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Joan Maragall, at the Edge of Modernity **Geoffrey Ribbans**

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JOAN MARAGALL,
AT THE EDGE OF MODERNITY
(IN MEMORY OF ARTHUR TERRY)

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ABSTRACT

In a tribute to the renowned scholar of Catalan literature, Arthur Terry, this paper offers a reassessment of certain aspects of the poet Joan Maragall. Maragall gives the appearance in his private and public life of being a typically patriarchal figure of the Barcelona bourgeoisie of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The impression is borne out in his article on "the Spanish woman" published in 1909 in *The Englishwoman*, in which, in a manner most conventional, the poet limits women's activity to the home and the church. Yet Maragall also reveals less conventional concerns that may be more properly considered as modern. Showing an unusual awareness of the complex nature of the violence that plagued Barcelona, he advocates—in both verse and prose—compassion rather than revenge. He also reaches out to Castilian writers like Unamuno and Giner de los Ríos. In his poetry, he seeks a distinctive spontaneity redolent of the more concentrated aspects of German romanticism and parallel in many ways to symbolism. At the same time he expresses an intense sense of temporality that leads him in his "Cant espiritual" to reconsider Faust's pact with Mephistopheles.

Let me start by paying a tribute to the memory of a great and dedicated scholar, Arthur Terry (1927-2004). His death on 24 January 2004, is a grievous loss to the study of Catalan literature, as well as, it should be added, to Hispanic Studies in general and to Comparative Literature. Permit me, "a fuer de viejo," to reminisce a little. I met Arthur in 1950 in Barcelona, where he was the recipient of one of those unofficial scholarships awarded to young British scholars by that great patron of Catalan culture in England, where he acted as a sort of honorary consul for Catalonia, Josep Maria Batista i Roca. The next year Arthur and I were colleagues at Queen's University, Belfast, under Professor Ignasi González-Llubera. Subsequently, Terry was himself Professor at Queen's and he later served as Professor of Literature—not separated, to his great satisfaction, into areas on the basis of language or geography—at the University of Essex. In his whole career he was revered as a brilliant and considerate teacher who has left his mark on all those privileged to study under him.

At Belfast we became close friends and shared digs together. I was best man at his wedding. Naturally, we discussed Catalan literature frequently, as Arthur acquired his vast expertise over the whole range of writing in Catalan. Apart from his excellent *History of Catalan Literature*, which has had such success both in the UK and in its Spanish version in the peninsula, I find his work on Ausiàs March particularly illuminating and his numerous translations from all periods of Catalan poetry quite outstanding in their poetic quality; I would specially single out his versions of March, "Pere Quart" and Gabriel Ferrater. The poetry of Joan Maragall figured prominently in these conversations of ours, although his knowledge of the poet went far beyond mine. In this context therefore it is fitting for me to throw off a few modest thoughts, offered with few scholarly pretensions, on a poet we have both esteemed so highly. Terry's book, *La poesia de Joan Maragall*, published in 1963, is a *tour de force*. I reviewed it at the time and called it "the first thorough examination and truly critical assessment of his poetry," a study in which "every aspect of Maragall's poetry is treated sensitively and methodically; at no point does Terry fail to deal with his themes from the proper starting point, the poem itself" (129). When the book was reprinted a couple of years ago, such distinguished scholars as Enric Bou and Jordi Larios, in reviews of their own, expressed their admiration that after some forty years Terry's judgments remained so fresh and so valid. This is only a small measure of the loss friends and scholars alike have suffered by his passing.

At first sight, Joan Maragall is hardly modern at all. A patriarchal figure, typical of the cultured bourgeoisie of Barcelona, a pillar of the Ateneu and the *Brusi* (or *Diario de Barcelona*), conservative by inclination and deeply Catholic, and a prolific author in a distinctly unmodern genre: his innumerable *Vides de sants*. Father of thirteen children, inordinately proud of his new house in Sant Gervasi, Maragall can easily be viewed as all too self-satisfied about the urban world around him. There is an all but unknown essay of his published in English in the suffragette review, *The Englishwoman*, in May 1909.¹ It appeared thanks to the good offices of Royall Tyler, a good friend of Maragall's and of Unamuno's² and —as an intimate friend of the editor Elisina Grant Richard— a frequent contributor to the magazine. The essay, entitled "The Spanish Woman," is given as an appendix to this article.

1. The essay was published, as the editor notes, by the "generous courtesy of Don Juan Maragall" (342). I do not know whether the Spanish original stills exists.

2. Unamuno contributed a lengthy study entitled "The Spirit of Spain", in four parts, to two successive issues of the review, Nos 10 o 11 (November and December 1909); it was reprinted, with a commentary, in my "Unamuno in England".

The piece must have disconcerted the intelligent and emancipated women who produced *The Englishwoman*. Maragall is so convinced of the paramount role of the family in Spain, undoubtedly reflecting his very happy personal experience, that it dominates all other considerations. Thus he declares with evident satisfaction that Feminism, "the desire for personal independence, the wish to exercise a direct influence upon public affairs... is practically unknown in Spain," (375). While he admits in passing that women in large cities like Madrid, Barcelona or Bilbao "live a life more closely resembling that of Northern European capitals" (374), and while he mentions Concepción Arenal and Emilia Pardo Bazán as "isolated instances of such aspirations," he insists "that, as a collective phenomenon affecting the social atmosphere, Feminism is unknown in Spain" (375). He does not stint praise, of a sort, for women as "thriftier, more trustworthy, more intelligent than our men," even claiming "that in Spain women as women are worth more than men," at the same time as he judges them far superior to women in other countries. Yet he goes on: "I do not credit [the Spanish woman] with the *ability to carry out, or even to imagine*, a scheme of life independent of the family. Marriage is *her accepted fate*, and if she misses it *she makes shift to bind herself to a family as best she may*." He stresses that her role in all social classes is that of a "confidant and helper" of men, with an "active share by assuming tasks which *lie within her powers*" (376; my emphases). The satisfaction that Maragall finds in the subordinate status of women in these condescending remarks is quite evident. He deplores any rupture with this pattern: "The feminine social unit that has broken loose and drifts is with us a rare and unhappy thing" (376). Moreover, he is proud of what he conceives as Catalonia's special place in this scheme of things. Noting the slightly greater legal protection afforded women in the Castilian *Fuero Juzgo*, he asserts that Catalan customary practice has provided ample compensation. Similarly, he deems Eduardo Dato's law of 1900 to provide meager support to women workers who became pregnant — "Socialist legislation," he calls it— and to be superfluous in view of the Catalan "deference" and "respect" for women and motherhood. Finally, Maragall turns to the other of his social imperatives: religion. He concludes, as a fully acceptable fact of life, that "Spanish women, socially, have nothing before them but the family or the convent" (378) and applauds the proliferation of the latter. In short, he declares, "in Spain, woman finds nothing beyond the family but religion" (379).

Such a limited, complacent and in many respects bleak view of woman's place in society comprises, however, only part of Maragall's position. For there are distinct signs of more modern and flexible attitudes regarding both social issues and literature. Despite his affinity

to, and admiration for, conservative politician Enric Prat de la Riba and bishop Torras i Bages, Maragall did not allow himself to be dominated ideologically by them; his political aim of *solidaritat* went beyond the promising if ultimately unsuccessful movement of that name (1905-08) to encompass a concept of *solidaritat* in a broader sense, demonstrated clearly in his enlightened attitude towards the massive disturbances of the so-called *Setmana Tràgica* in 1909, as such outstanding calls for tolerance and shared responsibility as "La iglesia cremada" and "La ciutat del perdó" testify. Equally noteworthy is his friendship, without in the least sacrificing his own opinions, with non-Catalan figures as diverse as Unamuno³ and, through Josep Pijoan, Francisco Giner de los Ríos.⁴ Maragall's essays as a refreshingly open journalist in Castilian are exemplary, and his work as a translator invaluable. But I want to limit my remarks to a few aspects of his poetry, where these features and others take on a more subtle and complex form. Let us take, first, his extraordinary poem "Paternal":

Tornant del Liceu en la nit del 7 de novembre de 1893

Furiat va esclatant l'odi per la terra,
regalen sang les colltorçades testes,
i cal anà a les festes
amb pit ben esforçat, com a la guerra.

A cada esclat mortal —la gent trèmola es gira:
la crudeltat que avança— la por que s'enretira,
se van partint el món...
Mirant el fill que mama —a la mare que sospira,
el pare arruga el front.

Prô l'infant innocent,
que deixa, satisfet, la buidada mamella,
se mira an ell, —se mira an ella,
i riu bàrbarament. (I, 47-48)

The deadly bomb attack in the Liceu by the Anarchist Santiago Salvador on the date given in the heading to the poem was hardly calculated to produce a humanitarian response from the self-satisfied bourgeoisie who attended the function; indeed, the response of the

3. Their correspondence is justly renowned for its remarkably frank and revealing qualities.

4. Pijoan was the first secretary of the Institut d'Estudis Catalans and an unconditional admirer of both Maragall and Giner, as his curiously parallel portraits *Mi Don Francisco Giner de los Ríos, 1906-1910* (1927) and *El meu Don Joan Maragall* (1927) testify. See my "Diálogo entre dos españoles".

authorities was swift and brutal. Although the conventional family structure so extolled in "The Spanish Woman" is clearly present in the references to "el pare [que] arruga el front," as he contemplates "el fill que mama" and "la mare que sospira," Maragall's immediate reaction is, rather exceptionally, to see both sides: "la crudeltat" and "la por" which divide the world, before he passes to the baby at his mother's breast, and concludes the poem with that highly significant word, "bàrbarament." As Arthur Terry has indicated (*A Literary History* 88), the contrast between civil strife and domestic peace is deceptive. All human beings, however "innocent," have, in theory, the same potential for extreme reactions, for some touch of barbarity—or so believed Maragall, who remained interested throughout his life in the complex interrelationship of good and evil, evinced with particular force in the disturbed, restless and dynamic Barcelona of the *Setmana Tràgica* in the "Oda a Barcelona" (also from 1909). This sense of conflict is especially apparent in the marginalized or dissident human beings on whom Maragall focuses in many of his works: "El mal caçador," Joan Serrallonga, Fra Garí, and, of course, "El comte Arnau," in which the ultra-Christian and at the same time universal themes of pity, contrition, and redemption are imaginatively played out in the successive stages of the poem. The same quality of compassion comes into play in "Oda a Espanya" (1898) and "el Cant del retorn" (1899) (from "Els tres cants de la guerra"), here for the pathetic figures of the defeated soldiers returning from Cuba and for the modicum of hope he offers for a non-imperialist new start.

In more intrinsically poetic matters, too, Maragall displays an original and independent attitude, which leads towards more modern as well as more universal concerns. Important in his formation is his exceptional knowledge and appreciation of German literature, which affords him a more distinctively internalized approach to poetry, especially through Goethe and early German romantics like Novalis, than the formalized structure he associated with French literature. In its emotional concentration, such poetry has much in common with Bécquer's, likewise influenced by the German lyric. What therefore might be seen as something of an anachronism by the late nineteenth century actually becomes a look towards the purifying aesthetics of the future. Along with this introspective Romantic inspiration is Maragall's fascination with the more modern figure of Nietzsche, through which the Catalan poet introduces the note of restless vitality that is destructive of any tendency to intellectual, as opposed to domestic, complacency.

Such diverse influences lead Maragall to focus, in a non-dogmatic way, on an inherent problem of approach towards poetic expression: the two impulses, to some extent contradictory but potentially

complementary, that Antonio Machado calls *esencialidad* and *temporalidad* (713). The first, *esencialidad*, may be equated with a central Symbolist motif, that of reducing the poem to the core of emotion by eliminating its circumstances and of fixing in permanent form this intense moment of experience. Now, Maragall had no direct acquaintance with French symbolism, except perhaps with Verlaine, but he does intuitively rather than intellectually, tackle some of its concerns.⁵ One example, in "L'elogi de la paraula," (1905) is the reduction — a bit naïve, to be sure — of poetic expression to its bare nucleus. What in effect "la paraula viva" does is to pare down experience to intense single words — "aquella canal," "lis esteles," "Mira" — without however considering for a moment (and this is its positive side) cutting out, in Symbolist fashion, the circumstances that give rise to them. Indeed, the concrete emotion is enhanced by the power of concentration. What is in Mallarmé an intellectualized curtailing and displacement of experience is in Maragall, on the contrary, an opening out from a joyfully celebrated incident. To give just one example, in "Ell parla," within "Les minves del gener," the sight of the first swallow in Spring wipes out all the personal discontent accumulated during the winter.

Music is a common inspiration to both Mallarmé and Maragall, but to the Catalan poet, rather than being a substitute or symbol, it constitutes a stimulus towards a recaptured and purified memory — "Has tornat a ensenyar-me la puresa," he declares on listening to a child prodigy playing Beethoven ("Havent sentit Beethoven," 164). And, as Terry points out, (*La poesia* 215) he uses such typical Symbolist images as the tree as natural organic growth and, more especially, the dance. In the dance, as he indicates in the short "Elogio de la danza" (c. 1909), "encontramos el principio y el fin de todas las artes" (III, 160). Dance corresponds to the urge to be at once body and soul; form and content. In W. B. Yeats's felicitous expression, the dancer is "self-begotten" (192-94). It is thus not surprising that Haidé, in the poem that bears her name, should also be enthusiastic about dancing, since she is the clearest example of a self-sufficient and self-justifying synthesis of form and content, her human beauty being a reflection of an absolute divine beauty: "Ella és la santa d'ella perquè és bella, / i Déu li ha fet la gràcia de llençar llum entorn; / ella és el sol del seu propi jorn / i de sa nit l'estrella" (I, 113).

Maragall's second source of inspiration bears an affinity to an aspect of Machado's *temporalidad*: a dynamic urge for continuous movement. Indeed, Maragall progresses from his first collection,

5. For a wider discussion see my "La poesia de Maragall and "Maragall i les teories estètiques".

Poesies (1895), forwards and upwards from "L'oda infinita" of the "Pròleg" to the "Excelsior" of the "Epíleg": "Fora terres, fora platja, / oblida't de tot regrés: / no s'acaba el teu viatge, / no s'acabarà mai més..." (I, 64). It is no surprise that a later collection should be entitled *Enllà*. These two forces, stasis and movement, come into interplay in some of the complex arguments teased out in his "Cant espiritual." On the one hand, the intense attachment to life on earth produces a semi-symbolist desire to preserve forever each and every moment of ecstasy. This in turn brings to mind the Faustian pact with Mephistopheles in Goethe's masterpiece, whereby the moment when Faust is completely satisfied with life —the negation, in other words, of the impulse forwards— will be the moment in which he dies:

Aquell que a cap moment li digué "—Atura't"
sinó al mateix que li dugué la mort,
jo no l'entenc, Senyor; jo, que voldria
aturar tants moments de cada dia
per fè'ls eterns a dintre del meu cor!...
O és que aquest "fè etern" és ja la mort? (I, 176)⁶

As Terry points out, on other occasions Maragall cites Faust to take the opposite view: "Mentre vivim, mai hem de donar la vida per resolta; hem d'ésser Faust per no dir a l'instant *atura't*, fins que aquest instant sia el de la mort" (*La poesia* 179). The two impulses —enjoyment of the moment, continuous striving— exist in constant struggle, as indeed they did for Faust.

These reflections lead the poet into a necessarily inconclusive discussion —full, certainly, of a Bakhtinian-like tension— about whether such a complete absorption in the present would not imply, through its lack of temporality, a predestined determinism: "ja tot ho és tot." Then he comes back to the contrary imperative for the need for continuity, one that will endure beyond death, and exemplified in another context by the highwayman Serrallonga's final defiant clinging, before his execution, to the words of the Credo, "'Crec en la resurrecció de la carn'" (I, 85). From the very beginning of "El cant espiritual," in accordance with this drive forward, the poet has proclaimed his deep anxiety about prolonging indefinitely his earthly existence just as it is, with only God's "la eterna pau" added; when he returns to the theme at the end of the poem he equates God, in Spinozian fashion, with His creation, and desires finally that life after death be simply a perfected existence on earth: "Sia'm la mort una

6. These lines reflect quite closely Faust's famous declaration: "Werd ich um Augenblicke sagen: / Verweile doch! du bist so schön / Dann magst du mich in Fesseln schlagen, / Dann will ich gern zugrunde gehn!" (1, 52).

major naixença!" (I, 177). Thus the constant renewal of life would not, in aspiration at least, impede the intense enjoyment of each of the special moments life offers.

These are —to conclude— just a few summary indications of the degree to which Maragall's poetry, from his materially solid yet intellectually restless roots in finisecular Barcelona, retains a vitality and a validity that is both modern and universal. They may also justify why I ventured, in a paper given at Harvard a few years ago, to offer a provocative and enigmatic title: "El mejor poeta de España del año 1900."⁷ No marks for guessing who it is.

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7. I have distinguished company in this opinion; see Dámaso Alonso: "Maragall, que en 1900 era el mayor poeta español, de los que habíamos de sentir nosotros, es decir, modernos, es decir, actuantes sobre nuestra vida" (133).

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