

MANHATTAN TRANSFER: THE “CLANDESTINE” INFLUENCE ON LORCA’S *POETA EN NUEVA YORK*

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In his brilliant introduction to Ben Belitt’s edition of *Poet in New York*, Angel del Río discusses several sources on which Lorca may have relied while writing *Poeta en Nueva York*:

... it can be safely affirmed that the poet knew little, at least directly, of modern American literature. Lorca had a remarkable impatience with any language other than Spanish. Practically all he read of foreign literature he read in translation. There were few books in his room in John Jay [Hall, his dormitory at Columbia University], and he was busy not only absorbing the impressions of the city but also in writing a great deal of his own verse... Of the books that he read while in New York there are two which may have some significance as indirect sources: *Manhattan Transfer* by Dos Passos and *All Quiet on the Western Front* by Eric Remarque, both in Spanish translations. A more direct connection could be established with *The Waste Land* of Eliot which undoubtedly he read in the Spanish translation, *Tierra baldía*, of Angel Flores (Del Río, 1955, pp. xxx-xxx).

T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* has been thoroughly explored by Richard Saez (1962); the other two have been virtually ignored. Although there is no doubt that Remarque’s work is filled with despair, disillusionment, disorientation, and the search for identity, neither the style nor the plot can be tangibly connected to *Poeta en Nueva York*. If there is any contribution at all, it would have to have been in the subconscious affect of mood rather than substance. On the other hand, there is so much of Eliot apparent in *Poeta en Nueva York* that whatever debt Lorca owed to Dos Passos has been understandably obscured. Though not mentioning Lorca, E.D. Lowery unwittingly provides an important clue for this oversight. “Critics” he has pointed out, “have... hitherto overlooked John Dos Passos’ heavy debt [to Eliot] in *Manhattan Transfer* (1925), a novel conceived and published when the stir created by *The Waste Land* was at its height” (Lowery, 1974, pág. 53). In other word, of these two, Eliot is, indeed,

Lorca's prime source while Dos Passos is an indirect or secondary one. Therefore, Dos Passos' influence is difficult to detect due to the fusion of Eliot into *Manhattan Transfer*.

With this difficulty acknowledged, let us, nevertheless, examine various aspects of *Manhattan Transfer* and *Poeta en Nueva York* and compare the existing similarities.

In an early review, Mike Gold calls the novel a "barbaric poem of New York", and observes that *Manhattan Transfer* reflected "bewilderment"; and that the protagonist, Jimmy Herf, "is tortured by American commercialism and always seeks some escape" (Ludington, 1980, pág. 245). At the conclusion of the book, Herf does, indeed try to escape by hitchhiking out of the city. When a truck stops and Herf is asked how far he is going, he replies, "I dunno, pretty far" (Dos Passos, 1925, pág. 404), which "is an affirmation of nothing except the negative effects of urban life" (Ludington, 1980, pág. 245).

Throughout *Poeta en Nueva York*, Lorca's protagonist is in a constant state of disorientation and seeks relief from the chaos of the city in "Poemas del lago Edem Mills" (García Lorca, 1960, pp. 426-429), "En la cabaña del farmer (campo de Newburg)" (pp. 429-433), and "Introducción a la muerte" (pp. 434-442). Upon his return to the city in "Vuelta a la ciudad", he asks: "¿Qué voy a hacer?" (p. 445). At the conclusion of *Poeta en Nueva York*, the protagonist, like Herf, flees the city and announces over and over: "Iré a Santiago" (pp. 458-459).

Both protagonists, as we have seen, have the same desire, i.e. to escape New York City for a far-away place. The two books close while the protagonists are in route, before they reach the destinations which are the concrete negations of life in the city.

An additional similarity exists in two themes, one an effect, the other a cause, and are manifest in the actions of Herf and the "poeta": (1) the quest for identity and (2) unrequited love.

Upon arriving in New York from abroad (the "poeta" also comes from Europe), Herf immediately needs to know who he is, what he is doing, and where he is going; he pursues his quest for identity with "a desperation expressed in... nightmarish urban fantasies" (Gelfant, 1971, pág. 181). This enigma is projected onto the screen of defeat where people are forced to live together but, lacking communication, find themselves cruelly isolated and "brutally aggravated by the nature of the megalopolis" (Colley, 1978, pág. 65). As Blanche Gelfant has so aptly described the circumstances, Herf performs against the backdrop of "a fragmented and confusing world where the need for self-definition grows urgent because the social supports of the past are weakened" (Gelfant, 1971, pág. 156).

In the opening poem of *Poeta en Nueva York*, "Vuelta de paseo" (pág. 399), the protagonist announces his cosmic assassination, his "murder". He finds

himself in a world without love. Thus, he can neither procreate nor exist for he is a creature who depends upon love and its counterparts: God, Beauty, and Truth. To take love, this indefinable quality, away from man is to make him a man no longer. To leave him in a world without love is surely to kill him. To find his identity, the protagonist embarks on his quest "tropezando con mi rostro distinto de cada día", hoping that he will some day discover himself. Like Herf, the "poeta" wanders through the chaos of a city reeking of isolation and doom, surrounded by formless shapes, animals with broken skulls, and engulfed by the frenetic pace of commercialism and materialism. Futility pervades the book, and one discovers the same attack on modern industrial life as in *Manhattan Transfer*.

The two protagonists find themselves the victims of the identical enemy: frustration. In the words of Lowery, both Herf and the "poeta" are "crippled by the moral and emotional enervation they would relieve; unable or unwilling to direct their masculine energies toward fruitful, life-enhancing ends" (Lowery, 1974, pág. 57). Herf is rejected by Ellen; the poet by his "elusive" love. Love has abandoned the poet and left only a "filo de mi amor" (pág. 420) to wound him.

Of particular significance in the two books is the treatment of homosexuality. Lowery comments on the "almost total absence of authentic love in *Manhattan Transfer* [and] in the homosexuality of Ogletorpe and Tony Hunter" (Lowery, 1974, pág. 56). And, of course, we should not ignore Lorca's preoccupation with the world of the "Faeries de Norteamérica, Pájaros de la Habana, Jotos de Méjico, Sarasas de Cádiz, Apios de Sevilla, Cancos de Madrid, Floras de Alicante, Adelaidas de Portugal" in "Oda a Walt Whitman" (pág. 454).

On another plane, one of the distinctive features of *Manhattan Transfer* is the technique Dos Passos displays with snatches of conversation and fragments (the Camera Eye), especially those used as epigraphs to introduce chapters. Some of these are amazingly similar to the poem "Asesinato (dos voces de madrugada en Riverside Drive)" (pp. 418-419), in which two passersby discuss a typical, by-the-numbers New York murder. According to a transcription of an interview which Lorca gave to L. Méndez Domínguez in 1933, what Lorca told him, conversationally, as an event from real life, appears as the poem, almost verbatim (García Lorca, 1960, pág. 1674). Lorca had never before written any poetry on this order. The suspicion of influence on these "life snatches" of conversation should lie strongly in Dos Passos.

On a more formal note, however, both books actually lack a plot or dramatic schemata in their structural presentations. In exploring such a book as *Poeta en Nueva York*, one encounters many thematic ideas; it is inevitable that some are not, in the main, themes, but sub-themes. Nevertheless, there are three principal topics: Death, Love, and Negro. Frequently, one or two of the themes overlap, essentially strengthening the organic unity of the book. Without a unifying technique of some kind, the already difficult, somnambulistic style which threatens to engulf the reader would be more emphatic and might

succeed in leaving the reader stranded in a state of irretrievable confusion. The same can be said of *Manhattan Transfer*, that it “is not a story in the traditional sense. It is an abstract composition of story elements made to develop a series of themes” (Beach, 1971, pág. 68). These themes are identified as “materialism, conformity, political corruption, and lack of communication” (Lundington, 1980, pág. 242). In resume, the book can be described as “a ‘collective’ novel about the city” (Lundington, 1980, pág. 229).

Turning to another matter, one should note the descriptive similarity of the landscape of modern urban-industrial life depicted by Dos Passos and Lorca. “At the very outset of the novel”, observes Lowery, “the broken boxes, orange-rinds, spoiled cabbage heads floating in the ferry slip (pág. 3) set the mood for what is to come and... characterizes an entire culture” (Lowery, 1974, pp. 54-55). Not to be outdone, with a brush apparently purchased from the same store, Lorca paints the city with “los pedazos de limón seco bajo el negro duro de las botellas” (pág. 400); “periódicos abandonados” (pág. 401); “los borrachos” (pág. 402); “los objetos abandonados”, “el insomnio de los lavabos”, “una aurora de tabaco” (pág. 408); “las barcas rotas”, “un viento sur que lleva... una pila de Volta” (pág. 409); “parejas de microscopios en las cuevas de las ardillas”, “láminas grises donde flotan automóviles cubiertos de dientes” (pág. 410) and “pedazos de espejos” (pág. 413). The landscape, itself, overflows with vomit and urine [“the horrible episode of the abortionist whose activities foul the plumbing of an entire apartment house” (Lowery, 1974, pág. 56)?] as death ravages the city (García Lorca, 1960, pp. 415-418), spreading chaos in the grotesque figure of the “mujer gorda”. Meanwhile, underground, the subways [“... circulaciones subterráneas. / Son los cementerios” (pág. 416)] evoke the memory of Ruth Prynne’s “trainload of jiggling corpses, nodding and swaying...” (Dos Passos, 1925, pp. 293-294).

Death by drowning should also be given consideration as the motif appears in both works. Dos Passos epitomizes his inclusion of it in the following lines from a prose poem on the Great War: “In the subway their eyes pop as they spell out Apocalypse, typhus, cholera, shrapnel, insurrection, death in fire, *death in water* [emphasis mine], death in hunger, death in mud” (pág. 271). In separate passages, Bud Korpenning, two nameless highjackers, and Martin Schiff die, or are apt to die, by drowning:

Bud is sitting on the rail of the bridge... He jerks himself forward, slips, dangles by a hand with the sun in his eyes. The yell strangles in his throat as he drops... At the same moment a man leaning out of the engineroom door [of a tugboat] shouted, “A guy juss jumped offn de bridge”. (pág. 125)

“Was anybody hurt?”

“Everybody was... I think two of the highjackers were drowned”. (pág. 324)

“Say Martin old man, pipe down”, Roy was reiterating.

“Nobody shall stop me... I must run to the end of the black wharf on the East River and throw myself off”. (pág. 362)

The coincidence of Blackhead dying when his daughter enters his room, wearing a wet raincoat and carrying a wet umbrella may not, in actuality, be a coincidence at all:

A jerking spasm went through all his limbs. He twisted his mouth in an effort to speak. For a second his eyes looked about the room, the eyes of a little child that has been hurt before it begins to cry, until he fell back limp, his open mouth biting at his shoulder. (pp. 394-395)

Lorca wastes no time in presenting the motif as we learn of the "mariposa ahogada en el tintero" (pág. 399) in the tenth line of the first poem. Then again, in the sea of vomit, the poet, himself, perishes "sin brazos, perdido entre la multitud que vomita" (pág. 416). Later, in the countryside where the poet has sought refuge from the chaos, he devotes an entire poem to the "Niña ahogada en el pozo" (pp. 432-433). In "Paisaje con dos tumbas y un perro asirio", the moon drowns the already dead: "y la luna... tuvo que... ahogar en sangre y ceniza los cementerios antiguos" (pág. 438). In the same poem, the warning of catastrophe is not important to the "amigo" as the poet discovers that "estés lleno de agua de mar" (pág. 438).

Not to be overlooked is Lorca's debt to a few isolated but amazingly similar passages that must have impressed him as he was reading *Manhattan Transfer*. Compare the line from "Ciudad sin sueño" —"hay que llevarlos al muro donde iguanas y serpientes esperan" (pág. 422)— with the following passage from *Manhattan Transfer*:

Big snake appears on Fifth Avenue... Ladies screamed and ran in all directions this morning at eleven thirty when a big snake crawled out of a crack in the masonry of the retaining wall of the reservoir and Fifth Avenue and Fortysecond Street and started to cross the sidewalk... (pág. 19)

In "Iglesia abandonada" the *hijo* suddenly becomes a little girl: "Yo tenía una niña" (pág. 411). In *Manhattan Transfer*, we find just the reverse:

"Oh daddy I want to be a boy". Crying quietly she dropped her head on her father's shoulders and then began to jump up and down, chanting "Ellie's going to be a boy" (p. 23).

There is also a parody of the Lord's Prayer in both works. Lorca's appears in "Grito hacia Roma": "porque queremos el pan nuestro de cada día, / flor aliso y perenne ternura desgranada, / porque queremos que se cumpla la voluntad de la Tierra / que da sus frutos para todos" (pág. 450).

The Dos Passos version concerns Bud who is sitting on the edge of his cot, his arms stretched out, yawning. He says: "Oh God I want to go to sleep. Sweet Jesus I want to go to sleep... Our father which art in Heaven I want to go to sleep" (pág. 121).

From the above passages, there should linger no doubt that there are similarities in the two books and that they are not only close in style and

substance, but in sufficient numbers to place them beyond the level of mere coincidence. It is unfortunate though, that Professor del R o did not expand on his suggestion of Dos Passos' possible influence on Lorca's creation of *Poeta en Nueva York*, and that an examination of the two books has not been undertaken until the present study. However, besides the obvious value of exploring a literary debt that has previously lain dormant for more than half a century, the more important result of this analysis is the insight we should gain into Lorca's vision and literary state of mind in his writing of the New York poems.

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