

“A grammar of images” – Stephen Spender’s translations of Lorca’s homoerotic poetry.”

The paper analyses Stephen Spender’s translations of the work of the poet most closely associated with the Spanish Civil War, Federico García Lorca, and how Spender approached the delicate question of the taboo elements of Lorca’s poetry, specifically its notably homoerotic contents. Spender was both gay and a Republican sympathizer and, in the light of these two facts, I will examine his approach to the essential translatability and universality of Lorca’s poetry, its “grammar of images”, to use the memorably apposite phrase that Spender coined to refer to the key to translating his work. Spender discovered Lorca’s work in Spain in the spring of 1936, and wrote to Christopher Isherwood “I like what I can understand of the poems by Lorca [...] they are really very beautiful”, expressing his wish to translate them. When he did begin his translations of Lorca’s work, after the Spanish poet’s murder in 1936, Spender was able to count on the textual guidance of members of Lorca’s intimate circle of family and friends. This privileged access also meant that Spender and his co-translator, the Catalan editor Joan Gili, were undoubtedly under considerable pressure to play down and even eliminate any unequivocally homosexual references in the original poems. The Republican sympathizer Spender, therefore, was faced with the translational dilemma of avoiding problems with the poet’s friends and family whilst trying to faithfully reproduce the poems and thus incurring the wrath of these apparent sympathizers, in view of the homophobia which was still prevalent in Republican circles. The paper will analyse how Spender resolved the taboo of homosexuality in his 1939 translation of Lorca’s *Selected Poems*, the first anthology in English, along with the manner in which he saw translation as a way of expressing his allegiance to a democratic Spain attacked by Fascism.