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***Ausiàs March's Sainted Eros: A Model of Christian
Syncretism***
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AUSIÀS MARCH'S SAINTED EROS: A MODEL OF CHRISTIAN SYNCRETISM

PETER COCOZZELLA

Ausiàs March, the outstanding Valencian poet of the first half of the fifteenth century—he was born around 1397 in Gandia, a village near Valencia, and died in 1459 in that prosperous Mediterranean metropolis—strikes us an unusual figure in the history of Western culture.¹ The reputation he enjoyed among his contemporaries and even among the Spanish writers of the *siglo de oro* as a lyricist of the highest accomplishments is substantiated by the handful of seminal studies that have been published about him since the late 1800s. One would expect that this uncontested distinction confirmed by the unanimous acclaim accorded by a select group of such eminent scholars as Marcelino Menéndez y Pelayo, Amédée Pagès, Pere Bohigas, Martí de Riquer, among others, would have won for Ausiàs the wide recognition he justly deserves. This has not been the case, however.

What is the reason, we may ask, for this unusual gap between undisputed merit and meager recognition? Ausiàs, after all, is credited with a sizeable production of 128 extant poems, generally referred to as «cants», which, according to a recent editor's count, total an impressive 10,263 verses (Ferrerres 95). In the preface to his recent book on Ausiàs March, Robert Archer suggests an answer to our query when he proffers the following observation:

It is nevertheless tempting to speculate that had March written in

¹ For a well-documented survey of Ausiàs March's life and literary career see Pagès 1-121. Cf., also, Bohigas, *Introducció*, 11-25, Riquer, 2: 471-484, Ferrerres, 16-41.

Spanish instead of in a language which was soon to lose its political currency, he would by now undoubtedly be more widely recognised as the finest lyric poet in the Iberian Peninsula before the sixteenth century, and as one of the greatest in fifteenth century Europe as a whole. (ix)

There are, then, significant historical circumstances and political factors that need to be taken into account in order to come to an understanding of Ausiàs's case. Apparently, Ausiàs wrote exclusively in his native Valencian, a variant of Catalan, which, soon after the poet's death, drastically declined in officialdom and prestige. This decline naturally redounded in the reduction of readership for Ausiàs and for a host of other writers of Catalan.

Historians have dealt at length with the turbulent winds of change that swept across the Iberian Peninsula as Ferdinand's and Isabella's spectacular rise to power brought about the ascendancy and dominance of one language (Castilian) to the detriment of the other (Catalan). Castilian, in short, was chosen to be the primary vehicle employed by the nascent Spanish state for the diffusion of its culture. In this paper I intend to pursue my investigation as to how Ausiàs March prevailed upon those forces, unleashed by the centralist policies of the Reyes Católicos, which would have condemned him to oblivion. He prevailed and could rightfully stake his claim to fame thanks mainly, I believe, to one salient characteristic of his ingenious creativity, which elsewhere I have identified as the overall syncretic bent of his entire production. My research has led me to describe March's syncretism in terms of Northrop Frye's definition of what this distinguished critic calls «encyclopaedic form». In my analysis of the «encyclopaedic form» as a distinctive manifestation of Ausiàs March's pronounced strain of «archaism» or «conservatism» in the special meaning that Roger Boase ascribes to these terms, I have been guided by the insights put forth originally by Torras i Bages and, more recent-

ly, by Ramírez i Molas and, thus, have been able to underscore the radically Christian nature of Ausiàs's syncretism. As it reflects the quintessential design of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Ausiàs's Christian syncretism provides, in turn, yet another testimonial of the Florentine's widespread influence upon the Hispanic letters of the waning Middle Ages.² Taking my analysis a step further, here I will show how, in following the Dantesque paradigm—the basic journey from perdition to salvation through love—in unison with the principles of Scholastic metaphysics with which he is especially conversant, March reconciles in his *cants* the diverse traits he inherits from both pagan eros and Christian agape.

There are prominent theologians like Anders Nygren who would establish clearcut distinctions between these fundamental manifestations of love in the history of Western thought. As Martin Cyril D'Arcy explains,

Nygren suggests as tests of the presence of Eros, first a leaning to mysticism in preference to Revelation, then a tendency to replace faith by charity, the symbolism of the heavenly ladder, the emphasis on asceticism, deification, natural immortality, ecstasy, vision, and beatitude. It is impossible, he thinks, to reconcile the two loves; they represent two utterly opposing views of life. In one, man of himself seeks out God, in the other he is so much nothing that it is God's own love which predestines him. Eros desires the good of the self, Agape is a self-giving; Eros is man's way to God, Agape is God's way to man; Eros is the noblest form of egocentric love, Agape seeketh not its own; Eros seeks to gain its life by the possession of immortal beauty, Agape lives by God's life and therefore dares to lose its own. Eros is motivated by the beauty and value in the object. Agape bestows itself on what is quite unworthy, creates the value and is sovereign. (74)

² For an informative, comprehensive study of Dante's influence on March see Peyton's article listed in the bibliography below.

D'Arcy is quick to point out that Nygren's abstract distinctions, though quite useful as theoretical signposts, belie the complexity of the lover's condition: «Neither of them [*Eros and Agape*] taken in complete abstraction from the other is able to reveal the true nature of human love» (80).

Instinctively drawn by lifelong concerns to investigate a possible bond between the natural and the supernatural, the carnal and the spiritual, Ausiàs perceives in the recesses of the lover's psyche the primeval stirrings of the «dark passion», the affliction and morbidity of which he, in unison with many a *cancionero* poet, bemoans in numerous poems in the double sense of «suffering» and «creative, ecstatic love», an ambivalence originally discovered by Erich Auerbach and applied by Jane Yvonne Tillier precisely to the amatory lyrics of those *cancioneros*. Even in the direst moments of his passionate condition, the poet-lover depicted by Ausiàs March cannot fail to recognize at least some signs of that uplifting élan of ecstasy, which, though not completely purged from the dross of carnality, does function, all the same, as an agent of refinement and ennobling desire. This exalted state of the lover, transfixed with intense emotion in the contemplation of the beloved, may be easily identified with the «tresport» which Ramírez i Molas lists among the leitmotifs of Ausiàs March's poems that bear the *senyal* of «Lir entre carts» (262-265). The sublimity of the lover's bliss, however, does not free him altogether from the fetters of sensuality. Even as Ausiàs's poetic voice is likely to boast «Tant en amor ma pensa'n alt grau munta / que m'arma és dins lo cors que ama» («So high does my thought in love rise in degree / that my soul dwells in my beloved's body», 73, 45-46),³ the reader well may suspect, as does Rudolf Otto apropos of any type of Neoplatonic «tresport», that

³ This and the subsequent quotations from March's text are taken from Ferreres's edition. The ciphers immediately before and after the period indicate, respectively, March's poem and the specific verses involved.

[i]n its finest sublimation it [*Plotinus's mystical love*] still bears within it something of the eros of Plato's *Symposium*: that great Daemon, which is purified into a divine passion out of the ardor of procreation, yet even then retains a sublimated element of the original passion. (Quoted in D'Arcy, 46)

Eros, indeed, exercises a wide sway impelling the lover toward a higher and higher sphere of contemplation in the pursuit of an elusive goal, which transcends the limits of the sensory world. As D'Arcy explains, the dominion of Eros attains a striking epiphany in the formidable woman who «figures most prominently» in Celtic myths,

a woman who stirs up the belief in immortality and can be called even the symbol of eternal desire, but she is also the dark lady, one whose dwelling is in darkness and whose charm is fatal. Spiritually conceived she is that vanishing vision which calls man out of the world, but in a less spiritual age she may represent what is unholy and be to her followers the eternal courtesan. To the Tristrans, however, she is that Eros whose song of love is heard in the night, which is more illuminating than the transient gleams of day when the soul of man is imprisoned among earthly forms. (38)⁴

On the flip side of the myth, the lover remains, of course, a hapless «courtier of the Absolute», in D'Arcy's happy expression (16), a victim of his own blind desire and insatiable drive, a prisoner of his own «cárcel de amor», to use the soulful phrase that, some two generations later than Ausiàs March's, Diego de San Pedro was to employ as an emblematic title of his prototypic «novela sentimental», a veritable pioneering exploration of the lover's malaise, recounted in the format of a prose fiction.

Can the lover ever escape the thralldom of that «cárcel de

⁴ For a useful overview of the abundant love-centered literature produced in Europe throughout the Middle Ages, see D'Arcy, especially 33-96.

amor»? In his own explorations Ausiàs comes serendipitously to an efficacious therapy of liberation in a radical reorientation of the lover's conscience and consciousness. In a sudden shift of behavior, the lover, recoiling from the sphere of Eros, must raise his awareness to an existential mode governed by those *moviments* (the *primer* and the *segon*) Ausiàs occasionally refers to, and by their corresponding *intencions* (the *primera* and *segona*)—in short, by the ethical principles that, apparently, Ausiàs derived directly from Lull (Ramírez i Molas, 326-332). Thus, following his instinct, which leads him to a moralistic stance, the lover portrayed by March finds his bearings in an orientation toward the orbit of Agape, God's outpouring of love for humanity through grace.

In a key stanza of Poem 104 (vv. 9-16), the parameters of this new level of the lover's consciousness are precisely demarcated in the author's typical complex, protean discursiveness. In an obvious moral tone the poetic voice inveighs against those human beings representing a cross section of society—«papes e reys fins al estat pus minve» (v. 13)—who have strayed irrevocably from the path of righteousness precisely because they have refused to be guided by the *moviment primer*. In this extraordinary passage, this *primus motus* or «actus potentiae, qui incipit sine deliberatione», to quote Lull's own definition (cited in Ramírez i Molas, 378, n. 45), becomes associated with the «intenció primera», which, in turn, expresses the natural, that is, instinctive inclination of the human will. In the light of these quintessential associations, we can now tackle the crucial text:

papes e reys fins al estat pus minve,
fan lo que'ls plau, mas no pas lo que volen.
Déu, amador d'intenció primera,
és colt y honrat d'intenció segona.

(vv. 13-16)

I believe that v. 15, perfectly balanced in its denotation and connotation, provides a seminal clue in the central doctrine it both states and implies. The first hemistich indicates that God is the initiator of the act of love: significantly, it is to Him that the poet assigns the primary epithet of lover, «amador». The second hemistich refers to the reaction of the human lover who instinctually corresponds to the initiative of the Divine Lover by virtue, it bears repeating, of that «moviment primer» and «intenció primera» that guide the free will. This correspondence between the Creator and His beloved creature, stated in a plain and simple verse—«Déu, amador d'intenció primera»—adumbrates the act of perfect communion, a *sine qua non* in the notion of Christian agape.

By a stroke of genius Ausiàs has been able to charge a straightforward phrase, a mere splinter of his prosy but hardly prosaic rhetoric, with intimations of an entire universal order, evoked much more epigrammatically but hardly more significantly by Dante's famous dictum: «Amor ch'a nullo amato amar perdona» («Love, which to no loved one permits excuse for loving», *Inferno*, 5, 103).⁵ The full impact of both Dante's and Ausiàs March's dicta resides in the intriguing twist of irony that each assumes within its specific context. In both cases the sententious statement underscores a transgression of that universal, natural harmony it postulates between the Creator and the human being created in the image of the Supreme Maker. In appealing to «Amor, ch'a nullo amato amar perdona» Francesca da Rimini, in the unforgettable passage of Dante's *Inferno* (5, 70-143), enhances our understanding of the enormous gap that separates the salvific love of «caritas» from the baneful passion of Eros, the «Amor» that, in Francesca's words, «condusse noi ad una morte» («Love led us to one death», *Inferno*, 5, 106). Ironically, it is precisely that great chasm that

⁵ For this and the subsequent quotations from the *Divine Comedy*, I make use of the Carlyle-Wicksteed translation (cf. the bibliography below).

she, beset by her conflicting emotions, with which all of us (including the poet's persona) can fully sympathize, and lost in the rationalizations of what Ausiàs would call «intenció segona», is irrevocably doomed never to perceive with the equanimity of truly disinterested reasoning. In much the same vein, Ausiàs March's aforementioned one-liner—«Déu, amador d'intenció primera»—which embodies the definition of righteous love emanating from God and requited by the rightful disposition of the human will, comes as a rebuke for those who would rationalize their relationship with God by that «intenció segona»—«secundus motus es actus potentiae, in quo sit deliberatio et consensus», as Llull would have it (Ramírez i Molas, 378, n. 44)—and end up deflecting the course of their will away from the free and natural acceptance of God's proffering of His grace. They turn, instead, to the pursuit of their own gratification: «fan lo que ls plau, mas no pas lo que volen» (104, 14).

The focus on some key texts by Ausiàs March has led us to identify the parameters of his creativity. In the nimbleness and versatility typical of his poetic of lyricism, Ausiàs allows his creative mind to alternate back and forth between the psychological and ethical sphere of the human experience. This means that, now and then, the poet-lover, an epiphany, after all, of the historical Ausiàs *de carne y hueso*, feels that a state of enlightenment has dawned upon him and he can take the leap from psychological probing to a moralistic stance. It is only through the point of view of the moralizer that he can come to an appreciation of the order of Agape, and, from this appreciation, presume to assess not only the negative dimension of Eros as the narcissistic dark passion that feeds upon itself but also its positive aspect as an «askesis» to a state of perfection in the eternal realm of the infinite. The high point of this assessment comes as a flash of insight into that «intenció segona», the rationalism of which vitiates the erotic asceticism and converts it into a more or less pleasantly disguised form of *cupiditas*.

The cogency of Ausiàs's insight is confirmed by the constructive lucubrations of modern theologians like Nygren, who decry any enterprise, no matter how highminded, that attempts to fashion a philosophy of love based on systematic rationalism. Summarizing Nygren's caveat on this very issue, D'Arcy concludes:

[I]f Nygren be right, once Eros is espoused by Plato and Platonism, a remarkable metamorphosis takes place. The mythos becomes a logos; what was essentially a wild and irrational passion is converted into an excessively rational religion. Whereas in de Rougemont's account the disciplined order of marriage is the symbol of the Christian ideal and lawless love is the mark of Eros, in this new account, it is, as we shall find, the Platonic and Aristotelian theology and the exercise of reason by the medieval scholastics, which are regarded as marks of the presence of Eros. (68-69)

Getting closer to home in terms of Ausiàs's own preoccupations, we notice that Dante himself may have provided him with an example of this vicious injection of «logos» into the «mythos» of Eros. Reflecting, once again, upon the Francesca da Rimini episode, even a kindred soul like Dante's own persona, who ends up swooning overwhelmed by the pathos of the story—«e caddi come corpo morto cade» («and [I] fell, as a dead body falls», *Inferno*, 5, 143)—must come to the distressing realization that Francesca's argumentation (cf. vv. 100-107), though founded on the most alluring principles of *dolce stil nuovo*, degenerates into specious rationalism precisely because it cannot serve as a justification for her sin, in her case, adulterous love. Quite appropriately, in his perceptive comments on Francesca's speech, Natalino Sapegno dwells upon the function of her syllogistic rhetoric, a smoke screen devised to detract her interlocutor's attention from her personal responsibility and sinful conduct:

Francesca non racconta la sua vicenda e tanto meno la caratterizza nei suoi termini particolari; ch  anzi, col richiamarsi a taluni enunciati di dottrina ormai fissati e consacrati in formule universalmente adottate, tende a riportarla a una situazione generica e per cos  dire impersonale, e per questa via si sforza di spiegarla e giustificarla, sottraendo l'impulso primo del peccato ad una precisa responsabilit  individuale, per trasferirlo sul piano di una forza trascendente e irresistibile: Amore. Di qui l'elaborata struttura del suo discorso [...] (*Ad loc*).

As a true poet and a lyrical poet at that, Ausi s intuitively grasps the organic integrity of the lover's experience which defies categorization and dichotomies in the abstract while it amalgamates the impulses of the emotive and intellectual faculties in the elusive structure of life itself. March's portrayal of the lover dramatizes, if nothing else, the wisdom of apprehending the complexity of human existence, of appreciating the limitations of even the most sublime emotions and the crisis of even the sharpest of intellects. Above all, the lover incarnated in March's poetic persona must come to grips with the conflictive interplay between will and reason without losing sight of the grand scheme of the all-important, ultimate harmony envisaged between Eros and Agape. So, the ultimate harmony implicit in March's syncretic vision stems primarily from his firm hold on the irreducible nature of human experience. The student of Ausi s March would be well advised to take into account D'Arcy's suggestion to those who propose to undertake a philosophical scrutiny of how the tendencies of Eros and Agape actually come to bear upon the vicissitudes of an individual of flesh and blood:

The reader should [...] bear in mind that no sharp divisions can be made at any one moment of their history between the two loves. It is always, we must remember, a full human person who is loving, and in that love there are sure to be many different strands. Thought will be there and emotion, joy and sorrow, self-regarding and self-forgetting desires, the longing for fusion as well as for beatitude. (69)

We also realize that Ausiàs has his attention riveted upon the notion of a synthesis comparable to the one which St. Augustine effected out of the «spasmodic intercourse»—D'Arcy's words—between Eros and Agape (D'Arcy, 74). Truly Ausiàs follows in the footsteps of the famed Archbishop of Hippo, who, in Nygren's words, «lives on the frontier of two separate religious worlds, those of Hellenistic Eros and primitive Christian Agape, and his significance lies chiefly in the fact that these worlds really meet in his person and form a spiritual unity» (quoted in D'Arcy, 74). In emulating this Augustinian vision of overall unity, March deals with the two planes of the lover's experience (the psychological and the ethical) without violating the uniqueness or the organic integrity of that experience. We have seen how, from his own ethical perspective, Ausiàs is able to envisage the symbiosis between the animal and the sublime, between *loco amor* and *buen amor*, or, to use his own terminology, *folla amor*, and *vera amor*.

By focussing upon the two salient characteristics that we have discovered in March's artistry—namely, his vision of a truly comprehensive span and his safeguarding of the fundamental organic integrity of the lover's experience—we come to appreciate his crowning achievement: while providing a cross section of the love literature of his epoch, Ausiàs discovers that at some level of the lover's consciousness there stretches a psychic space where Tristram's malady complements Percival's ecstasy and vice versa. By probing deeply into the inner workings of Ausiàs lyricism we eventually confront the mechanics of a radical metamorphosis whereby the language of Eros evolves into a new level of signification in the realm of Agape. Spanish writers of the fifteenth century provide ample evidence of that metamorphosis especially in their treatment of a motif which elsewhere I have called the «canonization of the lover» (Cocozzella, «The Thematic Unity»). Such canonized lovers as Ardanlier in Juan Rodríguez del Padrón's *Siervo libre de amor* or Leriano in Diego de San Pedro's *Cárcel de amor*, whom some

critics have regarded as *figurae* of the idealized lover or of Christ himself (cf. Cocozzella, «The Thematic Unity», Prieto, War-dropper), attest to the «many possible areas of creative interplay between secular and religious experience» (Tillier, 76)—an interplay to which Tillier and Macpherson dedicate illuminating studies. We may fully agree with Tillier when she states that the symbiosis between human and spiritual love in *cancionero* poetry is

significant not only for the study of fifteenth-century amorous verse but also for the development of *contrafacta* in Spain and for the poetry of sixteenth-century religious poets such as San Juan de la Cruz, Santa Teresa and Fray Luis de León, who were writing from a basis of an established poetic tradition in Spain as well as from their religious experience. (76)

Also, we conclude with D'Arcy that a transformation of Eros into Agape

must take place if the «passionate» language of many Christian mystics belongs to Agape and not to Eros. Many of the mystics use the language of night and death. St. Teresa of Ávila has a special liking for the images of courtly love, and it is difficult to justify them if these images always betoken the presence of Eros. (48)

This leads to the realization that, not unlike the aforementioned mystics who flourished after him, Ausiàs strove to sanctify Eros. There are passages in Ausiàs's *cants* in which the author explores both the human and the divine dimensions of the lover's experience and, thus, attains an insight into the existential link between the two. In an extended simile comprising two entire stanzas of one of his earliest poems (cf. 5, 9-24), Ausiàs goes as far as comparing his own persona—the lover as the «exemplary sufferer»—to the Second Person of the Trinity, manifested in the Crucified Christ. Even a cursory reading of these extraordinary verses cannot but convey their great impact:

II

- Axí com Déu, qui no'l plach descobrir
 10 stant enclòs en lo virginal ventre,
 e quant isqué defora d'aquell centre,
 may lo Setan lo poch ben discernir,
 ans, quant en ell veyal cors de natura,
 creya de cert aquell no ésser Déu,
 15 mas ja retut son sperit en creu,
 sabé'l mester que paradís procura.

III

- Per mals parlés he tret saber e cura
 de retenir lo foch d'amor sens fum,
 e per açò he cartejat volum
 20 d'aquell saber que sens amor no dura.
 Viscut he molt sens ésser conegut
 per molts senyals que fictes he mostrats,
 mas quant seré per hom foll publicats,
 serà ben cert lo tart apercebut.

(1:150)

We will have to leave for another occasion a thorough analysis of the full metaphysical, theological—indeed, Christological or Incarnational—implications of these verses. Let it suffice to state here that in his magnificent simile March establishes the solid basis for transforming the suffering of the human love into an *Imitatio Christi*. What remains to be analyzed, then, is Ausiàs's distinctive lyricism which combines metaphysical principles with the techniques of analogy in order to show forth the point of transition between the heights of human emotion and the transport of mystical ecstasy.

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