

## STEPHEN SPENDER, THE 1930S, AND SPANISH WRITING

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### The Future of Writing

Much has been written about the response of the English literary world to that central thirties event, the Spanish Civil War. Valentine Cunningham is decisive in his assessment, in his magisterial *British Writers of the Thirties*, that “at no time in English literature has one foreign country so obsessed our poets” (1988: 431). It was a literary world which constructed important meanings about itself at this time through how it perceived itself responding to the conflict in Spain. To be a writer was, for many, to be implicated in a direct way in the Spanish Civil War, inasmuch as it was read as a war in which the future of Writing itself was being decided. However, one of the overlooked facets of this response involves the reading of and responding to Spanish writers on the part of the literary worlds for which the war was so significant; Cunningham’s 500-page volume doesn’t mention Lorca’s poems once, for example. The literary production of Spanish writers and their assessment of their role in the intense and embattled circumstances of the Civil War interested English observers even when they were unable to do more than guess at the nature of the actual writings of the Spaniards. The situation in Spain appeared to have concentrated all of the socially contingent factors upon which the writer’s relation to society was based, to have encapsulated the difficulties facing the individual writer with respect to his or her political responsibility and social function. At the

forefront of this encounter with Spanish writers in Britain was, as might be expected, Stephen Spender, litmus paper for so many of the tests of the decade, whose ensuing relation to what he found is of interest to anyone curious about the nature of both Spender's poetic development and the 1930s in general.

For all of the scholarly energy expended since the conflict in relating the Spanish Civil War to the study of literature, the actual reading of Spanish writing by interested observers, as opposed to personal contact with Spanish writers, was extremely limited. More Spanish books were translated into English in any three-year period in the 1920s than during the three years of the Civil War.<sup>1</sup> The broadsheet *Volunteers for Liberty*, put out for English-speaking members of the International Brigade, and edited initially by the then important English novelist, Ralph Bates, who had lived in Spain for several years, contained almost no Spanish writing, translated or otherwise. And when in 1940 John Lehmann produced his *New Writing in Europe* he included the curious chapter, "Spain is the Word", in which only 2 of the 20 pages deal with Spanish writers, in cursory fashion as might be imagined. This, immediately after three years of intense involvement with the country.

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When Spender himself wrote on Spanish authors, as in his article for *New Writing* in 1937, "Spain Invites the World's Writers", or, in the same year, "A Communication: The International Writers' Congress" in the *London Mercury*, he mentioned several of them but it was clear that he didn't expect his readers to know who he was talking about. The personalisation of politics in the battle for hearts and minds led Spender to describe the writers rather than quote their works, and indeed the urgency of events meant there was little time for introducing writers from such an unfamiliar literary tradition at any length; indeed, Spender's hurried summary suggested that the principal tradition that contemporary Spanish poets belonged to was simply that of the Civil War itself. In attempting to interest British observers in contemporary Spanish writers, Spender was endeavouring to further contextualise events by reference to individual consciences, which he followed up by translating a small selection of poems as well. These translations—four poems by Manuel Altolaguirre, and one by Miguel Hernández, along with his collaboration in a high-profile volume of translations of Lorca's poetry—in addition to his interest in contemporary Spanish writing, mean that, more than any other of the notable writers of the time, he did attempt to bring Spanish writers to the attention of English readers.

## Contact with Spain

Indeed, Spender was actually one of the few members of the English literary world to have begun to make contact with Spanish writing even before the outbreak of

the Spanish Civil War. He made two extended visits to Spain prior to the conflict. The first of these visits, in 1933, is of little importance here, and the following remark in *Letters to Christopher* [Isherwood] is revealing: “Barcelona is certainly the most red hot revolutionary place I have ever been in [...] But as I know nothing of Spanish politics I didn’t get very thrilled: not nearly as much as in Berlin” (1980: 57). The following year, 1934, he told Isherwood that he knew no-one in Barcelona (69). For Spender at this time, then, unless he could relate to a place through either its writers or a love affair it was difficult for him to relate to it in more extended fashion.

However, by his second visit, in March 1936, four months before the outbreak of the Civil War, it was quite different; he found Barcelona immensely stimulating, began to make personal contacts and to learn something about Spanish politics and literature. Furthermore, he informed Isherwood that a friend “has read me some modern Spanish poetry, particularly by Lorca. It is quite easy to understand & very beautiful, I think” (108). On the strength of his interests he began to learn Spanish and quoted four lines from Lorca (from the “Romance de la Guardia Civil española”), noting that: “There are a lot of very good things like that I would like to understand better than I do at present. I don’t know any idioms nor can I understand the use of pronouns always” (110). He mentioned a translation (unspecified) of Lorca he had done, and then, just after the outbreak of the Civil War he wrote to Isherwood from Vienna mentioning Spanish lessons he had been taking and stating again:

I have discovered some very beautiful modern Spanish poetry, mostly by Garcia Lorca. I’m also going to read a play by Lopez, which is often performed in Russia [probably Lope de Vega’s *Fuente Ovejuna*] [...] I read a very good novel indeed, called *Seven Red Sundays*, by Ramon J. Sender. (119)<sup>2</sup>

The need to adopt the tone of someone introducing a new subject to a not-very-interested interlocutor disappeared with the progress of the Civil War, and Lorca was one writer Spender was able to refer to in his “Spain Invites the World’s Writers” without any need for further explanation. In the anthology *Poems for Spain*, edited by Spender and John Lehmann in 1939, there was even a separate section entitled simply “Lorca”, although this did not contain any of Lorca’s poems, as he had hardly had time to write Civil War poems before he was murdered, but rather poems lamenting his death and drawing inspiration from his example. What the earlier letters to Isherwood show is that Spender’s interest in Lorca was genuine and antedated the Civil War; they also enable us to fix with some precision the length of time over which Spender was reading the Spanish poet.

As a mediator Spender was crucial in the transmission of Lorca’s poetry to English readers, for apart from writing and speaking about it, he also co-translated a volume

of the Spaniard's poems in 1939. Not only was this volume —*Poems*— the more comprehensive of the two collections of Lorca's poetry to have appeared in England —which indicates the extent to which Lorca had captured the British imagination— it was also linked with Spender's name, and by 1939 Spender was one of the most prominent figures in the literary world. It is also consistent with the evidence to suppose that Spender spoke or wrote to others about Lorca well before this, as he had to Isherwood.

Spender's translations were produced in partnership with the Catalan scholar Joan Gili from a selection made by Lorca's friend Rafael Martínez Nadal. The method of the two translators was not always consistent for at times it was strictly "literal", while at other times it attempted to reproduce rhyming patterns, with the consequent juggling of lines, minor additions and deletions. As always, there were the occasional infelicities of translation but there were also moments of good fortune: "¡Ay, su anillito de plomo/ay, su anillito plomado!" for example, emerges strongly as "Ah, their little leaden wedding ring,/ah, their little ring of lead" ("Canción/ Song", 8-9). The clumsiest note is the translation of "todos los amigos de la manzana" as "all the friends of the apple" ("Oda al Rey de Harlem/ Ode to the King of Harlem", 66-67). Lorca's metaphors are not quite that bizarre; it should be, of course, "all the friends on the block". Spender's difficulties were most apparent when he tried to capture rhyme schemes analogous to the originals. In the "Sonnet on the Death of José de Ciria y Escalante", for example, he had to strain word order and strand the occasional weak word at the end of the line, as in "[...] he saw you?" The fluid (in Spanish) "Un delirio de nardo ceniciento" became the wracked "Delirium of cinerous nard burns", in order to form a half-rhyme with "Remembrance". Words not in the original were inserted, like "dream" in the penultimate line so as to rhyme with "stream", "go" in the last line of the first sestet so as to rhyme with "Giocondo" (62-63). However, the nature of the translations is not so significant here as their resonance within the literary milieu to which they were directed, further ensured by Spender's high profile; indeed, despite wartime printing restrictions they were reprinted in 1943.

Lorca was not the only Spanish poet whom Spender helped to present to British readers. He both wrote about Spanish writers and translated poems by Manuel Altolaguirre and Miguel Hernández, although none of his other activities were as comprehensive as his Lorca translations. Neither did this other activity occur until after the outbreak of the Civil War and it was thus complicated by his relationship to the conflict and the issues it appeared to raise for him and the whole of Europe. Historians of the Civil War have written of its aetiology as being clearly visible within the internal history of Spain, yet at the time most people saw it as part of the general European polarization into Right and Left which had been taking place during the 1920s and 1930s. It was not merely detached sympathy which drove

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people to fight or otherwise concern themselves with the fate of Spain. It was the feeling that Spain was the front-line in the battle to shape the future of Western, or world, society. Spender's interest, once it had been "revealed" that the line was to be drawn in Spain, was real and sincere.

Spender's involvement with Spanish writing came to be closely linked to his personal acquaintance with several Spanish authors, although as we have seen there were hints in his letters to Isherwood that even before the Civil War he was reading more than just Lorca. In March 1936 he related to Isherwood that:

Spanish literature is so alive that there are special counters for new books in Castilian and Catalan, a great many of which are poetry, very nicely produced! The book you see on every kiosk—even the smallest—is a new *Anthología de la Poesía Cataluña*. (1980: 105)

Before this, however, there was definitely nothing to suggest that Spender had read any Spanish literature or taken any particular interest in Spain; indeed, the tone of these comments in his letters reveals that he was discovering something new to him. The title story from Spender's volume of short stories, *The Burning Cactus* (1936), was first published in 1933 and does take place in Barcelona but it has little connection with the place. The story deals rather with social disintegration as mirrored in the aimless, neurotic set of personal relationships in which the narrator finds himself. The story's characters are in Barcelona as they have had to decamp from Berlin, so the city serves not so much as "itself" as "somewhere else".

In the case of Miguel Hernández, "Hear this Voice" was the first of his poems to be published in England, in 1938 (not that he has ever aroused much enthusiasm in the English-speaking world). He was, however, one of the Spanish writers whose reputation owes most to the recognition he achieved during the Civil War. It was unusual for anything by a Spanish writer to be translated into English so soon after his initial appearance, his first volume having been published only in 1933, a rapidity directly ascribable to the Civil War. We can gauge reasons for his failure in England by looking at this poem ("The Winds of the People") and comparing it not only to the poems Spender was writing but to those of the majority of English writers who dealt with the war. Where the two poems by Hernández are strident, urgent and populist, Spender's are intimate, questioning and afraid. Hernández was quite capable of writing poems in a similar vein to Spender, as he demonstrated in the work he wrote between 1938-1941, later collected and published posthumously as *Cancionero y romancero de ausencias y Últimos poemas* (1958). In terms of Spanish writing during the Civil War the two poems by Hernández which were translated were admittedly more typical, yet it is a type of war poetry which had not found favour in British literary circles since before the success of First World War poets such as Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon.

## Poetry is the Response

This leads us to Spender's poetic reaction to his Spanish experiences, for it was a process in which his travels, friendships and readings all played a part. What we see, however, is principally the solidifying of his beliefs about the nature of poetry and the role of the poet. The Spanish Civil War did not occasion any radical change in Spender's activities or work for he had clearly formulated what he felt to be his poetic precepts at numerous times during his as yet short career. In 1933 he wrote in "Poetry and Revolution":

Of human activities, writing poetry is one of the least revolutionary [...] the writing of a poem in itself solves the poem's problem [...] Poetry is certainly "counter-revolutionary" in the sense that it contains an element of pity. (1933b: 62 and 69)

In *The Destructive Element* we find him saying that "it seems likely, then, that the Communist explanation of our society is not adequate to produce considerable art" (1935: 254). It was this sort of sentiment which led him to experience some discomfort while in Spain: "I myself, because I am not a writer of heroics, have felt rather isolated", he records in "Spain Invites the World's Writers" (250). He mentions having spoken to Alberti, Altolaguirre and Bergamín about his disquiet and discovering that they felt the same way. It was thus consistent that he should have translated Altolaguirre, and praised the subtlety and warmth of his mind, for like Spender's own poems Altolaguirre's enact the responses of an undogmatic voice for whom individual suffering and survival are central, caught up in the violent processes of history.

Altolaguirre's "I Demand the Ultimate Death", for example, seems to articulate in its title the bombastic polarisation and hostility of the rhetoric of war, only to deny our expectations by opposing not any named enemy of human beings but the abstract enemy describable as all violence. All of the four poems by Altolaguirre which Spender translated were personal ones which do not glorify war or the Republic and which involve metaphorical subtleties not present in the poems by Miguel Hernández, nor in the bulk of Civil War verse by Spaniards published in Britain. They were probably the best Civil War poems from a Spanish writer to be printed in England during the conflict, yet there is no evidence that anyone other than Spender was impressed by Altolaguirre.

When it comes to deciding whether Spender's reading of the Spanish poets has left any clear traces in his work the answer would have to be that it has not. Spender's poetic diction and his techniques did not change markedly during the 1930s, nor did they afterwards. Just as he formulated early in his career the relationship of personal poetry to public events, so also did he early light upon that mixture of lyricism, compassion, the deliberately prosaic and the startling image which

characterize his poetry. As early as Edwin Muir's *The Present Age From 1914*, Spender's evenly consistent output led Muir to suggest that "his work shows less sign of external influence than that of any other poet of his time, except for the unavoidable influence of the contemporary world" (1939: 127). And in the most comprehensive modern study of Spender's work of this period, A.K. Weatherhead, in *Stephen Spender and the Thirties*, also concludes that "few poets have changed their styles less", and that "Spender has been largely unswayed by passing planetary figures and fashions" (1975: 221).

Muir and Weatherhead's claims can generally be borne out by examination of Spender's poetry. However, there *are* subtle changes in his poetry in this period, principally alterations in the weight he gives to the surrounding signs of industrial, urbanising and material life and to the human beings who have to negotiate them. While the linguistic manoeuvres might be similar, they come to be used for slightly different ends between the poems of the early 1930s and those of the later years of the decade.

To take a representative poem from Spender's early phase, "The Landscape Near an Aerodrome" (published in *Poems* in 1933c: 45-46), we can see a distinctive movement from the objects and surfaces of modern life into a concern with what they might be obscuring and distorting in the lives of the people who work them. As the airliner, a monument to human creativity and vision, glides over the suburbs, we experience first a sense of wonder followed by an awareness of our numbed inability to deal with precisely those objects which we are restlessly bringing into being. An ambiguous tenderness for the capacity of human beings to create, even when what they create is inexorably enslaving and baffling them, permeates Spender's poems of this type. The initial fascination launches off from these artefacts, a fascination patent in "The Express" or "Pylons"(43-44, 47-48), a recovery of the industrial present over against the sentimentalising of the past or of nature.

By the latter part of the 1930s, however, the poems no longer make conciliatory gestures towards the icons of material progress. The already ambivalent treatment of urbanising Britain comes down more and more on the side of the unheroic and uncertain inhabitant of a constrained and compromised era. Even so, this is not so much a change of direction as a change in emphasis among elements which were already present and significant in Spender's poetry from the outset of his career. For apart from those poems mentioned above, we can also find in his early work a poem such as the much-praised "I Think Continually" (37-38) in which modern life metonymically appears as "traffic" which threatens to "smother/ With noise and fog the flowering of the Spirit". The poem recalls those who have retained some sense of integrity and urgency of desire in the face of attempts to suppress

them, although it is still a poem which appears to borrow most of its rhetoric and imagery from the less than urgent conventionalities of Pre-Raphaelite and Victorian paeans to love, imagination, the ideal or the spiritual. Here, the “truly great”, of whom the speaker thinks continually, are vague and generalized (albeit perhaps befitting their anonymity), and the supposed integrity they have retained is couched in such a woolly mixture of abstractions and “poetic” vocabulary—they “wore at their hearts the fire’s centre”—that, notwithstanding partial success, the poem’s sentimental archness scarcely convinces us of what this true greatness really consists. Despite the fact that this poem, in fellow poet Gavin Ewart’s disapproving observation, “has had the sort of following that Byron’s ‘Corsair’ had in his lifetime” (1971: 10), Nicholas Jenkins probably sums up the present assessment of Spender’s work when he observes that: “Readers in the 1930s and since have complained that Spender’s language is vague and abstract” (2004: 4).

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Where there is an attempt to rescue the true heroism of the ceaseless yet anonymous struggle for love and personal worth in “I Think Continually”, the more concrete and urgent aggressions of “modern life” which Spender was to experience in Germany, Vienna and, especially, the Spanish Civil War, saw that this impulse became more focused and specific as the decade progressed. Instead of shapeless battles for “light”, “desire” or “the essential delight of the blood”, as in “I Think Continually”, the battles become more particular and the gains and losses more tangible. Spender has been especially scrupulous in ensuring that his tendency to use the specific circumstance as the occasion for a meaningful generalization does not overwhelm and belittle the particular deaths and griefs of which he was writing, which can be seen in poems such as “Ultima Ratio Regum” and “A Stopwatch and an Ordinance Map” (1939: 57-58; 61). In this he seems very close to Altolaguirre, certainly to those poems of Altolaguirre’s he chose to translate. Altolaguirre’s “Madrid” and Spender’s “Till Death Completes Their Arc”, for instance, both retreat from the language of heroics common in the discourses approved of by officials on either side, so that security or conviction can only find refuge beyond the text in a realm gestured to but absent. For Altolaguirre “my narrow heart keeps hidden/ a love which grieves me which I cannot/ even reveal to this night”. Spender, in turn, is “pressed into the inside of a mask/ At the back of love, the back of air, the back of light”. The intensity of the war demands the response of a committed presence, an integral relation to the issues and the events of the conflict which admits no seams between the observer and the actor. Both writers, however, find that the messiness of the struggle and a concern for the pain and suffering they observe dilute the possibilities of certainty. Accordingly they must deal with their relation to the light, that medium by which we are seen and distinguished, placed in relation to what exists around us. Spender “watches through a sky/ And is deceived by mirrors”; his



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self-image  
Lifted in light against the lens  
Stares back with my dumb wall of eyes:  
The seen and seeing softly mutually strike  
Their glass barrier that arrests the sight.

The opposition between appearance and identity is distorted even in the act of self-observation, so that it is hardly surprising that when it comes to observing others, “The other lives revolve around my sight/ Scratching a distant eyelid like the stars”. As the successive unfoldings of the act of perception reveal the increasingly powerful distortion of the perceiver the further away from the self he gets, the inevitable completion of the arc is the awareness that, as far as others are concerned, so also must the speaker be a distantly unreadable distortion of the self he approaches in himself. The immediacies of others, the enormity of their attempt to survive “the foul history” of “the world’s being”, all that which the poet should be able to see and to show, prove both impossible to perceive authentically and impossible to present poetically. In this, of course, Spender is also participating in that acknowledged literary manoeuvre in which the distance between the writing subject and the object referred to is lamented and thereby made the moment of the work.

In Altolaguirre’s poem, the idea of light has been distorted by the violent explosive flashes of the war, away from its metaphorical function as the medium by which we may see and know. The light of an explosion promises and indicates here only the place of death. Faced by “the glorious circle of fire” the speaker “can evoke nothing”, and the night which the flashes of light illuminate, just as they spotlight imagined moments and acts of “heroism”, becomes the ground in which the invisibility of the poet is made manifest.

Both poems, then, bear the weight of the “determinate absence” in not dealing directly with the heroism and suffering of the war along with what is felt as a retreat (a surrender?) into the experience of precisely that evasion. The pressure of the public insistence on an “appropriate” writerly response collapses their very real concern for the public into a record of their ultimately belonging somewhere else. The reality of their fellow-feeling is predicated upon their capacity for feeling in those absent realms indicated above. Unsurprisingly, this was a register that did not serve the ends defined by the stern ideologues of the struggle in that polarised decade, and still today it can rouse the ire of a Marxist analyst such as Adrian Caesar in his *Dividing lines: poetry, class and ideology in the 1930s*, where he is scathing in his assessment of Spender’s work, suggesting that “Spender’s ‘pity’ for the working class too often tends to result in self-pity” (1991: 83).

## Spender and Lorca

Spender's first response to Lorca's poetry was in terms of its "beauty". However, Lorca, like Altolaguirre, can also be seen to relate to Spender's interest in the marginalised or defenceless as opposed to rhetorical gestures assimilating the individual to large social abstractions. Spender was consistent throughout his career in indicating that the "truly great" are not the conventionally heroic or famous but the anonymous who preserve decency despite the forces that would enlist us under the banner of violence or the oppression of others. Accordingly, he responded to that element in Lorca's poetry that concentrates on the unequal struggle between the marginal individual or way of life and the actions of varying levels of authority—whether official on the part of social institutions or unofficial but nevertheless powerful on the part of convention and tradition.

Spender tried to specify what it was about Lorca's poetry which was valuable when he wrote in 1937 in *Life and Letters To-Day* on A. L. Lloyd's translations of Lorca, the first selection to be translated into English:

The virtues of Lorca's poetry lie in its beautiful music, its strong and original imagery, the poet's mastery of a simple narrative style, and above all in a magic which is perhaps the rarest of all qualities in lyric poetry. (1937c: 144)

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Of these qualities Spender pointed to the "music" as the one really untranslatable feature; however, in his letters to Isherwood he did not separate out even the vaguely denominated qualities indicated above. Instead, he merely repeated that Lorca's poetry was "very beautiful".<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, Spender was not specific about what poems or what volume of Lorca's he was reading, and the only concrete clue we have is the fragment quoted from the "Romance de la Guardia Civil española", a poem contained in Lorca's *Romancero gitano*. Spender's claim to Isherwood, however, that Lorca's poetry "is quite easy to understand" (1980: 108) would seem to indicate that he was not reading the more demanding New York poems, which is not surprising as at this time only a few of them had been published in literary magazines and Spender still didn't know the Spanish poets who could have directed him to this material. By the time Spender came to collaborate in the translation of a volume of Lorca's selected poetry, poems were included from all of the Spaniard's published volumes as well as poems that had only been published in magazines and anthologies. As the selection of poems to be translated was officially made not by Spender but by Martínez Nadal, we are unable to point to the particular selection of poems in the volume of translations as necessarily representative of Spender's reading of Lorca or indicative of those aspects of the Spaniard's work he found rewarding.

We may still, however, return to the fact that Spender and Lorca find related ground in their opposition to the dehumanizing forces which thwart the possibility

of self-realization and dignified freedom. It may not be pushing this too far to suggest that there is also a common locus in the ambiguous sexuality which lies behind some of their poems and which certainly informed their lives in this period. Even Lorca's "gypsy" poems, with which it appears Spender first came into contact, often refer to occasions of forbidden sexuality which can be read as analogues in some way for the more expressly forbidden homosexuality. And moreover when they are not dealing with an event, they often refer to a less focused but acute sensation of emotional frustration, blockage, restriction and incompleteness (see, for example, many of the shorter poems in *Poema del Cante Jondo*, such as those which make up the "Poema de la Soleá"). In Spender's early work this vein could be said to be represented by many of the oracular and enigmatic poems in *Poems* (1933), expressive of a series of thirties anxieties, of which ambivalent sexuality was one.<sup>4</sup> Spender, however, also knew, certainly by the time he came to translate Lorca, those of Lorca's New York poems which had become available (given that the first, albeit imperfect, edition of *Poeta en Nueva York* was not published until 1940). We can see that they too can be read in terms of two of Spender's consistent concerns: those large inhuman forces crushing the emotional connections between people which are worthwhile (rendered more specifically and less surrealistically by Spender in, for example, "An Elementary School Class Room in a Slum", 1939: 28-29), and, contained within this perhaps, the gap that separates homosexual love from its poetic expression. Certain aspects of Spender's personal life at the period he was reading Lorca and responding to the Spanish Civil War contribute to the possibility that this facet of Lorca's poetry might have articulated the confused sexual drama he was living at the time. Spender's presence in Spain during the war was an ironically grim encapsulation of the discontinuities he felt between the public and the private, given that his real support for the Republic and feeling for the Spanish people overlaid his efforts to get his former male companion T. A. R. Hyndman out of the conflict and back home. When the relationship with Spender had ended, Hyndman enrolled for the fighting in Spain as a gesture of independence as well as an attempt to arouse sympathy in Spender, for he was temperamentally unsuited to military life and soon became desperate to leave. Spender was thus concerned about rescuing Hyndman, while at the same time deeply involved in a new relationship with a woman, Inez Pearn, whom he had met at an Aid for Spain meeting, and who soon became his wife.<sup>5</sup>

This intrusion of personal and sexual complications into Spender's relationship to a public conflict, in which, moreover, the public stance of writers became not only of propaganda value but a necessary item in the confirmation of the writer's identity, ironically turned the war for Spender into a site of the affirmation of the personal, the hidden, the unknown, the insignificant and the overlooked: "that wreath of incommunicable grief/ Which is all mystery or nothing", as he writes

in “Thoughts During an Air Raid” (1939: 45). The proliferation of references to wasted and anonymous young men in Spender’s Spanish Civil War poetry is not specific to him, however, for it can be seen in much of the poetry written by English people during the war. Further, it continues the rhetoric and stances of the type of anti-heroic English First World War poetry popularized by Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon. Indeed, this First World War writing is, in some ways, a translation of the closeness and intensity of public school life into related qualities in the armed forces, in which the camaraderie of male proximity shades into varying degrees of homosociality. There is thus a more likely native tradition or context for Spender’s writing of this type than that provided by his exposure to Lorca. Having said that, however, it is still possible to see in this aspect of Lorca something that might have attracted Spender, even when it has not given rise to identifiable verbal echoes or traces of influence.

It is possible that Spender knew of Lorca’s sexual orientation, given his familiarity with many of the Spanish literary figures of the day, including Martínez Nadal, a good friend of Lorca’s since 1923 and well aware of this side of Lorca. While it is not a subject on which Lorca’s friends were likely to speak lightly, Spender’s own relatively well-known sexual ambivalence at the time of the Spanish Civil War would presumably have made it more probable that such information would have come his way. Although repressed under Franco, knowledge of Lorca’s homosexuality was apparently widespread; Ian Gibson, for example, states bluntly in *The Assassination of Federico García Lorca* that in Granada Lorca “was considered to be a homosexual” (1983: 22), and in his extensive biography of Lorca more circumspectly: “Many of the poet’s former companions at the Residencia have been extremely reticent about his homosexuality, often denying that they were ever aware of the poet’s ‘problem’ [...] None the less his homosexuality was immediately apparent to many people” (1989: 94-95). At the same time, there exists in Spain a counter-current, both biographical and critical, which claims that Lorca’s homosexuality was by no means an open secret, and in any case that the immense majority of his poems can be read in the ageless tradition of love poems in which it is not so much the sexuality which is at stake but the attaining, retaining or loss of the love of the other. Eulalia-Dolores de la Higuera Rojas, for instance, and with the approval of Ian Gibson, presents in her *Mujeres en la vida de García Lorca* a series of outlines of several women who featured in Lorca’s life. These women —relatives, acquaintances and friends— appear to have concurred in finding Lorca extremely attractive and masculine (1980: 17); almost all of them suspected nothing of his homosexuality. Further, the influential Spanish critic Blas Matamoro, to take one example, was terse in his denial of explicit homosexuality even in those posthumously published poems putatively more revelatory of Lorca’s sexuality than any others, the *Sonetos del amor oscuro*:

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La homosexualidad aparece escasamente en Lorca, salvo que se hiciera de su obra una lectura basada en cierto difuso folklore gay y en sus tics, llevados a rasgos de estilo [...] en vano se buscará en estos sonetos la menor referencia a un acto sexual de esa especie ni, mucho menos, a sentimientos pretendidamente homosexuales, ya que estos no existen [...] Estos sonetos de Lorca confirman una larga tradición de la poesía amoratoria, a saber: que se canta a un objeto imaginario que se imagina, a su vez, lejano e inalcanzable. (1984: 189-90)

And indeed, one wonders to what extent Lorca's sexuality was perceived in English literary circles when one notes that the poem of his chosen by Herbert Read for his anthology of poems for soldiers to carry with them to the Second World War was the "Ode to Walt Whitman". Although a poem in which a certain type of what the poem sees as decadent homosexuality is linked with the dehumanizing forces Lorca encountered in New York, with the reduction of all relationships to networks of power and material exchange, it is also a poem which has been taken as a clearer statement than most in Lorca of the positive, life-affirming facet of homosexual love. That a poem which begins "Por el East River y el Bronx/ Los muchachos cantaban enseñando sus cinturas" (*Poeta en Nueva York. Tierra y luna*, 231) should have been considered suitable for the British Army leads back not only to the relation of upper-middle-class army life and unexamined homoeroticism, but also to the emasculation, as it were, of Lorca's poetry in England. This was not an emasculation, however, which can be blamed entirely on the English, for in the version of the "Ode to Walt Whitman" published by Martínez Nadal in his selection of Lorca's poetry, translated by Spender, the version Read was to include in his anthology, 61 of its 137 lines have been left out.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, it may be that the reading of the poem in the manner which has now become accepted was simply unavailable to the English literary world of the time, to the extent that it was instead easily assimilated to native traditions of masculine relationships which fed on a public school education, heavy emotional investment in a model of patrician male friendship derived from the Classics, and the idealised images of male companionship in late Victorian and Edwardian poetry. It was this tradition which, according to poet and well-known Spanish Civil War veteran Tom Wintringham writing in *Life and Letters To-Day*, lay behind Spender's translations of Lorca in the first place and which had diluted much of their power.<sup>7</sup> When Spender and Gili's translations of Lorca appeared, their association with Spender had a bearing on the content of one evaluation at least, that of Ralph Abercrombie (son of Georgian poet and man-of-letters Lascelles Abercrombie) in *Time and Tide*. He admitted to no knowledge of Spanish but suggested that Spender's versions were more accurate than those of Australian A. L. Lloyd, while being less rhythmical. He went on: "And in some of these versions there are signs of that peculiar soggy (and sagging) which seems to be Mr. Spender's speciality nowadays" (1939: 961).

However, as Wintringham suggests, the soggyiness seems more likely to be Spender's rather than Lorca's, something Spender has imposed on Lorca.

Paul Binding, in his *Lorca: The Gay Imagination*, despite the brevity of his book, does not claim direct links between Lorca and Spender's sexuality. What he does find is that:

what first impressed [Spender] was the Spanish poet's "grammar of images". Of that grammar *El poema del cante jondo* is the first primer. Here we encounter that aggregate of figures and features which at once evoke Lorca's own land and are of wide psychic address: olive trees; orange and lemon groves; mountains with hemlocks and nettles growing on their slopes; oleanders; poplars; prospects of old cities, and of three cities in particular, Sevilla, Granada, Córdoba; rivers and their sluggish backwaters; the phallic-shaped rushes that grow by their banks; the wind; the tantalisingly apprehendable sea; the moon —especially when shining over uninhabited countryside; riders and their horses; white villages; forges; children in the squares of little towns; the *cantaores* and the ordinary Gypsies, old women, young boys, gentle girls. (1985: 51)

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Thus it is that throughout much of Lorca's poetry desire becomes something dangerous or oppressed, often unable to be satisfied and connected with the threat or the actuality of death or at the least frustration. This is not a register present in Spender's poetry at all, but it does relate to something present in the work of Spender's friends W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood and associated with the 1930s in general —a sense of impending threat, of relationships as moral tests or as emotional drama, the need to locate an edge or border beyond authority and the significance of the road whose destination is mysterious as a location for intense experience. Nonetheless, despite this general thematic or emotional resonance between 1930s England and Lorca's Andalusia, Spender's poetry is nowhere as similar to Lorca's as it is to Altolaguirre's. Even the more urban work in *Poeta en Nueva York* partakes of a degree of fragmentation and surrealism that Spender never approached. Indeed, Spender's most enigmatic and at the same time concrete poems, those displaying more vivid metaphors drawn from the natural world, occur before he had visited Spain. Before he had begun reading Lorca Spender's poetry revealed what *Scrutiny's* reviewer E. S. Huelin called "the false glitter of the many startling and curious metaphors with which it is heavily decorated" (1936: 119).

What seems probable then is that Spender intuited certain themes important to him within the superficially exotic set of Lorca's Andalusian symbols and images. While the locally exotic possesses its own estranging and colourful attractions for a foreign reader, Lorca was also a poet of his time in European terms. The menace that suffuses many of Lorca's poems and plays possesses an enigmatic and unstoppable power similar to that in Auden and Isherwood's plays or the parables of Kafka, also popularised in the inter-war period in Britain. How closely apposite to Lorca's

poetry seems Robin Skelton's thumbnail sketch of English poetry of the time: "The blurred borderlands between real and unreal, boyhood and manhood, game and ritual, vision and fantasy, fable and history, are the territories in which the poets of the thirties live" (1964: 33). At the same time, it is also possible to see why Spender's poetry did not really change despite his approval of Lorca's work: these general areas of concern and registers for dealing with them were already present and well represented in Spender's poetry. What may be seen as the principal contemporary literary influence on his work had already occurred and, as usual with Spender, it was bound up with a personal relationship he never had with Lorca, his friendship with W. H. Auden.

Spender, then, was important as a mediator of Spanish literature but does not appear to have imported readily identifiable techniques or ideas from Spanish writers in this period. Perhaps indicative of the radical break with the immediate past which the Second World War occasioned for many people, personal loyalties and moral positions having to be adjusted to the more immediate need for physical and ideological survival in the intense period which followed, Spender refers only once to Lorca in his *Journals 1939-1983*. The brief reference, furthermore, occurs in 1955 in answer to a request, when Spender agrees to speak about Spain only to discover that "my memories of Spain, from over twenty years ago, were extremely vague". What he does talk about is "the Spanish poets I had met, and [...] translating Lorca" (1985: 154). Notwithstanding the thinness of his later references to Lorca, as a mediator of Spanish writing Spender was highly visible during the years 1936-1939. Through his labours as translator, editor and literary critic he contributed notably to the supply of material and information desired by the reading public at this time, his translations of Lorca being especially important in the transmission of this poet to the English literary world. And Spender's reading of Altolaguirre and Lorca in the crucible of the Spanish Civil War may not have changed his own writing strategies but they certainly became one more significant factor in convincing him of the oblique relationship of personal poetry to public event, even, or perhaps especially, in the extremity of war, revolution and the possible reshaping of the social, political and literary landscape. The results of such reflections can be seen in *Life and the Poet* (1942), which argues, in David Leeming's words: "that poetry cannot be cause-oriented [...] that even in times of great political and social stress a poet must be true to his sense of 'satisfactory living'" (1999: 138). After all, Lorca had come to be considered a great poet of the inter-war period without being easily identified with the political rallying points of the age, and it was no accident that Spender placed "To a Spanish Poet (for Manuel Altolaguirre)" last in his 1939 volume, *The Still Centre*, thus constituting, as Sanford Sternlicht says, "an *ave atque vale* to all that the 'idea' of Spain connoted in the 1930s, to the decade itself, and to the poet's youth" (1992: 50).

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup>. General contexts for the response to Spanish writing in this period may be seen in Callahan's "Material Conditions for Reception: Spanish Literature in England 1920-1940". *New Comparison* 15 (Spring 1993): 100-109.

<sup>2</sup>. Spender, as did most commentators on Spain, tended to omit the orthographic accents when writing Spanish names and words; I have not used "sic" as it would have littered the quotations in an untidy and distracting fashion, but it is to be understood in the case of all quotations containing errors of Spanish.

<sup>3</sup>. Spender uses these words in all of the four letters in *Letters to Christopher* where he refers to Lorca.

<sup>4</sup>. See, for example, *Poems*: "How strangely this sun reminds me of my love!" (1939a: 31); or "Abrupt and charming mover" (49-50); or "Acts passed beyond the boundary of mere wishing" (15).

<sup>5</sup>. Despite her name, Inez was not Spanish or half-Spanish as one rumour had it; she had changed her name from Marie Agnes in support of the Republican cause. However, she was working on the poetry of Góngora, which meant she was able to help Spender closely on all of his translations from Spanish during this period. See Sutherland 2004: 196-256 and Spender 1964: 204-210.

<sup>6</sup>. The lines omitted in the English version of 1939 are 45-72 and 92-126, as per the edition edited by Eutimio Martín.

<sup>7</sup>. This was the tradition whose "finest" poem, perhaps, was Tennyson's threnody, *In Memoriam*, occasioned by the death of his friend Arthur Hallam. The conjunction of the ideal of male friendship and romantic lyric furnishes us with such unmistakable lines as, for example, "Ah yet, ev'n yet, if this might be,/ I, falling on his faithful heart,/ Would breathing thro' his lips impart/The life that almost dies in me". Poem XVIII, *In Memoriam* [1850]. Tennyson 1975: 235.

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