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***Patricia Hart***

***Time to fold up and die: Metafiction in És hora de plegar de Rafael Tasis***

**Catalan Review, Vol. VII, number 1 (1993), p. 63-70**

TIME TO FOLD UP AND DIE: METAFICTION IN  
*ÉS HORA DE PLEGAR* DE RAFAEL TASIS

PATRICIA HART

«*És hora de plegar*» —«time to fold up»— is the colloquial way that «quitting time» is expressed in Catalonia, and it is a phrase that appears in all dialects of the *Principat*. By the time a reader is finished with Rafael Tasis' 1956 novel, *És hora de plegar*, the words have taken on a new and sinister meaning that sends chills up and down the spine with each repetition until the phrase becomes synonymous with death. The remarkable achievement of this book becomes more telling as we see how Tasis creates this chilling final effect by means of metafiction.

The layers of metafiction in *És hora de plegar* are multiple. The reader first believes that the book is a traditional confession by a criminal, and then discovers that there is a confession within the confession —a «novelization» of the story within which the murderer has cleverly concealed himself, in an attempt to make works of art of his crime and its narration. However, we then discover that it is not the murderer who has organized the text. A subsequent passage appears to be narrated by the policeman who investigated the murder, beat cop Jaume Vilagut. But just as we have accepted that, we realize that it is not Vilagut who has organized the story at all. In fact, he has passed all the material on to his friend, reporter Francesc Caldes, who at last claims authorship of the book. The final metafictional step, the one that takes us beyond the binding of the book, of course, is that we readers know that the real author is Rafael Tasis. In yet another bit of sleight of hand, however, he dedicates the book to Agustí and Victor, «que m'ho van explicar» (9). Agustí and Victor happen to be the names of two key characters in the book. Thus the illusion of outside reality trapped within the various retellings and refashioning is very cleverly carried out to the extent that the more we contemplate the text, the more it

begins to resemble an Escher print or one of Penrose's «Impossible Objectes.»

To understand better how the different layers of metafiction are put together, it makes sense to examine them one at a time. The novel opens with a brief, feverish declaration from a character who has just read in the newspaper that the police have discovered a body. The narrator, a male, judging from the adjectives «beneit,» and «fet» that he applies to himself, hints that he is responsible, and tells us of a manuscript in which he has written down his story, mainly because he hopes to show it to a woman with whom he is obsessed in order to demonstrate how clever he has been. From his fear of having the manuscript discovered by anyone else, nevertheless, we deduce that it might be used as evidence against him to prove that he has committed this and other crimes. Only his pride in authorship (both of the crime itself *and* the story) keep him from destroying the manuscript. «Sap greu que la gent no sàpiga de què ets capaç,» he tells us, «que et preguin per un infeliç» (12). Then he adds pointedly, «tots començant per ella» (12). With this he alludes to a specific imaginary reader, clearly the object of obscure desires, a character who will never even see the manuscript.

The subsequent ten chapters narrated in the third person evidently constitute the manuscript of which the murderer spoke, and they are intercalated with italicized passages in the first person, spoken by the murderer, tantalizingly pointing us in the right direction or steering us astray.

The book begins, then, with a variation on Agatha Christie's Roger Ackroyd trick. It is probably no secret to anyone by this time that *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926) is a cleverly-written whodunit narrated in the first person by a seemingly inoffensive country doctor (much reminiscent of Doctors Watson and Hastings, with whom the avid mystery fan was already well acquainted), but who, in the last pages of the book, is revealed to be the murderer himself. Thus *Ackroyd* demands of those who pick it up two readings — an «innocent» first reading where the reader (supposing he or she has not been told the ending already) naively follows the narrative



down the garden path that the narrator, Dr. Sheppard, points out; and a second «cynical» reading, to check out whether or not Sheppard has really played straight all along the way, and to reinterpret the clues that were laid pointing to his guilt. Although critics of Christie's book who call «foul play» have been many and vociferous (some of the loudest of whom seem, strangely, never to have read the book), the text is still a mystery writer's *tour de force*, and the technique has been pinched by such redoubtable *letterati* as Jorge Luis Borges. The Argentine, despite his oft-declared contempt for the English mystery writer, had no compunctions about borrowing this gambit for his short story, «Hombre de la Esquina Rosada,» which was first published as «Hombres de las orillas» in the magazine *Crítica* under the pseudonym of F. Bustos, in 1933, seven years after Christie's world-famous *Roger Ackroyd* appeared. Writing in 1956, long after both of these extremely popular works had been published, Tasis took advantage of the expectation they created to work some lively magic in this book. From the assurance of the murderer in the first pages, the reader assumes that the story is all told honestly in the third-person portions of the narrative, where only the names and minor details have been changed, and that the detective-reader's complicitous role in the investigation is simply to decide *which* of the characters is the murderer. Now, even if this were the case, Tasis' story would be an excellent puzzle, as it skillfully misdirects our suspicions. However, the final surprise, after the thrill of seeing who the murderer really is, comes not from the simple elimination of suspects, as in a game of «clue,» but rather from our realization as to just how far we have allowed ourselves to be misled.

Police Inspector Jaime Vilagut's report of the case, another level of fiction within fiction, reveals that the murderer has a skewed view not only of morality, but of reality as well. The murderer's manuscript describes a spectacularly sleazy crime of passion à la James M. Cain, carried out in a jewelry store for the benefit of a glamorous shop assistant, *la Pepis*, and a fabulous *modernista*-style necklace crafted by the skilled artisans in his shop. But in reality, the stunning

necklace fashioned of gold, rubies, and diamonds that looked murderously good on the voluptuous throat of *la Pepis*, turns out to be nothing more than an inexpensive bracelet, a cheap trinket. And *la Pepis*, that blond bombshell of Barcelona, that *dona fatal* of the Passatge de la Pau, is in reality not a Catalan Ava Gardener, as the murderer sees her. According to the policeman's description, the «real-life» Lluïsa Solans is a vulgar, manipulative working girl, and not even a particularly good looking one at that! «No sembla pas destinada per la seva bellesa a despertar grans passions,» Vilagut pens in disgust on his police report, although his superior will later scratch out this subjective observation (159). The brilliance of his planning, the seduction of the desirable *Pepis*, and the intelligent control of his surroundings have all been imagined, and are nothing more than a literary trick conjured up for us by the murderer. Even the job he holds down is transformed in his manuscript. In his «novel,» he and the other characters are employed as apprentices in a jewelry store, and although the hours are long and the pay is low, there is a certain *glamour noir* to their propinquity to delicate pieces of jewelry that adds ambience to the story. In the «real» version that Vilagut relates, however, the murderer works as a laborer in a *serralleria i lampisteria*. The locks and pieces of tin and wire over which he toils have none of the cachet of the imitation pieces of *modernista*-style jewelry he crafts in his fictional workshop. The alchemic transformation of tin and iron into precious metals and gems is an apt metaphor for his own imaginative transformation of his base selfishness into proof of artistic greatness.

But perhaps the most interesting metafictional game of all is revealed only at the end of the story. Throughout the course of the novel, the narrator, in his intercalated passages, has spoken of his pride in his deeds, and the importance of having people know, «de què ets capaç (12). His writing down of the story has clearly been dangerous, as it sets his guilt down in black and white, but as we follow his thinking, we see that he has fashioned the text hoping it will serve as a tool of seduction of his beloved *Pepis*. Even in the worst of all cases, should he be caught and punished, at least his manuscript will



prove to his arch-rival, the police commissioner who captures him, how brilliant he has been. The ultimate irony here is that the Francoist policeman represents an entire body of functional illiterates, a group of people on whom literature can have little effect. In this way the metafictional games of the novel serve as a cleverly hidden but clear denunciation of the post-war years when literary production was squelched not only because of direct censorship, but also because much of the public had been incapacitated by the brutal regime for appreciating artistic subtlety. Ironically, here the logical reader of the murderer's story, the commissioner, is simply not a reader. Instead of admiring the murderer's style, ingenuity, and literary verve, the commissioner flips through a few pages and then refuses to even finish reading the manuscript, and instead has Vilagut simply tell him the story. Thus all of the artist's subtlety is transformed back to dross by the policeman's literal telling from which all suspense, alchemy, and red herrings have of course been removed. The commissioner is proof that even the most perfect work of art requires a lucid observer to complete it. Like Kant's fish looking at a painting, the commissioner cannot transcend the literal level and sees only a series of lines:

Qui li feia posar-se novel·lista! Tan fàcil com és no escriure!  
Hagués de fer-ho per força com jo mateix. (167)

This prime specimen of the Francoist Philistine can see no difference between the mundane reports he cranks out and this (albeit demented) work of art. Even when Vilagut insists that the «novel» could be used as evidence, the commissioner counters:

Jo no penso pas lligir la seva novel·la, ni admirar el seu enginy literari ni criminal. Si l'ha llegit vostè, ja en tinc prou... (168)

As it turns out, in the last deceptive flush of capture and confession, the murderer has signed a statement admitting his guilt, assuming that now at least his manuscript will make him famous.

Ironically, his signing of another text —the confession that retells his story in banal prose— makes the use of the manuscript unnecessary. As the boorish commissioner puts it, policeman Vilagut's terse account of the events is superior. «És més clar, i no embolicarà tant les coses» (168). Of course, «embolicar les coses» has been both the murderer's and Tasis' purpose from the beginning.

By the end of the book, with each step backwards into what we successively agree to pretend is «reality,» we have repeatedly been forced to abandon our acceptance of the facts of the case and the identities of all of the suspects. What has remained unchanged, however, is the cynical view of postwar mediocrity and amorality.

The abrupt shift in style and tone to the joking exchanges between Vilagut and his journalist friend Caldes at the end of the book serves to make the dark, brooding murder story seem even more «real.» By ending the book with a humorous passage, Tasis pretends to say that «reality» in Francoist-dominated Barcelona is more normal and more sane than his murderer perceives it to be. But when we discover that even this passage is not «real,» but a literary recreation by the good-natured and egotistical newspaperman Caldes the shrewd reader is forced to doubt such a sunny conclusion once more.

Recent criticism dedicated to the growing body of detective fiction in Catalan has tended either to ignore Rafael Tasis completely, or else to patronize him or speak of him condescendingly. Even his good friend, Manuel de Pedrolo, himself a pioneer of the Catalan *novel·la negra*, dismisses his detective novels:

Era un home d'una capacitat de treball, d'una curiositat intel·lectual molt oberta i d'una envejable competència en una gran diversitat de camps culturals. Fluïxjava en canvi com a novel·lista... (Hart, *The Spanish Sleuth*, 62)

Contemporary detective novelist Jaume Fuster also recognizes him as a predecessor, but considers Tasis' novels to be uninteresting in and of themselves:

Tasis... publicó tres novelitas que no tienen gran importancia, pero fue el introductor del género, no ya en catalán, sino en España, en los años cincuenta. (Hart, *The Spanish Sleuth*, 80)<sup>1</sup>

When his name was discussed at the round table on Spanish detective fiction held in conjunction with the 1983 San Sebastián Film Festival, organizer and well known critic and screenplay writer Ricardo Muñoz Suay categorized Tasis as a sort of well-meaning but simple-minded follower of the British «cosy» tradition.<sup>2</sup> The widely accepted logic that Spanish critics like Salvador Vázquez de Parga and Javier Coma put forth insists that the British school is reactionary, where the American *roman noir* tradition is socially critical and therefore politically correct and literarily superior. Marxist critics like Ernst Mandel have how shallow this general analysis is and how relatively conservative both Chandler and Hammett actually are. Therefore, even if it were true that Tasis wrote within the «cosy» tradition, that would be no basis for rejecting his possible contributions out of hand. But even more importantly, while Tasis' two other and perhaps better-known works, *Un crim al Paralelo* and *La Biblia valenciana* are more «cosy», the bulk of *És hora de plegar* is clearly much more indebted to the works of James M. Cain, especially *Double Indemnity* and *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. An easy mis-assessment that Coma, Vázquez de Parga, and virtually all other students of the detective tradition in Spain and Catalonia have made to date is to believe that Tasis is worth mentioning as a pioneer, but that only Pedrolo is worth reading. Actually, Pedrolo's *Joc brut* and Tasis' *És hora de plegar* have a lot in common, and neither has anything in particular to do with the English «cosy» school.

With its seething sensual obsession, its fascination with abnormal psychology, and its dark setting among working-class drones

<sup>1</sup> This was in Castilian in the original, although Fuster writes in his native language, Catalan.

<sup>2</sup> I was invited to give an overview of the Spanish detective novel on this panel, which also included Patricia Highsmith, Guillermo Cabrera Infante, Jaume Fuster, Jorge Martínez Reverte, Andreu Martín, and Juan Madrid.



who kill each other over no-good queen bees, *Es hora de plegar* has nothing in common with Agatha Christie's upright defense of bourgeois mores or her longing for pre-war, clearly-delineated class divisions. Moreover the intricacy with which Tasis handles the levels of metafiction show him to be an inventive, skilled novelist, not a mere crusader for the language who dashed off a couple of simple potboilers. Long overshadowed by his close friend and colleague, Pedrolo, Tasis deserves scrutiny of his own. For the works of Rafael Tasis, it is far from being, «hora de plegar.» In fact, it is really just time to begin.

PATRICIA HART

PERDUA UNIVERSITY

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