

## LANGSTON HUGHES'S SPANISH CIVIL WAR VERSE

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### Resumen

El artículo se centra en seis poemas del escritor afroamericano Langston Hughes, inspirados en la Guerra Civil española. La estancia de Hughes durante seis meses en España como corresponsal de guerra para los periódicos afroamericanos catalizó su sensibilidad poética, fruto de la cual son algunos de sus poemas de protesta social más amargos. Utilizando su pluma como arma, Hughes refleja en estos poemas vehementes y sonoros la inmediatez de la guerra y la intensidad de las emociones que suscitó.

*Palabras clave:* Langston Hughes, literatura norteamericana, Guerra Civil española, poesía.

### Abstract

This paper focuses on six poems written by the African American writer Langston Hughes inspired by the Spanish Civil War. Hughes's six-month stay in Spain as a war correspondent for the *Afro-American* newspapers also catalyzed his poetic sensibility, thus writing some of his most bitter poems of social protest. Taking arms with his pen, Hughes captures in these passionate and vibrant poems the immediacy of the war and the intensity of emotions it elicited.

*Keywords:* Langston Hughes, American Literature, Spanish Civil War, Poetry.

This paper intends to analyze six poems written by the African American poet Langston Hughes inspired by the Spanish Civil War which have received little scholarly attention<sup>1</sup>. Although Hughes's literary reputation does not

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of American poets writing on the Spanish Civil War, see, among others, Mary Rosenthal, *Poetry of the Spanish Civil War* (New York, New York University Press, 1975), and «American Poets and the Spanish Civil War», *Anglo-American Studies*, VII, 1 (April 1987), págs. 27-37; and Román Álvarez Rodríguez, «Imágenes de la Guerra Civil Española en la poesía

rest on these poems written during the Civil War<sup>2</sup>, they serve as an important document which captures the immediacy of the war and the intensity of emotions it elicited. Hughes traveled to Spain in August 1937 as a correspondent for the Baltimore *African-American* newspaper<sup>3</sup>. In addition, he had been invited as a delegate to the Second International Writers' Congress in Paris where he delivered a passionate speech in which he linked fascism with racism:

Members of the Second International Writers' Congress, comrades, people of Paris: I come from a land whose democracy from the very beginning has been tainted with race prejudice, born of slavery, and whose richness has been poured through the narrow channels of greed into the hands of the few. I come to the Second International Writers' Congress representing my country, America, and the peoples of America —because I am both a Negro and poor. And that combination of color and of poverty gives me the right then to speak for the most oppressed group in America, that group that has known so little of American democracy, the fifteen million of Negroes who dwell within our borders<sup>4</sup>.

Hughes lived at the headquarters of the Alianza de Intelectuales Antifascistas in Madrid for the greater part of his six-month stay in Spain, where he was welcomed by the Spanish poet Rafael Alberti and his wife María Teresa León. While food was scarce in the Alianza, the cultural atmosphere was anything but impoverished. In his autobiography *I Wonder as I Wander*, Hughes writes:

When heavy shells began to whistle too near...or explode within wall-trembling distance, Maria Teresa would go to the game room and we would gather and listen to music until the bombardment ceased<sup>5</sup>.

Hughes's probably most widely known poem «The Song of Spain» was published in *A New Song* by the International Workers Order in 1938. That same year it was included in Nancy Cunard and Pablo Neruda's anthology of *Deux*

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de expresión inglesa», *Anuario de Estudios Filológicos*, XI (1988), págs. 7-22. For a thorough and updated compilation of poems written by Americans about the Spanish Civil War, see Cary Nelson, *The Wound and Dream: Sixty Years of American Poems about the Spanish Civil War* (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Hughes, a prolific writer, wrote sixteen books of poems, two novels, three collections of short stories, four volumes of editorial and documentary fiction, twenty plays, children's poetry, three autobiographies, and radio and television scripts.

<sup>3</sup> Hughes recalls directly his experiences as a war correspondent, for the *Afro-American*, the *Cleveland Call* and *Post* and *Globe Magazine*, during the Spanish Civil War, in his *I Wonder as I Wander: An Autobiographical Journey* (New York, Rinehart, 1956).

<sup>4</sup> Langston Hughes, «Too Much of Race», *The Volunteer for Liberty* (August 1937).

<sup>5</sup> See Hughes's autobiography, *I Wonder as I Wander: An Autobiographical Journey* (New York, Rinehart, 1956), p. 340.

*Poèmes*, one of a series of leaflets called *Les Poètes du Monde Défendent le Peuple Espagnol* which received wide circulation in Spain. This poem was read at a mass rally of the National Negro Congress and the American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy in the summer of 1936. As the title of the poem indicates, it is a song of Spain, not devoid of a folkloric character and a series of clichés:

*Flamenco* is the song of Spain  
Gypsies, guitars, dancing  
Death and love and heartbreak  
To a heel tap and a swirl of fingers  
On three strings.  
*Flamenco* is the song of Spain.

I do not understand.

*Toros* are the song of Spain:  
The bellowing bull, the red cape,  
A sword thrust, a horn tip,  
The torn suit of satin and gold,  
Blood on the sand  
Is the song of Spain.

I do not understand.

*Pintura* is the song of Spain:  
Goya, Velasquez, Murillo,  
Splash of color on canvass,  
Whirl of cherub-faces.  
La Maja Desnuda's  
The song of Spain.

Hughes associates the «gitanos» with a form of primitive carnality by juxtaposing the primary compulsion of Eros and Thanatos, or «Death and love and heartbreak», thus placing the «gitanos» in a primitive, carnal stage, which is the same stage on which the white man places African Americans. Hughes exhorted workers to «make bombs again». Using his most familiar stylistic devices of repetition and simple diction, Hughes constructs a poem which gradually builds to a dramatic crescendo. More than a denunciation of fascism, it is a personal plea for the workers of the world to refuse to participate in the war:

I must drive the bombers out of Spain!  
I must drive the bombers out of the world!  
I must take the world for my own again—

A worker's world  
Is the song of Spain.

Responding to the deadly drama of Madrid, Hughes wrote «Madrid-1937»<sup>6</sup>. This long and passionate war poem was not published until thirty-six years later. Inscribed and sent in September 1937 to his friend and lawyer, Arthur Springarn, it revealed a city under siege. Madrid! / Beneath the bullets! / Madrid! / Beneath the bombing planes! Madrid's civilian population still remained fiercely Loyalist, and Hughes found them holding out bravely against Franco's continual aerial attacks<sup>7</sup>. For months the besieged Spanish capital had been hit from the air by Nationalist artillery. Against this onslaught, Madrid's men, women, and children fought back with the help of the International Brigades<sup>8</sup>.

This poem presents Hughes's reaction to the meaning of the Spanish Civil War. The first line of the poem refers to the bomb-damaged clocks and nightly blackouts in the city. Hughes likens the assault on Madrid to an attack on civilization itself. Using the imperative mood, he directs his poem to the Fascist aggressors:

Put out the lights and stop the clocks.  
Let time stand still,  
Again man mocks himself  
And all his human will to build and grow!  
Madrid!  
The fact and symbol of man's woe,  
Madrid!  
Time's end and throw-back,  
Birth of darkness  
Years of light reduced:  
The ever minus of the brute,  
The nothingness of barren land  
And stone and metal,  
Emptiness of gold,

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<sup>6</sup> This poem is now preserved in the University of Texas collection of material on the Spanish Civil War, housed in the Humanities Research Center and is considered one of the unique items of this remarkable collection.

<sup>7</sup> As Hugh Thomas has noted, «the air-raids on Madrid were the first kind to occur». See Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War* (New York, Harper and Row, 1977). Indeed, never before in the Western world had civilian populations been systematically bombed as they were in Spain.

<sup>8</sup> The International Brigades have an enormous literature of their own. See R. Richardson, *Comintern Army: the International Brigades and the Spanish Civil War* (Lexington, University Press of Kentucky, 1982). The motives of the American volunteers are examined, among others, by Arthur H. Landis, *The Abraham Lincoln Brigade* (New York, Citadel Books, 1967); and Cecil Eby, *Between the Bullet and the Lie* (New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969).

The dullness of a bill of sale:  
BOUGHT AND PAID FOR! SOLD!  
(.....)  
Oh, mind of man  
Moulded into a metal shell—  
Left-overs of the past  
That rain dull hell and misery  
On the world again—  
Have your way  
And stop the clocks!  
Bomb out the lights!  
And mock yourself!

The besieged city responds to the assault with one word:

In the darkness of her broken clocks  
Madrid cries NO!  
In the timeless midnight of the Fascist guns,  
Madrid cries NO!  
To all the killers of man's dreams,  
Madrid cries NO!

To break that NO apart  
Will be to break the human heart.

Madrid was the center of a war whose front lines were drawn through its very streets. The tragedy of two Spains, each at the other's throat, was articulated by the front line trenches running through the University City. It was here that Langston Hughes, while reluctantly playing the role of guide to a group of «war tourists», received what he termed his «one and only wound in Spain», a superficial arm wound from a Nationalist bullet. Although it was his first and last war injury, it was neither the first nor the last time Hughes was at the front lines. Earlier he had traveled to the Brunete front with some other reporters, being among the first Americans to assess the state of the place following a Rebel air-offensive. In an essay appropriately titled «Head Here, Leg There», he describes the ghastly destruction of what had once been the little town of Quijorna. He then recalls the response of some International Brigaders when asked why they had come to Spain. «To help keep war and Fascism from spreading» was the men's simple reply. Hughes considers the probability that back in America the remark might seem to be just another liberal slogan, thus his reaction:

War and fascism! He was not just a slogan, that dead man sprawled on the floor of his house...certainly not a slogan the streets I had to traverse through

that smashed village with a leg here, a hand there, to get back to the road exposed to snipers' fire to reach our car to return to Madrid<sup>9</sup>.

The words of his poem «Air Raid: Barcelona» came after an aerial attack which Hughes himself had just barely missed. He first wrote about it in an article from Spain to the *Afro-American* newspaper:

I came down from Paris by train. We reached Barcelona at night. The day before had been a terrific air raid in the city, killing about a hundred persons and wounding a great many more. We read about it in the papers at the border: AIR RAID OVER BARCELONA<sup>10</sup>.

In the opening lines of this visually graphic poem, «Air Raid: Barcelona», Hughes employs a powerful synesthetic image, «Black smoke of sound / Curls against the midnight sky», with a clear emphasis on contrasting visual images. The image of a vulnerable population victimized by a merciless, hawk-like creature is employed in this poem by Hughes describing the aftermath of the bombing raid:

The death birds wheel East  
To their lairs again  
Leaving iron eggs  
In the streets of Spain.  
With wings like black cubes  
Against the far dawn,  
The stench of their passage  
Remains when they're gone.  
In what was a courtyard  
A child weeps alone.

Men uncover bodies  
From ruins of stone.

Although Hughes titles this poem «Air Raid: Barcelona», he could be describing any civilian population brutalized by war. Hughes emphasizes the monstrous nature of the aggressor («*halcones*» / «death birds...with wings like black cubes»), thus underscoring the barbarity of the crime and eliciting sympathy for the heroic, collective protagonist.

In a similar vein, in «Moonlight in Valencia: Civil War», Hughes's objective is the same: to encourage the defenders of the Republic and to motivate his American and European readers to come to their aid. In this poem, Hughes associates airplanes with death and undercuts the traditional connotations of moonlight:

<sup>9</sup> *I Wonder as I Wander*, *op. cit.*, p. 348.

<sup>10</sup> *Afro-American*, October 23, 1937.

Moonlight in Valencia:  
 The moon meant planes,  
 The planes meant death.

Although Valencia had been bombed by planes and shelled from the sea, the city was still largely free of the hunger and terror afflicting other parts of Spain. Hughes would write, «The cafés were full morning to night even after dark... Valencians just didn't care much. They had good wine and good food —fresh fish and melons and the sweetest oranges and grapes»<sup>11</sup>.

Hughes presents the war as an allegorical as well as historical conflict; he tends to equate the ideological struggle between democracy and fascism as a conflict between good and evil, likewise depicting the combatants as either virtuous comrades or villainous adversaries. Hughes was disturbed by the one component that did not fit into this neat arrangement of opposites: the North African troops serving with Franco's army. In the essay «General Franco's Moors», Hughes recounts his anguish upon seeing these colonials unwittingly fighting against their own independence by aligning themselves with the fascists.

In «Letter from Spain Addressed to Alabama», he expresses the same sentiments in verse. First published in *Volunteer for Liberty*, the main organ of the 15th International Brigade, it clearly reflects Hughes's growing concern with the historical consciousness peculiar to black men. A nine stanza poem composed in the form of a rhymed letter, it was written, as Hughes explains, to try to express the feelings of the black soldiers of the International Brigade about fighting the colonial Moors —victims themselves of the oppression in North Africa. The poem captures the American's sense of despair when confronted by his brother enemy. The soldier relates the capture of a wounded Moor with whom he attempts to communicate:

He answered something in a language  
 I couldn't understand.  
 But somebody told me he was sayin'  
 They nabbed him in his land  
 And made him join the Fascist army  
 And come across to Spain  
 And he said he had a feelin'  
 He'd never get back home again.

He said he had a feelin'

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 369.

This whole thing wasn't right.  
 He said he didn't know  
 These folks he had to fight.

Halfway in the poem his persona then turns his eyes to Africa and underscores both the economic and racial ties between him and his Moorish brother:

And as he lay there dying  
 In a village we had taken,  
 I looked across to Africa  
 And seed foundations shakin'.

Cause if a Free Spain wins this war,  
 The colonies, too, are free—  
 Then something wonderful'll happen  
 To them Moors as dark as me.

I said, I guess that's why old England  
 And I reckon Italy, too,  
 Is afraid to let a worker's Spain  
 Be too good to me and you—

Because they got slaves in Africa—  
 And they don't want 'em to be free.

Hughes concludes the poem with a symbolic gesture of absolution from the International:

Listen, Moorish prisoner, hell!  
 Here, shake hands with me!  
 I knelt down there beside him,  
 And I took his hand—  
 But the wounded Moor was dyin'  
 So he didn't understand.

The general message of this poem is one which appears throughout Hughes's poetry. Identifying himself with the Africans on ethnic grounds, he felt compassion for them as ignorant victims of Fascism. Hughes understood the reasoning of many black Internationals who, outraged by Franco's alliance with Hitler, had decided to enlist in the Brigades. But it puzzled him that some of America's most politically aware Blacks had left their own troubled country to risk their lives in Spain. Nevertheless, he respected these volunteers and according to his own estimate interviewed at least a hundred of them. Many of the essays that appeared in *I Wonder as I Wander* contain some other character sketches, interviews and anecdotes concerning the black vol-

unteers. Most of them are not brilliant soldiers, but regular troopers. Yet all are heroes in the sense that they had the courage to come to Spain and, if necessary, give their lives.

In another poem, «Tomorrow's Seed», the protagonist is a class of people, a nameless collective hero. Presumably, the poet's persona is looking out across a battlefield cemetery and considering the eventual harvest of this crop of patriots. This poem deserves quoting in full:

Proud banners of death,  
 I see them waving  
 There against the sky,  
 Struck deep in Spanish earth  
 Where your dark bodies lie  
 Inert and helpless—  
 So they think  
 Who do not know  
 That from your death  
 New life will grow.  
 For there are those who cannot see  
 The mighty roots of liberty  
 Push upward in the dark  
 To burst in flame—  
 A million stars—  
 And one your name:  
     Man  
 Who fell in Spanish earth:  
 Human seed  
 For freedom's birth.

The great sacrifice being made is worthwhile because ultimately liberty must win out. The imagery is consistent with the title's reference to seed: Spanish earth, roots, and growth. In this poem Hughes casually peppers his consonantal rhyme with an occasional free verse, effecting an informal rhyme scheme similar to that found throughout his poetry.

«Hero-International Brigade» is yet another example of the energetic and compassionate poetry written by Hughes during the Spanish conflict<sup>12</sup>. One of his most memorable poems, it speaks for many of the International Brigade volunteers and artists who came to Spain during the war:

I came.  
 An ocean in between

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<sup>12</sup> This poem was first published in *The Heart of Spain*, ed. Alvah Bessie (New York, Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade Inc., 1952), pp. 325-326.

And half a continent.  
 Frontiers,  
 And mountains skyline tall,  
 And governments that told me  
 NO,  
 YOU CANNOT GO!  
     I came.

Hughes presents us with the perspective of a dying International volunteer who views his death as a personal sacrifice for universal freedom. In this poem Hughes introduces a persona who speaks directly to the reader in a personal voice and an intimate tone:

But had I lived four score and ten  
 Life could not've had  
 A better end,  
 I've given what I wished  
 And what I had to give  
 That others live.  
 And when the bullets  
 Cut my heart away  
 And the blood  
 Gushed to my throat  
 I wondered if it were blood  
 Gushing there.  
 Or a red flame?  
 Or just my death  
 Turned into life?

The poem concludes with a series of exclamations in which Hughes expresses his sense of unity and brotherhood with all mankind, in suffering and in hope:

Our dream!  
     My death!  
     Your life!  
     Our blood!  
     One flame!  
 They're all the same!

The speaker insists that he has died so that his «dream» will survive and other lives will be saved.

Certainly no war literature flows redder with blood than the Spanish Civil War. The bombing of cities, the machine-gunning of refugees on open roads, introduced new senses of horror. Under this barbarism, women and

children as well as soldiers became for the first time in history regular targets for professional soldiers' angry guns.

In the «Civil War in Spain», Hughes would assert, «I am a writer, not a fighter. But that is what I want to be, a writer, recording what I see, commenting upon it, and distilling from my own emotions a personal interpretation»<sup>13</sup>. More than anything, Hughes's Civil War verse is the expression of his personal testimony of horror at the events he had witnessed. Indeed, his poetry constitutes a vivid and passionate manifestation of his feelings of admiration for the Republican militiamen and abhorrence for the aerial bombardment by the Nationalist airforce. As Albert Camus remarked, it was in Spain that «men learned that one can be right and yet be beaten, that force can vanquish spirit, that there are times when courage is not its own recompense»<sup>14</sup>. In Spain, a humanitarian cause was defeated but it was not humiliated, nor was the war fought in vain.

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<sup>13</sup> *I Wonder as I Wander*, *op. cit.*, p. 400.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted by F.R. Benson, *Writers in Arms: The Literary Impact of the Spanish Civil War* (New York, New York University Press, p. 302).