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WHY DID (SOME) MODERN CATALAN POETS TAKE TO MEDIEVAL POETRY?

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The purpose of this lecture is to provide some answers to the question posed in the title. I will try and do so as an amateur reader of modern poetry, leaving aside as much as possible the knowledge on the history of medieval poetry (and its reception) I may have gathered in the past forty years. If any conclusion on the history of modern Catalan poetry could be gathered from this overview, I will leave it for the end, and for the audience to reach on its own. When selecting a gallery of apposite examples, however, I have tried to make sure that every selected modern poet had an in-depth acquaintance with his/her medieval counterpart, thereby avoiding merely symbolic mentions of, and quotations from, such revered authorities as, say, Dante, Ramon Llull or Ausiàs March. I will proceed by chronological order, covering over a century of Catalan poetry, roughly from 1840 to 1960, from the early Romantics to the generation that first dispensed with the poetics of symbolism.

My first example is the poetry of Majorcan writer Marià Aguiló, a distinguished linguist and bibliophile who worked as a librarian at the University of Valencia and later at the University of Barcelona, thereby acquiring an indisputable command of medieval Catalan and unrivalled familiarity with manuscripts and early prints, to the extent that he became a towering figure of Catalan Renaixença next to historians such as Manuel Milà i Fontanals and Antoni Rubió i Lluch. From his youth Aguiló also penned sentimental poems on love and death, and one striking feature of this output is that

Aguiló proves to know the ins and outs of the fifteenth-century massive corpus of Ausiàs March's verse, which he no doubt was able to read in sixteenth-century editions. The poems "Tos ulls" ('Your eyes', 1844) and "Ma estrella" ('My star', n. d.) are both preceded by a quotation from March ["Yo viu uns ulls"; CI in modern editions] that comes, precisely, from the poem that in sixteenth-century editions of March had been placed in the fourth position so that readers would couple it with the sonnets in which Petrarch meets the beautiful "occhi" of Laura for the first time (Rvf 2-3). Such Petrarchan reading of March had been commonplace for centuries, but Aguiló went far beyond it by quoting a score of March passages with precision, many of them from little-known poems, in order to head dozens of his own pieces over the years. "Decepció" ('Disillusion', 1864), for instance, opens with a quotation from March that gets across incommensurable pain ("Bé·m meravell on tanta dolor cap"; XC.41, 'I can hardly believe that so much pain finds room'), and goes on to reflect on Aguiló's inability to truly repent ("Decepció" is dated on the Day of Our Lady of the Sorrows). As if conveying Aguiló's despair, several echoes of his medieval companion come to his mind:

> ¡Ay! del mesquí qu' en hora malehida
> per ésser naix, d'alts sentiments trahit,
> la Mort matexa 'n fuig, y en fuig la vida!
> Viu per provar ab desficiós neguit,
> que si 'ls desitgs del home son sens mida,
> també 'l cor pel dolor és infinit! (Aguiló 1925: 24-25)

These lines are a patchwork of quite a few March passages, among which the following are worth highlighting:

Maleit lo jorn que·m fon donada vida (CXIX.1)
Mas tu [Mort] defuigs a l'hom qui a tu crida (XXXVI.5)
[Parla la Mort:] Car jo defuig a tot home qui em crida (XI.15)

Aguiló read March as a body of confessional verse, very much as Petrarch's *canzoniere* was read in the spirit of the Romantic age, and with a penchant towards the painful condition of human life. But he did so with such an intimate, detailed knowledge of March's poetry that the reader suspects that Aguiló had learnt his medieval predecessor's work by heart, as if it were a bedtime reading, a Book of Hours or a Kempis rather than a mere literary model.

In 1864 the first modern edition of Ausiàs March came to light thanks to Francesc Pelagi Briz. Ausiàs March was the only Catalan writer who had been continuously appreciated right from the medieval times to the coming of Romanticism. In fact, in 1835 there was a project to publish his poetry anew, thus proving that at the earliest stage of Catalan Renaixença historical interest in the medieval past was far more important than literary production in the Catalan language. However, such early interest in March did not eventually come to the press, and Briz's edition became a landmark in as much as it made March's poetry available beyond the circle of those who, like Aguiló, were able to read his works in early prints. Briz himself was one of the happy few who could exhibit such acquaintance. His edition, of course, relied upon sixteenth-century editions of March, but he annotated March's verse and took pride in underlying, and separating from the rest, the pieces composed in *estramps* —a medieval form of blank verse that was thought to be of purely Catalan origin. The jewel in the crown of March's *estramps* was the so-called 'Cant espiritual' (CV), a penitential poem which had been read as the peak of March's poetry since 1543, when his works were reassembled as a Petrarchan construct leading to the poet's repentance. No wonder that

Briz himself penned a poem named "Penediment" ('Repentance', 1870) as a reworking of March's 'Cant espiritual'. Unlike Aguiló, however, Briz attempted to reproduce March's verse-pattern and even some medieval expressions, as in the following example:

> Perdó, Senyor! I si de nou m'allunyo,
> haja per cert trobar *ta orella sorda*.
> *Confés* ne so d'haver estat *culpable*:
> los *ulls del cos* m'han allunyat ta glòria;
> que me l'atansen fes los *ulls de l'ànima*! (Molas 1965: 96-97)

> A nostres precs Ell ou *d'orella sorda* (March CIV.31)
> Perdona'm, Déu, si t'he clamada culpa,
> car jo *confés* ésser aquell *culpable*;
> amb *ull de carn* he fets los teus judicis:
> vulles dar llum a la *vista de l'arma*! (March CV.94-96; my italics)

This short passage shows that Briz envisaged March as a medieval classic able to inspire Romantic verse in a mimetic way. He voiced March's thoughts as if no time had elapsed and identified himself so closely with the medieval sinner who prays to God that he composed modern poetry merely by verbatim imitation.

The 1900s brought about a more sophisticated use of medieval models. I shall skip the commonplace presence of Dante at the background of pre-Raphaelite writers. Far more enlightening is to pay attention to Josep Carner's *La paraula en el vent* ('The word in the wind'). Published in 1914, this volume has been praised as the aurora of many beginnings, for one as the first result of Carner's acquaintance with English poetry after having learned the English language three years before. The fact remains that *La paraula en el vent* includes pieces mostly published in periodicals between 1912

and 1914 and a couple of older poems, as the opening one from 1907-08. To my mind, they were all gathered and eventually organized in this book having in mind some principles of Petrarch's *Canzoniere*.

As is well known, Petrarch's *canzoniere* is a pseudo autobiographical account of his love for Laura in life and death during many years. Conversant as he was with the Latin elegiac poets of his admired Roman past, Petrarch chose to portray his fictional relationship with Laura as a poetic narrative, and he told it in retrospect. Thus the general preface (sonnet 1) tells the reader that he will hear a love story from the past, when the poet was "in parte altr'uom da quell ch 'i' sono" ('a man in part different from what I am'), and this point of view is of paramount importance for the Christian reader to understand that love (desire) is deceitful, vain, for "quanto piace al mondo è breve sogno" ('all that pleases earthly life is a short dream'). Of course, the reader also understands, no matter the poet's recantation, that the book is a witness to the past, so much so that poetry saves it in a way, even if words are also subject to the passing of time. After the general preface, the second prologue (sonnet 2) portrays the first vision of Laura (*causa*) and the third (sonnet 3) famously places Petrarch's meeting with her on Good Friday (*tempus*), and then the story begins. Josep Carner was fully aware of all this. He assembled his volume so that his poems on love (and faith) created the illusion of a chronological progress along the seasons of one symbolic year. As with Petrarch, *La paraula en el vent* opens with a poem on remorse ("Veu de recança", 'A remorseful voice'), followed by one on the birth of love ("Cançó de l'amor matiner") and a third that recalls Good Friday. Petrarch had written: "Era il giorno ch'al sol si scoloraro /per la pietà del suo Factore i rai" (Rvf, 3.1-2); likewise Carner dwells on the darkness that follows Christ's death: "Perdó de mon oblit quan s'apagava el sol" ('Forgive me [Lord] for my forgetfulness when the sun's light faded'). The placement of these three poems

by Carner should suffice to prove that, for the first time in the modern history of Catalan poetry, a poet was learned enough as to compose a book of poetry that was purposefully and minutely organized according to the poet that had first done so in the Western post classical tradition. Carner had read Petrarch extensively and had recently translated into Catalan a couple of Petrarch's sonnets. He acknowledged his debt to Petrarch in the foreword to his 1914 volume ('At the doorway'):

> It is fairly possible that, regarding the virtue of his own artistic work, the author may say, as he may do regarding his haphazard love, the words of Petrarch: *Scrissi in vento*.

Petrarch never wrote those exact words. He did write, however, the line "solco onde, e 'n rena fondo, et *scrivo in vento*" (Rvf, 212.4; 'I plough the seas, and found my house on sand, and write on the wind'). These impossible tasks are described in the present tense of the narration. Carner changed the present to the past (*Scrissi*, 'I wrote'), true to Petrarch's point of view, for the *canzoniere* is told in retrospect, as *La paraula en el vent* is. It goes without saying that Carner had fully grasped that not only love perishes; the poet's words are also eventually doomed into oblivion. Poetry is indeed *The Word in the Wind*, as it was the last conversation of Petrarch with Laura: "ma' l vento ne portava le parole" (Rvf 267.14), concludes the first text that evokes Petrarch's beloved after her death, in which *parole* mean "speranze e desideri vani, perché le parole di quell'ultimo colloquio le rapì il vento" (ed. Santagata 1996: 1065; '[unfruitful] hope and vain desire, for the words of that last conversation were taken away by the wind'). Hence, in a nutshell, the meaning of the title of Carner's book.

From Aguiló's poetics of immediacy to Carner's subtle craft a formidable leap forward in the imitation practice had taken place. Twenty years later, another major

Catalan poet, J. V. Foix decided that it was high time to publish a book of sonnets (*Sol, i de dol*, 'In solitude and in pain') entirely devoted to promoting modern poetry with a foot in the avantgarde and another one in the medieval classics. The volume was not published until 1947 (and by that time its contents had been substantially changed) but it was shaped (and mostly written) between 1934 and 1936. Some of its medieval features are well known: it consists of Petrarchan sonnets though composed in a decasyllabic verse that is dominantly stressed on the fourth syllable as in medieval Catalan; it is divided into six sections with titles and introductory quotations taken from the troubadours, Dante, Guido Cavalcanti, Llull, March and other medieval writers, all of which announce the themes and the tone of each part; and even archaisms and dialect forms point to Foix's will to foreground the medieval vest of his collection. Equally apparent are numerous passages in which he showed how medieval poetry could be adjusted to contemporary life. Thus "Com el pilot que força els governalls / Quan ix del Prat" (I.13.1-2; "Like the pilot who struggles with the aircraft controls when he takes off from El Prat') refers to his interest in modern aviation [El Prat was about to be Barcelona's airport] and is obviously rooted in March's celebrated similes about sailors in dire straits:

> Jo contrafaç nau en golf perillant,
> l'arbre perdent e son *governador* (March, XXVII.25-26)
> ('I am like a ship on the high seas, in danger,
> having lost the mast and the rudder as well')

Likewise, the sonnet "Jo sóc aquell que en mar advers veleja" (IV.45.1; 'I am the one who sails in troubled seas') recalls March's similes again and immediately brings to mind the famous line "Jo sóc aquell qui en lo temps de tempesta" (AM, LXVIII.17),

while portraying Foix's passion for sailing in the not always calm waters of his beloved Port de la Selva and up north. More interestingly, on other occasions Foix, like an alchemist, transmutes the medieval text by the sheer power of imagination, as with the opening lines of Cavalcanti's sonnet on the vision of an angel-like lady:

> Chi è questa che ven, ch' ogn 'om la mira,
> e mena seco amor, sì che parlare
> ome non può, ma ciascun ne sospira?

Foix recreates the scene thus:

> Entre els morats i l'ocre, en carrer clos,
> A sol morent, arribes tu, llunyana;
> Calla l'ocell, la font i la campana,
> I al teu petjar hi ha un defallir de flors. (III.32.1-4)

The arrival from afar of the enigmatic woman is placed at sunset or rather at dusk, when all colors change and dilute, and distant vision becomes blurred –a favorite hour for symbolist poets and impressionist painters alike. And then, the reverential mutism of the lady's admirers in Cavalcanti is transformed as well, as if by magic, into the silence of everything that sings (birds, fountains and bells), and flowers bend (or decay) as if they were bowing to the lady that, in Cavalcanti, makes all men sigh in awe. Had Cavalcanti's passage not been quoted in precedence, Foix's imitation would have passed unnoticed. When no previous quotation alerts the reader, Foix's imitation is harder to catch, as in the next example. Fifteenth-century Valencian poet Jordi de Sant Jordi wrote a moral piece to get across the world's disarray through a long enumeration of oxymora. Foix turned it into a sonnet about the opposition between intellectual

knowledge and sense perception, in other words, about uncertainty: “El real, doncs, què és?” (“What is reality, then?”; I.4.9), he exclaims. One of Sant Jordi’s witty *impossibilia* states: “e·l blan tenc per molt dur” (XV.31; “and what is soft seems to me very hard”). Foix embellishes the medieval phrase by means of surreal imagination: “I són coixins i flors els rocs més durs” (I.4.6; ‘And the hardest stones are to me cushions and flowers’).

I could go on and on, and underline how Foix drew on Petrarch and Llull, on Pere Torroella and on Joan Roís de Corella’s version of the Psalter, but I expect that the previous examples will be enough to prove that he really wanted to demonstrate that medieval poetry was quite modern or at least that it could provide Catalan poets with subject-matter to be transformed into contemporary, innovative verse. Admittedly, Foix believed that neither literary tendencies nor genres should be distinguished throughout history. Nevertheless, the fundamentals of Foix’s poetics do not account for his unexpected decision to compose a whole book based on medieval poetry in such an open way, giving away most of his sources, almost as a public statement. Why did he do it? This question is particularly relevant when we consider that recent studies have pointed out that many of his medieval readings and quotations came from recently acquired anthologies and editions. [Furthermore, I very much doubt that he was following Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot’s gusto for the troubadours and Dante and Cavalcanti, for Foix did not have a good command of English and when he translated long chunks of Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (for the first time in the Iberian Peninsula), he did so via a French version.] The answer to the question is perhaps provided by Foix himself in his second, manifesto-like sonnet (I.2), in which he invokes old Catalan as a model against foreign influence. He intends to be “fugitiu de la faisó estrangera” (‘fugitive from the foreign manner’) and, under the wing of Llull’s and March’s harsh language, he aims to write for posterity: “si […] /Els meus dictats guanyessin el demà,

/Sense miralls ni atzurs, arpes ni cignes!" ('I wish […] my poems were to conquer the day-to-come, /with neither mirrors or blue skies, harps or swans!'). My paraphrase of this passage would be: 'I wish to write without any of the key-words that are typical of Spanish *Modernismo* (e. g. Rubén Darío) and French late symbolism (from Mallarmé to Jean Moréas)'. [See the handout 5 for a sample of such trite use of literary motifs encapsulated within grand rhetoric and mythological lore.] Be of to-day, implies Foix, but leave aside the neighboring tendencies [the ones, one may add, that may pose a threat to Catalan writing] and root your poetry in your own tradition. [It is worth noticing that he only quoted from Occitan and Italian, the Romance languages that he considered linked to Catalan cultural identity.] To my mind Foix is taking a political stance, and even though he never said so much, some of his protégées made abundantly clear in the periodicals of the mid-1930s that Catalan medieval poets should inspire the young ones, as they had done in the first two decades of the twentieth century. I wonder whether Foix had in mind that some members of the so-called Generación del 27 [Alberti, Gerardo Diego, José Bergamín] were perfectly able of penning avantgarde poetry blended with superb knowledge of Garcilaso, Lope de Vega, Góngora and other prominent figures of the Spanish Golden Age.

At any rate Foix's educational program was never to be. War broke out in July 1936, and his book did not come to the press until 1947. In the postwar years only the poetry of Ausiàs March seems to have captured the attention of the young generation of poets who had been born and educated before the war. Pride of place among these is to be given to Rosa Leveroni. She was one of the first Catalan women writers to have a university education, and before and after the war she remained a follower of the distinguished classical scholar and poet Carles Riba. In 1940, just after the war, she attended a course on March by Jordi Rubió i Balaguer at his home, and thus she gained

access to Amadeu Pagès's critical edition of March's poetry (1912-14). She dwelled on March's verse to convey the pain of love and life in her own poetry, and above all she entertained the idea that March's verse was somewhat in tune with the dark side of Baudelaire and French *maudit* poetry. Leveroni, her friend poet Josep Palau i Fabre (1917-2008) and the Sephardic hispanist Maurice Molho (then at Barcelona) made that claim in clandestine publications of the mid-1940s, but only she went on to write a scholarly article (published in the *Bulletin of Spanish Studies* in 1951) in order to prove that March had managed to reach a summit of all-time poetry, despite accusations of being too dry and philosophical. To that end she retrieved the critical acumen of some nineteenth-century critics who had regarded March as a predecessor of the Romantic spirit, and finally made the point: "No ens escandalitzem massa, per tant, que els joves nostres vegin en ell un precedent dels poetes maleïts que més estimen" (Leveroni 1951: 165; 'Let's not be too shocked if our young [poets] regard March as a predecessor of the *maudit* poets they so cherish'). Indeed, she considered March "an elder brother of Baudelaire" and perceived inside him the "the void of nothingness, the death of his love", in a crystal-clear reference to Sartre's *néant*.

Leveroni's stance is understandable if we bear in mind that postwar Spain and then the aftermath of World War II invited Catalan writers both to stick to March as a symbol of permanence throughout the centuries, and to read him as an epitome of inner conflict of the soul, as he had been read by Romantic poets like Aguiló and Briz, though now the connection was made to Baudelaire and Lautréamont rather than to Lord Byron or Lamartine. Leveroni's statement has the tinge of an apology ('Let's not be too shocked'). She may have had in mind that, while she was advocating for March to be read as the poet who expressed nothingness, her elder guide Carles Riba was at that

time writing a book of confessional sonnets with March at the backdrop in order to portray his own struggle alongside the path that leads to faith in God.

Riba's volume was published in 1952 with the title *Salvatge cor* (Savage Heart). Fortunately, an article by Jordi Malé (*Reduccions* 2000) directs the reader straight to the conclusion: Riba took the title from March's poem LXVIII, but all through the writing of his book he was thinking of March's "Cant espiritual". Malé is right in observing that the phrase "salvatge cor" in March applies to his chaste beloved, Full of Wisdom, who "en tot lleig fet hagué lo cor salvatge" (LXVIII.23), thereby concluding that Riba took March's phrase out of context and used it to encompass both March's inner attitude and his own. I totally agree with Malé. Riba had been reading March for decades, had always considered him the poet that epitomized the struggle of human passions, and had come to identify himself intimately with his medieval predecessor's "Cant espiritual". Nevertheless, a further observation is to be made. When Riba writes that God is to be found not by any sort of mystical or penitential progress but rather by descending to the bottom of the human heart, right where desire and all passions lie, he says so with March's verse in mind:

> Nu en el meu pes, m'he llançat, bus tenaç
> en noble golf, pantera amb tèrbol pas
> en bosc *salvatge*, al profund de l'amor;
> la boca al goig, *l'esperit cos avall*,
> de sobte he vist, dolç dins l'obac mirall
> que l'inverteix, l'esclat del teu Favor. (*Salvatge cor*, XIV, 1.9-14; my italics)

> In my solid nakedness I've plunged, resolute diver
> down a noble gulf, panther darkly treading
> the wild forest, into the depths of love;
> savouring pleasure, the spirit sinking,

I've suddenly seen, gently in the hazy mirror
that inverts it, the blaze of Thy Favour. (trans. Joan Gili 1993)

Plena de seny, lleigs desigs de mi tall;
herbes no es fan males en mon ribatge;
sia entès com *dins en mon coratge* [heart]
los pensaments no em davallen avall. (AM, LXVIII.25-28)

To sum it all up in plain words. March states that his thoughts will not sink down his flesh, on account of his chastity and that of his beloved. Riba, instead, plunges "l'esperit cos avall" in order to discover God at the bottom of human passion. He is subverting March's words and, by doing so, dialoguing with his own poetic tradition.

Between 1952 and 1959 scholar Pere Bohigas published a new edition of March's poetry, not entirely critical but fully, and wisely, annotated. It brought the attention of Gabriel Ferrater (1922-72), a friend of Bohigas's and later of Leveroni's. Around 1955 Ferrater passionately took to Bohigas's edition and began to write accurate notes on March's poems —his extant notebook and other documents provide evidence of yet another knowledgeable reader of March's verse. Ferrater's interest focused as much on medieval syntax as on March's love poetry, thereby departing from the hitherto sustained attraction exerted by the "Cant espiritual". As with Catullus and some medieval poets, March seemed to Ferrater a poet who talked about love and human passions in a straightforward manner, a voice that was devoid of the farrago of metaphors and aestheticism that, according to him, had prevailed from the Renaissance onwards and prevented the modern poet from getting to the core of everyday moral life. He wrote a poem ("Tant no turmenta") as a moral commentary on one by March, and there are quite a few instances in which his vast reading of medieval literature comes to the surface. But perhaps his long-lasting contribution to the topic I am dealing with is

that he convinced his fellow poet Jaime Gil de Biedma (1929-90) to read, and reflect on, Latin and medieval writers. In separate ways, they had both embarked on a similar quest: no matter how much they admired Carles Riba and Jorge Guillén, respectively, Ferrater and Gil de Biedma wanted to do without symbolism [and embrace the poetics of authors such as Robert Frost and W. H. Auden]. In the case of Gil de Biedma, the recreation of troubadour Giraut de Bornelh's *alba* became his "Albada" ('Dawn song'), one of those perfect poems that only rarely come to life.

Gil de Biedma reproduced the pattern and every motif of the troubadour dawn song, while transforming the courtly love chamber into a homosexual encounter in a sordid brothel of Barcelona's Rambla in the 1950s. Although I have no time to go into detail, I should like to make a final point. The medieval song consists of six stanzas spoken by the voice of someone who talks to an anonymous friend and tells him that dawn is imminent; only the seventh stanza makes clear that this friend is a lover in bed with his beloved, for he unexpectedly replies to the first voice. Romance language scholars knew that the seventh stanza was apocryphal (and they had, and still have, doubts about the intention of Bornelh's poem). Gil de Biedma stated: "las seis primeras estrofas podrían leerse como una exhortación del alma al cuerpo —fue Gabriel Ferrater quien me lo dijo—, y eso determinó la concepción de mi poema" (2017: 416; 'the first six stanzas could be read as an exhortation of the soul to the body—it was Gabriel Ferrater who told me about it—, and this piece of information determined the way in which I conceived my poem'). Ferrater could have possibly told him so much only because Martí de Riquer had made the point in a footnote of his university handbook on troubadour poetry (1948), which must have reached Ferrater, who had befriended both scholars [e. g. Bohigas] and college students [Helena Valentí?]. This anecdote was worth telling, for Gil de Biedma's "Albada" is a fine example of his well-known ability

to reflect on his own experience by doubling his persona (as in his later pieces "Contra Jaime Gil de Biedma",'Against JGB', or "Después de la muerte de Jaime Gil de Biedma", 'After the death of JGB'). In the last stanza of his "Albada", after the first voice has described the brothel scene at dawn in the first person, the poet's second voice crudely replies to himself:

> Junto al cuerpo que anoche me gustaba
> tanto desnudo, déjame que encienda
> la luz para besarse cara a cara,
> en el amanecer.
> Porque conozco el día que me espera,
> y no por el placer.

Gil de Biedma took everything from the medieval model but the meaning; everything, that is, that could be reduced to a form (verse pattern, structure, iteration, theme, motifs, situation, point of view), and updated it to express the everyday, gloomy feeling of living a double life: the life of a promiscuous, clandestine homosexual in postwar Spain by night, and the life of an affluent manager of a tobacco company by day. The duplicity, he found it in the medieval song thanks to Romance philology (see the handout) and an insightful conversation with Gabriel Ferrater.

As Antoni Rubió i Lluch used to teach in the early twentieth-century, one thing is the history of Catalan literature and another one the history of literature written in the Catalan-speaking lands. The latter, whether in Latin, Hebrew, Occitan, French, Aragonese or Spanish quite often helps to understand some aspects of Catalan culture as a whole and not only in the case of bilingual authors [Francesc Eiximenis, Pere Torroella, Joan Boscà, and so forth]. The case of Gil de Biedma speaks for itself. Even though he only wrote in Spanish and his ancestors came from Segovia, he was born in

Barcelona, his poems were mostly written there, and he benefited from the Barcelona intellectual milieu in the 1950s and 1960s. His poetry, his essays and his letters shed light on a generation of writers and critics (such as Joan Ferraté) that was perhaps the last to exhibit an in-depth knowledge of medieval poetry.

* * *

As stated at the beginning I do not wish to draw any conclusions from the previous outline. My aim was to show that, for some 120 years, significant Catalan poets kept dwelling on the medieval tradition. No book-length monograph has ever been devoted to this aspect of Catalan poetry, and no chapter in any handbook on the history of Catalan literature deals with this issue. Dozens of entries on Llull, Petrarch, March and other medieval writers feature, however, in the index of names of the 1984 five-volume *Història de la literatura catalana* directed by Joaquim Molas. The ongoing equivalent dispenses with many of such references. The index of names of the first volume on contemporary writing does not even mention March, and the chapter devoted to Carner's *La paraula en el vent* makes no reference to Petrarch.

Societies evolve and too many current issues keep cropping up for the twentieth-first century education system to face to. Surely, to be acquainted with the medieval classics is probably not a pressing priority. However, it is well known that Italian youngsters learn by heart a number of cantos of Dante's *Commedia* at the Liceo. Likewise, British students are supposed to know a modicum of Shakespeare at the A levels, and the French ones must answer questions on Molière, Balzac or Victor Hugo at the BAC, as much as Spanish secondary students read fragments of Manrique, Garcilaso and Cervantes. Forty-odd years after the establishment of a democratic regime in Spain, and the institution of a syllabus in Catalan in the secondary school, the classics

seem to have vanished into thin air (and when I say the classics I do no only mean the medieval ones, but Foix and Riba and all the writers who offer some difficulty in reading). This peculiar circumstance may have something to do with the little attention paid to medieval Catalan poetry by some present-day university critics.

Many thanks for your patience.

WHY DID (SOME) MODERN CATALAN POETS TAKE

TO MEDIEVAL POETRY?

Lluís Cabré (UAB), NACS Conference, April 15, 2022

1. Marian Aguiló (1825-97), "Decepció" ('Disillusion', 1864)

¡Ay! del mesquí qu' en hora malehida
per ésser naix, d'alts sentiments trahit,
la Mort matexa 'n fuig, y en fuig la vida!
Viu per provar ab desficiós neguit,
que si 'ls desitgs del home son sens mida,
també 'l cor pel dolor és infinit!
('Alas the wretched who in a cursed hour is born into being, and [is later] betrayed by lofty feelings, for Death flees from him as does life! He only lives on to prove, with uneasy discomfort, that much as human desire cannot be measured, pain can be infinite in his heart!')

Maleit lo jorn que·m fon donada vida (March, CXIX.1)
('I curse the day life was bestowed on me')

Mas tu [Mort] defuigs a l'hom qui a tu crida (March, XXXVI.5)
('But you [O Death] avoid the man who invokes you')

[Parla la Mort:] Car jo defuig a tot home qui em crida (March, XI.15)
('[Death says:] For I avoid everyone who invokes me')

2. Francesc Pelagi Briz (1839-89), "Penediment" ('Repentance', 1870)

Perdó, Senyor! I si de nou m'allunyo,
haja per cert trobar *ta orella sorda*.
Confés ne so d'haver estat *culpable*:
los *ulls del cos* m'han allunyat ta glòria;
que me l'atansen fes los *ulls de l'ànima*!
('Forgive me, Lord! If I depart from you once more, I shall deserve to encounter your deaf ear. I confess to having been guilty: my eyes of flesh have taken your glory away from me; do make the eyes of my soul bring it closer!')

A nostres precs Ell ou *d'orella sorda* (March CIV.31)
('He listens to our pray with a deaf ear')
Perdona'm, Déu, si t'he donada culpa,
car jo *confés* ésser aquell *culpable*;
amb *ull de carn* he fets los teus judicis:
vulles dar llum a la *vista de l'arma*! (March CV.93-96; my italics)
('Forgive me, Lord, if ever I accused you,
for I confess myself the guilty one;
I have judged all you do with eyes of flesh.
Only give light to the eyes of my soul! [trans. Robert Archer 2006])

3. Josep Carner (1884-70), *La paraula en el vent* ('The Word in the Wind', 1914)

Perdó de mon oblit quan s'apagava el sol
('Forgive me [Lord] for my forgetfulness when the sun's light faded').
Era il giorno ch'al sol si scoloraro /per la pietà del suo Factore i rai (*Rvf,* 3.1-2)
('It was the day when the sun's rays paled out of commiseration for their Maker['s death]')

És ben possible que en quant a la virtut de sa obra artística [l'autor] pugui dir, com de l'atzar de son amor, la paraula de Petrarca: *Scrissi in vento*. ("En el llindar")
('It is fairly possible that, regarding the virtue of his own artistic work, the author may say, as he may do regarding his haphazard love, the words of Petrarch: *Scrissi in vento*.' ['At the doorway'])

solco onde, e 'n rena fondo, et *scrivo in vento* (Rvf, 212.4, my italics);
('I plough the seas, and found my house on sand, and write on the wind').
ma' l vento ne portava le parole (Rvf 267.14)
('but the wind took the words away')

4. J. V. Foix (1893-1987), *Sol, i de dol* (‘In Solitude and in Pain’, 1936; 1947)

Com el pilot que força els *governalls* /Quan ix del Prat (I.13.1-2; my italics)
(‘Like the pilot who must battle with the aircraft controls when he takes off from El Prat’)
Jo contrafaç nau en golf perillant,
l’arbre perdent e son *governador* (March, XXVII.25-26)
(‘I am like a ship on the high seas, in danger,
having lost the mast and the rudder as well’)

Jo sóc aquell que en mar advers veleja (IV.45.1; my italics)
(‘I am the one who sails in troubled seas’)
Jo sóc aquell qui en lo temps de tempesta (March, LXVIII.17)
(‘I am the one who in the storming weather’)

Chi è questa che ven, ch’ ogn ‘om la mira,
e mena seco amor, sì che parlare
ome non può, ma ciascun ne sospira? (Cavalcanti)
(‘Who is the lady coming this way, at whom everyone looks, and who brings love with her, so everyone remains speechless and can only sigh?’)
Entre els morats i l’ocre, en carrer clos,
A sol morent, arribes tu, llunyana;
Calla l’ocell, la font i la campana,
I al teu petjar hi ha un defallir de flors. (III.32.1-4)
(‘Amidst purple and ocher, in a blind alley, when the sun dies, you arrive from afar. Birds, fountains and bells keep quiet, and all flowers bend down when you walk by.’)

e·l blan tenc per molt dur (Jordi de Sant Jordi)
(‘and what is soft seems to me very hard’).
I són coixins i flors els rocs més durs” (I.4.6)
(‘And the hardest stones are to me cushions and flowers’)

Si, *fugitiu de la faisó estrangera*,

Arromancés […]

[…], i a l'aspriva manera

Dels qui en vulgar parlaren sobirà,

—*Oh Llull! Oh March*!—, i amb claredat de signes,

Rústec però sever, pogués rimar

Pels qui vindran; *si*, ponderats i dignes,

Els meus dictats guanyessin el demà,

Sense miralls ni atzurs, arpes ni cignes! (I.2.5-14; my italics)

('*Fugitive from the foreign manner*, I wish I could write in Romance […], and in the harsh style of those who spoke in Catalan superbly —Oh Llull! Oh March!—, and with transparent signs, unpolished but accurate, [I wish] I could rhyme for those who are not yet born; *I wish my poems, balanced and lofty, were to conquer the day-to-come, with neither mirrors or blue skies, harps or swans*!')

5. Atzur, arpes I cignes

Rubén Darío

- ni los **cisnes** unánimes en el lago de **azur** ("Sonatina")
- Su alma del infinito parece **espejo** […] /y con **arpa** labrada de un roble añejo ("Walt Whitman", in ***Azul***)
- yerran nubes tranquilas /en el **azul** […] /Ella me dijo: "¡Ven!" con el acento /con que me hablaría un **arpa** ("Autumnal", ibid.)

Stéphane Mallarmé

- Et la bouche, fiévreuse et d'**azur** bleu vorace […] /Voit des galères d'or, belles comme des **cygnes** […] /Me force à me boucher le nez devant l'**azur**. ("Les fenêtres", in *Parnasse contemporain*)
- Des avalanches d'or du vieil **azur** […] /Le glaïel fauve, avec les **cygnes** au col fin ("Les fleurs", ibid.)
- De l'éternel **azur** la sereine ironie […] etc ("**L'Azur**", ibid.)
- **Harpe**, ton chan est mort […] /**Harpes** d'or, résonnez! […] /Les Choeurs mélodieux ont jeté cet accord /Dans l'**azur** ("La prière d'une mère")

Jean Moréas

- Ce sont tropeaux encor les **cygnes** du Caystre [river mentioned in the *Iliad*] (*Les Stances*, I.1)

- Je vous invoque [Muses] ici sur la **harpe** sonore (ibid., I.9)
- Au temps de ma jeunesse, harmonieuse **Lyre** (ibid., II.1)
- Ce n'est pas vers l'**azur** que mon esprit s'envole (ibid., II.5)
- Vous [my poems, Muse's gifts] étiez le ruisseau quand le soleil l'égaie /Et s'en fait un **miroir** (ibid., II.19)

6. Rosa Leveroni (1910-85), "Les imatges marines en la poesia d'Ausies March" (1951)

No ens escandalitzem massa, per tant, que els joves nostres vegin en ell [March] un precedent dels poetes maleïts que més estimen" ('Let's not be too shocked if our young [poets] regard March as a predecessor of the *maudit* poets they so cherish').

[aquests versos, March's XXVII.43-44] em semblen definitius com a concreció justa de l'esglai en trobar dintre seu la buidor del no-res, de la mort —per què no?— del seu amor [RL, "El meu Auziàs March", 1944]. ('[these lines] are the exact concretion of his fear when he finds inside him the void of nothingness, of the death —why not?— of his love')

7. Carles Riba (1893-1959), *Salvatge cor* ('Savage Heart', 1952)

"en tot lleig fet hagué lo cor salvatge" (March, LXVIII.23)
('against all matters of the flesh, she had a savage [i.e. ruthless] heart')

Nu en el meu pes, m'he llançat, bus tenaç
en noble golf, pantera amb tèrbol pas
en bosc *salvatge*, al profund de l'amor;
la boca al goig, *l'esperit cos avall*,
de sobte he vist, dolç dins l'obac mirall
que l'inverteix, l'esclat del teu Favor. (XIV, 1.9-14; my italics)

In my solid nakedness I've plunged, resolute diver
down a noble gulf, panther darkly treading

the wild forest, into the depths of love;
savouring pleasure, the spirit sinking,
I've suddenly seen, gently in the hazy mirror
that inverts it, the blaze of Thy Favour. (trans. Joan Gili 1993)

Plena de seny, lleigs desigs de mi tall;
herbes no es fan males en mon ribatge;
sia entès com *dins en mon coratge*
los pensaments no em devallen avall. (March, LXVIII.25-28; my italics)
('Full of Wisdom, I cut all base desires out of me; in my meadow weeds do not grow at all. In other words, inside my heart none of my thoughts sinks down [my flesh].´)

8. Jaime Gil de Biedma (1929-90), "Albada" ('Dawn song', 1961)

Junto al cuerpo que anoche me gustaba
tanto desnudo, déjame que encienda
la luz para besarse cara a cara,
    en el amanecer.
Porque conozco el día que me espera,
    y no por el placer.
('Close to the naked body which last night I enjoyed so much, let me turn on the lights to kiss him face to face, at dawn. For I am fully aware of the day that awaits me, and not for the pleasure')

Parece ser, según algunas teorías, que la última estrofa [del alba de Giraut de Bornelh] es apócrifa, es añadida —la estrofa de la respuesta del amante— y que en realidad es una exhortación del alma al cuerpo agonizante, es decir del alma del agonizante a sí mismo. Y precisamente fue esa posibilidad de desdoblamiento, según esta interpretación albigense de esta albada, la que a mí me dio la idea de que la exhortación y la respuesta estén en boca de dos dimensiones diferentes de la conciencia de un mismo sujeto. (1988; cf. Jaime Gil de Biedma 2015: 438; 2017: 415-16, 599-600).