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Faust and the Cant Espiritual
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FAUST AND THE CANT ESPIRITUAL

MARIA GUITART RIBAS

Many things have been said and written about Joan Maragall's poem «Cant Espiritual.» Manuel de Montoliu, for example, has given the poem a Christian interpretation which is based on the doctrines of the Catholic Church. To him the poem is a hymn of thanksgiving to God «for all the great pleasures that the poet received from the divine beauty of the world».¹

Josep Romeu, on the other hand, believes the poem focuses on the conflict between the poet's personal feelings and his Catholic doctrine, and on Maragall's internal struggle and his crisis of faith.² In another approach, Carles Soldevila considers the poem a lament in the face of a reality which is incomprehensible to him, as well as a confession of the poet's weakness as he faces death.³

These and other different meanings which have been given to the poem miss an important interpretation which no one has presented for critical analysis: The «Cant Espiritual» is, above all, a rejection of the idea of life, and consequently of death, as expressed by Goethe in his masterpiece *Faust*.

It is well known that Maragall was in high admiration of the works and the philosophy of the great German author. The letters written by Maragall to his friend Joaquim Freixas, between 1881 and 1884, contain many references to the esteem in which Goethe was held by the Catalan poet. For example, he wrote:

¹ Montoliu, Manuel de, «El nostre Joan Maragall», *La Paraula Cristiana*, N. 37, Any IV, (1928), p. 27.

² Romeu Figueras, Josep, «El mito de "El conde Arnau" en la canción popular, la tradición legendaria y literaria» «De Juan Maragall a nuestros días», (Barcelona, Archivo de Etnografía y Folklore, 1948) p. 205.

³ Soldevila, Carles, «L'Epistolari de Maragall, dues il·lusions injustificades i una de justificada», *El Mirador*, gener 1930.

«Estoy leyendo el *Faust* de Goethe. Es inútil que intente pintarte mis impresiones. Goethe es mi poeta».⁴

(I am reading Goethe's *Faust*. There is no point in trying to describe to you my impressions. Goethe is my poet.)

In another letter, he commented:

Después de haber quedado encantado de algunos *Lieder* de Goethe, ahora leo su novela *Las afinidades electivas*. Es muy particular que todo lo de aquel genio me entusiasme, hasta las novelas, en las que, según Mme. Staël y otros literatos de renombre, no brilló en todo su esplendor el sol de Weimar.⁵

(After being thrilled by some of Goethe's *Lieder*, I am reading now his novel *Die Wahlverwandschaften*. My enthusiasm for everything written by that genius is peculiar. I am thrilled even by his novels, in which, according to Mme. Staël and other well known scholars, the sun of Weimar did not shine with all its splendor.)

Maragall's admiration for Goethe became almost an obsession. He wrote in another letter to Joaquim Freixas:

«He desistido de leer las tragedias de Shakespeare; pero me vuelvo a entregar en cuerpo y alma al *Werther*. He formado el propósito de leer eternamente esta obra...»⁶

(I have given up reading Shakespeare's tragedies; but I have returned with body and soul to *Werther*. My resolution is to read this work forever...)

The admiration for his literary idol, which could be illustrated by scores of other examples, reflects Maragall's attitude toward the works of Goethe. Nevertheless, when the major works of

⁴ Maragall, Joan, Carta a Joaquim Freixas, Barcelona 3 agosto 1884.

⁵ Ibid., 15 julio 1881.

⁶ Ibid., 8 julio 1881.

these two writers, Maragall's «Cant Espiritual» and Goethe's *Faust*, are compared, the theme of the «Cant Espiritual» clearly moves away from that of its model and takes a position which is definitely contrary to *Faust's* spirit.

In this article, a comparison of the two works will be made based on the following three points: the authors' vision of the world; their attitude toward life and the desire to live; and their hope that the world shall remain the same after death.

THE AUTHORS' VISION OF THE WORLD

Maragall says in the «Cant Espiritual»:

Si el món és ja tan formós, Senyor, si es mira
amb la pau vostra dintre de l'ull nostre,
què més ens podeu dà en una altra vida?

(If the world is already so beautiful, Lord, if we see it with your peace in our eye, what else can you give us in another life?)

Maragall loves the world in which he lives. Everything in it is an image of the God who created him. Physical beauty is obvious everywhere. The blue skies, the mountains, the sea, the whole universe speak of the greatness of their Creator. What else can He give to mankind in another world?

The poem continues:

Més enllà veig el cel i les estrelles,
i encara allí voldria ésser-hi hom:
si heu fet les coses a mos ulls tan belles,
per què acluca'ls cercant un altre com?

(I see far away the sky and the stars, and I would like to be there: If you have made things so beautiful to my eyes, why close them looking for another where?)

These lines are a tribute to the world, to its beauty, and to Maragall's love of everything that surrounds him. They are a love song in praise of the physical reality which was present at his birth, which continued during his adolescence and which still gives him enjoyment in his maturity. There is not a word of contempt for, nor a rejection of, life in these lines.

Faust, on the contrary, sees the world with different eyes. He says: ⁷

Dafür ist mir auch alle Freud entrißen.

(but, in return, all joy has been torn from me.)

He continues:

O glücklich, wer noch hoffen kann,
Aus diesen Meer des Irrtums aufzutauchen.

(Oh, happy the man with any hope of rising out of error's ocean.)

For Faust the world is nothing but an ocean of deception and lies, where there is no hope. Faust is a desperate man, tired of everything. He has lost joy and happiness.

Faust curses:

Fluch sei der Hoffnung! Fluch dem Glauben!

(Accursed be hope and faith!)

These strong words prompted Benno von Wiese to comment:

⁷ For Goethe's works we shall use the edition *Goethes sämtliche Werke*, Jubiläumsd Ausgabe, hrg. von Eduard von der Hellen, mit Einleitung und Anmerkungen von Erich Schmidt, (Stuttgart und Berlin: 1940). For Goethe's English version we shall use: Mac Intyre, Carlyle F., *Goethe's Faust*, a new American translation. (Norfolk-Connecticut: New Directions, 1941).

«Hier spricht nicht mehr der seiner Gottessuche und Gottesunruhe gewisse Faust, (...) sondern hier spricht nur noch der vom Dasein tief enttäuschte Mensch».⁸

(The Faust who speaks here is not the one conscious of his search for God and of his anxiety to find Him, here speaks only the man deeply deceived of his own existence.)

This comparison of the two authors' visions of the world clearly demonstrates that their visions are diametrically opposed. One portrays love for the world, the other hate for it; one extols the world's beauty, the other laments its confusion and nihilism; one sees a world of hope, whereas the other finds an ocean of despair.

THE AUTHOR'S ATTITUDE TOWARD LIFE AND THE DESIRE TO LIVE

In the «Cant Espiritual», Maragall says:

Per'xò estic tan gelós dels ulls, i el rostre
i el cos que m'heu donat, Senyor, i el cor
que s'hi mou sempre... i temo tant la mort.

...

(...) jo, que voldria
aturar tants moments de cada dia
per fè'ls eterns a dintre del meu cor.

(That is why I am so jealous of the eyes, the face and the body that You gave me, Lord, and of the heart that is constantly beating... and I fear death so much.) ... ([...] I, who would like to stop so many moments of each day to perpetuate them in my heart.)

⁸ Wiese, Benno von: *Die Deutsche Tragödie von Lessing bis Hebbel*, Tragödie und Mysterienspiel, (Hamburg: Hoffman und Campe Verlag, 1967) viertes Kapitel, p. 138.

Maragall is expressing a desire to live. He wants to savor each moment of the day and perpetuate it. For him, life is a gift that he is afraid to lose with death. In his anxiety, the poet searches for God and finds Him where he is, that is, in the world. Manuel de Montoliu points this out:

(...) Perquè la inquietud religiosa d'en Maragall és la de tenir d'anar a Déu deixant aquest «món tan formós» on Déu també li és present.⁹

(Thus Maragall's religious anxiety is to have to go to God leaving this «world, as beautiful as it is» where God is also present to him.)

For Maragall the world, the earth on which he lives, is already like a paradise that cannot be improved. For that reason, he clings to life with joy. Everything in it is positive. He loves everything in the world and, therefore, he does not want to leave it.

Faust's words on life and his desire to live are completely different:

Auch hab' ich weder Gut noch Geld,
Noch Ehr und Herrlichkeit der Welt;
Es möchte kein Hund so länger leben.

(...I haven't any property, I haven't got money, promotions, or the glories of this earth — not even a dog would fancy my berth.)

Faust compares his life with that of a dog. Worse, he believes that even a dog would not want to live like he does. He wants to finish his miserable life; he desires to die. He is a desperate man for whom life has no meaning at all.

Faust continues:

In jedem Kleid werde ich wohl die Pein
Des engen Erdelebens fühlen.
Ich bin zu alt, um nur zu spielen,

⁹ Montoliu, Manuel de, *Ibid.*, p. 25

Zu jung, um ohne Wunsch zu sein.
Was kann die Welt mir wohl gewähren?

(Whatever the clothes, I still would feel the pain of this earth's narrow life. I am too old for play, too young to live without desire. What more can the world allow me?)

Life has become a prison for Faust, a prison from which he cannot escape. If the world cannot give him anything, why should he continue to live? Faust is a defeated man, worn out, without any hope of illusion, without love. He is also a man deceived by the world and by everything that surrounds him. It is with this attitude that he concludes:

Und so ist mir das Dasein eine Last,
der Tod erwünscht, das Leben nur verhaßt.

(And so, existence is a burden, death wished for, and life hated.)

Only death can free Faust from the burden of a life which has become unbearable for him. Faust has made it clear that life offers him nothing.

THE AUTHORS' HOPE THAT THIS WORLD SHALL REMAIN THE SAME AFTER DEATH

In his «Cant Espiritual», Maragall poses a question:

Tant se val. Aquest món, sia com sia,
tan divers, tan extens, tan temporal;
aquesta terra, amb tot lo que s'hi cria,
és ma pàtria, Senyor; i no podria
ésser també una pàtria celestial?

(It does not matter. This world, as it may be, so diverse, so broad, so temporal; this world, with all that grows on it, is my homeland, Lord; and could it not also be a heavenly homeland?)

Maragall's words of supplication to God reveal a man who cannot think of an existence which could be better than the one which he is now living. As Manuel de Montoliu notes:

Maragall es prosterna allà amb el cor vessant de reconeixença, i tota la primera part és una ardent pregària de gràcies a la Divinitat. Ell, tan sensible, ho era sobretot per reconèixer la gran mercè que Déu ens fa de la vida.¹⁰

(Maragall goes on his knees with his heart full of thanks. The entire first part is an ardent thanksgiving prayer to the Divinity. His fine sensitivity led him to recognize the great gift of life that God has given us.)

It is in fact the expression of a faith that wants to unite the eternal and worldly life in this world, so dear to him.

Faust, in comparison, proclaims:

Das Drüben kann mich wenig kümmern;
Schlägst du erst diese Welt zu Trümmern,
Die andre mag darnach entstehn.

(What lies beyond doesn't worry me. Suppose you break this world to bits, another may then arise.)

Faust cannot hide his hate for this world and for all that it represents. If Maragall turns to God and begs him to make this world into the promised paradise, Faust turns to Mephistopheles and begs him to free him from this world and to annihilate it.

Maragall and Faust have diametrically opposed concepts of life. The problem posed by this opposition is whether or not Maragall, who almost worshipped Goethe, used his poem «Cant Espiritual» to challenge the master's beliefs as expressed in great

¹⁰ Montoliu, Manuel de, *Ibid.*, p. 27.

masterpiece *Faust*. Josep M. Solà-Solé believes that this interpretation is correct.¹¹

In the «Cant Espiritual» Maragall presents himself in clear opposition to Goethe.

The most solid proof of Maragall's purpose, according to Solà-Solé, is found in the passage of the «Cant Espiritual» which begins:

Aquell que a cap moment li digué «Atura't»
sinó al mateix que li dugué la mort,
jo no l'entenc, Senyor;

(The one who at any moment asked him «To stop» but to the same who brought him death, I do not understand him, Lord;)

Who is «the one who at any moment asked him "to stop"»? Solà-Solé answers that question by turning to *Faust*. When Faust is ready to close his pact with Mephistopheles, he addresses his partner:

Topp. Und Schlag auf Schlag!

(Shake on it! Shake again!)¹²

¹¹ Professor Josep M. Solà-Solé has expressed this opinion in some of his lectures on Catalan Literature given at the University of Tübingen, Germany, and at The Catholic University of America.

I wish to thank Dr. Solà-Solé for allowing me to take into consideration his interpretation of Joan Maragall's «Cant Espiritual». His interpretation sheds considerable light upon one of the most interesting poems of contemporary literature.

¹² Grimm, Jacob und Wilhelm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch* (Leipzig: Verlag von S. Hirzel, 1935), vol. 11, p. 866. (Topp. is an expression that already appears in the 16th. century. It is connected with gambling and means something like «I agree». The expression was accompanied by tapping with the hands on the table or on the hand of the opponent. It wasd and it still is an onomatopeia of the osund of hands when tapping. With the passing of the centuries the word passed through different forms, but always related with the fact of closing a pact. In Goethe's times the expression already belonged to the colloquial language.)

Faust continue:

Dann magst du mich in Fesseln schlagen,
Dann will ich gern zugrunde gehn,

(You may throw me in chains: I'd want to die.)

Faust's conversation with Mephistopheles clearly indicates that all he wants is to die, to be destroyed. Life has no sense for him. He only wants to be free from the ties of this world; therefore, whatever happens to him after death is not important to him. In that same vein, he continues:

Dann mag die Totenglocke schallen,
Dann bist du deines Dienstes frei,

(Let the death-bells toll,
any you'll be free.)

Once he is dead, Mephistopheles will no longer have to provide Faust any services. What services? The service of insuring his death, of helping him to disappear from this world which is nothing but a prison to him.

Nevertheless, like every mortal human being, at the very moment of his death, when he faces the ultimate reality, he betrays himself, becomes afraid and asks Mephistopheles not to go on but to let him live. From that moment, the end of Faust is inevitable. At this point, the passage finishes with these significant words:

Die Uhr mag stehn, der Zeiger fallen,
Es sei die Zeit für mich vorbei

(The clock may stop, the hands drop down,
and time come to an end, for all of me.)

The key words — «May the clock stop» — of Maragall's poem

can now be seen in their proper context, the conversation between Faust and Mephistopheles.

Faust made a pact with Mephistopheles and knows that he has to die. He also wants to die. That is why Faust does not say «stop» at «any moment». He does not ask for the time to stop so that he might enjoy the happiness of this world. Faust does not want a single instant of his life to be extended. All of his moments are nothing but a source of anguish and desperation. During his whole life he never found «any moment» worth perpetuating. Faust is the one who has tired of this life and wants to die in order to end his tormented existence. Faust is the one who does not want the clock to stop. More emphatically, he does not want to stop «any moment» of his life to live it again.

Unquestionably, in this passage of the «Cant Espiritual» Maragall is pointing to Faust and confessing that he does not understand him. He does not understand how Faust could always have wanted to die. He does not understand that there might not be «any moment» of his life in which he would have liked to stop the clock so as not to lose the happiness of that moment. Maragall, on the contrary, would like to live forever every moment of his life. He tells us so in the «Cant Espiritual»:

...jo que voldria
aturar tants moments de cada dia
per fè'ls eterns a dintre del meu cor

(I myself, who would like to stop so many moments of each day to live them forever in my heart.)

Maragall's family belonged to the Catalan upper-middle class. His socio-economic background placed him in an environment where there were no economic hardships. He attended respected schools. He became a lawyer and was a husband and father of eleven. He enjoyed life and everything that surrounded him. This hedonistic aspect of his personality explains his joy in

life in this world. Maragall liked to live and had deep roots in this world. The idea of death was something that bothered Maragall. To him, death meant leaving all the things which he enjoyed to go to an unknown world. Faust's attitude could not be more distant from Maragall's way of thinking and, above all, from his feelings.

In the «Cant Espiritual», Maragall expresses his bewilderment at death.

Tan se val! Aquest món, sia com sia,
tan divers, tan extens, tan temporal;
aquesta terra, amb tot lo que s'hi cria,
és ma pàtria, Senyor; i no podria
ésser també una pàtria celestial?

...
si heu fet les coses a mos ulls tan belles,
si heu fet mos ulls i mos sentits per elles,
per què acluca'ls cercant un altre com?
si per mi com aquest no n'hi haurà cap.

(It does not matter. This world, as it is, so divers, so broad, so temporal; this earth, with everything that grows on it, is my homeland, Lord; and could it not also be a heavenly homeland? ... if you made things so beautiful to my eyes, if you made my eyes and my senses for them, why close them in search of another where? for me there is not going to be another one like this one.)

Maragall was in complete disagreement with Faust over the desire to live, love for the world and hope that this world would still be the same after death. For Maragall, the «Cant Espiritual» was a good way to express, shortly before his death, his rejection of *Faust*, not as a literary work but as a statement of Goethe's negative attitude toward life.

In spite of Maragall's admiration for Goethe, at the end of his life, the poet clearly defines his philosophy, which is so contrary to that of his mentor, and he openly opposes the idea of life, of the world, and of death as expressed by Goethe in *Faust*.

One further point in this comparison, however, deserves further examination. As is well-established, Maragall was very familiar with German literature, but it is not clear how well he knew the German language. Through this author's research, it appears that Maragall approached Goethe, not through his works in German, but through translations into other languages, most probably into French. The effect of the use of translations on Maragall's understanding of Goethe will be the subject of another article.

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