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J. V. FOIX: AN INTRODUCTION

JAUME FERRAN - JOSEP ROCA-PONS

It is a great source of pleasure for us to devote this first issue of our Journal to the greatest living poet in Catalonia, a man who is, without a doubt, the most original and stimulating poet in all modern Catalan literature as well. Our paying this homage to him should hardly come as a surprise, as this is only one among the many honors conferred upon Foix in recent years. Belated as these may be, however, the generally felt affection, recognition and admiration for the illustrious author of *Sol, i de dol* (Alone and in Mourning) and so many other remarkable works has at long last been made explicit.

J. V. Foix was born in Sarrià — at the time a small town “separated from Barcelona by fields, vineyards, orchards, and private gardens” but part of it now — in 1893. He has spent most of his life there. After attending Salvador Mundi’s elementary school and some courses in the neighboring district of Gràcia, he began and soon abandoned the study of Law. He subsequently worked at a printing press and later in his family business, an old and renowned pastry shop. For many years now Foix has also been spending long summers at El Port de la Selva, the atmosphere and landscape of which have greatly influenced his work.

This is obviously not the place for a detailed analysis of Foix’s literary merits. This has already been done by numerous outstanding literary critics, a sample of which is provided in this first issue of CATALAN REVIEW.

We should like to underscore, however, some characteristic features of the great poet’s personality, first and foremost

among which is his deep moral sensitivity. His is without a doubt an exemplary life. To this should be added his unshakable commitment to the Catalan cause. His loyalty to both the language and Catalan culture have been robust and admirable throughout, as have his concern with, and involvement in, the upheavals of Catalan political life. At the risk of redundancy, we cannot fail to mention also his overall intellectual stature, as evident in his literary and critical work as in his always stimulating personal contact.

Foix's active participation in diverse Catalan periodicals is noteworthy. He was the long-time chief editor of the literary section of the Catalan newspaper *La Publicitat*, where, under the pseudonym "Focius", he brought the ordinary reader up-to-date on recent cultural events. Likewise, he co-edited, with his illustrious friend from Sitges, Josep Carbonell, the magazine *El Monitor de les Arts i de les Lletres* (1921-1923); he collaborated in other such literary magazines as *L'Amic de les Arts* (1926-1928), which appeared in Sitges, *La Revista* (1915-1936), founded and edited by Josep M. López-Picó, *Revista de Poesia* (1925-1927), edited by Marià Manent, *Trossos* (1917-1918), *La Cònsola* (1919-1920), published in Sarrià, etc. In 1934 Foix directed *Revista de Catalunya*. Foix has also unquestionably been a great theoretician of the avant-garde in Catalonia, in close contact with renowned artists such as Dalí, Miró, Tàpies, Ponç, et al., with some of whom he actually collaborated. In a related vein, Foix was elected a member of the Secció Filològica of the Institut d'Estudis Catalans many years ago on account of his deep linguistic intuition and broad knowledge of Catalan.

Although he likes to call himself a "researcher in poetry" few would hesitate, in view of his poetry and prose, to consider Foix an extraordinary poet in the broad sense of the term. He is a worthy successor to Ramon Llull and Ausiàs March, both of

whom he knows well. It has often been pointed out that Foix's poetry reveals a harmonious synthesis between the formal properties of the mediaeval classics — especially those just mentioned — and his own avant-garde style, characterized by an always dazzling imagination, often related to dreams. Also frequently pointed out is his extraordinary lexical wealth and his preference for archaic or dialectal words, often peculiarly monosyllabic, issuing in both a more genuinely Catalan effect than ordinary speech and an enormous poetic force. Possibly difficult to understand at first, Foix's poetry achieves incomparable beauty. His is a remarkable metaphysical sensitivity, which manifests itself, for example, in some of the transcendental opposites with which he is concerned, such as Reason and Folly, Reason and Emotion, Old and New, Moment and Eternity, etc. Mention should also be made in this connection of the importance of Foix's search for Unity or The Absolute One. As Gimferrer has indicated, Foix combines a thorough metaphysical reflection with a powerful control of expressive form.

Patricia Boehne, an authority on J. V. Foix, has given us one of the best appraisals of the poet in her article "J. V. Foix: A Catalan Transformation of Reality",¹ where she sums up her views as follows:

Foix's span of writing over the 20th century has remained constant in theme, in his individual approach, and in his love for the Catalan language. He has never stopped writing in Catalan and since the 1950's has published and written with renewed vigor, always pursuing his stated goals. He is revered and respected in Catalonia not only as a writer, but as a symbol and a guardian of Catalan literature, a tangible link from past to future.²

¹ *Discurso Literario*, Vol. 2, N. 4, Oklahoma State University, Department of FFLL, Stillwater, Oklahoma.

² *Ibid.*, 317.

It is now possible to contemplate Foix's work as a whole. As Arthur Terry has fittingly said:

In the fantastic narratives of many of his poems, details which in isolation seem merely surrealistic fall into place as parts of a personal myth which, because it is detached of any autobiographical intentions, can move easily between individual and collective experience. However much his poems approach the condition of waking dreams, Foix insists that the poet is a kind of magician who retains the power to manipulate the elements of his vision.³

In one of his "Letters", his "Letter to Clara Subirós" — an important *ars poetica* — Foix says:

The poet, magician, speculator of the word, pilgrim of the invisible, unsatisfied, adventurer or investigator in the dream's horizon, does not expect anything for himself. Not even redemption.⁴

This has been a position Foix has maintained throughout his life; his effort has redeemed, however, Catalan literature.

It follows from the introductory paragraphs above that the body of Foix's writings can be divided in two main components: on the one hand, his strictly poetic work (in verse or in prose); on the other, his essays and journalistic pieces, which reflect his political and artistic thought. Most important among the former are *Sol, i de dol* (Alone and in Mourning), a book of sonnets of tightly classic cut, which was to be published in 1936 but could only appear in 1948.⁵ *Les irrealis omegues* (The Unreal Omegas), published in 1949, with free verse and the

³ Arthur Terry, *Catalan Literature*, London, Ernst Ltd., New York, Barnes and Noble Books, 105.

⁴ J. V. Foix, *Obres Poètiques*, Barcelona, Nauta, 1964.

⁵ Barcelona, Edicions L'Amic de les Arts.

appearance, for the first time, of long titles preceding the poems.⁶ His other works in verse are *On he deixat les claus...* (Where Have I Left the Keys...),⁷ *Onze Nadals i un Cap d'Any* (Eleven Christmases and one New Year),⁸ *Desa aquests llibres al calaix de baix* (Store These Books in the Bottom Drawer),⁹ *Plant d'en Joseph Vicenç, de Barcelona, en lo qual respòs a Joan Ferrerter...* (Lamentation of Joseph-Vicenç, of Barcelona, in which he answered to Joan Ferrerter...),¹⁰ His Christmas poems, probably his most intelligible poetry, is not, despite his title, an example of religious literature, but rather an effort to stylize popular cultural traditions around the theme of Christmas. His authentically religious poetry is to be found among the last sonnets in *Sol, i de dol*. The three last books listed above, on the other hand, provide his best examples of thematic unity.

As for his poetic prose, mention must be made of a number of works influenced by an old manuscript, *Diari 1918* (From the 1918 Diary)¹¹ such as *Gertrudis*,¹² *KRTU*,¹³ *L'estrella d'En Perris* (The Star of Mr. Perris), popular term for Venus among fishermen,¹⁴ *Darrer comunicat* (Last Communiqué)¹⁵ and *Tocant a mà* (Within Reach),¹⁶ all of which reveal a magnificent control of language alongside an extremely powerful imagination.

⁶ Barcelona, Edicions L'Amic de les Arts, 1949.

⁷ Barcelona, Edicions L'Amic de les Arts, 1953.

⁸ Barcelona, Edicions L'Amic de les Arts, 1960.

⁹ Barcelona, Editorial Nauta, 1964.

¹⁰ Vic, *Inquietud*, 1957.

¹¹ It was published, partially, with this title, in 1956: *Del "Diari 1918"* (From the 1918 Diary), Barcelona, J. Horta.

¹² Barcelona, Edicions L'Amic de les Arts, 1927.

¹³ Barcelona, Edicions L'Amic de les Arts, 1932.

¹⁴ Barcelona, Editorial Fontanella, 1963.

¹⁵ Barcelona, Edicions 62, 1970.

¹⁶ Barcelona, Edicions 62, 1972.

Another old manuscript, *Dietari*, has been the source of a more descriptive kind of poetry as in *Catalans de 1918* (Catalans of 1918),¹⁷ which belongs rather among the following examples of poetic prose: *Còpia d'una lletra tramesa a Na Madrona Puignau, de Palau Ça Verdera* (Copy of a Letter Sent to Mrs. Madrona Puignau, from Palau Ça Verdera),¹⁸ *Lletra a Joan Salvat-Papasseit* (Letter to Joan Salvat-Papasseit)¹⁹ and, perhaps his most fantastic and at the same time amusing book, *Allò que no diu "La Vanguardia"* (What *La Vanguardia* Doesn't Say), drawing on the name of the well-known newspaper.²⁰

Special mention must also be made of Foix's collaboration with great contemporary Catalan painters: *Quatre colors aparien el món* (The World is Made of Four Colours), with Miró,²¹ *La pell de la pell* (The Skin's Skin)²² and *97 notes sobre ficcions ponçianes* (97 Notes of Ponç's Fiction)²³ with Ponç, *L'Estació* (The Station), with Tàpies.²⁴ The last one has just been reprinted along with *Cròniques de l'Ultrason* (Chronicles of the Ultrasleep) in a single volume, the poet's most recent book.²⁵

Regarding Foix's essays we must cite his collaboration with his loyal friend Josep Carbonell in *La Revolució catalanista* (The Catalanist Revolution) about the Catalan national problem,²⁶ *Els lloms transparents* (Transparent Loins), a series of literary,

¹⁷ Barcelona, Edicions 62, 1972.

¹⁸ Barcelona, *Dau al set*, 1957.

¹⁹ *Índice de Artes y Letras*, n. 172, 1963.

²⁰ Barcelona, Editorial Proa, 1970.

²¹ Barcelona, Editorial G. Gili, 1975.

²² Barcelona, La Polígrafa, 1970.

²³ Barcelona, La Polígrafa, 1974.

²⁴ Barcelona, Taché, editor, 1984.

²⁵ Barcelona, Edicions L'Amic de les Arts-Quaderns Crema, 1985.

²⁶ Barcelona, Edicions Monitor, 1934.

civic and patriotic articles collected by Gabriel Ferrater,²⁷ Foix's introduction to his anthology of Verdaguer's works in prose²⁸ and *Mots i maons o a cascú el seu* (Words and Bricks or to Each his Own), a series of articles on architecture and urbanism.²⁹ The following collected works must be mentioned: *Obres Poètiques* (Poetical Works),³⁰ *Obres Completes* (Complete Works): I, Poesia, II, Prosa and III, Articles i assaigs polítics,³¹ and *Obra poètica* (Poetical Work), in the course of publication,³² which is a critical edition by Jaume VallcorbaPlana including the definitive and authorized text of Foix's poems. Concerning the anthologies, the following have been published: *Antologia lírica*, with Spanish translation by Enrique Badosa,³³ *Antologia poètica*,³⁴ *J. V. Foix en els seus millors escrits* (J. V. Foix in His Best Writings)³⁵ and *Antologia poètica*, by Pere Gimferrer.³⁶ An anthology by Patricia Boehne is going to be published, which will contain the original Catalan texts and their English translation.

The essays contained in this first issue of CATALAN REVIEW concentrate on the various aspects of Foix's work and, we hope, will contribute to a better knowledge of the author of *Alone and in Mourning* outside Catalonia. Patricia Boehne investigates some interesting aspects of Foixian poetry in relation to the Spanish Civil War; María José Corominas and Xavier

²⁷ Barcelona, Edicions 62, 1969.

²⁸ J. Verdaguer, *Prosa antològica*, Barcelona, Editorial Selecta, 1952.

²⁹ Barcelona, Edicions L'Amic de les Arts, 1971.

³⁰ Barcelona, Editorial Nauta, 1964.

³¹ Barcelona, Edicions 62, 1974, 1979 and 1985.

³² Barcelona, Edicions dels Quaderns Crema: I, *Gertrudis* (1983), II, *KRTU* (1983), III, *Sol, i de dol* (1985), IV, *Les irrealis omegues* (1986), VI, *Onze nadals i un cap d'any* (1984).

³³ Barcelona, Editorial Rialp, 1963.

³⁴ Barcelona, Editorial Proa, 1973.

³⁵ Barcelona, Editorial Arimany, 1973.

³⁶ Barcelona, Edicions 62, 1980.

Canals are concerned with the poet's relation to avant-garde art and its great personalities; Manuel Duran stresses Foix's connection with some avant-garde painters, underscoring the difference between, and the reasons for, the uneven knowledge the world has of them; Carles Miralles zeroes in on a fascinating and so far neglected aspect of the poet's work, viz, the poetic value of the long titles that began to appear in *The Unreal Omegas*; Joaquim Molas studies the relation between Foix and various avant-garde movements, with emphasis on their inherent shortcomings; C. Brian Morris analyzes, in particular, *Gertrudis* and brings into relief the poet's modesty therein; Vinyet Panyella writes about Foix's political ideology, a scarcely researched aspect in his bibliography; Josep Romeu analyzes some very representative sonnets in *Alone and in Mourning*; David Rosenthal comments on some general aspects of Foix's work, with special reference to his poetic achievements; M. L. Rosenthal considers Foix one of the first poets of this century to face and overcome the contradictions of modern life and to fight its alienating effects; Arthur Terry talks about the literal and metaphysical frontiers in Foix's poetry; Jaume VallcorbaPlana expounds on the "Renaissance" aspects in some sonnets in *Alone and in Mourning*; Marià Manent has contributed a brief comment; finally, Pere Gimferrer, an expert on Foix, offers some exquisite paragraphs on the poet's prose.

The existence of someone of Foix's caliber encourages us to look to the future with confidence — not only to the future of Catalan literature but of Catalan culture at large. Foix's work is without a doubt of universal value in that his ideas, anxieties and hopes are not only those of a Catalan man, but those of Man throughout time.

Despite the fact that, as pointed out above, Foix was born in a small town and that he has spent a good share of his life in

other small places in Catalonia, Foix has remained a citizen of Barcelona, a city in which he found a sense of belonging and where he became part of the great cultural movements of our century. Barcelona repaid him with a year-long itinerant exhibit about him, which opened in Sarrià (June 1985 to April 1986). In recent years he has been the recipient of numerous distinctions, among others, the Premi d'Honor de les Lletres Catalanes (1964), an honorary degree from the University of Barcelona (1984) and the Premio Nacional de Literatura (1985). His eightieth and ninetieth birthdays were the object of widespread recognition and publicity throughout the country.

In his first entry in his *Dietari*, dated 1918, Foix expounds on the excitement that the First International Congress on the Catalan Language (1906) aroused in him. Eighty years later he has solemnly announced the Second International Congress in Poblet. Between these two dates spans a life that never failed his native Catalan culture. To visit him today at his home on carrer Setantí affords the visitor a fascinating experience for the host is at once a living legend and one of the greatest writers in the world.

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