

The American Dream In Spanish Poetry: Some Early Twentieth-Century Visions Of The United States

It is extraordinary that between 1898 and 1936 (or over a period of about forty years) Spain saw the emergence of probably as many great poets as during the whole of the previous four hundred years. After the death of Quevedo, for two and a half centuries, nobody of comparable calibre had appeared. Then, Spanish verse again entered a phase of spectacular creativity. The major talents who contributed to this astonishing phenomenon were Antonio Machado, Juan Ramón Jiménez, Pedro Salinas, Jorge Guillén, Federico García Lorca, Rafael Alberti, Vicente Aleixandre, and Luis Cernuda. Two of them, Jiménez and Aleixandre, would go on to win Nobel Prizes for Literature (in 1956 and 1977 respectively), while a third, Lorca, was to become the most famous Spanish writer of modern times. It is therefore easy to understand why these early years of the twentieth century are sometimes regarded by critics as a second Golden Age of Spanish poetry. More remarkable still is the fact that, unlike the first Golden Age which took more than a century to produce about the same number of exceptionally gifted poets (from Garcilaso, born in 1501, to Quevedo who died in 1645), the second Golden Age was concentrated into a few decades prior to the Civil War. When the eight figures of international repute who emerged as outstanding exponents of modern Spanish verse are examined more closely, however, they prove to have something unexpected in common. Most of them reveal in both their lives and work a connection with the United States of America.

Chronologically the first was Juan Ramón Jiménez who in 1916 crossed the Atlantic Ocean for a stay that lasted from mid-February until the start of June. The main

reason for his visit could hardly have been more pleasant. He was to be married, at Saint Stephen's Catholic church in New York, on 2 March 1916 to Zenobia Camprubí. Though born in Barcelona, she had close links with America where her three brothers had settled and where she herself had lived, at one stage, for four years. During the period of several months that Juan Ramón spent in the United States, and despite trips to such places as Boston, Baltimore, Philadelphia and Washington, he was essentially based in New York. A substantial record of his experiences is provided by the lyrical volume entitled *Diario de un poeta recién casado* (1917) where he noted down, as in a poetic diary, a selection of his daily sensations and reactions more or less as they occurred. Through his marriage, Juan Ramón acquired family ties with America and, at the same time, he was also a man, literally, on a protracted honeymoon. So it would perhaps be unfair to expect his view of the United States to be that of an objective and detached social observer. In actual fact, he sifts his impressions, transforming them in the process, as is clear from the following prose-poem:

New York,
26 de marzo.

ORILLAS DEL SUEÑO

Cada noche, antes de dormirme, pueblo de aspectos deleitosos, tomados de la mejor realidad, las orillas del río de mi imaginación, para que su encauzado sueño las refleje, las complique y se las lleve al infinito, como un agua corriente. Sí, ¡qué anhelo de no derramar en la aurora torvas aguas luctuosas de pesadillas de la ciudad comercial, de la octava avenida, del barrio chino, del elevado o del subterráneo; de aclarar, como a un viento puro de otras partes, su carmín humoso y seco, con la brillante transparencia de un corazón puro, libre y fuerte! ¡Qué ganas de sonreír en sueños, de ir, alegremente, por estos trozos negros de camino oscuro de la noche, que van alternando con los de luz, del día, a la muerte - ensayos breves de ella -; de tener blanca, azul y rosa la vida que no está bajo la luz y el poder de la

conciencia; de no ir por el subsuelo de la noche en tren una vez
más, ni tan aprisa, sino en veneros de diamante, ¡y lentamente!
(132-133)

The title 'Orillas del sueño' is ambiguous. One way of translating it could be 'On the banks of a dream' with the implication of the dreamworld as a river or stream of consciousness. This river image (maybe echoing the literal Hudson) is one which the text itself overtly reinforces in the expressions "las orillas del río de mi imaginación", "su encauzado sueño", and "como un agua corriente". Alternatively, the title might be rendered as 'On the verge of sleep', an interpretation supported by the phrase "antes de dormirme" which would locate the text at a precise kind of moment, namely, when the speaker is on the brink of unconsciousness. One precedent for this exists in Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer's *Rima* LXXI (108-109): "No dormía; vagaba en ese limbo/en que cambian de forma los objetos,/misteriosos espacios que separan/la vigilia del sueño" (ll.1-4). Another is Antonio Machado's poem LXIV (474) which begins: "Desde el umbral de un sueño" (l.1). But in Juan Ramón's case there is a fundamental difference. Rather than surrendering to drowsiness like Bécquer and Machado, whose work he knew and admired, he wishes instead to influence, control or shape his dreams by focusing in his final moments of wakefulness on purely positive details selected from the external world ("aspectos deleitosos, tomados de la mejor realidad") which his imagination will then register and recombine for posterity. In other words, his deliberate and stated intention is not to capture and reproduce a complete picture of the New York around him. He simply prefers to filter out or exclude negative and disagreeable impressions of the city and so brighten the hours of night with a cheerful vision of experience ("sonreír en sueños", "ir,

alegremente, por estos trozos negros de camino oscuro de la noche”). It even seems that he wants to animate the dark realm of the unconscious with an image of reality as ebullient, optimistic and typically American as a rose-coloured version of the Stars and Stripes (“tener blanca, azul y rosa la vida”). This idealized portrayal presents an affirmative view of the metropolis purged of its uglier and less salubrious features of materialism, pollution, poverty and stressful bustle as exemplified by references to the business district, Eighth Avenue, Chinatown, the overhead railway and the subway. Of course, the paradox is that since these unattractive elements are actually mentioned in the text, attention is thus drawn to their very existence. Consequently, while the poet aims to be one-sided, his evocation of New York achieves a greater degree of comprehensiveness than was intended. Nevertheless, the gap between the crude reality of city living and the refined image Jiménez extracts from it is neatly conveyed at the end of his prose poem. Here the speaker tackles an illustration of the daily grind of modern urban life: the subway journey. By beautifully transmuting its negative overtones into the more glamorous picture of somebody underground feasting their eyes at leisure on seams of diamonds Juan Ramón echoes a set of poems by Antonio Machado, poems whose general title *Galerías* (472-488) refers to the subterranean tunnels of the poet’s inner world where like some miner he digs deep in search of riches beneath the surface. Moreover, Jiménez’s transformation of the hectic subway journey into a pleasurable, unhurried but intense contemplation of “veneros de diamante” smacks distinctly of *modernismo*.

Modernismo was a trend fashionable in Spain at the turn of the century whereby the commonplace was disdained in favour of an exquisite world of refined sensations. It

derived partly from a French Symbolist tradition where Baudelaire, significantly, had defined his own artistic practice in the memorable phrase: “Tu m’as donné ta boue et j’en ai fait de l’or” (180). This capacity to extract something of aesthetic value from the most unpromising raw material of experience is obvious too in ‘Orillas del sueño’ whose lingering *modernista* tendencies seem to serve a similar purpose. For someone of Juan Ramón’s fastidious nature it would have been hard to handle the modern metropolis, fraught with contradictions, as a theme in its own right. Perhaps this is why in so many pieces from the *Diario de un poeta recién casado* the city functions more as a setting than as a subject. An essential element in ‘Orillas del sueño’ is the way its visual shift from above to below ground metaphorically implies how the speaker assimilates or internalizes America, ultimately making it part of himself and revealing hidden treasures in the process. Yet at the end of the day (so to speak), behind the glittering and precious imagery of a prose poem ostensibly dedicated to the discovery of timeless beauty, lurk disturbing, vivid and very real hints of: “torvas aguas luctuosas de pesadillas de la ciudad comercial, de la octava avenida, del barrio chino, del elevado o del subterráneo”. Their dynamic and energizing effect is clear from the successive exclamations which dominate the text after the initial sentence. Caught between a world of urban sense-perceptions and the imaginative realm where these impressions are absorbed or reformulated, Jiménez’s regenerative contact with America juxtaposes reality and image in a self-renewing, subtle statement of creative tension. To this extent his encounter with New York propels him beyond conventional *modernista* aestheticism.

During the 1920s, for many people who, unlike Juan Ramón, had never set foot in America, the United States still acted as a galvanizing and potent stimulus on their imaginations. This was certainly true of Spain, which, historically, had played a crucial role in the discovery and conquest of the New World. Florida provides a case in point. Discovered by Ponce de León in 1512, it remained a Spanish possession for over three hundred years before being sold to the United States as recently as 1821. Furthermore the region's exotic name, Florida, a Spanish word redolent of luxuriant tropical blooms, provides a discreet yet permanent reminder of its long-standing connection with the Iberian peninsula. In May 1928, Jorge Guillén, who had not yet ventured further abroad than Paris, completed 'La Florida', a poem whose relationship with this Hispanic cultural heritage is worth exploring.

LA FLORIDA

J'ai heurté, savez-vous? d'incroyables Florides.

Rimbaud

El universo fue. Lo oscuro
Rindió su fondo de futuro.
Y el cielo, estrellado en secreto
Aquella noche para mí,
5 Respondió con un sólo sí
A mis preguntas sin objeto.

¡Con la Florida tropecé!
Si el azar no era ya mi fe,
Mi esperanza en acto era el viaje.
10 ¿El destino creó el azar?
Una ola fue todo el mar.
El mar es un solo oleaje.

¡Oh concentración prodigiosa!
Todas las rosas son la rosa:
15 Plenaria esencia universal.
En el adorable volumen

Todos los deseos se sumen:
¡Ahinco del gozo total!

(Alrededor, ¡haz de vivaces
20 Vínculos!, vibran los enlaces
En las nervaduras del orbe,
Tan envolventes. ¡Cuántos nudos
Activos, aún más agudos
Dentro de quien tanto se absorbe!)

25 ¡Distancia! Sin cesar palpable,
Por el sol me tiende su cable:
Espacio bajo claridad.
Respiro la atmósfera toda:
¡El ángel más desnudo poda
30 Sin cesar la frondosidad!

¡Tiempo todo en presente!: mío,
De mi avidez - y del estío,
Que me arrebatara a su eminencia.
Luz en redondo ciñe al día,
35 Tan levantado: ¡mediodía,
Siempre en delicia de evidencia!

¿Pero hay tiempo? ¡Sólo una vida!
¿Cabrará en magnitud tan medida
Lo perennemente absoluto?
40 Yo necesito los tamaños
Astrales: presencias sin años,
Montes de eternidad en bruto. (199-200)

Surprisingly little of ‘La Florida’ fulfils any literal expectations aroused by the title.

In both geographical and historical terms, the place itself remains elusive. Yet some latent resonances of its discovery and conquest do emerge. For instance Guillén’s protagonist, guided by the stars (stanza one), resembles an inquisitive seafarer whose voyage into the unknown (stanza two) constitutes an act of faith (l.8) reminiscent of the *conquistadores* who in addition, of course, included Christian missionaries dedicated to spreading the

faith throughout this New World. An exhilarated sense of achievement (stanza three) leads to imagery redolent of circumnavigation (stanza four). Far-flung, wide-open spaces (stanza five), there for the taking (l.28), where some noble savage endlessly hacks through lush vegetation (ll.29-30), attract potential colonists to drop anchor (l.26). Such expansive urges, reinforced by greed (l.32), reach their zenith (stanza six) with an intensity of transcendental proportions (stanza seven).

However, while these verses certainly capture the excitement of disembarking onto virgin territory, to interpret them primarily as a colonial apotheosis looks eccentric. Due to a virtual absence of Florida as such, the Spanish might be better understood as an example of Mallarmé's desire to: "Peindre, non la chose, mais l'effet qu'elle produit" (Walzer 112). For, if Florida remains almost invisible, emotional or psychological reactions instead pervade a poem that maps out, not the natural scenery of a specific location, but rather the interior landscape of the speaker's own responses. Guillén's title then is symbolic: it represents a whole New World of experience.

As reproduced here, more or less in its final form, 'La Florida' dates from 1928. But an earlier draft (200), just two stanzas long, published in 1923, arguably proves more revealing. Perhaps its most interesting variant concerns what is now the phrase: "Mi esperanza en acto era el viaje" (l.9). Originally this read: "Y mi arte poética el viaje" (l.3). Despite the fact that Guillén later replaced the words "mi arte poética", probably because they sounded too explicit, nevertheless the expanded, definitive version still contains an intuitive consideration of the Spaniard's own poetic practice. Readers are alerted to this possibility by an epigraph taken from 'Le Bateau ivre' (66-69): "J'ai heurté, savez-vous?"

d'incroyables Florides" (l.45). There Rimbaud had already acknowledged that his particular voyage of exploration was a metaphorical one that entailed immersion in the artistic process itself: "je me suis baigné" he had written "dans le Poème/De la Mer" (ll.21-22). Allusions elsewhere in 'La Florida' also identify it as belonging to a post-Symbolist metapoetic tradition. Mallarmé's 'Les Fenêtres' (32-33, ll.29-31), 'Don du poème' (40, l.5) and 'Le Tombeau d'Edgar Poe' (70, ll.5-6), for instance, had all portrayed the poet as an angel. Hence a distinctly self-conscious artistic resonance can be detected where the Spanish text states: "¡El ángel más desnudo poda/Sin cesar la frondosidad!" (ll.29-30). Here Guillén refers to a contemporary tendency to strip verse to its aesthetic essentials. It is remarkable that his pruning analogy echoes a description of the same phenomenon by Lorca who in 1922 had mentioned: "Todos los poetas que actualmente nos ocupamos, en más o menos escala, en la poda y cuidado del demasiado frondoso árbol lírico que nos dejaron los románticos y los postrománticos" (III, 205). This removal of extraneous features in the search for a poetic absolute, this purging of verse, culminated in Paul Valéry's characteristic metaphor of the midday sun, a symbol highlighted in 'Le Cimetière marin' (147-151) which his friend Guillén would later translate into Spanish. It is significant that although 'La Florida' ostensibly opens on a starry night (ll.1-4), it soon gravitates towards the high noon of summer (ll.31-36), a setting which in Valéry evokes a heightened state of acute mental lucidity and self-sufficient aesthetic intensity : "Midi là-haut, Midi sans mouvement/En soi se pense et convient à soi-même" (ll.75-76). The poetic implications of this transcendental urge seem most relevant here. Guillén's composition illustrates the trend towards *poesía pura* or

purismo current in Spain during the early 1920s. An intertextuality with Rimbaud, Mallarmé and Valéry indicates that the Spanish poem's preoccupation with the creative process stems from a French Symbolist heritage. Therefore when it incorporates terms like "concentración" (l.13), "esencia" (l.15) and "quien tanto se absorbe" (l.24) they can be interpreted as symptomatic of aesthetic autonomy and self-reflexiveness. The Florida of the title reveals an almost total lack of circumstantial detail since its spirit has been laid bare, divested of unnecessary elements, freed from overt referential limitations or distractions in accordance with the aesthetic priorities of (ll.29-30). Condensed to an idea, America thus acts on Guillén as a catalyst that generates surprise, excitement, admiration and adventure through ten undulating exclamations, (ll.7, 13, 18, 19-20, 22-24, 25, 29-30, 31, 35-36, 37) whose accelerating rhythm, vibrant with articulate energy (ll.19-24), emphasizes the text's maximization of poetic effect.

After Jiménez and Guillén, Rafael Alberti's vision of the United States comes as light relief. It can be found in 'Telegrama' (composed 1926-27). Like 'La Florida', Alberti's poem is not the result of direct experience but a product of his imagination. Yet, its tone is very different since it resembles a humorous sketch, parody or cartoon.

TELEGRAMA

Nueva York.
Un triángulo escaleno
asesina a un cobrador.

5 El cobrador, de hojalata.
Y el triángulo, de prisa,
otra vez a su pizarra.

Nick Carter no entiende nada.

¡Oh!

Nueva York. (232)

Given the extreme brevity and concision of its language, the title ‘Telegrama’ is peculiarly apt here. Of course the word ‘telegram’ in addition carries overtones of modernity, urgency and drama, which are qualities also exhibited by this text. To all intents and purposes, ‘Telegrama’ is a mixture of a nonsense rhyme and a murder mystery. In only thirty-two words, Alberti offers the reader a miniature detective novel. The framework for his narrative is New York (ll.1, 8), a dangerous venue highly familiar to devotees of crime fiction. As so often with the genre, this minimalist thriller centres on a fatal instance of robbery with violence (ll.2-3). Since the victim is “un cobrador” (l.3), or somebody who collects money, the motive is presumably theft. But a note of outrageous absurdity is introduced when the murderer is identified. It is true that cases of homicide, whether real or imaginary, have often involved the ‘eternal triangle’, but this must surely be the first one ever to have been performed by a geometrical triangle! The culprit, a ‘triángulo escaleno’ (l.2), is one whose sides are all of different lengths. Such lop-sidedness therefore denotes an entity that is unbalanced, unstable, hence suspect, capable of anything. Despite appearances, however, the triangle’s role here, though perplexing, is far from incomprehensible. Evidence contained in, for example, the *Sobre los ángeles* poem ‘Los ángeles colegiales’ (284-285) reveals that, like many people, at school Alberti felt intimidated by the study of geometry: “Ninguno comprendíamos nada” (l.6). Thus it is not so strange to see him now playfully branding as a killer something

which terrified him as a child. Equally childlike in ‘Telegrama’ is (1.4) where the hitherto reassuringly human “cobrador” suddenly assumes the incongruous form of a tin man, as if he had stepped straight from the pages of Frank Baum’s American fantasy, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900).

In the best tradition of the whodunit, Alberti, to ensure his readers’ alertness, lays a small syntactical trap for them in (11.4-5). The parallelism between both lines leads one to anticipate a similarity in content from (1.5), but in fact this parallelism masks a surprise getaway by the miscreant who, through a kind of persuasively crazy logic, finds refuge, back where it came from, on a blackboard (1.6), an environment which in the circumstances provides the perfect camouflage. No story of lawbreaking in the American metropolis is complete without an investigator bent on bringing the villain to justice. Alberti calls on the services of one of the most famous, Nick Carter, the hero of a flood of popular American pulp fiction from 1886 until the 1920s. But even Nick is baffled by this situation (1.7), and who could blame him? One final ingredient rounds off Alberti’s detective novel pastiche. Every good cliffhanger has a trick ending and ‘Telegrama’ is no exception. Here it is simply signalled by the exclamation “¡Oh!” (1.8), an enigmatic and hilarious understatement visually reinforced by the comical line-drop (1.8) which typographically mimics the standard unpredictable dénouement.

‘Telegrama’ is a laconic yet lively American fairytale as written by Dashiell Hammett or Raymond Chandler. It borrows the conventions of two seemingly incompatible genres (the children’s fable, and the crime novel) and blends them together successfully. Its cheeky fusion of superficially disconnected elements, its contemporary

ring, its brisk dynamism, its flippant charm, its impudent parody, can all be regarded as attributes of *creacionismo*, a Spanish avantgarde literary movement in vogue during the 1920s. However, in addition, these same traits also mirror or capture a certain distinctive aspect of the American spirit, namely, its unique amalgam of idealistic innocence and hardboiled scepticism. This extraordinary feat of imaginative empathy is all the more impressive as Alberti still only knew the United States at second hand.

The tersely volatile and elliptical wit of Rafael Alberti may seem a far cry from the sensuous desolation of Luis Cernuda, but in a way their objectives were similar. Both created from the merest scraps of information a vivid sense of somewhere they had never set eyes on. In his autobiographical essay 'Historial de un libro' (1958) Cernuda retrospectively reviewed his literary career and commented as follows on the importance that the United States had for him in the 1920s:

La afición al cine hacía que me interesaran los Estados Unidos, ya que las películas norteamericanas eran las más cotizadas entonces, y la vida allá la que más cercana parecía al ideal juvenil, sonriente y atlético, que no pocos mozos se trazaban entonces. Nombres de ciudades o de Estados de aquel país dieron pretexto a algunos de mis versos. (910)

A network of such allusions links various poems from his collection *Un río, un amor* (1929), a work whose very title deliberately echoes that of a jazz song 'A little river, a little love' by Buddy van Arlen. In this manner, Cernuda elaborated over several texts a composite picture of a mythical America rooted in the evocativeness of such place-names

as Nevada, Durango, Daytona, Colorado, Virginia, and the Wild West. Slightly earlier in the same essay, Cernuda makes another pertinent observation:

Dado mi gusto por los aires de *jazz*, recorría catálogos de discos y, a veces, un título me sugería posibilidades poéticas, como éste de *I want to be alone in the South*, del cual salió el poemito segundo de la colección susodicha, y que algunos, erróneamente, interpretaron como expresión nostálgica de Andalucía. (909)

Here is the Spanish poem in question:

QUISIERA ESTAR SOLO EN EL SUR

Quizá mis lentos ojos no verán más el sur
De ligeros paisajes dormidos en el aire,
Con cuerpos a la sombra de ramas como flores
O huyendo en un galope de caballos furiosos.

5 El sur es un desierto que llora mientras canta,
Y esa voz no se extingue como pájaro muerto;
Hacia el mar encamina sus deseos amargos
Abriendo un eco débil que vive lentamente.

En el sur tan distante quiero estar confundido.
10 La lluvia allí no es más que una rosa entreabierta;
Su niebla misma ríe, risa blanca en el viento.
Su oscuridad, su luz son bellezas iguales. (84)

Finished on 20 April 1929, Cernuda's 'Quisiera estar solo en el sur' glosses a title which itself translates an entry spotted by the poet in a jazz record catalogue. Right from the start, the speaker appears drowsy ("mis lentos ojos") and tentative ("Quizá") as he contemplates the ephemeral nature ("no verán más") of a reverie he has enjoyed while it hovered mirage-like before his mind's eye (ll.1-2). This imaginary panorama of the great outdoors encompasses, at one extreme, an impression of human figures in repose who

blossom psychologically as they relax into this dream world (1.3), and at the other, a glimpse of the fantasy vision presumably enjoyed by these siesta seekers: complementary and vicarious sensations of unbridled physical energy (1.4) whose stampeding horses recall an adventurous cowboy lifestyle on the frontier.

Stanza two exudes an alienated atmosphere with phrases like: “un desierto que llora” (1.5), “pájaro muerto” (1.6), “deseos amargos” (1.7). Emotionally arid, miserable, morbid and thwarted, the speaker finds therapeutic relief for these disappointments and frustrations through the jazz hinted at in the title, specifically the Blues endemic to the American south, which purges pain (“llora mientras canta” 1.5) and supplies a cathartic outlet for feelings of bitterness (1.7). Though a fragile solution (“un eco débil” 1.8), such music offers the possibility of survival (“no se extingue” 1.6), and facilitates a life of sorts (“vive” 1.8) in the midst of an otherwise negative human condition.

If a safety-valve for existential misery can be found in the distant, lingering resonances of the Blues (1.8) whose soothing melancholy is subtly captured in the lyrical languor of these Spanish verses (so unlike the nervous delivery of *cante jondo*), then perhaps the very faintness or remoteness of such reverberations is part of their elusive and exotic appeal (1.9). According to Sigmund Freud dreams are basically wish-fulfillments so Cernuda’s wistful and reiterated yearnings (‘Quisiera’ title ; “quiero” 1.9) generate a dream vision intended to provide an escape (“huyendo” 1.4) or compensation for the inadequacies and limitations of his conscious experience. A hallucinatory image of the southern United States thus becomes the focus and expression of his aspirations. That process is consummated in a remarkable conclusion. Negative terms normally associated

with depression (“lluvia” 1.10 ; “niebla” 1.11 ; “oscuridad” 1.12) acquire in this fabulous region a positive aura. Hence the usually dreary rain now promotes fertility by enabling a rosebud to open in a timid yet delicate gesture of optimism (1.10), swirling mist conveys exuberant amusement (1.11), while alternating day and night provide elegantly balanced sources of pleasure and fulfilment (1.12). Consequently, Cernuda’s dashed hopes find some comfort in a vicarious experience of the United States, an intimation of paradise on earth culled from American popular music. In this sensitive and nuanced realm of the imagination, the harsh reality of the protagonist’s disenchanted longings is transfigured through a subconscious world of dreams that supplies a Surreal consolation for his problems.

In contrast to Cernuda, Federico García Lorca’s contact with America was based not on fantasy but on fact. Lorca went to New York in June 1929 and stayed there, mostly, until March 1930. Much of the verse he composed as a result mentions locations such as Harlem, Wall Street, Coney Island, Battery Place, Riverside Drive, Brooklyn Bridge, Manhattan, the Chrysler Building, the Bronx and Queensborough. The corresponding poems form one of his longest collections, *Poeta en Nueva York*. This volume has a more obvious connection with the *Diario de un poeta recién casado* than with Guillén, Alberti or Cernuda since Jiménez and Lorca recorded reactions to a place where they had actually lived. Still, the responses of both poets are very different. Fortified by his emotionally resilient status as a newlywed, Jiménez kept at bay ugly aspects of urban life in the United States, a dark and disturbing side of metropolitan

existence to which Lorca later felt more vulnerable. For, as 'La aurora' shows, in *Poeta en Nueva York* the American dream, though addictive as ever, had now turned sour.

LA AURORA

La aurora de Nueva York tiene
cuatro columnas de cieno
y un huracán de negras palomas
que chapotean las aguas podridas.

5 La aurora de Nueva York gime
por las inmensas escaleras
buscando entre las aristas
nardos de angustia dibujada.

10 La aurora llega y nadie la recibe en su boca
porque allí no hay mañana ni esperanza posible.
A veces las monedas en enjambres furiosos
taladran y devoran abandonados niños.

15 Los primeros que salen comprenden con sus huesos
que no habrá paraíso ni amores deshojados;
saben que van al cieno de números y leyes,
a los juegos sin arte, a sudores sin fruto.

20 La luz es sepultada por cadenas y ruidos
en impúdico reto de ciencia sin raíces.
Por los barrios hay gentes que vacilan insomnes
como recién salidas de un naufragio de sangre. (I, 485)

Various subjective and objective factors help to explain the sombre and alarming light in which Lorca saw New York. At the time of his visit (1929-30) he was in the grip of a personal, spiritual and artistic crisis which this (his first) trip abroad, was meant to cure. Thus the atmosphere in which he now found himself was filtered by the poet through a morbid and tormented sensibility. Moreover, this was an environment for which Lorca was culturally and linguistically unprepared. So it is no surprise that *Poeta en Nueva York* is pervaded by a sense of the speaker's disorientation and estrangement from

his surroundings. But the author's personal difficulties are not the whole story. Aspects of the contemporary American social situation also contributed to the doom-laden panorama embodied in the Spanish text. For this was the New York of Prohibition, and of the Wall Street Crash which actually occurred during Lorca's stay in the city and whose immediate impact was described luridly in his letters home to his family. It was the New York of the Great Depression, of mass unemployment and ingrained racial discrimination. Small wonder, then, that these external public traumas reinforced Lorca's own inner anguish, as 'La aurora' makes abundantly clear.

The city pictured here is a nightmare realm of contamination and anxiety, in which spiritual values have been sacrificed to materialism, and where the masses are exploited by capitalist forces. While hardly what one might expect from a title like 'La aurora', this portrayal of dawn by the Spaniard is quite consistent with his approach elsewhere. Conventionally, literary references to daybreak tend to have positive overtones, but that is rarely if ever the case with Lorca. He characteristically regards dawn as a harsh and unpleasant time of day, a cold, bleak period. This is especially true of 'La aurora' whose title and setting are intended to bring out the worst in city life. Two notions underlie the initial stanza. First, the "cuatro columnas" (1.2) or four pillars that support this society are in fact the columns of the accountant's or statistician's balance-sheet, namely, the columns of addition, subtraction, multiplication and division. Other textual evidence confirms this interpretation. Compare, for instance "cuatro columnas de *cieno*" (1.2) with "*cieno* de números" (1.15). Both allude to the tainted or corrupt materialism of an economic system based on mathematical calculations that reduce people to mere numbers

and subordinate human values to profits. Later in the collection, a poem entitled 'New York: oficina y denuncia' (517-519) also vehemently criticizes this capitalist mentality while explicitly mentioning the terms "multiplicaciones" (l.1), "divisiones" (l.3) and "sumas" (l.5). The second key ingredient in the opening lines of 'La aurora' is suggested by a more literal translation of "cieno" (l.2), that is, "mire" or "grime". This place is not just morally squalid but physically filthy too. Hence the repulsive image of dirty pigeons swooping down on stagnant puddles (ll.3-4) in a movement which is aggressive both visually ("huracán" l.3) and aurally (note the onomatopoeia of "chapotean" l.4 with its splashing effect). Just as the birds are "negras" (l.3), the waters are "podridas" (l.4), equally sullied by an industrially polluted urban atmosphere.

After this unprepossessing start, stanza two shifts attention to the city-dwellers themselves, forced to reside in buildings whose vast metal fire-escapes, so typical of New York tenement façades, are evoked in the phrase ("las inmensas escaleras" l.6). The new dawn to which they reluctantly awake begins with a groan ("gime" l.5). A predatory daylight seeks them out ("buscando" l.7) like victims in an urban environment which is angular, hard-edged and uninviting ("entre las aristas" l.7). This conjures up a city skyline whose clear-cut silhouette and sharp corners are cruelly accentuated by the radiance of a sun still low on the horizon. Caught in the wan light of morning, these unfortunate people are pictures of anguish ("angustia dibujada" l.8). They are also designated by the word "nardos" (l.8). A term employed by Lorca on various occasions it means "spikenard", the name of a flower with soft, fleshy, scented petals that reminded the Spaniard of human skin.

Needless to say, and as stanza three corroborates, this is a dismal world in which humans actually starve, or are unnourished by hope (l.9), nor do they have anything to look forward to (l.10). Perhaps their unsatisfied hunger is spiritual too because there seems to be a reference here to the Catholic sacrament of the Eucharist (l.9), possibly derived from a visual analogy between the disc of the rising sun and the shape of the Communion wafer raised up by the priest at the consecration of the Mass. If so, this fits in with a motif that recurs in *Poeta en Nueva York*, namely, the absence of authentic spiritual values from the 20th century metropolis. The pictorial implications of “dibujada” (l.8) are now picked up and amplified by the continuing attack on rampant capitalism in (ll.11-12) where a hallucinatory effect worthy of a Surrealist painting by Salvador Dalí implies that the rich get richer at the expense of those who are vulnerable and neglected. Here financial greed is symbolised by coins which whirl around like a swarm of insects feeding voraciously on the very group that society should protect and care for: abandoned children. This graphic image gives concrete immediacy to what would otherwise be just an abstract statement.

Of course, Lorca’s sympathies lie precisely with such innocent victims and with the disenchanting workers of stanza four. They are “Los primeros que salen” (l.13) because their lowly occupations condemn them to long hours of labour with an early start whereupon the frosty morning air reminds them in a vividly physical way, through stiff joints and rheumatic aches (“comprenden con sus huesos” l.13), that this is an unforgiving world. It is also a realm devoid of Romantic illusions since nobody here bothers to play the traditional lovers’ game of asking if their affections are returned while

stripping petals from a flower (“ni amores deshojados” 1.14). There is no faith in an afterlife to sustain them either (“no habrá paraíso” 1.14). A sense of religious crisis is detectable too in the calculated anticlimax of (1.15) which reads not “saben que van al cielo” but, less reassuringly, “saben que van al *cieno*”. Death, therefore, is the end of everything and only guarantees a grave in the dirt. Furthermore, on a metaphorical level, “*cieno* de números y leyes” (1.15) implies a corrupt capitalism backed by a legal system designed to protect the wealthy. The masses exist as factory fodder in an economic context that renders their lives trivial and coarse (“juegos sin arte” 1.16), while the workers themselves are denied the benefits of their own physical labour: “sudores sin fruto” (1.16). Simultaneously, however, “los juegos sin arte” might be construed as a gambling reference whose “unskilled games of chance” are an indictment of the reckless Stock Market speculation that eventually led to the Wall Street Crash.

For Lorca, technology and industrialization were unnatural developments (“sin raíces” 1.18) which had ushered in a new Dark Age. So pollution blocks out the sunlight in the city, condemning to a living death wage-slaves whose senses are assaulted by the pandemonium of urban existence: “La luz es sepultada por cadenas y ruidos” (1.17). The Spaniard’s denunciation of the modern metropolis ends on a particularly powerful image (ll.19-20). From various neighbourhoods come those who stagger to work like zombies, drowsy and reeling after a sleepless night filled with bad dreams. Such is the lot of the urban population (ll.5-8), subject to stress, deprived of refreshing nocturnal repose, like survivors of some traumatic shipwreck or natural catastrophe, unable, through sheer exhaustion, to distinguish between their inner nightmares and external reality (ll.19-20).

This blurring together of the conscious and unconscious for inhabitants of New York is therefore a by-product of their tense and debilitating lifestyle. Significantly, one section of *Poeta en Nueva York* is called 'Calles y sueños' suggesting that it is intrinsically hard to separate the two in such conditions. Clearly, for an artist the fusion of fantasy with reality, also characteristic of Surrealism, can be a creative asset. In *Poeta en Nueva York* its considerable expressive potential is pursued by Lorca beyond mere reverie into the more abrasive social criticism which radical French Surrealists had come to favour as well. Despite the ostensibly hostile tone of the poems, though, the Spaniard's feelings about the United States were actually more ambivalent according to his companions at the time, to the testimony of his correspondence, and to some retrospective comments in his later public readings. No doubt the surge of creative energy he experienced there either proved therapeutic or engendered a positive response in someone eager to reinvent himself who, despite the pain involved, had succeeded in doing so. For this collection contains much of Lorca's most original and durable verse, poetry which still sounds fresh and modern today. If the fairness and balance of the Spaniard's fierce social commentary is questionable on occasion, nevertheless his heart is certainly in the right place and it is difficult not to be impressed by the resourcefulness of his almost hysterical eloquence.

Perhaps the most obvious thing about examples of the American dream just considered is their astonishing variety. These differences of approach illustrate various major successive literary trends in Spain during the period 1900-1936: *modernismo* (Jiménez), *purismo* (Guillén), *creacionismo* (Alberti), and *surrealismo* (Cernuda and Lorca). Consequently, taken together, the five texts form a kind of miniature anthology, a

representative cross-section of key developments in Spanish verse from the turn of the 20th century until the outbreak of the Civil War. Only fifteen years divided the late or residual *modernismo* of 'Orillas del sueño' from the avantgarde inventiveness of 'La aurora' yet Spanish poetry had made amazing strides in that short space of time. Each of these writers discovered America differently but a common thread links them too. What was the nature of their affinity, the source of their empathy with the United States? Maybe they identified with its openness to change, sensing or intuiting in the dynamism of America an analogy for the growing vitality of Spanish verse.

It might be argued too that the United States was, to some extent, a mirror in which these Spanish poets also saw themselves reflected. Writing about America thus encouraged them to display the full range of their diverse creative personalities, from Jiménez's exquisitely refined eclecticism, at one end, to Lorca's brooding exuberance, at the other. In seeking to capture the distinctive and intrinsic qualities of this New World, however, they also gained the advantage of broader horizons. As an object of inherent fascination, the United States inspired and galvanized their artistic potential.

It was perhaps ironic, and fated, that America, the accidental author of Spain's downfall in 1898, should then have become, however modestly, an unconscious agent of its cultural regeneration. There was a prophetic element in all this as well. For instance, in 1935 Rafael Alberti finally got to New York where he gave some readings and lectures on what was to be his only visit. Lorca, who had been at his most prolific in the United States, died tragically young and never returned. But more typical was what ultimately happened to the other three. They gravitated to America as part of the diaspora of

expatriate Spaniards who sought sanctuary there from the Civil War and its aftermath. Jiménez was involved in academic life in Miami, Maryland and elsewhere before moving to Puerto Rico in the 1950s. Cernuda progressed through university posts in New England and California. Guillén's distinguished teaching career combined almost twenty years in Wellesley with visiting professorships at Yale (1947), Berkeley (1951), Ohio State (1952), Harvard (1957), Pittsburgh (1966) and San Diego (1968). All three still composed verse about the United States, as did their equally celebrated colleague and gifted fellow poet Pedro Salinas who taught at Johns Hopkins for over a decade. Yet while they produced interesting work at this time, their perspective had changed utterly. In their eyes the United States was no longer primarily a source, real or imaginary, of the American dream. Instead it had become essentially a place of exile. Gone forever now was the initial, invigorating if unsustainable shock of the new which accompanies the first flush of discovery. Still, this brilliant constellation of Spaniards already had good reason to feel grateful to a United States that had been, on occasion, not only the highly charged subject-matter of their early poems but which, in a wider sense, had given them a more general incentive to write. Thus America, by providing both a topic and a trigger, seems to have functioned here as a creative pre-text, in the fullest possible meaning of that most appropriate word.

Works Cited

- Alberti, Rafael. *Poesías completas*. Buenos Aires: Losada, 1961.
- Baudelaire, Charles. *Oeuvres complètes*. Paris: Gallimard 'Bibliothèque de la Pléiade', 1968.
- Bécquer, Gustavo Adolfo. *Rimas*. Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1963.
- Cernuda, Luis. *Poesías completas*, ed., D. Harris y L. Maristany. Barcelona: Barral, 1974.
- Cernuda, Luis. *Prosa completa*, ed., D.Harris y L.Maristany. Barcelona: Barral, 1975.
- García Lorca, Federico. *Obras completas*. tomo I. Madrid: Aguilar, 1988; tomo III. Madrid: Aguilar, 1987.
- Guillén, Jorge. *Cántico 1936*, ed., J. M. Blecua. Barcelona: Labor, 1970.
- Jiménez, Juan Ramón. *Diario de un poeta recién casado*, ed., A. Sánchez Barbudo. Barcelona: Labor, 1970.
- Machado, Antonio. *Poesías completas*, ed., Oreste Macrì. Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1989.
- Mallarmé, Stéphane. *Oeuvres complètes*. Paris: Gallimard 'Bibliothèque de la Pléiade', 1970.
- Rimbaud, Arthur. *Oeuvres complètes*. Paris: Gallimard 'Bibliothèque de la Pléiade', 1972.
- Valéry, Paul. *Oeuvres*. tome 1. Paris: Gallimard 'Bibliothèque de la Pléiade', 1968.
- Walzer, Pierre-Olivier. *Stéphane Mallarmé*. Paris: Pierre Seghers, 1963

List of publications to date:

No. 1. *The American Dream in Spanish Poetry: Some Early Twentieth-Century Visions of the United States*, Dr Terence McMullan, Queen's University Belfast, February 2000.

No. 2. *Autobiography and Intertextuality in Carajicomedia by Juan Goytisolo*, Dr Stanley Black, University of Ulster, November 2000.

No. 3. *Radical Propensities and Juxtapositions: Defamiliarization and Difficulty in Borges and Beckett*, Dr Ciaran Cosgrove, Trinity College Dublin, February 2002.

No. 4. *Voices From Lusophone Borderlands: The Angolan Identities Of António Agostinho Neto, Jorge Arrimar And José Eduardo Agualusa*, Dr David Brookshaw, University of Bristol, March 2002.

No. 5. *National Identity – a Revisitation of the Portuguese Debate*, Professor Onésimo Teotónio Almeida, Brown University, Rhode Island, USA. October 2002.

No. 6. *Translation for the Stage: Product and Process*, Professor David Johnston, Queen's University of Belfast, November 2002.

No. 7. *Sujeto femenino en contextos de modernidad tardía*, Professor Francisca López, Bates College, USA, March 2003.

No. 8. *Antonio Machado And The Royal Art: Fact And Fiction*, Dr Philip Johnston, University College Dublin, October 2003.

No. 9. *The Censors' Confusion: (Mis)Interpretations of the Works of Alfonso Sastre*, Dr Catherine O' Leary, National University of Ireland, Maynooth, February 2004.

No. 10. *East Timorese Poems of the Revolution and Beyond: The Poetry of Francisco Borja da Costa and Celso de Oliveira*, Mr Anthony Soares, Queen's University Belfast, March 2004.

No. 11. *Borders, Batos Locos and Barrios: Space as Signifier in Chicano Film*, Dr Catherine Leen, National University of Ireland, Maynooth, November 2004.

No. 12. *"Camões, Portuguese war propaganda, and the dream of a safe colonial empire, 1914-1918"*, Dr Filipe Ribeiro de Meneses, National University of Ireland, Maynooth, March 2005.