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The Frontiers of J. V. Foix **Arthur Terry**

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THE FRONTIERS OF J. V. FOIX

ARTHUR TERRY

"One of Foix's basic themes", Gabriel Ferrater has written, "is the confrontation with the world of his imagination, and the sense in which this brings about a doubling, or rather an infinite multiplication, of his personality".¹ And Foix himself speaks of the "objective reality of poetry":

In other words, that poetry, despite the mass of tendencies and conventions which seem to suggest the contrary, is external to us. I mean that there is a poetic reality, with its own magic and individual mystery which anyone concerned with its essences attempts to describe.²

These two quotations — by no means the only ones of their kind — point to one of the most distinctive features of Foix's poetry: the way in which it sees itself in terms of space, as if the poet's essential task were to place himself before a world of the imagination which, while preserving its autonomy, would serve both as the object and the justification of his inquiry. The consequences of such a view are clear enough: instead of believing in the existence of a "real" world — the world of "normal" experience — which the poem is content to describe, it recognizes that reality is revealed only through words; that is to say, that apparently objective things have no existence outside language, and that it is this which determines their status

¹ Gabriel Ferrater, preface to J. V. Foix, *Els lloms transparents*, Barcelona, 1969, 60-61.

² J. V. Foix, preface to Albert Manent, *La nostra nit*, Barcelona, 1951, 9.

as "things". Or, to put it more concretely: in a poem written from this point of view, the world we know is assimilated to an alternative order — the order of the poem, with everything which distinguishes it from other kinds of discourse — which resists any attempt to reduce it to non-poetic terms.

Spatial metaphors also help us to see other features of this poetry: while recognizing the distance which separates the poet from the reality which he can only grasp obliquely, through the medium of appearances, one can regard the poem itself as a space within which the verbal transformations which reflect the workings of the poets imagination may come about. Moreover, as well as the distance imposed on the poet by his role as "investigator" (Foix's own term), one must also bear in mind the limits which he himself imposes between what is expressed in the poem and what is excluded: the other kinds of discourse I have already referred to, and which the poem, by definition, transcends.

As I have explained elsewhere,³ the idea of order in Foix's poetry presupposes a cosmic, and to some extent a metaphysical, vision which it appears to take as a real datum. What I am concerned with here, however, is the way in which this cosmic vision, which may often determine the smallest details of a poem, is able to assimilate actual facts which exist independently of the poem without distorting either their value as facts or their personal and collective significance. Once again, there is a paradox here which is inherent in the nature of poetry itself: if the subject of every poem, at least implicitly, is the act of writing a poem, it is also true that it may deal with many other things, provided these are adjusted to the technique of

³ Arthur Terry, "La idea de l'ordre en la poesia de J. V. Foix", *Serra d'Or* (January, 1973), 41-43.

the poem — that is to say, to the network of artifices, both semantic and non-semantic, by means of which the poem comes to constitute a unique whole which calls into question the categories of the world we know.

Thus the space of the poem becomes a kind of "field" within which the poet deliberately places the elements of his vision: "Us mostraré els reialmes privats on jo esbosso allò que no és. Us descobriré, més allà de la muralla i de la frontera, l'ombra de l'Etern i el joc de flames que el nodreix." (I shall show you the private domains where I sketch in what is not. I shall reveal to you, beyond the wall and the frontier, the shadow of the Eternal and the tongues of fire which sustain it.)⁴ Or, speaking of an act of destruction which implies the loss of a source of poetry: "Ja no vagarà més a la frontera de les transmutacions, ni ombrarà les finestres del somni" (He will go no more to the frontier of transformations nor cast his shadow on the windows of dream) (OC, II, 183). In both instances, Foix again uses a series of spatial or topographical metaphors — "wall ... frontier", "frontiers ... windows" — to indicate the division between two mental states or, alternatively, a point of convergence where the boundaries between the real and the unreal are confused. In this kind of text, clearly, it is a question of metaphorical "frontiers" which share, at a mental level, certain features of geographical frontiers: the divisions they represent are difficult or impossible to cross, or can be passed only with special permission. The list of such metaphors could be extended: what is most important, however, is that these figurative "frontiers" act as demarcation lines which map out the territory of the imagination in a way which is psychologically coherent and in no sense arbitrary.

⁴ All references are to the three-volume edition of *Obres completes* published by Edicions 62, Barcelona, 1974, 1979 and 1985.

This tendency, which is already at work in the early fragments of *Diari 1918*, becomes noticeably subtler in certain poems written during the Civil War. Here, because of the historical circumstances, one has to do with a literal, not a metaphorical, situation, in which geographical frontiers have taken on a symbolic, and often painful, significance in the collective experience of the country. It has often been remarked that Foix, despite his reputation as a "difficult" poet, is a writer who is always able to rise to circumstances and to produce the kind of poems which seem necessary at a particular moment. What is most remarkable, however, is that he should be capable of doing this without in any way compromising the complex vision which underlies most of his work, and that his ability to "look candidly at the kind of realities we could call public"⁵ should be made to seem a natural extension of his poetic "investigation".

One of the most revealing poems in this connection is the sixth poem of *On be deixat les claus...*, dated September 1936:

A L'ENTRADA D'UNA ESTACIÓ SUBTERRÀNIA, LLIGAT DE
MANS I PEUS PER DUANERS BARBOSOS, VAIG VEURE COM LA
MARTA SE N'ANAVA EN UN TREN FRONTERER. LI VOLIA SOM-
RIURE, PERÒ UN MILICIÀ POLICÈFAL SE'M VA ENDUR AMB ELS
SEUS, I VA CALAR FOC AL BOSC

Escales de cristall a l'andana solar
On passen trens de llum cap a platges obertes
Entre murs transparents i coralls sarmentosos
I ocelles d'ull clarós en brogiment de brancs.

¿Ets tu, blanca en el blanc d'aquesta alba insular,
—Líquid l'esguard, atenta a músiques innates—

⁵ Gabriel Ferrater, *op. cit.*, 18.

Que escrius adéus humits a la forest dels vidres,
Amb semença de nit per a un somni desclòs?

Te'n vas enllà del goig, al ribatge encantar
Amb gegants embriacs a l'espluga gatosa
I falcons dissecats a les roques senyades,
A un mar petjat pels déus en els nocturns furtius.

No puc heure't, dorment, orb de llum i de ment,
Vestit com un infant, sense veu ni bagatge,
Entre tràmeçs guardat per hostalers biformes;
Els passaports són vells i sangosos els cors.

T'emportes puigs i rius, i els estanys estel·lars
I fonts en bacs gelius en profundes valises;
Un guaita tenebrós, des del serrat en flames,
Em crida amb noms estranys i em fa que no amb les mans.

Onegen foramur banderes esquinçades.

(AT THE ENTRANCE TO AN UNDERGROUND STATION, TIED
HAND AND FOOT BY BEARDED CUSTOMS MEN, I SAW MARTA
LEAVE IN A TRAIN FOR THE FRONTIER. I TRIED TO SMILE AT
HER, BUT A MANY-HEADED MILITIAMAN TOOK ME AWAY
WITH HIS COMPANIONS AND SET FIRE TO THE WOODS.

Crystal stairways to platforms of sun
Where trains go past on their way to open beaches
Between transparent walls and twining coral
And bright-eyed birds among creaking branches.

Is it you, white in the white of this island dawn,
—Your gaze liquid, attentive to inborn music—
Who write moist farewells on the forest of windows,
With the seed of night for an open[ed] dream?

Your are going beyond pleasure, to the enchanted shore
With drunken giants in the overgrown[y] cave

And stuffed falcons on the marked rocks,
To a sea where the gods tread on stealthy nights.

I cannot reach you, asleep, deprived of light and mind,
Dressed like a child, without voice or luggage,
Guarded between hoes by twin-shaped innkeepers;
Passports are out-of-date and hearts are bleeding.

You take with you hills and rivers, and lakes of stars
And springs in icy grottoes in deep suitcases;
A dark sentry, from the burning ridge,
Shouts strange names at me and signals "no" with his hands.

Beyond the walls tattered flags wave.)

The title, as in other compositions of this type, refers to the anecdote which must have formed the point of origin of the poem: the departure of a woman friend in wartime. At the same time, if the function of such titles is to clarify the poem's intention, it should be noticed that, in this instance, the title itself suggests an irrational, and even caricaturesque, element which increases considerably later on. As well as this, there are the beginnings of the alternating pattern of light and darkness which runs through the poem: thus, the "underground station" of the title is transformed into the "platform of sun" of the opening line, and in the second stanza the woman, seen now in terms of whiteness, is associated with images of night and dream. Strictly speaking, however, these are not oppositions so much as signs of a possibility which can be found elsewhere in Foix: "També quan sóc amb tu, ara ets la nit amb plugim de pòl·lens i crits mig ofegats per la muralla — sota un sol de mig dia de mar, amb claror de pins i entre aigües llumejants" (Also when we are together, you are now night with a rain of pollen and cries half stifled by the undergrowth — now the midday sun by the sea, with the clarity of pines between flashing waters) (*OC*, II, 251).

The consequences of these transformations only become apparent in the second stanza. The opening stanza imagines the country beyond the frontier as a sunlit paradise — the “transparent walls” are barriers which present no obstacle — through a combination of sea and land images. This ideal atmosphere from which the poet himself is excluded also carries over into the description of the woman: “island dawn” not only refers, in a way very characteristic of Foix, to “islands” as symbols of imaginative experience,⁶ but also to the idea of “insularity” — here associated with the woman — which constitutes another kind of separation. The most immediate symbol of separation, however, both in the title and in the poem itself, is the difficulty of communication. The interrogative form of the second stanza seems to indicate a certain resistance on the part of the poet to accept the reality of the situation. This “reality” — the original anecdote which is absorbed into the poem — is most probably that of a woman who is writing words with her fingers on the window of a railway carriage in an attempt to prolong the moment of separation. The effect of the poem, on the other hand, is much more complex: while preserving the emotional force of the anecdote, the poet makes it undergo a series of transformations in the course of which it is assimilated to a deeper and more general vision.

These transformations, as is usual in Foix, are brought about through a series of cosmic metaphors. If it is the “windows” which literally separate the two protagonists, the image of the “forest” has associations which help to reinforce this sense of alienation: mystery, multiplicity, wildness, darkness

⁶ Compare “Cerco el no-re en pregones illes” (I seek nothingness — *no-res* — in deep islands) (*OC*, I, 245); “A l’arxipèlag càlid de les Formes” (In the warm archipelago of Forms) (*OC*, I, 197).

(not incompatible with clarity, as we have seen), growth, and so on. Thus from the poet's point of view, the woman has already entered a metaphorical wood where he cannot follow her physically (nor, as it emerges later, mentally). This initial metaphor, however, is supplemented by another: that of night as a generative force. In the sentence from *Diari 1918* I have already quoted ("Also when we are together ...), it was the woman who alternated between day and night, a night associated with woods ("cries half stifled by the undergrowth") within an atmosphere of sensual pleasure. Moreover, we may be reminded of the "huge man" (*homenàs*) of the eleventh poem of *Les irrealis omegues*, so subtly analysed by Pere Gimferrer,⁷ who represents "the androgyne of night, generous of seeds ... Present wherever we seek after bodies". And, in contrast to these openly sexual allusions, there are other, more abstract moments when night, seen as an archetype of permanence, gives place to the endless metamorphoses of dream: "the Other Night, where the multiple grows ripe" (*OC*, I, 273).

At this point in the poem, then, the woman is writing on the glass with the "seed of night", that is to say, with the same generative substance which will produce an "open[ed] dream": a dream to which the other protagonist will have access (given the interrogative form of the second stanza, all this represents a *supposition* on the part of the latter, which will be qualified in the rest of the poem). The erotic possibilities of this image-complex are cancelled, however, in the third stanza. Here it seems clear that the "pleasure" referred to in the opening line is that which the two protagonists have experienced and which is now about to be destroyed. Nevertheless, it may have another, less obvious meaning which appears frequently in other

⁷ Pere Gimferrer, *La poesia de J. V. Foix*, Barcelona, 1974, 175-76.

poems, where the actual notion of "pleasure" takes on an ambivalence which is very characteristic of Foix. Thus, in certain sonnets of *Sol, i de dol*, one finds an opposition between "pleasure" (*goig*) and "mind" (*ment*): "En goig de carn als límits só present" (In carnal pleasure I am present at the limits) (*OC*, I, 67); or, still more concretely: "La meva ment, que de goig és avara" (My mind which is sparing of pleasure) (*OC*, I, 75). This opposition, though not consistent — in the sonnet which begins "Com és la carn, guanyat el goig, d'inerta ..." (How lifeless is the body after pleasure ...) (*OC*, I, 121), the death of the senses makes possible a kind of mystical transcendence in which sexual pleasure is not renounced — gives rise to a significant number of poems which emphasize the insufficiency of the sexual act in almost Neoplatonic terms. As Gimferrer observes:

... one is forced to conclude that, once the beloved is raised to a higher way of knowledge, both she and the poet exist only as shadows in the Platonic cave: the real world is the world of ideas, not of appearances.⁸

What is striking, though, is the way in which Foix, instead of merely accepting without qualification an ancient and familiar concept of love, uses the basic distinctions of such a concept as a means of exploring his own more personal vision. Thus in the lines I am discussing, as in other poems of his, there is a division between the man and the woman which precedes any physical separation. Here, however, there is no question of mutual transcendence: it is the woman who transcends her situation on her own. As a result, the geographical frontier she must cross is at the same time a mental and psychological one; the "real" country which awaits her "beyond

⁸ Pere Gimferrer, *op. cit.*, 125-26.

pleasure", though still the same ideal country of the first stanza, is now an "enchanted shore", whose magic is conveyed through a cluster of dream images. Taken together, these images seem to belong to the same vision: that of a Mediterranean landscape — a combination of land and sea — from which the ancient gods, as elsewhere in Foix, are absent, or where, at best, they lead a "stealthy" or clandestine existence. More tentatively, one might be inclined to associate the other images with certain cultural facts: thus, the "drunken giants" may suggest the Dionysiac world of ancient mythology, while the "stuffed falcons", apart from functioning as surrealist-type objects, seem also to represent an aristocratic, feudal world, now lost, though still potent.⁹

The fourth stanza insists on the idea of separation, now transferred almost entirely to the dream world. The opening phrase — "I cannot reach you, asleep ..." — refers, not so much to sexual possession, as to the possibility of sharing the "open[ed] dream" of stanza two. In the lines that follow, this lack of continuity — in other words, the impossibility of crossing the "frontier" of sleep — is expressed through a typical dream situation: the physical shrinking of the protagonist (already familiar from *Gertrudis* and *KRTU*) and the superimposed images — "guarded between hoes" and "twin-shaped innkeepers" — which belong to the world of metamorphoses in

⁹ The falcon, for Foix, is always a noble bird, bred for hunting; compare: "Nodreixen els falcons de qui ... els flagel·la" (They breed the falcons of the man who ... scourges them) (*OC*, I, 353); "cap escala [no donava] a la cria de falcons" (No stairway [led] to the place where they bred falcons) (*OC*, II, 416). In the same sentence, the "marked rocks" (*roques senyades*) may be "marked, or blessed, with the sign of the cross" (i.e. *persignades*), like the objects of a religious cult, and also "marked", perhaps to indicate territorial boundaries.

which so much of Foix's poetry is enacted.¹⁰ The last line of the stanza, on the other hand, returns us without violence to the world of war and exile, with a poignant simplicity very characteristic of the poems of this period. In this last part, despite the obvious return to the actual situation of the protagonists, the metaphysical references still persist. What the woman is taking with her — "deep suitcases" forms what seems a deliberately exaggerated contrast with the child-like figure, "without voice or luggage", of the previous stanza — is the poet's own landscape, or rather, the setting for the "pleasure" which they have experienced together (in more conventional terms, it is as if the landscape had ceased to exist for the poet without the woman's presence).

The final situation of the poet, on the other hand, shows a certain ambiguity, above all if one takes into account the concluding sentence of the title. Thus, the "many-headed militiaman" (a reminiscence of the mythological Hydra?) turns into the "dark sentry" who guards the frontier, the "burning ridge" which recalls the traditional etymology (*pyros* = "fire") of the word "Pyrenees". Nevertheless, the connection between the poem and the anecdote related in the title seems a little blurred at this point: the act of "(setting) fire to the woods" hardly corresponds to the end of the poem, where the "burning ridge" merely represents an impassable barrier. Nevertheless, there may be a connection between the "burning ridge" and the "forest of windows" of the second stanza. If so, it would mean that what has been set on fire is the figurative "forest"; in other words, that the possibility of communicating through dream

¹⁰ "Hoes" (*tràmecs*) suggests the intersection of the rural and military worlds; similarly, the "twin-shaped innkeepers" may be at one and the same time innkeepers and the customs men of the title.

— an idea which is developed in the central part of the poem — has been lost once and for all. And in this case, the literal action would also have a metaphorical function, although the consequences of such an association do not appear fully, either in the title or the poem itself, but only in a combination of the two.

Finally, one should notice another ambiguity in the last line but one: if the "dark sentry" shouts "strange names" at the poet, one might think that the "strangeness" came from a difference in languages, or else from the fact that the poet's own name seems "strange" because of the woman's departure (or possibly, in a more general sense, as a result of the circumstances which have brought about this departure).¹¹ In practice, these closing lines, like the rest of the poem, keep a delicate balance between public events and the situation of the protagonists. Thus the slight archaism of the last line — "Beyond the walls (*foramur*) tattered flags wave" — seems to introduce an unexpected dimension — "all this has happened many times, in other ages" — which adds considerably to the universality of the poem.

This universality, which cannot be reduced to a simple "message", is the result of a vision in which the sheer act of writing calls into question the relations between the "I" of the poet, with all the problems implied in the concept of "personality", and a set of circumstances which are never allowed to appear as stable and unproblematical. So, in the poem I have been discussing, the limits imposed by circumstances, though they never at any point lose their emotional force, become a metaphor for those deeper and more mysterious processes

¹¹ Compare the opening poem of *On he deixat les claus ...* "—Com me dic?, els pregunto ..." (— What's my name? I ask them ...) (OC, I, 231).

which, in Foix's view, determine the actual nature of man. In artistic terms, perhaps the most important thing is that such processes should reveal themselves through the multiple verbal transformations of the poem. Hence the "porous" nature of the central images of this poetry: the fact that geographical "frontiers" can be embodied in a meditation on the "frontiers" which demonstrate the limits of human experience, and that the recognition of this second kind of "frontier" may accentuate the real-life situation from which the poem springs.

The flexibility of imagination which this suggests often results in a kind of verbal economy seldom found in modern Catalan poetry. Perhaps the best example of this in the present context is the short poem entitled "Fronteres" (Frontiers), dated September 1937:

Pel corriol, entre flames de tinta,
 El no-res augur;
 Oscil·la en cels antics llàntia extinta
 I una ombra en el mur.

Avanç enllà, però una mà m'atura
 I, dura, una veu
 Molla dels rous d'antany, clama segura:
 —De tot crim ets reu.

I en cloure els ulls per contemplar el paisatge
 De la mort carnal,
 Abandon en els glaços el bagatge
 Del país natal.

(Along the narrow path, between flames of ink,
 I sense nothingness;
 An extinguished lantern sways in the ancient skies
 And a shadow [sways] on the wall.

I push ahead, but a hand stops me
And a hard voice
Moist with the dews of former years, cries confidently;
You are guilty of every crime.

And as I close my eyes to behold the landscape
Of bodily death,
I leave behind in the ice the luggage
Of my native country).

Here, the "frontiers" of the title belong to no anecdote outside the poem. Although certain images — "narrow path", "ice" — suggest actual frontiers, the whole emphasis of the poem falls on the mental journey of the poet as he moves through a strictly stylized "landscape". This journey, clearly, bears a certain relation to the collective situation, which is revealed, above all, in the fact that the poet sees himself as the representative of the general guilt. This is not the only point of contact with the previous poem: here, too, there is a voice which blocks the way, just as there is a reference to abandoned of non-existent "luggage". Moreover, at a less superficial level, there may be a connection between "bodily death" and the transcended "pleasure" of the other poem, as if the physical separation of the two protagonists had become a need for asceticism, now concentrated on the solitary figure of the poet. The whole poem, in fact, takes the form of a quest: the difficult search for "nothingness" (*no-res*), associated as always in Foix with the loss of identity,¹² and the obstacles and sacrifices which this entails. In this process, the "frontier" theme has been interiorized: the visible gestures of the "dark sentry" have been replaced by the innocent and self-confident voice of con-

¹² Compare the first example in note 6, above; also: "Adoro el Rei en múltiples imatges" (Worship the King in multiple images) (OC, I, 251).

science,¹³ which reminds the poet of his guilt. Thus the final stanza describes the loss of physical identity which must precede transcendence, a loss which implies the renunciation of the senses and, at the same time, the abandoning of all personal ties.

The extraordinary bareness of this poem allows no falling-off in the quality of Foix's vision. Unlike the previous poem, where the "frontier" was incorporated in the play of relations between various mental "frontiers", here, the attempt to cross a mental "frontier" is transposed into a series of images related to the crossing of a geographical "frontier". Despite this, the technique of the two poems, generally speaking, remains the same: behind the mutual situation of the one and the harsh and poignant self-criticism of the other, we feel the whole weight of the vision which Foix has never ceased to pursue in the "plural exploration" of his work. If for specific historical reasons the notion of frontiers has taken on unexpected importance in this work, the intensity with which Foix has devoted himself to the collective theme comes not only from his reaction to immediate circumstances, but also from his prolonged attempt to understand the other "frontiers" — mental, though no less real — which persist through the contingencies of human life.

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¹³ "Dew" in Foix's poetry, usually suggests the freshness of the elements: "*Pluges i rous i sediments lacustres*" (Rains and dews and the sediments of lakes) (OC, I, 198); or else of the powers of growth: "*Rou i sement de delirants captaires*" (Dew and seed of delirious beggars) (OC, I, 214). The reference to "former years" (*antany*) in the same line seems to connect with the "ancient skies" of line 3.

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