") and in three ballads that bear the names of saints —Saints Michael, Raphael, and Gabriel ("San Miguel," "San Rafael," and "San Gabriel")— Hughes' Madam confuses superstition and religion as she appeals to her number writer, her fortune teller, and her minister—in that order. Finally, not to be outdone by the unfaithful married gypsy woman or Hughes' own girl whose name is mud, Madam justifies her amorous exploits outside of the confines of her two marriages in "Madam and her Might Have Been."

If the situations in Hughes' ballads are only vaguely suggestive of those in García Lorca's, Hughes' poems about the Spanish Civil War draw some explicit parallels between the American black and "them Moors as dark as me"[3] who were fighting in Spain. "From Spain to Alabama" equates the flamenco with the blues. Hughes abandons the ballad stanza in practically all of his poems about Spain, some of which were written before and some after his two ballad sequences. But whereas his ballads resemble the *Gypsy Ballads* in their stanza form and dramatic situations, Hughes' poems about the Spanish Civil War more closely resemble García Lorca's with respect to style. Edward Mullen has noticed the Spanish poet's influence in the opening lines of Hughes' "Air Raid: Barcelona": "Black smoke of sound/Curls against the midnight shy"[4]. This passage "is vaguely reminiscent of García Lorca in its emphasis on contrasting visual images" (Mullen, p. 37).

Without the restraint of the ballad stanza, perhaps Hughes felt freer to experiment with images in his poems about Spain than he did in his ballad sequences. One can only speculate as to why he considered the ballad stanza and plain imagery appropriate for his Afro-American setting, and the less rigid, more impressionistic style appropriate for his Spanish setting. And while Hughes never

3 Langston Hughes, "Letter From Spain Addressed to Alabama," in *Langston Hughes in the Hispanic World and Haiti*, ed. Edward J. Mullen (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1877), p. 157.

4 Hughes, "Air Raid: Barcelona," in Mullen, p. 151.

adopts García Lorca's style completely, one may find traces of the Spaniard's influence in Hughes' poetry. Hughes acknowledged a similar indirect influence on his writing when he wrote that his reading of *Don Quixote* helped him create his fictional character Simple many years later[5]. Considering the many years (1937-51) that Hughes spent in preparing his translation of García Lorca's poetry, one is not surprised to find evidence in Hughes' poetry of his familiarity with the structure, form, content, and imagery of the *Gypsy Ballads.*

5 Hughes, *I Wonder As I Wander* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1956), p. 291.

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