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***Ramon Xirau: from Poetry to Metaphysics***  
**Manuel Duran**

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## RAMON XIRAU: FROM POETRY TO METAPHYSICS

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Born in Barcelona in 1924, the son of the distinguished philosopher, Joaquim Xirau, Ramon Xirau has become one of the most versatile and prolific authors of the Catalan diaspora. Yet although his father is probably the central figure in the exile movement, and most other writers and thinkers in the field working outside Catalonia are related to him, indeed indebted to him as students and disciples are related to a teacher and master, his son Ramon, although strongly influenced by him, has established a separate identity that in some ways transcends nationality and roots in order to relate closely to Mexican thought and culture. There is no doubt that in Mexico and in all of Latin America, where his writings are widely read and enjoyed, Ramon Xirau is seen very much as a Mexican author.

The fact remains that Ramon Xirau is also at home in the Catalan cultural tradition. The great Mexican poet Octavio Paz has stated that there are authors who become bridges between cultures: Ramon Xirau is such an author. Seen from Mexico he fully belongs to the Mexican cultural scene. Seen from the other shore, Catalonia and Spain, he shares many of the goals and traditions that are typical to that shore. If nationalism were less obtrusive, less insistent, this problem would not arise. There were moments in the Eighteenth Century when writers and scholars felt themselves to be members of a universal Republic of Letters. We can only wish that such an expansive and open attitude prevailed in our century. It is significant in any case that Ramon Xirau has published books of poetry written in Catalan, *L'Espill soterrat*, *Platges*, *Graons*, and *Ocells*, all highly prai-

sed by critics, and that the essays and poetry by Maragall, who, as we know, was not only a great poet but also an essayist keenly aware of ethical and metaphysical questions, occupy a special place in Ramon Xirau's cultural background.

Ramon Xirau is both a philosopher and a poet. This combination is of course not unknown in the history of philosophy. Plato was undoubtedly a great master of language and would probably have written great poetry if he had wished to do so. His version of Socrates' self-defence is a masterpiece which ranks with the best Greek literature. Nietzsche and Bergson were also great writers. Yet it is only among the mystical poets, such as Eckhardt or Saint John of the Cross, that we can find a solid link between language and metaphysics. Ramon Xirau is not only a poet and a philosopher, he is also a critic of poetry who is fully aware of all the dimensions of language, a critic who has explored language, specifically poetic language, in a deliberate and thorough manner, coming to the conclusion that poetic language is a special form of knowledge, not less efficient than the most sophisticated and the deepest prose handled by the best philosophers. Great poets are often capable of providing us with a link to the most important aspects of Nature. We should not forget, of course, that the "outside world", the realm of matter and space, and the "inside world" where the human mind takes stock of what exists, are always linked by two great bridges, the senses, and the way in which we, the "insiders", decipher the meaning of this communication. Our way is twofold, through language and through numbers. If only we can make the two readings, language and numbers, coincide, agree, point out in the same direction, we can be hopeful that we are close to our goal.

How can the task of the poet and the rational effort of the philosopher be brought together? The poet is full of emotion,



inspiration, while the philosopher is precise, exact, clear. Plato thought that poets were certainly "inspired" but at the same time they misled others, they lied. Inspiration was irrational, and moreover if poetry imitates the world around us, the world of appearances, and this world in turn is only an imitation, a pale copy of the world of Ideas or Forms, poetry will only be an imitation of an imitation. Finally in his basic irrationality the poet is a menace to the perfect rational structure of the *Republic* Plato conceived. Yet the list of those who see poetry as a source of knowledge is long and impressive. Dante, among others, points out that a poetic text has several meanings, a literal meaning and an allegorical one which is superimposed upon the first. In his letter to Can Grande della Scala he defends and praises the importance of poetry as a source of knowledge, emphasizing specifically the importance of allegorical knowledge, of knowledge through allegory. Later, also in Italy, Vico sees in poetic language the beginning of all civilizations: every civilization must live through the essentially poetic Age of Gods in order to reach the equally poetic Age of Heroes — after which it will succumb in the purely rational Age of Men. Many Romantic thinkers, Schelling among them, identified poetry and absolute knowledge.

Poetry is knowledge, Ramon Xirau points out, if we define knowledge in a wider sense than the definition given this word by common sense. Knowledge is much more than an accumulation of supposedly objective data. Poets create metaphors and images but also make use of ideas: philosophers work with ideas and yet also make use of images and metaphors as tools of knowledge. The only way to reach a correct definition of what knowledge is and can be leads to overcome and discard the old dichotomy that separates human beings into two halves, two unreconcilable halves, on the one hand man's emotions, together

with his beliefs and his images, on the other hand man's exact and precise thought. This division is erroneous and misleading. Basically both poetry and philosophy are forms of a wider and more comprehensive modality of knowledge, religious knowledge. Even our past, mankind's history, lives in us and through us often as a collective unconscious memory, and such a memory is often expressed through poetic images and metaphors. Such metaphors are a part of a possible poetic knowledge.

Yet the inescapable fact is that the history of Western thought is, from the fourteenth century and Occam's nominalism, the unfolding of an increasing separation which places face to face, in confrontation, two types of knowledge. Occam defines two kinds of knowledge, one which derives from experience, to which we refer through a language which is basically arbitrary, and one which involves faith and belief, an experience related to religious thought which words are incapable of expressing. Later on Bacon propounds scientific knowledge based upon experience as the basis for a progress based upon man's rule over Nature. Descartes makes use only of pure intellectual reasoning in order to establish a rational view of the world, from which faith is excluded, leaving it in the hands of theologians, and feelings as well as poetic imagination are also absent. The French philosopher states, "*J'étais amoureux de la poésie*", yet this love is not expressed in his works. Kant and Hegel contribute also through their conscious choices and their philosophical systems to the cleavage of knowledge into two unreconciled halves which has been characteristic of Western thought. For Kant it is pure reason that leads us to knowledge and gives us the necessary and universal foundations for scientific knowledge, while practical reason is the expression of the Categorical Imperative. On the one hand we have science, which excludes metaphysics, and on the other hand we have the moral values,

based upon three hypotheses, which are freedom, immortality, and the existence of God. Hegel tries to rationalize the whole reality, from inanimate objects to Ideas, from society to religion, from psychology to History, and while doing so Hegel is bound to unbalance his vision of human goals and purposes. "Man is not merely reason, man is being and values, hatred and love, sympathy and rejection. Man is Reason, that is to say, *Logos*, we cannot doubt it, yet man is also, as Plato thought, *Eros*, and even, also in Plato's conception, *Myth*" (*Poesía y Conocimiento*, 20).

After Hegel the cleavage becomes even sharper between the religious interpretations of a Kierkegaard on the one hand and on the other the sociological and economical interpretations of Feuerbach and Marx. Such a cleavage can be also found in the Russian nihilists, in Max Stirner, and most especially in Nietzsche. After Nietzsche proclaims the death of God contemporary philosophy faces the thankless and impossible task of trying to replace what is infinite by what is finite and limited. Theology is reduced to anthropology, what is relative is postulated into an absolute — in politics this is the road to totalitarianism. Having lost his center, his core, his sense of harmony and balance, modern man looks for the whole reality in what is only a part of it, hence the frustration and anguish of the contemporary scene. While Romantic philosophers, from Schelling to Nietzsche, seem incapable of avoiding a lurch towards the irrational, a poet such as Coleridge, also very much a part of the Romantic tradition, can identify creation, imagination and knowledge. Finally when we reach the threshold of contemporary poetry we witness a strong trend towards the subjective. Many great novels of our century seem to dissolve into poetry — Proust's vast opus, Joyce's *Ulysses* and *Finnegan's Wake* among others. On the other hand poets such as Eliot, Lorca, and Paz



write long poems, almost as long as novels: "novel writers and poets seem to be at home today in what I have called the epic of subjectivity" (*Poesía y conocimiento*, p. 25). Yet subjectivity does not mean isolation. Kierkegaard has pointed out that "we must be objective with ourselves, subjective with others". If intersubjectivity is deep the poem will give us a deep knowledge of other people, of "otherness". Poetry can point towards the essential subjects, life, death, love, the sacred. Poetry unites us to other human beings by building a web of similarities and differences. Through poetry language is recreated time and time again. A poem is not made exclusively with emotions: poetry may start from an emotion but ultimately the poem becomes a structure, a construction. In modern poets such as Borges, Lezama Lima, and Paz, Xirau detects an effort, conscious at times, unconscious at other times, to convey to their readers a vision of the world that is, in each instance, highly structured. Nothing is left unconnected: this organic vision is coherent and solid, and although it has been created subjectively by each poet, the relationship of each element to the whole, and to the elements around it, is such that it points out to the organic and meaningful relationship which holds together the many parts which constitute the cosmos. By analogy and also as an allegory poetry shows us that the world is tightly organized and that such organization has a meaning.

The word "meaning" is, of course, related to communication. If something becomes meaningful to us it is because a message from "something" has reached us. Yet modern philosophy emphasizes the difficulty of communication. German philosophy perhaps does it, but certainly the German school is not the only one to underline our loneliness. Heidegger stresses time and time again the "distance" between man and man. In French philosophical context Sartre has emphasized the point that com-

munication is precarious, subject to misunderstandings, and, ultimately, communication does not exist. Hell is others, because they attack us, misunderstand us, and even when we think we love another human being we are deceiving ourselves and that other being: to love is, basically, only the project of being loved. This pessimistic approach is in itself a deep existential challenge. Can we be in search of the very being of others because we cannot find our own self? Is there any solution to the constant problems created by our passions, our sufferings, our narcissism and solipsism? Must we always manipulate other human beings, tyrannize them, use them for our own purposes. Yet there is still hope:

However, and in spite of what has been called the "opacity" of the others, there seems to be a real set of possibilities both for knowing his identity and for understanding his character. It is no doubt true that the child's first movement, as selfish as it might be, is a movement toward the other. A community of sorts is established since our very first days in this world. This community *can* be developed in the higher stage of our life. A real communion would then imply, beyond obstacles and opacities, a going beyond one's own self, and understanding (comprehending) of the other's self, and a sense of responsibility and faithfulness that involves the I, the Thou, and the We.

(Introd. to *The Nature of Man*, with Erich Fromm, N.Y., The Macmillan Co., 1968, 21)

Love is knowledge, but precisely because it is knowledge, it is also respect. We are only capable of knowledge and understanding and caring for the other if we are also capable of understanding, caring for, and knowing ourselves. The opacity of the other will become transparent if, and only if, we become transparent to ourselves. Many pessimistic philosophers have emphasized the precariousness, the non existence even, of communications between human beings. Sartre, for instance, denies that we really speak to each other. Heidegger underlines the "dis-



tance" that separates man and man. As in the case of the poetic message, this group of philosophers reaches such a negative conclusion because they conceive knowledge and communication along strictly intellectual lines. Such a limitation precludes our understanding of poetry and negates some of the deepest and most important qualities of human experience. "The problem of communication is not merely a social or a historical problem. As it is the case with our passions and our sufferings, the alternative to sheer solipsism, 'narcissism', and, morally speaking, selfishness, lies in the fact that men are in search of the very being of others" (*Ibid.*, 20).

Communication is possible. This does not imply, however, that it is easy. Writing poetry, really good poetry, is not easy either. Finding and understanding the message which a great poem may contain is also a demanding task — not an impossible one. There are many reasons why communication should be so difficult, and in some extreme cases impossible. Sometimes we tend to see abstractions everywhere, even in human beings. There may be instances when we try to use others for our own purpose. We become manipulative. Or else we want to tyrannize others, to rule them. Or we may be too dependent on others. Tyranny, both personal and social, and fear, are constant obstacles. Social, psychological, and economic factors are many times combined to make communication in depth an impossible attempt. People become secretive, they hide their innermost being, which has its negative and positive aspects: negative inasmuch as it is a way of hiding and becoming isolated; positive inasmuch as, in the other's eyes, an intimacy may be present that we should not try to disturb if the other is not going to be a mere duplicate of my own self but really somebody else whom I may know and respect.

All of which means that communication is possible, but

difficult and even precarious: we have to keep working at it in order to maintain and improve it. It depends on a series of circumstances, inside and outside ourselves, which may make it possible and fruitful at times, barren or impossible at other moments.

Communicating with others at a high level means integrating our thoughts and our feelings in those of others, to feel in harmony with ourselves and the world. Curiously enough, the same rhythm which pervades our individual lives when we try to communicate with our fellow human beings, a rhythm which brings us sometimes to feel the fulness of communication and communion while at other times plunges us into loneliness and depression, can also be found in the history of ideas, in the history of Western thought, more specifically in the history of Western philosophy. Such is the thesis which Ramon Xirau develops in one of his most successful books, *El desarrollo y las crisis de la filosofía occidental*. (We are aware that the date of publication of this book is 1975 and therefore it precedes the publication of *Poesía y conocimiento*, which appeared in 1978. Both books relate to a basic idea, the relationship between communication, meaning, integration, and harmony: both books may have been conceived and written at the same time, since they are often similar in conception and message. We have chosen to discuss *Poesía y conocimiento* first because it is in some ways an introduction to *El desarrollo y las crisis* since it deals with a similar idea in a more restricted environment.)

*El desarrollo y las crisis* is a rich and complex book. Its point of departure is an effort to understand the meaning and the origins of the modern crisis, or at least of the facets of this crisis that have to do with ideas and values. In order to see this crisis in its proper perspective Xirau goes back to other periods in the history of Western thought, both periods of harmony and

plenitude and periods of crisis and anguish. From the very beginning of the book Xirau anticipates some of the conclusions. Throughout the centuries, Xirau points out, the situations of crisis are moments or periods in which what should be merely a part of the whole picture seems to grow out of all proportion and finally occupies the whole stage: the part becomes the totality, what should be subordinated is transformed into an absolute. During a period of crisis we tend to attribute god-like characteristics to such elements as pleasure, intelligence, Progress, History, Man, which make sense only as pieces of a larger puzzle. During such times human beings become divided into two irreconcilable parts: love vs. reason, for instance, emotion vs. intellect. Man tends to become his own god and finally becomes his own idol.

There is a pattern of philosophical attitudes in Western thought that seems to reappear periodically. We find it first among the early Greek philosophers, and later during the Medieval period: it reappears also in our own times. If we manage to define and understand this pattern we will be able to explain much better the present crisis in our moral values.

At the beginning of each of the three periods above mentioned we find relatively free and open philosophical attitudes, views of the world that are creative, visionary, somewhat "unfinished", more valuable perhaps for what they suggest than for their definitions or their conclusions. The Pre-Socratic philosophers are typical of this period in Classical Greece. The Fathers of the Church writing before Saint Augustine represent a similar attitude at the threshold of the Medieval period. Modern times begin with the flowering of Renaissance thinkers and continue with the elaboration of systems of thought created along Rationalism lines by, among others, Descartes, Leibnitz, and Spinoza, and along empirical lines by Bacon, Locke, Berkeley, Hume.



Such initial periods are succeeded by periods in which a real effort at synthesis takes place. The goal is then to harmonize, to integrate, to build a global system in which much of what has been discovered or proposed by the previous period may find its place, without tensions or contradictions. Thus Plato harmonizes Logos, Eros, and Mythos; Aristotle harmonizes the many trends present in human behavior, such as habits, customs, friendship, and the sense of justice. Later on, in the Middle Ages, Saint Augustine harmonizes and combines love, faith, reason, and St. Thomas Aquinas combines faith, reason, habits and customs. In the modern era, the great effort at synthesis can be found in philosophers such as Kant, Fichte, and especially Hegel. Yet in every instance we can find a third period which follows the first and second periods just mentioned: it is a period of crisis. During such times the great syntheses of the past are sharply criticized, but what is essential is that they are replaced by systems of thought and values that are fragmented, and in which an element that should be related to the whole replaces it as the only reality worthy of attention. Among the ancient Greeks, for instance, the Epicureans affirm that pleasure (which is only one aspect of human nature) is really the essence and core of the human condition; stoics invent a closed system of ethics; sceptics exalt silence and lack of conclusions. Later, in Medieval times, nominalists also pursue limited solutions.

Needless to say, we live in an era in which atheism or indifference with religious thought and with attempts to reach a new synthesis. Atheism or indifference can be found in Marxism, in the Frankfurt School, in the Vienna Circle, in the philosophies of language, in the existentialism derived from Sartre and in Structuralism. Religious thought can be found in the works of Maurice Blondel, Jacques Maritain, Louis Lavelle, Xavier Zubiri, Joaquim Xirau, Nicholas Berdiaeff, Leon Chestov,

among others. We do not lack theologians, such as Karl Barth, Urs von Balthazar, Romano Guardini, Henri de Lubac. In *Cuatro filósofos y lo sagrado* (Mexico, Joaquín Mortiz, 1986) Ramon Xirau finds important sources of contemporary religious thought in four famous thinkers of our time: Teilhard de Chardin, Martin Heidegger, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Simone Weil. Xirau's analysis is here at its best and most original, especially when dealing with philosophers like Heidegger and Wittgenstein whose religious attitudes are often hidden and hard to decipher.

Teilhard de Chardin attempts to unite science and consciousness, reason and faith. Martin Heidegger thinks a knowledge of God is difficult but not impossible. Wittgenstein after losing his faith pursues the Unnamable, in a quasi-mystical attitude. Simone Weil attempts a fusion of Classical Greece and Christian beliefs.

*Cuatro filósofos...* should be read as an appendix or conclusion to *El desarrollo y las crisis...*, which provides a more general framework to the fusion of science and religion. In *El desarrollo*'s Introduction Xirau points out that unconsciously many contemporary philosophers would like to return to the great syntheses of the past, and yet such a return would be futile or impossible. We are capable, however, to aspire to the same lofty goals that moved the great philosophers of the past if we attempt once more to achieve the synthesis of Love and Reason, of Promise and Language, without renouncing our new body, the body of knowledge created in modern times by science and technology. Religion, art, philosophy, science, are facets of a man who has fully integrated his personality.

What follows the introduction of Xirau's book is a remarkable display of philosophical erudition. It is not a history of philosophy in the usual sense, although it could be read and used as such, since most of the great philosophers and their most



important works are discussed and analyzed. It is not a general law explaining the development of Western thought such as Vico's in *Nuova Scienza*. It is rather an original and thought-provoking interpretation of Western philosophy according to its periods of expansion, plenitude, and contraction. Each period, three times repeated, offers certain values, emphasizes certain attitudes and techniques of thought. They are not, however, all equally worthy of praise when it comes to judge their impact upon the healthy development of human beings. It is clear that Xirau prefers the periods of synthesis, and that the periods in which Western thought seems to make a fresh start, such as the Pre-Socratic school, the early Fathers of the Church, the Renaissance philosophers, offer more hope and more stimulation than the periods of crisis. Xirau believes that only the great models of the past can inspire us to work towards a new period of synthesis. Today's philosophical attitudes have become too fragmented and purely intellectual to be able to embrace and interpret some of deepest values and yearnings: hence philosophy has become a pastime for specialists which the average cultivated person finds uninteresting or even frankly irritating.

To sum up, in *El desarrollo y las crisis* both the possibility of philosophy as a synthesis and the necessity of working towards such a synthesis are strongly affirmed. Not satisfied, however, with pointing the way to other philosophers, Xirau has made a contribution towards this goal in a book that is perhaps his most technical and challenging text, *De ideas y no ideas*, published in 1974. In five essays Xirau deals with four traditional philosophical subjects, Truth, Beauty, Language, and Knowledge. "Truth and Beauty", Xirau writes, "knowledge and emotion, interpenetrate each other in such a fashion that, even analyzed separately, they turn out to be not only compatible but necessarily so" (7). The three essays in which Xirau analyzes how



and why Truth and Beauty are always intertwined are then followed by a section in which this interpretation is reinforced by a discussion of "innate ideas": Xirau describes in it forms of consciousness which are not necessarily intellectual, which are of "archetypal" origin, and even "aesthetical" inasmuch as they shape our relationship with the external world. Throughout these essays Xirau interprets and applies some of the most important findings of contemporary Anglo-Saxon philosophers such as Alfred North Whitehead, Nelson Goodman, Noam Chomsky. Wittgenstein, Descartes, Plato, are also present, implicitly or explicitly. Xirau's essays are too technical and too packed with original ideas and close interpretations to be easily described. Pascal's "*esprit de finesse*" and "*esprit de géométrie*" are both present in Xirau's pages. We can only state that they convey the hope that a philosophical synthesis is not impossible in our time since its seeds are ever present in the structure of the human mind, the human psyche.

Perhaps what is most appealing in Xirau's thought is its extraordinary cohesiveness. Aesthetics, ethics, and the theory of knowledge are articulated in such a way that they are shown to be inseparable. Each new book by Xirau underlines these connections and reinforces them in new ways. Time and time again Xirau advocates the need of a new philosophical synthesis which will show how and why ethical and aesthetic values cannot be separated from the life of the intellect, and how intelligence and belief are also intertwined. A close reading of his books indicates that it is precisely such a synthesis that he is attempting — indeed that it was such a synthesis that he had in mind all along from the very beginning of his career as a philosopher.

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