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Manuel Duran

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JOSEP CARNER IN MEXICO: AS I REMEMBER HIM

MANUEL DURAN

No one can doubt that the word «exile» is usually associated with sadness, loss, frustration, depression, even often anguish and despair. For me, however, exile—exile in France and in Mexico after the Spanish Civil War—brings back bittersweet memories. On the one hand, it is true, it meant sadness and deprivation. Yet there was an unforeseen bright side to exile: because of it I was able to meet great writers and scholars that otherwise I might not have met. They were exiled, most of them, just as I was, and that fact created an almost instantaneous bond between us, in spite of the age difference (I was considerably younger than they were). Josep Carner was one of the most impressive writers I was fortunate to meet during our common exile in Mexico.

In France, where I had fled with my family after Franco's victory, I had met another great Catalan poet, Carles Riba, and also scholars such as Antoni Rovira i Virgili and Pompeu Fabra, as well as a young writer who was working on novels and short stories but was as yet almost unknown, Mercè Rodoreda. In Mexico I would get to know other poets and scholars, such as Emilio Prados, León Felipe, Manuel Altolaguirre, Juan Larrea, Joaquim Xirau, José Gaos, Max Aub, the great Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, the distinguished Catalan poet Agustí Bartra. Later, in the United States, I met Jorge Guillén, Pedro Salinas, Juan Ramón Jiménez, Américo Castro, Luis Cernuda... the list could go on and on. Sharing my exile with them was an honor, getting to know them made me feel that, far from wasting my life, exile had become for me the best of schools.

Carner was 55 years old when the Spanish Civil war ended

and the exile of Spanish Republicans began. For years he had been living away from his beloved Catalonia because as a member of the Diplomatic Corps his duties had taken him to many countries and allowed him only short visits to his mother land. But, as he was to explain to us, there were many ways to be absent from Catalonia. His previous absences always implied a return. Now, with Franco in power, the possibility of going back had to be refused time and time again. He was no longer a diplomat, he had become one of us, one of the hundreds of thousands of Catalans who could no longer go back to Catalonia. Moreover, the years of war and of internal turmoil had scarred the very vision, the very memory he had of Catalonia. The war years had pitted Catalans against Franco's fascist forces, but also weakened, paralyzed or destroyed the Catalan bourgeoisie, the middle classes that had been the main driving force of Catalan nationalism. Hunger and devastation had taken their toll. Now the country loved under Franco as under a foreign power, in a neo-colonial relationship. It was forbidden to speak Catalan, to teach it, to publish newspapers, magazines and books written in Catalan. Catalonia, Carner told us, reminded him of Dulcinea, the woman idealized by Don Quixote in Cervantes' novel, the woman created practically by Don Quixote in his mind, who suddenly appeared to the knight in a new light, enchanted, turned into an ugly, uncouth peasant girl. For Don Quixote the new quest, all through the final chapters of the novel, would be to disenchant Dulcinea, to restore her to her previous resplendent beauty. That would also be our task with respect to Catalonia.

The years were difficult for everybody, for the Catalan patriots who had stayed in Catalonia and for the exiles, and also for the many millions who were already under the Nazi iron grip or under the several dictatorships that ruled so many countries. It was truly the Age of Anxiety described by the great English poet Auden. Carner tried his best to hope

against hope. He had been, as he told us, too long an Epicurean, and now he had to learn to be a Stoic. I found his attitude much more serene, better balanced, in a word wiser, than the viewpoint of the other Catalan poet I had met recently, Carles Riba. Riba and his family had shared a house with us in Montpellier in 1940 and 1941. After the French defeat, the fall of Paris and the occupation of half of France by the Germans, the other half not much more free under the Vichy regime, Riba had despaired of the future. The Germans were victorious everywhere. Perhaps our fate, he claimed, would be cultural extinction, or at best a destiny similar to the Provençal language and its writers, and Catalan was destined to become a dead language, to be studied in Graduate schools but no longer to be spoken and to be part of the creative process of a people. Riba knew German very well, also Classical Greek, Latin, and perhaps seven or eight other languages. He listened too often to the Gennan broadcasting stations, which annoyed everyone else in our house, since we were always trying to listen to the B.B.C., where we could find at least a ray of hope. We trusted it, we knew that it seldom lied, at best it tried to present the best side possible to the anguishing war scene. Occasionally it broadcast propaganda slogans, yet in a way that we were aware that they were slogans and not news. One of such slogans told us that «in 1941 no one will be able to eat bread, in '42 not even God will find food, yet in '43 miraculously everybody will speak English». This was its Spanish version:

El año cuarenta y uno
no comerá pan ninguno.
El año cuarenta y dos
no comerá pan ni Dios.
¡El año cuarenta y tres
todo el mundo hablará inglés!

Riba was so pessimistic that he made us feel the Allies had

no chance to win the war and Hitler together with Franco would dictate our future. Carner, on the contrary, gave us reasons to hope and feel very much a part of the new world that would follow the war and Hitler's defeat, a democratic, free world where Catalonia would find its proper place.

This does not mean Carner was free from doubts and anguish. If we try to read his inner thoughts in the pages of the long philosophical poem he wrote during his first years as an exile, *Nabí*, we find mainly question marks. Jonah is the hero of this Biblical poem, yet he is not a typical epic hero. His relationship with God is as tormented and as full of surprises as Job's. Human destiny is never clear, never free from danger and error. Are we quite sure God loves us? Perhaps He is only playing with us, experimenting with us. Perhaps we are only the guinea pigs that will allow God to build a better world, one free from disease and death.

In any case Carner realized that literature could no longer be playful, as in the Twenties. The world had become too tragic a forum for it. Irony, satire, verbal games, were not enough to express a human horizon where Auschwitz and the battle of Stalingrad were happening simultaneously. If the chaos created by World War I had in part created or reinforced the avant-garde movements, Dada, Cubism, Surrealism, it would be left to World War II to close the cycle and make these movements look slightly out of fashion.

Carner and his wife, Émilie Noulet, a distinguished Belgian critic and professor, arrived in Mexico in February of 1939. Carner had visited Mexico previously, in 1929, and had written an article praising the picturesque and dramatic aspects of Mexican history and daily life.¹ He adjusted to his

¹ For a detailed account of Carner's years in Mexico see Albert Manent, *Josep Carner i el Noucentisme. Vida, obra i llegenda*. Barcelona: Edicions 62, 1969, esp. chapter XIV, pp. 269-280. See also my essay, "Josep Carner: Clasicismo, vitalismo, intimismo (y algo más)," in *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos*, No. 412, October 1984.

Mexican exile with relative ease. Soon after his arrival he was appointed to a chair at the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters of the University of Mexico, where he taught Comparative Literature. He also became a member of the prestigious Colegio de México. His knowledge of modern languages made him welcome to the newly created Fondo de Cultura Económica, the great publishing house directed by Daniel Cossío Villegas, which published several works by Milton, Bacon, and Vico, translated by Carner. He contributed often to the most important literary and political reviews and magazines created by the Spanish Republican exiles, such as *Romance*, *España Peregrina*, *Las Españas*. He even had his own magazine, the bilingual *Orbe*, subtitled «Revue Latine de Culture Générale», sponsored by the Gaullist movement, and publishing in both Spanish and French, with distinguished contributors such as Jules Supervielle and Denis de Rougemont. Carner became a good friend of several first-rank Mexican writers, such as Alfonso Reyes. Carner also helped create other magazines, such as *Revista dels catalans d'Amèrica*, *Full Català*, *El Poble Català*. *La Nostra Revista*, *Lletres*. In a word, he became the most visible, the most applauded, the most distinguished Catalan intellectual in Mexico.

Before I met Carner I had made the acquaintance of another Catalan poet, younger than Carner but somewhat older than myself, Agustí Bartra. Bartra was always full of projects, an enthusiastic man capable of writing not only poetry as we understood it, lyric poetry, but also epic poetry. He did translations, wrote plays, essays, novels. He was, together with his wife Anna Murià, a member of the select group of friends and admirers that met Carner often, sometimes twice a week, in a coffee-house in the downtown area of Mexico City. Pere Matalonga, Miquel i Vergés, Pere Calders, Jaume Terrades, Jordi Vallès, Miquel Ferrer, and myself, were the other members. I was the youngest and seldom spoke. Listening to Carner was always a pleasure. He

seldom talked about himself or his poetry. His monologues were always witty and enlightening. He talked about literature, politics, history, philosophy, religion. Anecdotes about great men and women he had known were his specialty. More than anything else what was surprising in his monologues was the fairness with which he treated everybody, both his friends and his adversaries, and also his sense of humor and the mild irony which was his main offensive and defensive weapon.

A new literary magazine, *Lletres*, had been proposed by Bartra, and Carner accepted to be its mentor. I was to run errands, gather addresses, and eventually contribute to the magazine. My first essay was read by Carner and underwent a critical review. Carner pointed out that I had used several mixed metaphors and had repeated myself in two or three paragraphs. He managed to make my article more readable, more compact; briefly, more effective. He did it without pedantry, without hurting my feelings, making me feel that every improvement actually came from me, not from him. I realized then that he was not only a great poet and a clearheaded critic, but also a great diplomat.

Carner was generous in his praise, yet discerning. Two among his friends were the object of his admiration, Bartra and Pere Calders. His judgment was to prove accurate. Bartra became one of the most distinguished contemporary Catalan poets, the author of a rich and complex opus, mainly lyric poetry, but with important texts that reach epic overtones, and also the author of lucid essays and interesting plays. Calders is the author of short stories that in my opinion have no rival in contemporary Catalan letters, short stories that in their inventiveness and unfettered imagination can be compared to the best texts by Kafka, Julio Cortázar, Jorge Luis Borges.

Although, as I have stated, Carner did not like to talk about himself and his poetry, he was aware that his work was

subject to revision and criticism on the part of younger writers. In Mexico he was not without detractors. Joan Sales and the team of *Quaderns de l'Exili*, a literary and political magazine, did not hesitate to attack Carner time and time again. They saw in him the representative of a Catalonia that had failed politically and culturally, and accused him of being frivolous, bloodless, too intellectual. Carner never took to heart their attacks and told us he refused to make them happy by acknowledging their negative statements.

In Catalonia, too, Carner's star was under a cloud. The young critic Joan Triadú was preparing his *Antologia de la poesia catalana (1900-1950)*, which appeared in 1951, and it was rumored that in it Carner's poetry was treated harshly. Elegant, yet superficial, was the essential, and essentially wrong, opinion emitted by Triadú. Carner from his Mexican exile was probably not aware of Triadú's strictures. Yet he did see clearly, not without bitterness, that his books were now forbidden in Catalonia, his name was unmentionable in the press published under Franco, his works published in exile could not reach any reader in Franco's Spain. A poet whose audience had been a whole country, a poet who had been proclaimed Prince of Catalan Poets, saw suddenly his public diminished to perhaps a dozen faithful friends in a modest coffe-house in a foreign country, Mexico, a country where no one, or almost no one, had heard of Catalonia, Catalan literature, least of all of Josep Carner, Prince of Catalan Poets.²

Yet if he was bitter, we were not aware of it. He seemed to be as optimistic and energetic as ever, a man in love with life, with poetry, with art, with every pleasure life could offer. He realized, as he pointed out to us, that most of his previously published work was not suited to an age of utter stupidity and total cruelty, an age that could be described in

² For his literary output during the years in Mexico and beyond, see Loreto Busquets, *La poesia d'exili de Josep Carner*. Barcelona: Editorial Barcino, 1980.

Rimbaud's sentence, «*le temps des assassins*», the Age of Murderers. New horrors might come, yet our duty was to endure, to wait for better weather the way plants and trees wait for Spring under the snow.

From 1939 to 1953 no book by Carner was published in Catalonia. Most of his early books were out of print and even when available could not be sold openly in any bookstore. Carner was of course fully aware of it. «A lesson for me, for all of us, he would state. «Fame is fleeting. The main thing is not to give up.» And he claimed that, of course, within the context of the general disaster in Catalonia, Spain, all of Europe, the prestige and influence of a single individual was a subject utterly devoid of interest. The only thing to be remembered for all of us, and especially for him, he told us, for him who had known only success and adulation during all his life, was a lesson in humility, one more step towards stoicism.

Towards the end of August 1945 Carner and his wife left Mexico and travelled by boat to Antwerp, Belgium. Europe had been liberated. Belgium was closer to Catalonia than Mexico. Belgium, moreover, was his wife's country. Carner would return briefly to Mexico in 1955: his son had remained in Mexico, married, and Carner was anxious to see his grandchildren, Françoise and Josep. In 1967 he returned once again for a few months, as his wife Emilie had been invited to give a course on French literature. On both occasions the Catalans who resided in Mexico greeted him with admiration and love, paying homage to him in several meetings and testimonial dinners. All negative criticism forgotten, Carner appeared to us once more as the best and purest poetic voice of Catalonia, a living symbol of Catalan culture, and those of us who had been lucky enough to meet him and listen to his voice would remember our experience for the rest of our lives.

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CARLES RIBA ON JOSEP CARNER:
FOUR STUDIES
(1914-1929)

LA PARAULA EN EL VENT
SOME THOUGHTS ON THE BOOK
BY JOSEP CARNER

Since Carner's work would appear to have been presaged and contained in its entirety inside the covers of the amazingly rich the *Verger de les galanies*, every time a new book of his is published we are made anxious by a curious, seemingly unsatisfied, wish for «unification». Each collection of poems, standing alongside other collections, and each poem standing alongside the other poems in the same volume, to my mind look vaguely like unconnected poetic offerings and, to a certain extent, even strange in comparison with each other, the reason for this, perhaps, being that they all come together, woven by invisible threads into one central idea which governs, invigorates and penetrates them, and yet only the poet knows the marvellous secret, a secret he might never reveal to us. Who knows if, should the time ever come to reveal it, this might not be mysteriously followed by a great silence, as happened when the «Cant espiritual» emerged out of Maragall's inspired mouth? And who knows, maybe when all is said and done, this is nothing but sweet deceit on the part of Carner's words, so suggestive are they in their rich and sonorous pageant, words that entice us to seek out and look for an «Enllà» that is always just beyond our grasp? In order that these words may have their «Enllà» and be an end in themselves, like the tender landscapes that stretch beyond the open windows in the background of some Titian painting. Also, Carner's subjectivism, the individual stance he adopts in the face of and amidst all that constitutes the occasion for his poems, imbues his words with a life outside the poet's own life, and therefore makes them infinitely more rich in a variety of ways. It is as if he has stepped outside himself and into an exterior reality; and only then can he look at himself

with detachment and talk about himself as if he were one of the many elements he sees all around him, the sharp vision of which is no longer hidden from his eyes because of the simple, fluctuating and uncertain vision—more «musical» than «poetic»—of his own inner self. Carner's position in this respect—hardly ever contradicted in any of his works by fleeting rhetorical moments—links him directly, and such as is rarely seen in other modern poets, with the finest Greek lyric poets. Not for him a passive wait for the most intense moments to take on a poetic form; every second of his life, and the whole of his life, he uses to speak the beautiful words and to sing the beautiful music he carries within him. Moreover, this attitude makes his sense of «irony» unique through Catalonia. He maintains a proper distance from himself, thus freeing himself from his passion yet without killing it, putting his heart to one side, without talking refuge in reason; were he just a little bit closer to his initial passion he would become vague, pathetic, even, if you like, a danger which he skilfully doesn't try to avoid altogether; two lines from the *Verger de les galanies* come to mind:

Fins al caire del pecat
l'he volguda, i ara és morta:¹

as do words form one of his sonnets «Un clavell» (A Carnation): and from the recent *La paraula en el vent*, fleeting cadences from «Serenada d'hivern» (Winter Serenade) or «La bella dama que no vol cantar» (The Beauty who doesn't want to sing). Had he gone one step further, he would have been lecturing. Perhaps this tendency is made vaguely apparent in some of the poems contained in this latest collection (already published at an earlier date and dismissively described as obscure by some idle minds; add to this the sweet tragedy of

¹ To the borderline of sin / I have wanted her, and now she is dead;

the barely half a dozen militant poets who know Catalan grammar...). Like some element of seriousness which from time to time obstinately enters the field of vision, slowing it down, causing it to become somewhat reflective. This poet, then, who goes on looking at things in order to «put names to them» (a form of creating; perhaps the true creation of lyrical poetry), is in contemplative mood, and through his poetry the severe, serene judgment battles only timidly against the whole range of beautiful things that refuse to be overlooked. Here is a magnificent, fleeting succession of clear and sharp sensations, as might, perhaps, only be found in the finest poems of the earliest literary works. Here and there the interposition of the image gets slightly in the way of this long vein of sensual pleasure, with the intellectual pleasure of discovering «the conjoint and simultaneous existence of two different things», or rather, as Coleridge would have said, of finding difference in what is similar, and identity in what is dissimilar. (For an exemple of this tendency, which is not entirely new, only now more accentuated in *La paraula en el vent*, see the following sonnets—«Divendres Sant» (Good Friday), «El viatge» (The journey), «L'ars» (The Hawthorn), «En terra estranya» (In a Foreign Land), «Conort» (Consolation), as well as «L'hora baixa en el temple» (Late Afternoon in the Temple), etc.). The power, which in Carner is immeasurable, to embrace all things in all their mysterious and surprising relationships, along with a torturous, clear presence in the ongoing battle between that which is limited within us—perhaps it would be more accurate to say «outside» us—and that which is infinite and divine. These inform albeit vaguely, at least in appearance, as was said earlier all his poetry: from the most serious exacerbation of the second of these, such as found in the satire of the collection *Auques i ventalls* (thrown into sharp relief by the ridiculous nature of the things he's writing about), and again in *La paraula en el vent*, for instance in the sonnet

«Descreeença» (Disbelief), to the sweet prevalence of the first in the poems on love or friendship contained in other books, in particular this latest. *Prevalence*, only, not annihilation of this conscience. Only once in a while does this conscience create the satire. Witness the voluptuous, tenuous sadness (never, on the other hand, far away from the highest manifestations of true Beauty, as Poe would have said) that floods the spirit after one has read *La paraula en el vent*. Like a rush of impatience coursing through every word. The disproportion that the poet «suffers» without searching out any satisfying explanation: the disproportion between desire and will, on the one hand, and the even more powerful, unattainable forces he refers to as «Fate» («tancat mon finestral amb l'eura del destí»²), on the other. Here is resignation, but words have overtones of mad, desperate, anxious joy, an anxiety not found in the anacreontic alexandrines, because inquietude substitutes ignorance or forgetfulness for what is the eternal «enllà». Yet conformity alternates with inquietude, and is almost always victorious.

If somewhere he writes:

¿Per què veurem un dia encara,
passat el vespre de paor,
si quan s'aixequi l'alba clara
ens trobarem sense l'amor?³

or, at the end of the wonderful «Romanç de la lluna clara» (Romance on the pale moon), where he summarizes all those questions which are so deeply human,

faré caure les parpelles
i la testa giraré,

² my window blocked off by the ivy of Fate.

³ Why there is another day to come, / once the evening of fear has passed
what if when clear dawn breaks / we should find ourselves without Love?

per no veure la misèria
d'un novell començament;⁴

if he feels the peremptory fugacity of time, and he writes the vehement «Cançó de la instància amorosa» (A Song to Courtship), in which the motif «now is the hour» is obstinately repeated like a churning anxiety, he will also be able to experience «new thoughts», and the «divine consolation of a moment that stands still», and, more than all the world has to offer, its gold and its honour, love like a «lovely custom». Adopting a «custom» of anxiety and pleasure, here is the sweet secret of this book which Carner himself offers up to us like «a sad love story». The «custom» gives his already mobile words something of the nobility of muscles freely flexed. Always «irony», far from being in spasm, far from twisting. And always the spirit is the sole and smiling master of the form. There is something beyond mere supreme mastery of the technique. At least, this does not emanate solely from study of vocabulary or rhythm. It is the word in all the purity of its self-expression, without its either being mixed in with or interfered with by other expressions which might be extraneous; it goes as far as it needs to go, yet never further; it also renounces, when it has to, although it never turns into vague Verlaine-type music. It is so sure of itself that from time it begins to practice a delightful feat of balancing, always with the interminable smile of the gymnast keeping his efforts to himself. The impression is of every poem having been conceived wisely and in consideration of its scope and means of composition, and in a flash, there it is, like Pallas sprung fully formed and armed from the brain of Zeus. Moderated by means of this word, we need never fear any glorious sensuality nor any

⁴ I will allow my eyelids to droop / and turn my head to one side / so I don't see the misery / of a new beginning.

subtle conceptism. See for example the vast ever-present, even slightly complicated, image (with such an illustrious lineage in the classical Catalan tradition, and even further back in the past) found in the following sonnets: «L'absència» (Absence), «Esperança» (Hope) and «Acabaments» (Endings). And only through that word has it been possible to arrive at the purest nobility and redemption of the language, in this genre of the Carnerian «song», only gently influenced by the procedural resources of our popular songs. Carner's songs fall between the sweet, sweet warmth of the Italian genre (remember, for example, the Piedigrotta annual competition), and the almost «sensible» lyricism of English poetry. This owes less to the blandness of Moore or the somewhat wild impulse of Burns than to the robust, carefully crafted contours of the noble classicism of Shelley, one of the poets (if not the only one), with whom Carner has more in common. («I arise from dreams of thee / In the first sweet sleep of night, etc.» and «Rarely rarely comest there, / Spirit of Delight, etc.»: poets—and perhaps even the rest of the world — seem similar or not similar from their position towards things rather than from the things they say). And going back through all these poems, from his miraculous renaissance in the «Cançó d'un doble amor» (A Song of Two Loves) from the *Verger de les galanies* to the tragic air of «Serenada d'hivern» (Winter Serenade) from *La paraula en el vent*, to some extent makes us realize that it is easier for literature to ascend the heights of heroic ode than overcome the simplicity of the «song».

(*La Veu de Catalunya*, 18.VII.1914)

BELLA TERRA, BELLA GENT

I

There are poets in whom the adventure—rather than being «arbitrada»¹ appears instead to be suffered, either in the world of external action or inside themselves, were they also find an adventure ground—is translated directly into lyrical creativity, working in total, or at least partial, collaboration with the imagination. Among every thousand examples of this we come across a Byron or a Baudelaire.

On the other hand, there are poets who have a tranquil outlook—in their own particular world or the world of external sensations—on the varied passing of time. It is as if they were berthed in harbours alive with images, with representations, stimulating chords, words that radiate their brilliance, that are unloaded there in the port. They choose from amongst them, demonstrating strict moderation or extreme opulence, and afterwards they forge their poem. At one and the same time they create both enthusiasm and the word. The former pay for the song with a drop of their blood:

poète, notre sang nous fuit par chaque pore;

the latter pay for the song with a song. We can find no purer example of this than Josep Carner.

With the former, the problem of sincerity refers to the very content of the poem: rather it is a question of ethics. With the latter, on the other hand, sincerity is a condition appended to the act of creation: it's a question, therefore, which is entirely artistic. Thus the former, even when they

¹ Translator's Note: Riba uses this word as defined by Eugeni d'Ors.

wish to be objective, cannot avoid being to some extent auto-biographical. But the latter, even in the most personal of their poems, retain the angle of vision that their sense of sober judgment took in respect of the diverse objectivity: in other words, even in the most extreme subjectivism they will be broadly objective; their biographical reality is their own song; in their song they find their true freedom, whilst the former scarcely find liberation through their poetry.

That is why poets like Josep Carner govern their work by a rule: diversity lies within this rule; but not surprise. Adventurous poets, in contrast, either give themselves up to wandering surprise, or embrace, paradoxically, some sort of programme (Baudelaire referred in a note to *Les Fleurs du Mal*, of his «painful programme»).

This Carnerian rule is, as we have been indicating, to objectivize. In other words, everyday activities, *aurea mediocritas* (a phrase, this one, ennobled by Horace), the customs recreated at every minute, ironic curiosity that is a general love with two bright, clear eyes. To put it differently, living through poetry, if you like, living with this creative exchange between the poet's own inner world and the realities of the world outside; it is not, however, to live life through poetry as a form of romanticism, this is the saddest mistake of all. (Where the poet lives his life through his own poetry we would be faced with a case of true moral want, known colloquially by the name of literature).

Consequently Carner's work cannot be ascribed any rigorously architectural intention. A pure lyric poet does not construct a vast monument, one that has been carefully worked out in advance, in their air; rather he sings tirelessly in time. We repeat, he observes the passing of each ever changing day, and chooses because he is free to do so; he suffers from no assaults from this passing of time. His lyric creation is a little bit of eternity, which two mean dates cannot impose any limits on: for the poem, all eternity is somehow

contained within it just as the river is contained in the water that flows on and never returns.

One isolated poem by Carner, more than a geometric shape, rigorously balanced, is a lyrical pretext which richly broadens out, like revealing, layer upon layer, new, unexpected, deep associations that the poet will discover. The same thing happens with each part of each poem; let us quote at random:

[...] blau safiri
i núvols que s'estufen de mirar-se
a l'aigüerol que es gronxa en el camí.²

Strictly speaking, this has been the story of his literary output to date: each new book, a further broadening. Like a lovely tree, which with the passing of the years produces a richer crown, and where each branch is multiplied, but always in a manner which is essentially rational, varied, and although the secret is staring us in the face, in turns out to be unpredictable, resulting in our admiration.

This sweet, extremely diverse, fatality which binds each new branch to the trunk is nothing more, in the lovely tree as well as in Carner's work, than that constructive sincerity we have already referred to.

II

Bella terra, bella gent is, in its whole, a triumph, a lyrical *Triumphus* of the spirit. In this sense, it is the culmination of that patriotic poetry which has always been present during our own Renaissance, and which indeed was the first voice to be heard in that Renaissance.

² [...] sapphire blue / and clouds happily content with their reflection / in the stream that meanders along the road.

Catalan nationalism is said to have started out as an Elegy which has today transformed into a Mission.

Our patriotic poetry, before anything else, contrasted the race with its own past; it was an evocation of great deeds, adorned with sad or angry laments, yet an evocation intimately satisfied: the poetry—whether you like it or not—redeemed from the every day anecdote. It was epic poetry filtered through history and sung by the lyrical poets. The document kindled, yet at the same limited both the poetry and the politics of the day.

A new voice was heard: a powerful intuition of this lyric poetry of the present was opening up new perspectives on the future. The Catalan race was looking ahead, thanks to the magic of the Poet-Prophet, half visionary, half public orator: the isolated elegiac voices raised together in one chorus.

Finally, when the building of a reality which was both alive and present began to fill the void, encompassed by the dream of the past, and the future, the Catalan race was being compared with its own self, in other words, defined. *La ben plantada* ascended to the Catalan heaven on the wings of a numeral idea of the race, the archetype of perfection and a role model. In parallel with this, throughout the whole work of Josep Carner, and in a more concrete form, in the poems collected under the title of *Bella terra, bella gent*, the Catalan spirit was not merely sung about, but represented in the diversity of its truest instincts, its enhanced sensibility, its creation of the Catalan notion of good common sense and its defence of irony.

There is no doubt that in centuries to come Catalans will still encounter the essence of that unique era in the rebuilding of their nation in these three wonderful little books *La nacionalitat catalana*, which enshrined the essence of the Law; *La ben plantada*, a revelation of Rhythm; *Bella terra, bella gent*, representing Character.

Character not in the sense of aspiration, but in the sense of what is already possessed:

fés que les gents estranyes comencin de comprendre
la glòria que ens has dat.³

This is why this book is fundamentally optimistic in its outlook. To possess a free and rich present reality: the act of bringing to mind a painful past, or of reflecting on what the future might hold, poses no danger, even if the future appears «pathless» or «rudderless», because an «illusion», which in this respect signifies will, guides those embarked on an adventure and provides them with absent instruments and gives order to their unguided efforts. Memory and hope are thus subject to the discipline of the Mission: their union is not accomplished and no weak son can be born of this union, this weak son is the Longing for the past that could slow down the journey of those who sailed across the sea to found colonies on the distant shore of the ideal, or dilute again in an elegy those who are structuring a new fatherland on the old land.

Other Catalan poets—Sagarra, for instance—have sung about man drawing nourishment from the sap which rises from the bitter earth: these were two widely used terms which tended to penetrate and confound each other. In Carner's last book, on other hand, an individual humanity, aware of itself and sensitive, is opposed in a balanced way against a specific landscape. From the very beginning the two things are knitted together: Man projects his «arbitrarietat»⁴ onto the landscape, the landscape projects its sweet fatality onto man. Man wins when he recognizes within himself an awareness not only of himself but also of the landscape. Then, for the painter, the

³ make foreigners start to understand / the glory you have given us

⁴ See note 1.

human form, in the rhythm of its own lines, springs up spontaneously from the landscape as its final and most perfect expression; the lyric poet feels:

la força tota vella i humil que ens agermana¹

man and landscape; and work and rest, happiness and sorrow, questions and answers, share with the house and the mountain, and the sea and the city which are his, one single meaning, profound and vivid, which is common to all.

The landscape has been changed into a fatherland, and the awareness which has been expressed has transformed into sovereignty.

An egocentric lyric poet would not have managed to arrive at this result; what was needed was a poet with a gift for being agile in objectivizing, in other words, putting on a multifarious display such as the poet who wrote *Bella terra, bella gent*, in order to re-work the racial spectrum without its becoming an abstraction or being reduced to some all-encompassing symbol; rather, to represent it in all its harmonious diversity, its secular victory, its universal humanity and its patrimonial peculiarities. In order words, as we have been insinuating since the beginning, in the Triumph of its Character.

(*La Veu de Catalunya*, I: 7.XII.1918 and II: 17.XII.1918)

¹ The force, old and humble, that makes us brothers.

L'OREIG ENTRE LES CANYES

With some poets—some of them our own—the creation of lyric poetry occurs through a rather critical process. With them, curiosity appears to make more demands than imagination. Stronger than the impulse to present some immediate representation is the impulse to speculate on the poetic hand they have been dealt, a hand which is complete and elusive. In order to have mastery over this hand, the parts are disassembled, becoming more vague, their individual components reduced to abstract formulae, easier to understand because they are wider in their generalities, or to symbols more readily understandable in their apparent plasticity. They are lyrical poets on the rebound, through the coincidence of finding themselves in musical mood at the moment of this critical excitement. Through the force of a rhythm, applied with an inflexible will, they then arrive at a reorganization of the poetic hand they have been dealt, colonized, you might say, in independent poetical works. However, what if during this process, which is almost a fight with something that is more subtle and winged than intelligence itself, the divine butterfly has slipped away, leaving nothing between the impatient fingers «except the shade of its escape»?

In contrast, in the lyrical poetry of Josep Carner it is as if the intelligence encompassed everything yet without rummaging through it. The lyrical pretext is not broken down into individual images, rather they are used to clothe it around, and before our eyes it turns, like a gemstone, with a thousand flashes of light radiating from its various facets; from time to time, from one of these facets there leaps a spark of moral truth. Sensations and emotional tinglings, epic visions and dramatic figures, but everything remains unchanged, kept integral in its appearance; no need here for penetration using in-depth analysis. It is not the sounding of

a world which is tormenting us with the mystery sometimes of its conflicts, sometimes of its happiness; but rather the reproduced contemplation of a world which is an idealized reflection of our own; in which the various forms reveal themselves in their full significance, illuminating many of the tenuous relationships which exist between them, natural and at times even unsuspected. And life pulses in it, taking different directions, at different speeds, obedient to laws to which the poet himself gives service without twisting them, like a smiling god. Hence that absence of shortness of breath, of clashes, even in opposition, and this is one of the first impressions readers of Josep Carner's poetry have of his work.

The form: that is to say the words. The touchstone for the purity of lyric poetry might be as follows: has the word become more expressive than it usually is? And this not as a result of some system of given values, accepted definitions—even if derived from the poet's own style, it doesn't matter—being applied, most, by resorting to a key, as happens with the School of poetry we spoke about earlier, and where the language of the poet more closely resembles the languages of science. Only through a light which is caused to shine out from every word every time it is spoken and in every place where it is to be found, and only at that specific moment, in that specific place; an ineffable musical enhancement that pushes back the frontiers of the world, that lends the word an echo of that primordial melody of which lyrical language, according to the famous theory, is nothing more than a symbolic representation, and thanks to which, through a word, we appear to be put in touch with «the true essence» of something. It is this fidelity, which is never betrayed since an effort is made (as fidelity is an active force), nourished by inspiration (a primary irrational impulse, which cannot be ignored), and sustained by art, that constant fidelity to the authentic musical essence of lyrical poetry, that is the secret of the outstanding quality of Carner's verse. Every word

redeems itself within the music: Among the words we find wise nuances of expressive intensity, clever dissonances; but they never lack nobility. We are beyond everyday syntax and language: the poetry has been transformed into a joy sported on festive days. Any reader taken in by the normality—apparently gratuitous—of this talent, and this poetic art of Josep Carner, upon reading the work of any other poet in whom a lack of musicality from time to time causes his acts of verbal derring-do to creak, might come to actively admire Carner again.

It is this musical game, this prodigious power over melody and rhythm—and we must not forget here that alliteration and rhyme are parts of that rhythm—that we might say is the source of the poet's enthusiasm. To put it another way: even when he is so warmed, he manages to objectivize himself; let's put it in yet another way: lyric enthusiasm happily stands apart from the poet and is yet alive in every work, both its quality and degree being peculiar to every work. This inexhaustible talent for lyrical objectivization makes Josep Carner unique amongst our poets. It is a talent for objectivization in a highly personal poetry in which there is yet at the same time a total absence of personal interest; in other words, in such poetry personal interest is of no interest to us. It would never occur to us to write a biography of Josep Carner, even a sentimental one, based on his books alone. He is a man who sings for many men, transforming himself into many shapes in an almost dramatic way; thus, the Dionysian marvel, to give it a form which is flexible and understood by all, is made real, but without any kind of violence, rather gently and lucidly. (And Dionysian does not mean dynamic, not to mention all the other things it does not necessarily mean.) Each new poem of his is a new lyrical voice which raises itself from the infinite tragicomedy of human aspirations and limitations; a new fragment from the innumerable landscapes of both Nature and the heart, seen from the a new angle and measured using a new word. He

rigorously avoids any form of dramatic mimesis; objectivization has come, we can say, before the poem and flows back carrying its booty of passion and vision through words that sing, and which are wrought with the lingering pleasure of the craftsman. That is why his style is only slightly transformed in the fabric of the poetry and in turn the subtle tones of his style vary enormously.

We need not fear that the poetry of Josep Carner will become either monotonous or exhausted. These are more likely to threaten those poets who furiously over-exploit the quarry of one sole passion: those who are weak on objectivization end up by beating their wings against a confused vision of the world, like a bat blinded by the light.

To ask him to change is simply not to understand him; to ask him to change direction and take the path of epic poetry or drama, might be tantamount to impatience; but if we were to ask him, he of the perfect health, to change by introducing torment which might result in disruption to both his subject matter and his style, would be nothing more than a romantic impertinence.

It's been a great pleasure—and might even be useful—to reflect a little on the generic qualities of the work of Josep Carner which make it the purest example of lyrical poetry we have ever had: an example of how inspiration and art can achieve the most natural and solid balance. This purity explains his success in influencing others, as well as the possibility that one day young people will turn their backs on him—although this is not to mean they will take a better direction. It is poets like Josep Carner though, who most readily create enthusiasm in the youth and vitality of our poetry.

(La Publicidad, 15.XI.1920)

(Translated by Montserrat Lunati and Marilyn Schwenk)

ELS FRUITS SABOROSOS*

Josep Carner has returned to work on a book which undoubtedly encapsulated the purest aspects of his poetry-writing youth. The maturity of the artist was less reluctant than the maturity of the man: the nostalgia to be found there in that evocation of the unrepeatably surely imposed more than the task of formal re-creation. Thus, the re-creation of *Els fruits saborosos* was ready and in print while the foreword appears to have been still awaited. To justify for today's readers a work of his own after a gap of twenty years, and on top of everything else, an idyllic work, called for extreme delicacy in handling the doses of coquettishness and responsibility applied. Josep Carner has succeeded in coming up with a solution that, in spite of being oblique has yet the virtue of seeming the most natural: what we are trying to say is that he gives his idyllic form. From now on *Els fruits saborosos* are no longer insulated in their simple, defenceless gentleness, as Carner might have put it. The foreword that has been added has put some distance between us and the poems; we have become accustomed to an environment in which the delimitations, being clearer and more sharply defined, appear to compress the plenitude of the heart and the memory less. In a small literary world in which an unwary generosity of intention, above anything else, had created confusion, a sagacious youthful ambition, a poetic ambition, strictly professional, let it be understood, for the mere act of affirming itself, selecting the genuine achievements of the previous work and limiting the original abundance of his verse that has no other purpose than its own sunny perfection, already seems to have imposed order. Such would be the meaning of *Els fruits saborosos* in 1906. The vision of this

* Re-edited in the «La Mirada» collection. Sabadell 1928.

phenomenon, that marks a crucial moment in the history of Catalan poetry, is today remodelled for us by the same protagonist with a detached and ironical attitude of goodwill that simplifies the values and retains an agreeable imbalance between those of reality and illusion, all the while oscillating as the result of some visible mechanism, favouring the latter shortly after having revealed to us a clearly tabulated set of values for the former.

In this critico-sentimental game, if we can put it that way, as played out in the foreswood, there is a certain mimetism with the idyllic game we find in the poems. *Els fruits savorosos* are far removed from any romantic idyllism. In them, nature is not a refuge but a framework and a background; it doesn't offer peace in communion with the natural, pure, infinitely fecund, life where everything that is special is carried away by the diffuse current of universal happiness and sadness, but rather an acquiescence, almost a condescension to many kindly-bestowed gifts. Neither is it a confidante, nor just a vast display of pretexts for the crystallization of feelings; rather is it a varied spectacle of forms and actions that, even when taken singly, might be seductive, be of more worth thanks to the rich source of references and symbols offered to the poet in order to make the first experiences of human realities more understandable to him in his youth, and if this is too much, to make the structures of his fantasy, in sweet wanderings, more brilliant, more amusing. It is a nature that gives way to man, precise, untiringly available; partial, in any case, only to happiness, although this is not to say either cruel or indifferent to misfortune; what it does have, is a something, we know not what, of inconsequential infant-like cheerfulness: it offers a gentle gift of evocative sweet chestnuts and an aromatic flame to the soliraty Agavé, and suddenly the wind whips her house into a doleful mood. It is man who has to lend his reserves of innocence and love, man who has to confide them to nature, without neither any more passion

nor mistrust: he will eventually re-encounter interest and capital if only he will agree to give up that which has begun to wilt inside him without any possibility of its revival, and he will once again enjoy the triumphant newness of nature, even though it may only be as yet implicit inside a fruit which has yet to set. With serene irony, Filemon in «Les gracioses ametlles» (Lovely Little Almonds) knows this; with a trembling, yet not despairing, nostalgia, so does Lamon of the unforgettable couple so reminiscent of Ovid, in «La poma escollida» (The Chosen Apple); and so, with virtually no feeling of victory, does Hersé in «Les serves endreçades» (Stores of Service Berries). Strictly speaking, there is in all this, like a restoration of a greatly-admiring reverence, a great deal of solicitude, half like that of a woman in love, half like that shown by an elder sister, plus a great deal of complicitous happiness, these idylls from nature bestowing on little Ixena her impish candour or Cal·lídia her luxurious gestures. And it is, after all, this nature that proceeds with an insinuating demand that neither pleasure nor peace be searched for beyond nature itself; and pouring out so much light it seems to suggest that it is in nature that we find all the clarity, all the knowledge, there is. It is a background which has no metaphysical spaces behind it. Hence the tranquillity that shrouds the idylls in atmosphere, not in a deliberate way, but rather in a natural, pagan way. Why should we not say it, when even the names of the characters, in their classical forms, start to betray the route the poet is taking, or perhaps even more the point, from where he is setting off? Humanism, in a word; but a humanism without the dead weight of mythologies «Les magranes flamejants» (Flame coloured pomegranates) are a curious exception, not so much from books as from lineage, and from seeds almost instinctively collected and re-fertilized in an atmosphere which is still yearning to echo Josep Carner for the shores of the Tyrrhenian Sea and the Aegean. Thanks to such humanism,

the poet of *Els fruits saborosos* feels himself to be free and agile in the face of a life which offers itself up to him like a source of material: being able to disregard whatever idea of supreme unity, he can then become the artist who re-creates life, fragmenting the way it is configured, reducing it in order to understand it better, distributing it, in other words, through the fluid measures of his verse, which has all three dimensions, but only these three. Thus, in the delicate realism of his little tableaux there is a gentle human comedy, small but complete; here we find an idyllism that is not evasive but instead perceptive; the «coarse madman» who, from the little might have been expecting a stream of pleasurable tastes, a Pantagruelian despoliation of orchards, would find himself disappointed upon noting that the poet above all invites us to re-create the pleasures of the eyes and of the intelligence, that the more abundant images are those of a visual order, which sometimes even give direction to the rare tasty sensations that are there within them: «feeling the sunny gold pouring down one's throat» as, for example, is the wish of the little apricot gatherer.

Now: in recreating *Els fruits saborosos* so patiently, Josep Carner appears today to have retained a more vigilant awareness of the essential sense of his idyllism than he did in the first fugue of his composition. We have, in short, two versions of the same work. The difference between them is based not so much on the mastery of artistic resources as on a change, we might say, in the taste of the man in the way he sees happiness. Between one and the other there is all the practical experience found in passing in the *bonhomies*¹, and summarized in this typical phrase: «Happiness always finds us with a gormless look on our face». The poet of the first *fruits saborosos*, would never have thought like this:

¹ We have used this word as the title not just of a book but also as the name of a typically Carnerian genre: the humoristic, moralizing pretext.

confronted with happiness, his face was more the face of a wise man, the face of a man who, in the happy extreme, suddenly frowns and talks about the other extreme, with a solemnity which is not, at heart, the solemnity of one who believes he will ever actually encounter it.

Sols al Dolor l'eternitat fou dada,
i ell fa els braços potents i els ulls brillants,²

he exclaimed, for example. This sounds like nothing more than shallow bookishness, although when everything is said and done it is healthily youthful. Today, in the grown man, taste undoubtedly suffers more than does experience; but the refuge of humour that has grown over time, he cannot see as appropriate, and he simply attenuates his judgement beneath fine, brilliant metaphors; in other words, he makes the poetry find solutions for things the poetry itself has distorted:

Malenconia al fi de la diada
i cremadissa d'ales dels instants!³

Thus, in the second version youth is indulged by the poet, in reality making purity of youth crystal clear. Such detail, abstract to the point of petulance,

i voldria besar son infant qui tremola,
dins la profunditat de lo desconegut,⁴

comes to be more agile in a more immediate life:

² Only to Pain was eternity granted, / and it makes our arms strong and our eyes to shine,

³ Melancholy at the day's end / as if the seconds had wings and the wings were aflame!

⁴ and she would like to kiss her trembling babe, / in the profundity of the unknown.

i voldria besar sont infant que tremola,
batec tan avinent i tan inconegut.⁵

Such sadnesses of nature, to which he put up some opposition with a cruelty of expression that was an entirely passionate protest:

Fer-se espremuda i lletja per la dolçor del fill.....⁶

I dalt de l'envejosa decrepitud del món....⁷

are now smoothed by a litotes or a concretion that wish to be gallantries but which in fact are only mercies:

Fer-se espremuda i lassa per la dolçor del fill...⁸

I dalt de l'envejosa mirada d'aquest món.....⁹

In the first version, what is most apparent about the romantic reminiscences had been condensed around the idea, filled with positive faith, that the poet had of poetry:

Mes de la poesia el vi sublim,
qui brilla amb l'or de divinal potència...¹⁰

In the second, it is hidden by an abstraction set among images made intentionally benal:

⁵ and she would like to kiss her trembling babe, / heartboat so close yet so unknown

⁶ To become squeezed dry and ugly for the tenderness of the son.../

⁷ And in the envious decrepitude of the world...

⁸ To become squeezed dry and exhausted for the tenderness of the son.../

⁹ And in the envious regard of the word...

¹⁰ But of the poetry the sublime wine, / that shimmers with the gold of divine power...

Però el vell nèctar en el vas del rim,
duració en perfum i transparència...¹¹

And the cycle of the idylls, which closed, like an apotheosis,

Que jo en senyal augusta de victòria
guaitaré en mes coronas esclatants
pàmpole vermells com els ponents llunyans
i cargolats com un flameig de glòria,¹²

now looks as if it has left the grown man to put the finishing touch with ironic melancholy:

No em plau corona que és del vent joguina,
sinó deixar, per a no nats humans,
un poc de sol de mos amors llunyans
clos al celler, colgat en teranyina.¹³

A methodical comparison of the two versions of *Els fruits saborosos* illustrated many aspects of the way Josep Carner has developed his technique, but in particular, and even more, aspects of the intention of his poetry. Now we have something urgent and glorious to proclaim. Many amendments, even those that have produced a more intimate modification to a verse or a stanza, have found their starting point in the need to normalize a slight syntactical superfluity, to wipe cut two or three barbarisms, above all to re-write the measures so as to release prosodies which are not genuine.

¹¹ But the ancient nectar in the glass of the rhyme, / with its enduring perfume and transparency...

¹² That I, in an august sign of victory / will see in my impetuous crowns/ red leaves like distant sunsets / and spiralled like the flames of glory.

¹³ The crown that is the plaything of the wind gives me no pleasure, / rather leaving, for the men who are not yet born, / a few rays of the sun of my long-past loves / shut up in the cellar, covered by cobwebs.

But the general tone of the poetic style has not been altered. The poetry of Maragall written during that same period now seems to us, to some extent, preserved in a sacred and sealed archaism; but in these idylls of Josep Carner, our poetic Catalan language which stems from the confluence of two forces, Verdaguer and the poetry of the islands, is revealed to us, as it was in 1906, as if held for a few moments in the wonder of its first and most golden youth.

(Febrer, 1929)