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The Catalan Poetry of Manuel Duran **Moraima De Semprún Donahue**

Catalan Review, Vol. V, number 1 (July, 1991), p. 197-219

THE CATALAN POETRY OF MANUEL DURÁN

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Manuel Durán's Catalan poetry appeared in print in diverse forms. *Ciutat i figures* as a book in 1952, others scattered in several NACS butlletins, the rest were published by the author in what he refers to as: «*Taller de poesia viatgera*, Barcelona-Mèxic-New Haven», with the added information of: «Imprès per l'autor al seu taller amb una ordenadora Mackintosh i una copiadora Canon. Orange, Connecticut»; dates differ and no pagination is provided in this later poetry. The rest of his poetry has been written in Spanish. However, except for *Puente*, his first known book of poems published in Mexico in 1946, his earliest work was Catalan. We therefore feel that he was unquestionably a Catalan author and creator of Catalan literature from the beginning of his literary life.

In the case of *Ciutat*, this poetry was later translated into Spanish, we assume by the author, and included in *Ciudad asediada*, Fondo de Cultura Económica, México D. F., 1954. Only minor changes can be noted from the original, for instance: «Artista adolescent» (9) is rendered as «El espectador» (3), and «Mes estàtues» (29) becomes «las estatuas» (81) and in this same poem «Grotesques en llur eterna» reads «gigantescas» for «Grotesques» in the Spanish version.

We will start our study of Durán's Catalan poetry analyzing *Ciutat i Figures*. Agustí Bartra, who writes a short prologue to this collection, sees a similarity in some of these poems with T. S. Eliot's «Unreal City» of the «Wasteland» but he insists this similarity is only superficial and that one cannot find any direct influence of the American poet on Durán:¹

¹ Years ago when I questioned Durán if he had a penchant for any particular writer, he admitted he favored T. S. Eliot, Octavio Paz and San Juan de la Cruz.

Amb tot, la coincidència amb Eliot no passa d'ésser superficial, i seria ben arriscat voler rastrejar en la poesia de Duran influències determinants d'aquest poeta nord-americà. (C, 6)

One notes very soon that this early Catalan poetry is very pessimistic, contrary to his more recent work. He does not have a very good opinion of mankind, whom he considers,

...gent flonja,
tova i vibrant con pops joiosos,
nedant en l'alegria indecisa i forçada de la nit
en què tot és possible, perquè s'ha acabat d'ésser home:
ara hom és una silueta grotesca, de cartró,...
...ja no som homes,
sinó monstres marins de cartró nedant en la llum blava
de la nit, com en el ventre plàcid i humit d'una mare gegant.
(C, 32)

Cities do not fare much better, as Agustí Bartra points out:

La ciutat—o les ciutats foses en una—és corrupta i damnada, polsosa, mecanitzada, sòrdida i vil, una monstruosa acumulació numèrica d'anonymats, una ciutat on «és impossible de somniar» i on els àngels han d'entrar disfressats de captaires. (F, 6)

An excellent example of Durán's attack on urban centers and urban living with its dirt, poverty, pollution, loneliness, is found in «Ciutat assetjada pels ocells»:

...la ciutat com un càncer immens,
cobrint tota la terra de despulles i cendres,
la ciutat feta d'amargues pues de ciment,
definitiva i total com una sentència de mort,
la ciutat on l'udol de les sirenes
segueix creixent, incontenible i magnífic,
i on les clapes d'ombra grisa
que senyalen els barris ja deshabitats

s'han estès fins al cor mateix de l'horitzó,
 les llars infectades, els morts que s'ignoren,...
 (C, 35)

Children are defeated even before they have a chance at life:
 «...els nens que corren pels terrats, amb el cap baix / i la mirada
 feixuga de crims sense nom» (C, 35).

It appears from this example and others we will illustrate later that there is the distinct flavor of surrealism in Durán's writings, in both his Catalan and his Spanish poetry.² Another excellent instance of this is found in «Els enemics» (C, 34) where the poet gives a nightmarish account of what it means to be a man surrounded by the frightening experience of an existence in a world in constant danger:

Tota la ciutat és plena de soldats estranys,
 Som nosaltres mateixos, disfressats de guerrers...

Nit i dia la ràdio parla, avisa, aconsella.
 Pels terrats corren capitans i noies
 estirant llargs fils de metall, clavant estaqués
 contra els enemics invisibles.
 Totes les portes es tanquen a la nit.
 L'alcalde no prova ni un tros de pa
 sense donar-se abans a la dona i als fills.
 Els diaris de la tarda, amb lletres color de sang,
 diuen que dos àngels, disfressats de captaires,
 han estat detinguts per la policia.

What is even more interesting about these selections, apart from their general themes, is the richness of their images and metaphors which reify abstraction such as:

² Manuel Durán's thesis for a Master's degree in language and literature from the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, is a study of surrealism in Spanish contemporary poetry. It was later published in book form by this same university in 1950 under the title of *El superrealismo en la poesía española contemporánea*.

...escales o músiques que uneixen amb plomes grises
els pensaments secrets i els cossos vibrants,
amb angles d'ombra en la nuesa tremolosa,
amb urpes de sang al cor eixut, esclatant en onades
d'ombra salvatge,...

(C, 32)

We will continue observing that the effect of reification is a favorite of Durán's, and that it gives his poetry a most unusual character. The poet takes an abstract concept and reifies it by making it into a living creature. In the following poem a portion of space is symbolized by a fish caught in a closed room and agonizes in a corner when it cannot scape. Eventually this space is conquered by man and woman who take it over and function as creatures of their own universe:

...L'espai,
com un peix sorprès,
s'agita feblement
i agonitza en un recó,
vençut.

Queden dempeus
l'home i la dona,
nus ja
sota una mirada implacable,
quatre vegades repetida:
esveltes sements
de la gran fruita quadrada,

(C, 13)

Notice the fascinating metaphors relating to fruits and walls that hold man and woman symbolizing the seeds which will conquer the space in which they live, and recalling Adam and Eve and the fatal fruit of Eden.

Later on «Space» is philosophically perceived as the con-

tainer rather than that which is contained. The poem refers to the vision given by «Els savis» to the world around them. Eventually this vision of reality is suspended in «l'espai / on plouen, invisibles, les idees pures» (C, 17).

Durán's fondness for giving life to objects and the phenomena of nature, gives rise to one of his favorite subjects, clouds which are «llampecs d'ombra / clavant-se amb un sospir en el cos nu...» (C, 32); gardens take on a personality becoming «jardins inquiets», harboring «parelles furtives, ... fonts nervioses». A trolley car becomes a «terratrèmol prefabricat», and «per la finestra els anuncis lluminosos, / bategar incessant de peixos elèctrics» (C, 21).

It behooves us to give a few more examples of some issues we have been discussing in *Ciutat*. For instance, the personification of objects, substances and atmospheric phenomena is especially well illustrated in the following cases. Cars are: «... feres que fugen d'una jungla en flames» (16), trees being «polsats sàviament / pel blau de la brisa, recobrat / els braços frenètics / de les xemeneies de la ciutat» (31). A church is thought to be «plena d'urpes per fora, de solitud per dintre» (23). A garden in a city lacks the freedom of nature, it is «jungla captiva» who is resigned to wait «concentrant tota la voluntat a les arrels eternes» (26). The center of the city «funciona com un cor monstruós» (28), and so on.

Concerning themes such as urban pollution, which can also symbolize the corruption of men and nations and innate pessimism that arises from that corruption, cities become the focus of the poet's critical intention. There are two poems clearly depicting these themes, one which ends the collection, «Límit de la ciutat» (36), the other, next to the last, «Ciutat assetjada pels ocells» (35), both surrealistic in their style and which unquestionably summarize the poet's vision. To quote them in their entirety would unnecessarily prolong this discussion but the most pointed lines are:

Els carrers s'han fet més vacil·lants,
ferits per una mà invisible
que ha arrencat grans forats polsosos
a dreta i esquerra, i aplanat
patis quasi infinits, plens de ferralla,
amb un fons de cel pintat
on grans dipòsits de gasolina i aigua
alcen llurs flors impures...

La ciutat acaba mansament, sense cap orgull
sense crits, amb algun petit grinyol
i el lamentar espasmòdic dels gossos.

...la ciutat com un càncer immens,
cobrint tota la terra de despulles i cendres,
la ciutat feta d'amargues pues de ciment,
definitiva i total com una sentència de mort,
la ciutat on l'udol de les sirenes
segueix creixent, incontenible i magnífic,
i on les clapes d'ombra frisa
que senyalen els barris ja deshabitats
s'han estès fins al cor mateix de l'horitzó,
les llars infectades, els morts que s'ignoren,...

...la ciutat on és impossible
somnia,...

la ciutat tèrbola com un pou en el qual no es reflecteix el cel,
immòbil, nua,
espera l'assalt dels que l'assetgen del cel.

There are four poems which appeared in NACS butlletins, three in the fall issue of 1985, number 22, p. 15, under the title of: «Tres poemes de Manhattan», the other «Tarda indecisa» in the summer of 1986, number 25 of the bulletin. Although the Manhattan selections were written many years after *Ciutat*, they nevertheless reflect many of the aspects we

have been discussing, such as themes, philosophical concerns, and poetic conceits the author is so fond of experimenting with. For instance the city is humanly depicted as a careless provider: «Mare difícil / terra de tots i de ningú», with symbols that portray its essence, «udols de les ambulàncies», buildings, the «Empire State», people going home from work, «corbant-se sota el pes de secrets», walking as «sonàmbuls silenciosos, / cap al Subway». However there is a distinction here; whereas the city of *Ciutat* is generally a hostile haven holding out to its citizens promises it will not keep, this city is more friendly, more beautiful, more in tune with its atmospheric surroundings where the sun «daura l'agulla / de l'Empire State / abans d'enfonsar-se silenciós i esplèndid...» and the «mercuri de les estrelles / aprenent a jugar a fet i amagat / entre els núvols / sobre la vella roda negra del cel».

«Espaces verticals», printed on the same page, gives one an upward feeling of being transported to spheric realms in which the poet, by simply contemplating the spiral effect of vertical corners, is able to reach otherwise impossible confines:

Em sento volar
 Sí és quasi com sentir-se volar
 quan segueixo amb els ulls
 quan acaricio amb els meus ulls
 l'angle vertical
 que puja i puja i puja
 i esclata finalment
 en retalls i quadrats de boira blava

The third one is more philosophical. It views a street, any street, as a symbol of life and what we make of it. The wind and the rain confuse the order of things: «Una vegada més el vent i la pluja / tot ho desordenen» giving a false perception of what is really there: «prestant un fals color rosa / als geranis del balcó», «geraniums» being one of the most prosaic and com-

mon of all flowers. Life goes on, there is no way to detain it but yes to alter it:

El carrer continua sense certesa
interromput i amagat per la pluja
per la boira i el vent...

It is now that we realize our perceptions have been false. We walk through life as actors in a movie set and what we think has been planned, worked out, has only been a series of improvisations:

Comencem a entendre:
tot el carrer és un estudi de cine
vivim dins un set de cine
algú es prepara a filmar-nos
sentim veus, llum, càmera, acció,
ens volta una música en sordina
i una vegada més
hem de tornar a improvisar
les nostres vides.

Many years later, Durán published the first of a series of short poems Haiku style entitled «Deu poemes d'hivern», «Deu poemes d'estiu escrits a l'hivern» and «Quinze poemes de tardor». Apparently the «spring» collection which would have completed the series has not appeared in print or otherwise. Notwithstanding, birth, youth, maturity and death are symbolically interpreted, even though the yearly rebirth of nature is not necessarily mentioned. The «winter» poems appeared in the *NACS Butlletí*, number 23 (hivern 1986), 16. «Deu poemes d'estiu» in the 30-31 number, most of the others, in «Taller de poesia viatgera», the exceptions being: «La caça», «El minaire sorprès», «Llac i cigne», «Boira i neu» and «La llum plena» which came out in the *NACS Butlletí*, number 26 (1986), 19. We note that the same reification we have alluded to before is present here as well. One new element is seen however, the concept

of Time, written in capital letter makes its appearance. This concept is not new to the poetry of Manuel Durán, in fact it plays a most important role in his Spanish poems, I discuss it thoroughly in its various symbolic meanings in my book *La poesía de Manuel Durán* (28). In this collection it is viewed as a devouring monster of life, as an enemy of mankind against whom we must fight at all times, and whom the poet tries to conquer by becoming eternal, he says:

I shall be outside of time.
Because I have burrowed into my body,
I will have consumed my space.
Free for the first time,...
I will immerse myself in eternity
(*Puente*, 110)³

In the «winter» collection time is simply personalized, nothing more:

És el Temps mateix, disfressat
de verd cavall de vent,
el déu que ordena i desordena el bosc.
(N. 16)

This same personalization is very often found in his Spanish poetry as well. The «llum blava» is «amagada a la boira del jardí». Water is again depicted in its humble quality, its sound «misteriós», the moon is:

Blanc suïcidi de la nit:
la lluna plena penjada
sota la branca del salze.
(N. 16)

³ All translations from the Spanish have been done by the author of this article.

Light is understood to have human qualities when «als vidres la llum plora de fred». All in all the poems symbolize the customary signs of winter: snow, cold winds, «cossos entumits», fog, the end of the season is described:

Un caliu verd dura dins cada planta.
Una espurna de joia brilla als teus ulls.
Calla, vençut, l'hivern darrera teu.

(N. 16)

In «Quinze poemes de tardor», the reification Durán is so interested in and does so well is quite evident. The moon, another mother nature figure who watches over the earth: «vetlla i salva la collita». The stars are friendly visitors from above: «...les estrelles ens visiten, / ens observen, i se'n tornen». Leaves «s'adornen, quietes» while «l'aire reposa a la branca». Water is once more humble, always «nua sota el cel / llibertat líquida meva».

There is a distinct connection between humanity and other forms of nature in these poems, whereas it does not appear in «Poemes d'estiu» or «D'hivern», for instance, thunder is asked to bring down a cloud:

Arquer, apunta cap a dalt,
esforça't, arc i cos en tensió:
voldríem caçar al menys un núvol.

(N. 19)

The fountain:

...aprèn a parlar
diu a penes dues paraules,
s'equivoca, i se'ns escapa.

(V)

The surface of a lake is a mirror whom the swan questions: «...quí és la més formosa?» The surface of the sea «Respira el mirall del mar; / respira boira i gavines» (V).

A pictorial quality in these poems is found in lines such as:

He cercat l'or i la plata
per muntanyes i valls:
ara fulles d'or i lluna tot m'ho donen.
(N. 19)

The poet, when admiring the beauty of nature, remembers a time when this admiration was intended for a woman:

Taques de sol a les branques.
Et recordo, nua,
amb taques de sol als ulls.
(V)

Young girls are symbolized by leaves:

Al final del camí
són tres noies que ballen
o un remolí de fulles seques?
(V)

The poet's body becomes a reality when

L'ombra i la llum de la tarda
van inventant el meu cos...
I els meus somnis, qui els inventa?
(V)

The imagination is further challenged when a «phantom», being what may, stealthy makes its appearance:

El fantasma s'atansa
sense remor: a penes respira
pàl·lid, sobre la pàl·lida vall.
(N. 19)

In «Deu poemes d'estiu» metaphors play a most important role. The images used are again, for the most part, of atmospheric nature; the main themes are: philosophical reflection on the perception of the beauty of nature and the shortness of our lives in which to experience its impact. Again Durán's constant companion, his personification and reification of objects and abstracting is evident. Mountains are «aquarel·les mullades» a song is born out of «les branques més altes, solitari», or «o / potser de les branques del meu somni», the sun, upon reaching its place in the sky, becomes «l'espasa lluminosa». Dust is a «serp» which curves around becoming «el camí». The moon acquires human personality, its reflection trembling in «les blavoses aigues d'aquest llac. / És por, fred, o modèstia? Res ens diu». The same interpretation applies to the poem called «El ritme» which reads:

La cançó de les ones a la platja
tan vella, no ha sapigut trobar encara
melodia o paraules: només ritme.

(N. 11, 12)

This series ends on a note of sadness when the poet realizes how limited our existence really is, and how little we have to account for:

Tot s'acaba

Els dies se'ns acaben: ara em sento
com el pobre que palpa a la butxaca
dues monedes de coure i una clau
Però ens queda el Record.

(N. 12)

With the exception of the final «Els núvols», the three poems found in the *NACS Butlletí*, number 28-29 (1987), 15-17, are thematically and stylistically slightly different from the poems we have discussed so far. There is a sensuous quality

to the opening one «L'illa misteriosa» hardly found in the others. The poet revels in the ambiance he wants to create which will enable him to enjoy the privacy and joy of the experience at hand. His «mysterious island» is a prosaic room which is changed into an enchanted dwelling by the presence of those therein:

...una illa misteriosa
millor que la descrita pel Jules Verne,
més íntima i més serena,
sempre soleiada i fresca,...

Fears, controversy, anger, war, all enemies of mankind have no place on this island. The poet intends to defeat them with his weapons: the beauty of words and the symbols they create:

...mentres afora, als voltants,
els mars inexplorats segueixen en tempesta

i allà, molt lluny,
cap un horitzó cobert de bruna
(o és, potser,
a la casa dels veïns)

lluïten ferotges exèrcits enemics.

A down-to-earth quality often found in Durán's poetry appears in this instance where his tone changes from the sublime to the commonplace. Their bed is their «castle», but the castle's banner is a woman's «stocking» which has been left at the head of the bed, yet nothing can destroy the intense experience of their love:

Abraça'm i besa'm,
fes que sempre duri, eternament,
el somriure
del sol i dels núvols blancs i les gavines
a la nostra illa misteriosa

mentres afora, al voltant nostre,
la temperatura gesticula amb braços d'escuma.
(N. 15, 16)

«L'enigma» is very much what the title suggests, a riddle puzzling over certain symbols and images which at first convey what appears to be a simple interpretation of a not very much traveled street in a Catalan city, most likely Barcelona, «ombrejat d'abets i de salzes», where originally we see a little girl running, then a mason smelling of his trade, and finally an old woman dressed in black. But then this would not be a «riddle», would it? Upon examining its contents with some measure of perplexity, we find, nonetheless, there is a certain logic in its thematic impact. The little girl is running because she is pursued by an «ombra llarga», in itself suggesting fear, perhaps even the pursuit of death, then the laborer is depicted as someone who has recently given birth to a new wall, thus he «feia olor a ciment tendre, / a paret acabada de néixer» which bears a wonderful similarity to a new born baby and its particular smell, all of which symbolize life. The woman, on the other hand, is not only old, but she resembles as well the mysterious frightful image of death. She is «pàl·lida i prima», her eyes are «profunds i lluents», cavernous therefore, and so the poet warns us: «—No li miris els ulls, / sobretot no li parlis ni contestis», further admonishing that one ought to run to one's home and «tanca bé la porta». This interpretation arises, not only from a careful examination of the poem, but also by the epigraph quoted from Agustí Bartra:

S'ha romput el fil d'aigua del meu somni...
Per què venen del record les falçs amigues
a segar camps, profunds d'any i rialles?
(N. 16)

«falçs» are both symbolic of Catalonia and of death.

The third of these poems «Els núvols» bears a distinct likeness to those found in «Deu núvols i un llampec», which we shall discuss later, specifically the ones which refer to the gentle action of the clouds in an environment of peace and tranquility. Here the effect of the clouds is to dissipate bitter thoughts and old terrors which besiege the poet: «els núvols esborren / meus records més amargs». The images remind us of an impressionist painting:

Pauses d'or entre l'ombra
d'un núvol i l'altra ombra,
d'un gris perla, del núvol
que el segueix...

...deixen la tarda neta,
ben ordenada,
amb tots els colors al lloc
que els correspon...

(N. 17)

The *NACS Butlletí*, number 34 (1989), published a collection of Durán's very short poems, none exceed three lines, entitled «Deu núvols i un llampec». The structural composition emulates steps executed in a ballet, the dancers are the clouds, the thunder the fawn, dangerous, but exciting. The author first starts in a playful tone in which the wind plays the role of a choreographer or a master of the ballet who arranges the clouds with his baton:

El vent, pastor de núvols, els separa i ajunta:
blanques, immenses noces a la jaça del cel.
La lluna puja, lenta. La pau es fa silenci.

(10)

The moon appears as the light slowly surfacing, as a soft floodlight coming from the floor of the stage. One does not

have much trouble visualizing the audience of one, the poet, watching the dancing of the clouds in the theater of the sky, wanting to participate in what he calls the «camins blaus del cel»:

Qui pogués trobar uns remes, uns remes forts i llarguíssims
per la barca de núvols que pel llevant s'avança
i sortir a l'aventura pels camins blaus del cel:

(N. 10)

As the tempo of the dancers progresses, so does the imagination of the perceiver. He questions his perceptions: «Són de cotó o de marbre?» He wants to engulf them in his embrace, as the prince would want to make love to the swan in the ballet «Swan Lake», but the clouds escape him: «esquerps, inacessibles» towards «un ponent daurant de llum al·lucinada». He continues questioning his vision and satisfies himself stating, «Ara ho sé», which is in fact the title of his next poem:

I ara tinc la resposta. No de cotó ni marbre:
són innombrables perles fetes pols, fetes vent,
pols d'estrelles llunyanes que ens parlen d'infinit.

(N. 10)

He is not satisfied with the scientific explanation that something so beautiful could be solely a mass of condensed watery vapor. His mood has changed, it has become openly philosophical, which is not surprising, since it is well known to the critics of the poetry of Manuel Durán that he is a poet-philosopher and that philosophy plays an important role in his research and intellectual interest which he often brings to his poetry. This philosophical mood is evident in the last line of the poem where Durán uses the name of Pythagoras as an adjective for «rhythms», wishing to evoke the Greek wiseman's belief in the soul as a fallen divinity entombed in man's body which is con-

demned to a cycle of reincarnation as man, plant or animal. We also note that Pythagoras was a student of the spirit and of nature, the study of which he considered a religion. Manuel Durán envies the clouds which can transcend time and space and be immersed in the beauty of sounds unheard by human ears, the music of the spheres.

The performance continues. The dancers have left the stage. Silence prevails. The poet calls his muse: the blue sky becomes the piercing eye of the atmosphere eternally observing the earth: «la fugida dels núvols / deixa un silenci clar des del mar a l'estrella / i uns infinits ulls blaus que ens miren sense treva». The prima ballerina is now at the center of the stage: «Alta torre d'escuma, dolç hereu de la tarda / caminant... sense treva, més lleuger que els ocells...» The viewer enchanted with her beauty becomes the worshipper: «...als teus peus vinc a ajeure'm, a l'ombra del teu cos». The rest of the dancers enter the stage again, «Ressaca de gavines»:

...sobre el daurat metall
del mar enlluernat pel ponent escarlata?
Són els núvols que tornen de viatges llunyans.
(N. 11)

Again the mood changes, this time it becomes foreboding. The fawn, accompanied by his court «la tempesta», makes his appearance: «Amb sudaris de boira, amb cabelleres d'ombra, / aquests núvols feréstecs pertorben el silenci. / Els meus ulls se m'enfonsen en bressols de tenebra» (N. 11). We can feel the wild crescendo in the steps of the dancers with the evil symbolized by «el tro» destroying the tranquility of the pastoral setting:

I el tro talla la fosca amb una negra espasa.
Els horitzons trontollen: els sanglots de la nit
sacsegen remorosos el somni de la terra.
(N. 11)

And the poet observer, again representing the audience, fears, but is seduced by the beauty and awesome quality of the ferocity of the dance:

L'èxtasi es torna esglai: sóc una estàtua immòbil
sota l'arbre de foc que un instant m'il·lumina:
un esquelet de sofre s'aixeca dins la boira.

(N. 11)

There is another poem which fits in very well with those we have been discussing, «Tarda indecisa», *NACS Butlletí*, number 25 (summer 1986), 33. Again we seem to be in front of an impressionist painting where the viewer enjoys the tranquility of the landscape in the sky and the summer colors of leaves and fruits. It is not difficult to observe that clouds comprise one of Durán's favorite subjects; here they are once more viewed as possessing a distinct personality, «...núvols quasi immòbils / naufraguen en un mar de llum,...» they wander in the sky toward a «horitzó incendiat» and then merge with «un temps invisible», but «feixuc indecís, / ple de peresa indulgent», which mingled with the lazy afternoon die in unison with periods of time that cannot be stopped:

I de sobte mirem al cel
i comencem a comprendre qui és,
com és, aquesta tarda indecisa,
just al moment en què s'allunya i mor.

The image of a lazy summer afternoon evokes in the reader the experience of past times and places.

The three poems under the title of «Tres poemes de la pedra: Arc Romà, a Tarragona, la catedral de Girona i Casa Milà a Barcelona», *NACS Butlletí*, number 24 (1986), are for the most part a tribute to Catalan architecture, ancient and modern, but they are more than that. The inherent qualities of stones, their hardness, durability, weight, color, are often shown in Durán's

poetry and as this title suggests, here they play a most significant role in carrying the poetry's symbolic nature. Most of these stones are city stones, sometimes firm, sometimes wrinkled, old and ugly, terse and firm as the body of a young man or woman. Their surface, their skin so to speak, can be white, pink, grey, brown, specked.

We'd like to point out that one of the author's best known Spanish language works, *La piedra en la mano*, has as its main theme this material in its various shapes and components. It is its symbolic meaning undoubtedly what makes them fascinating. They are viewed as living creatures endowed with the enduring patience of centuries of observation, they are eternally alive. They withstand the corruption of time: «Petrified time, matter without history, / the stone defies me, serene, indifferent...» (PM 17). They are mankind's allies both against death and against the void thereafter: «The stone defends itself: I learn its message, / to stand against death, fight against Nothing» (PM 12).⁴

Durán represents the «Arc Romà a Tarragona», the name of the first poem belonging to this short collection, in all its majesty: «s'aixeca abrupta / frase de pedra que no accepta contradiccions». The poet's imagination observing the marvel of the «Arc's» existence goes back to its origin endowing the structure with images of Roman gods silently observing the passing of time and people:

...Els vells déus romans
ens observen des de les línies fermes
de les pedres que el sol ha anat daurant,

⁴ The original for «Nothing» is «la nada». It is extremely difficult to translate «la nada» from Spanish into English since the Spanish has the philosophical meaning of a complete void after death, nothing will ever exist beyond this time, thus the word «nothing» in English is but a poor substitute.

que el vent i la pluja han esculpit,
 excavant arrugues i forats
 a la superfície llisa i dura
 a la pell duríssima de la pedra.

(N. 11)

The poet tries to conquer his own difficulties by evoking past history:

Diffícil mantenir-se ferm i dret
 difícil conservar a l'ombra, sota la gran volta
 el remor de la història, els ecos
 de petjades de soldats i de cavalls,
 el brogit dels carros de guerra del procònsul,
 quan tot ha canviat tant.

(N. 11)

He is saddened by the graffiti defacing the ancient beauty of the Roman arch, the insouciance of the pedestrian, the foul contamination of motorcycles and cars corrupting the surface which time had not previously altered, only the poet can leap into a past long gone and observe the phantoms of Scipio and Hannibal «...i ningú no sap veure flotar entre capitells / altius / el dos fantasmes lúcids que em visiten encara sovint / l'espasa nua a la mà / ...Escipió i Aníbal» (N. 11).

In «La catedral de Girona» (N. 12), the stones with which the cathedral was built become happy entities which created and shaped a monument to God and Girona. They are «Singing stones», «forts, alegres, decidits / treballant sense paga, per amor a la vida, / i a Déu, que sempre vetlla / per aquells que l'estimen». Metaphors describe the action of the workers: «martells» that «van repicar» even before the bells perform the ultimate function for which they were built. The personification of the stones is brought about by allowing them to be part of the team responsible for the creation of so much history, «I nosaltres creixent, més esveltes, més altes», shaping a

cathedral «alta muntanya màgica que cap al cel camina», that will never be a finished monument because,

Diuen que una catedral
mai no s'acaba del tot,
perquè l'esperança humana
tampoc vol acabar i sempre vol renéixer.

The third of these three poems is dedicated to the famous Casa Milà of Gaudí in Barcelona. This city plays an important role in the thematic interpretation of the work. Again it reminds us of some earlier poetry of Durán's, primarily the one found in *El lugar del hombre* and *Ciutat* which interprets philosophical cities and city life. Whereas in the cases in question the protagonists are identified, Barcelona and Mexico City, it is evident the poem can refer to any other center of city life. The city is no longer a place made of cement and mortar, buildings and thoroughfares, streets and neighborhoods, the city is much more than that, the city is the people who inhabit it, there is an assimilation of roles, one cannot exist without the other: «la ciutat enfeïnada i creadora». The «haughty stones» can see «el port i els vaixells / que van i vénen, joguines / passant pel pont de la mar blava».

These stones are also participants in the creation of time and beauty. The great Gaudí, sculptor of time, time imprisoned in the rocks that served to create his monuments to Catalan art and history, Gaudí the architect who created eternity in his work:

Però el savi que ens ha esculpit
sap combinar la geometria dels homes
i les línies pures de la terra,
dels arbres, de les plantes, de l'escuma...
som el passat, el present i el futur:
com la ciutat

que es projecta entre els dos rius,
 geomètrica i tentacular,
 nosaltres, les pedres del Gaudí
 també som eternes.

(N. 13)

This concept of testimony to Catalan architecture in its art form parallels Manuel Durán's personal commitment to Catalonia and the Catalan languages. Although the poet left his land of birth at a very early age, he nevertheless continued to think and write in his native tongue. Granted, his family went into exile first to France, then to Mexico and as a youngster he was much more exposed to Spanish, yet in his later years, the fondness and commitment felt for everything Catalan show that he never left his home. Therefore it is important to think of him as a twentieth century Catalan poet.

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