

JOAN SALVAT-PAPASSEIT



JOAN SALVAT PAPASSEIT (BARCELONA, 1894-1924) IS UNDOUBTEDLY ONE OF THE MOST SUGGESTIVE FIGURES IN THE RICH WORLD OF TWENTIETH CENTURY CATALAN LITERATURE. FROM HIS BIRTH IN A HUMBLE DISTRICT BESIDE THE PORT OF BARCELONA UNTIL HIS DEATH FROM TUBERCULOSIS AT THE AGE OF THIRTY, HIS WHOLE EXISTENCE CONSTITUTES AN IMPASSIONED PLEA IN FAVOUR OF LIFE.

MIQUEL-LLUÍS MUNTANÉ AUTHOR

*No thing is lowly
nor any hour cruel,
nor dark the coming of the night.
And the dew is clear
and enchants the rising sun
that bathes delighted:
and of all things made the bed is*
[mirrored.]

*No thing is lowly,
all is rich like wine or the rosy cheek.
And the waves on the sea for ever laugh,
Spring in winter. Spring in summer.
And all is spring:
and every leaf for ever green.*

*No thing is lowly,
because the days stand still;*

*and death comes not, even when called.
And if you have called her you are
hidden by the grave,
for to be born again you first must die.
And we are no lament
but a gentle smile
that spreads like the segments of an*
[orange.]

*No thing is lowly,
because there is song in every fragment.
Today, tomorrow and yesterday
a rose shall shed its petals
and the youngest maiden shall bear*
[milk.]

Joan Salvat-Papasseit (Barcelona, 1894-1924) is undoubtedly one of the most suggestive figures in the rich world of twentieth century Catalan literature. From his birth in a humble district beside the port of Barcelona until his death from tuberculosis at the age of thirty, his whole existence constitutes an impassioned plea in favour of life.

Left fatherless at the age of seven, Salvat received a cursory primary education, until at the age of thirteen he embarked on a series of jobs which he combined with copious and anarchic reading. Autodidacticism is therefore one of this author's defining characteristics.

In 1918 *Poemes en ondes hertzianes* appeared, his first book of poems, in which he shows the influence of Marinetti and Apollinaire. In fact, it was the model he found in the avantgarde authors which led him to become one of the principal importers into Catalonia of such movements as futurism, whose features are once more unmistakable in his next collection, *L'irradiador del port i les gavines*, published in 1921. His production continued with *Les conspiracions* (1922), *La gesta dels estels* (1922), *La rosa als llavis* (1923). This book, apparently the fruit of a sentimental attachment he went through during a stay in the town of Les Escaldes, in Andorra, is one of the most successful collections of love poems in Catalan literature. In it Salvat-Papasseit

uses a delicate, but nonetheless intense eroticism, which gives rise to some of the best poetry of Salvat's entire work. His last book, published posthumously, was *Ossa menor* (1925), which contains the poems Salvat had kept under the pillow of his deathbed.

This author's work also makes a considerable contribution to the field of non-fiction, with a great deal of work for newspapers, at the bottom of which lies always a spirit of rebellion, as regards both socio-political aspects and more specifically literary aspects. One outstanding volume is *Mots propis*, in which Salvat develops a series of moral reflections on the relationships of the individual with his social surroundings. Salvat's aesthetic ideas –summed up in his *Manifest contra els poetes amb minúscula*– reveals his own outline of the independent and honest poet. In this respect, Salvat Papasseit, like all the Catalan avant-gardists of the pre-war period, had a profound knowledge of the works of the modernist authors, with whom he shared the wish to construct a literature that would react in the face of the romantic myths forming the backbone of the *Renaixença* of the second half of the nineteenth century. In a "biographical note" Salvat expressed his poetic conception in the following way: "I have never yet written without wetting my pen in my heart, opened wide. I am, as a man of letters, of scarce imagination, somewhat elementary; I have seen or lived it all". This percep-

tion comes close to the concept of the "living word", put forward by Maragall, the most representative of our modernist poets.

Salvat-Papasseit's ideology, which can in no way be divorced from his eclectic and autodidactic training, has been the object of various and not always well-meaning interpretations. Be that as it may, two basic elements appear in his thinking which can be traced through all his writing: on the one hand, his social nonconformity, the critical spirit that takes shape through considerations of an anarchic nature; and on the other, his resounding Catalanism, which reaches the peak of its expression in the poems in the book *Les conspiracions*.

Towards the sixties, this author was re-discovered by the younger generations and his work acquired a considerable popularity which continues today. Many of his poems have had music put to them in a number of different styles, and his work has also been the object of recitals and stage productions, while studies of Salvat have proliferated. It certainly comes as no surprise that the extraordinary vitality of a man whose life was short and unhappy, and his role as the most determined defender of the avant-gardes within Catalan literature, should have made him a poet capable of reaching the sensitivity of a great number of readers.