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The "Crit de llibertat" of J. V. Foix **C. Brian Morris**

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THE "CRIT DE LLIBERTAT" OF J. V. FOIX

C. BRIAN MORRIS

Some twenty-five years ago I included Josep Vicenç Foix in my book *Surrealism and Spain* (1972); it is not difficult to see why I did so, or why, fifteen years after me, Mercè Tricàs i Preckler devoted a whole book to *J. V. Foix i el surrealisme* (Barcelona: Edicions Anglo-Catalanes, 1986). After all, he was familiar with Surrealist art and literature, and knew such distinguished practitioners as Joan Miró and Salvador Dalí; he did collaborate in such avant-garde journals as *L'Amic de les Arts*; he did write about Freud and about exploring "l'altre món"; he did describe his writings as "l'objectivació literària dels meus estats psíquics" (36); he did explain that each poem is "un crit de llibertat... un nou element d'intoxicació que reclama d'altres poemes amb imperiosa exigència" (37); and he did declare—in a sure echo of Surrealist doctrine—that "el 'desordre' sigui, encara, l'únic ordre possible" (37).¹ But he also included in a prose poem about a visit to the Galeries Dalmau to view an exhibition of Dalí's paintings two questions addressed purportedly to Dalí—with two forthright answers:

—Superrealisme?

—No, no.

—Cubisme?

—No, tampoc: pintura, pintura, si us plau. (50)

If we posed the same questions to Foix, I suggest that the most likely answer would be "No, no: literatura, literatura, si us plau," for he insists time and time again on the literary and aesthetic dimension of his writings, particularly of his prose poems, most of which were written, he states, "amb propòsits exclusivament literaris i adreçant-se en el risc de la investigació estètica" (175). I wish that twenty-five years ago I had listened more to Foix than to my own need to accommodate him to my own vision of Surrealist influence as I indulged the desire of so many literary scholars to color-code writers and, by classifying them, somehow control and possess them. We slot them into trends, currents, movements, schools, and thereby reduce their uniqueness. Perhaps we ought to listen a little more attentively to the writers themselves. T. S. Eliot adopted a characteristically arch and querulous tone when, in relation to the terms "romantic" and "classic," he proposed:

And it would perhaps be beneficial if we employed both terms as little as pos-

¹ Page references are to Foix, *Obres poètiques*. Barcelona: Edicions Nauta, 1964.

sible, if we even forgot those terms altogether, and looked steadily for the intelligence and sensibility which each work of art contains.²

Foix has an ample supply of intelligence and sensibility, which, leavened by an elfin humor, leads him to present himself as a creator without taking himself too seriously, as a man who, as he undertakes the adventure of writing, is honest both about the joys it offers and the tensions it generates. Writing provides its own recompense as words challenge him, beckon to him, converting the poet, as he stated in a celebrated letter to Clara Sobirós, into a "mag, especulador del mot, pelegrí de l'invisible, insatisfet, aventurer o investigador a la ratlla del son". The poet knows, he adds, that "cada poema és un crit de llibertat" (8). Freedom from what? we may ask. Surrealist doctrines and writings offer only partial help here: you don't have to be a Surrealist to advocate liberty, and preaching the autonomy of the poem does not make a writer into a Surrealist. It is tempting in Foix's case to postulate liberation from routine, mental and physical, from convention and an ordered existence. However, in postulating the poem itself as a cry of liberty, Foix obliges us to bear in mind that freedom exists, and can be understood, only in relation to those forces and constraints that threaten it. He also teaches us that a literary creation exists only in relation to other literary creations or—the most terrible alternative of all—to the blank page, silence.

Foix's poetry is marked by creative tensions: between free-flowing prose poems and impeccable sonnets; between the syntactical correctitude and elegant formulation of his prose sentences and their fantastic content; between the desire to write non-sense, to explore disorder, and the imperative to explain and justify that need. Foix's gift of artful artlessness is fully displayed in the prose poem "Sense simbolisme," which belongs to his first published work, *Gertrudis* (1927). In it he leads us, in a carefully modulated narrative, from the recognizable world of the town square of Sarrià to a zone of fantasy in which bizarre events erupt when the rules and norms of routine break down:

El director de la banda municipal és tan corpulent que ocupa mitja plaça. Quan estén el braç tots els nois del poble allarguen les mans per fer-hi tombarelles com a la barra fixa. Però criden molt i el director s'enfada. El director és un home singular: creu que la gent hi acut per la seva orquestra i que el poble aplaudeix els grans autors. Aleshores s'irrita per qualsevol soroll, i els algutzirs fan callar els ocells i tanquen les fonts. Però la música de banda, en el silenci,

2. Eliot's comments are included in a letter to *The Times Literary Supplement* of Oct. 28, 1920; reprinted in *The Letters of T. S. Eliot. Volume I 1898-1922*. Ed. Valerie Eliot. San Diego-New York-London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988, pp. 416-417.

és impura. Els gran músics encara no s'han adonat que llurs composicions són per a acompanyar només, discretament, el brogit inharmoní del veïnat aplegat a la festa. Sense cavallets, enamorats, sac de gemecs i piules, ¿què seria, oh grans mestres, la vostra obra?

Un dia vam pintar un teló de fons que representava una casa amb dues finestres ovalades i la vam penjar a la plaça de manera que se'n menjava una quarta part. Ens hi vam amagar al darrere tot de nois i noies. A mitja simfonia de Haëndel el teló, al mateix moment que jo pessigava l'anca de Gertrudis, va caure i vam restar en descobert. Gertrudis va fer un xiscle enjogassat. La banda va parar en sec. Mai cap compositor no ha escrit ni escriurà una nota equivalent al crit de Gertrudis llançat, a mitjanit, a plaça oberta.

El director, convertit en un Ogre de Gustau Doré, ens empaïtà terriblement amenaçador, carrer avall. Com dues ales verdes se'ns obriren misteriosament les portes de casa la cotillaire i ens refugiàrem darrere l'espectre sedós d'un maniquí. En desvetllar-nos teníem entre mans, desinflat i a trossos, un esfèric de paper amb la vera efígie del director de la banda. (23-24)

In this splendidly orchestrated story, Foix moves us from a familiar milieu into circumstances that, however odd, are appropriate to his purpose and, I suggest, his message. As it nods in the direction of paintings Miró entitled "Sense títol," his title rebuts a symbolic reading. Yet a literal reading of the passage allows us to see it as a *novela ejemplar* in miniature, a cautionary tale about the fate that befalls the pompous bandmaster who imposes his music, demanding respectful silence from an audience that, characteristically, takes the music no more seriously than as a background accompaniment to their own activities: talking, playing, flirting, and, according to the narrator's confession, pinching Gertrudis's thigh. The narrator's answer to the bandmaster's imperiousness is to paint a curtain that, simulating one quarter of the square, he hangs as a screen in an illusion worthy of René Magritte, who in a number of paintings, for example, *The Human Condition* (1935), uses a favorite technique of placing on an easel before an open space a painting depicting exactly the segment of landscape or seascape behind it. Magritte's game is obvious: as he draws attention to the optical illusion, he also reminds us that it is he as the painter who has painted the painting that forms part of a painting of an unremarkable seascape. The only purpose of the small, inset, apparently redundant painting, is to extend the illusion of art onto the wall on the right.

Foix's curtain is less a *trompe l'oeil* than the only way by which young people—under the tyranny of the conductor—can meet, flirt, be young, pinch thighs. When it falls, converting them rather than the orchestra into the spectacle, the conductor goes literally wild. Foix's revenge is that of the cultured man, who, through words, can interpret the conductor's pomposity—he is corpulent and overbearing—, his ignorance—Händel was a composer of many fine achievements, but

writing symphonies was not among them—, and his monstrous rage—he becomes an ogre of Gustave Doré, as misshapen as the monsters Doré devised for *Orlando furioso*. As a creator, Foix can also write him out of existence, dispose of him, as Unamuno dispatched Augusto Pérez in *Niebla*, by deflating him: factually within the episode, and figuratively within the interpretation of the episode. Unlike the conductor, who is nothing more than a large bubble easily burst, the writer—as magician—can devise a magic escape route, making the doors of the house of the corset-maker open mysteriously “like two green wings.” The conductor’s grave error was to separate art from life, and Foix’s question rings with the humanity he so clearly lacks: “Sense cavallets, enamorats, sac de gemecs i piules, ¿què seria, oh grans mestres, la vostra obra?” At the end the conductor is reduced to nothing more than a deflated paper effigy: he has lost his humanity by denying that of his audience.

Composed again of prose poems, Foix’s second book, *Krtu* (1932), continues and complements *Gertrudis* in manner and in content, with one significant difference; he provides for it a dual preface: a sonnet, and a brief essay, from which I quoted earlier, entitled “Algunes reflexions sobre la pròpia literatura”. Both preambles are significant, for both focus on the act and objective of writing before he undertakes, in the body of the work, the great adventure of writing that is *Krtu*. *Krtu* is an uncomfortable title to pronounce, but it does respond to a deliberate choice if we heed the passage similarly titled in which he visualizes as part of his inner monologue four men bearing each one a letter, K, R, T, U, which, when permutated, make up “KURT, URKT, TRUK, UKRT, TURK, KRUT...” (44). Although this seems very much like a Dada game, Foix eventually placed the four letters in the alphabetical order that seemed to satisfy him, even if it does not inform or illuminate us: that initial K and final U transport us to a visually quaint lexical world. The K denies access even if the sound of the letters does not, which invites possibilities like *cretí*, *coratge*, and *Creta*, home of the labyrinth. I had fallen into Foix’s trap by trying to impose sense on a title that advertises non-sense as its distinctive mode in very large letters to be followed immediately by the name of Petrarch under the epigraph to the prefatory sonnet. This beautiful sonnet creates an unlikely alliance between the arbitrary and private on the one hand, and, on the other, a poet who has become public property, a poet who holds impeccable credentials as the paragon and authenticator of a literary experience (in the same way as Dante supports and validates Eliot in *The Waste Land*). What connects Petrarch and Foix is the adventure of writing—seasoned by the fundamental irony of Foix’s articulating the problem of freedom in a form as prescribed as the sonnet.

Solo e pensoso
i più deserti campi.
Petrarca, sonet XXVIII

Pistes desertes, avingudes mortes,
ombres sense ombra per cales i platges,
pujols de cendra en els més folls viratges,
trofeus d'amor per finestres i portes.

¿A quin indret, oh ma follia, emportes
aquest cos meu que no tem els oratges,
ní el meravellen els mòbils paratges
ní els mil espectres de viles somortes?

No sé períbol en la terra obscura
que ajusti el gest i la passa diversa
de qui la soledat li és bell viure.

¿No hi ha caserna ni presó tan dura,
ni hi ha galera en la mar més adversa
que em faci prou esclau i ésser més lliure?

A sonnet like this, with its carefully chosen epigraph, points to precedent as a significant factor in the poet's thinking and writing. Vélez de Guevara also placed a sonnet as preamble to the prose fantasy of *El diablo cojuelo*, but without weighing the problem of adventure or the solitude of the writer who, in the words of Petrarch, is "Solo e pensoso i più deserti campi." One of Luis Cernuda's early poems presents the poet/narrator trying hard to write a poem but faced at the end of the poem by "un blanco papel vacío." By sleight of hand and a mirror image, Cernuda wrote another poem about his failure to write the first poem.³ In the same way, Foix has imagined in this sonnet the frightening open spaces of the unknown and the unwritten, scaring himself with the words of Petrarch yet finding in them the comfort of the creator who vanquished silence and undertook his own odyssey with words. Again, a comparison with Magritte is instructive. In 1928 Magritte painted *Attempting the Impossible*, in which a young painter paints his model –and his painting– into existence, and by which another young painter affirms his art by painting a young painter painting. Foix does the same: he writes himself into existence, creates –like Eliot, Cernuda, and Antonio Machado– a textual self who explores the tense and troubled relationship between insecurity and security, which is represented both by the symbols –"períbol,"

³ The phrase "un blanco papel vacío" is the last line of the *décima* "En soledad. No se siente..." which is poem XXII of Cernuda's *Primeras poesías* (1924-1927)

“caserna,” “presó” – and by the form of the sonnet which he chose to contain them. The last tercet poses a tension of antitheses that would have done credit to Petrarch, Ausiàs March, Garcilaso, and Herrera:

Is there no barracks or harsh prison,
is there no galley on the adverse sea
that may enslave me and let me be more free?

The symbolic geography that Foix outlines presents a lonely place: spectral, sleepy, dead, dark, bleak. It offers no sense of liberation: rather does it underline risks and dangers through allusions to storms and madness. It is this consciousness of the cost and difficulty of writing that accounts for the distinctiveness of Foix’s voice: the painter paints, the writer writes; the painter covers a blank canvas, the writer a blank sheet of paper. In that struggle with the void, a poem becomes a shout of triumphant creativity, the piercing cry of the newborn baby affirming its lungs and its vitality, demanding attention as it emerges into the world from the womb that is the poet’s mind. “Show me an angel and I’ll paint one,” challenged Courbet. Show me a poem, Foix could say, and you will find a creation that has liberated itself from non-being because its creator has coaxed words out of the void.

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