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Avant-garde art and the Catalan spirit *

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In memory of Lluís Nicolau d'Olwer on the tenth anniversary of his death.

[..] if hope were scarce and badly depicted and if words
were not an act, these lines would not be a poem.

Joan Brossa

We have been assured that «national emancipation movements are characteristic phenomena of capitalist society [...]»¹. We should not, therefore, be surprised if, in a state where many have not yet swallowed the French Revolution - as someone once said -, the Catalan culture can be considered by some to be an integral part of conservative thought, or is confused with diabolical action by others, and that even the avant-garde movements in our country, which we thought to be more progressive, are labelled as «catalanism = bourgeoisie» by the critics expecting more recent revolutions.

Who can say if surprise will be evoked by the fact that, initially, besides reiterating its progressive content we now take for granted the fact that, not only can our authentic avant-garde art be considered an integral part of Catalanism, but it can even appear to be an indispensable requisite for those who really want to go ahead. It goes without saying that some people, the usual ones, those who have never seen anything in the avant-garde, will be surprised by it but others may even be disturbed by it, those who, despite having faith in it, imagined it - perhaps because it is exported or, because of the well-known «depoliticization» tactics - to have an «internationalist» vocation, devoid of interest for the country or, in any case, with an interest that is merely «strategic».

It is sufficient to know some names directly or, as in some situations, where they have been put *au pied du mur* as the French say, to realize on which side the new art stands, and has always stood, at least the art that we consider to be the best. It is in fact evident that among our great artists, as among our poets - this fact increases according to importance -, the attachment to the land, and the will to serve it have always been fundamental, even though at times it has seemed the contrary to the less imaginative and in some cases the authors themselves were often not completely aware of it. Frequently they belong to that sphere of almost visceral sensitivity, characteristic of every creative being, which makes him perceive the tendencies most beneficial to man in general, to the common good and to *progress*. (Benefit always goes hand in hand with true beauty, even though this may not seem so to many). Furthermore, although it sounds strange, due to the current confusion of values, patriotic sentiment continues to be - at least in our country, and despite

* This text, written in the summer of 1971, was published in «Serra d'Or», no. 146, November 1971.

¹ A. Nin, *Els moviments d'emancipació nacional*, Edicions Catalanes, París 1970.

whatever the critics may believe - essentially *progressive*.

Naturally, these points must be clarified in order to avoid the feeling of defending once again the formulas of the academy of poetry. On one hand, the mere fact that one is an enthusiastic Catalan does not necessarily imply being a good poet or a good painter. Neither is it secret that what has been called Catalan *patufista*, *llepaaltars* or *lliguer*² is still a reality in our country and, therefore, whatever criticism may be made, regarding this reality, appears to fully accept the fact in general terms. Let us consider the whole range of the good Catalan's catechisms, which, for some, are still valid today - from the ineffable creed and prayers endorsed by Fidel Constant to the most solemn menacing ones of Torras i Barges on the future of Catalonia - which, after Vatican II, are piece of native land, the sentimental love for the home, the whining respect for paternal authority or hierarchy, the blind obedience to the convenient excuses like the «destinies of the fatherland» or the «foundations of society». All this, at times like these when everything is polemicized or doubted, when the efficiency of the traditional family seems to fail - according to what is said -, when no form of paternalism is accepted, and all the great words and flags, which once excited people, often appear on the mouth, or in the hands of those whose belief is weaker, or who use them less nobly.

On the other hand, however, as is obvious, it is not sufficient to be young, *antipatufista*, even having many of revolutionary's attributes, in order to have a minimum of human propriety and, even less, to produce good novels, poems and paintings.

Although there are perfectly justifiable caustic polemic discussions - which we welcome hoping for others and, if we can have an equal say in the matter, the more the better - there are sometimes others in our cultural world which are not that clear. Strangely enough the latter hardly ever spring - although at times they wish to create this impression - from the healthy criticism or the altruistic rebellion of our youth. A proof of this is the fact that most of their documented statements, articles and protests often ignore, or scorn our language. Some of them create that same depressing impression - which a short time ago José Luis L. Aranguren claimed to have heard on his return from a period spent abroad - faced with many formulas, copied from other countries, which have perhaps ceased to be valid, or which mean nothing out of context. Others, despite the polemic nature they assume consciously or unconsciously, have rather been the delight, as is well-known, of the systems which actually take pleasure in the «*mel i mató*»³ culture. It is at this point that we must include some jokes - which pretend to demythologize - to which the Catalan culture and its representatives have been subjected. The expressions used like «*ceba*»⁴, «resentment», «alienation», mixed with other, more «scientific» insinuations, like «the world leans towards unification», «European integration will, as it progresses, cancel out nationalism», or «interplanetary travel will make us feel that all regional causes are prehistoric», expect to give our claims a negative nuance. We all know that, as well as other trivialities, all these converge in that famous piece of nonsense, already condemned by Marx: that is not realizing - or not wanting to realize - that, in practice, all form of rejection of national minorities, the underestimation of them, or the considering of them to be uncouth or fanatical, is still equivalent, for the moment, to giving hegemony to other nationalisms. But it may be because «something always remains» - which is certainly what most interests this kind of «Lerrouxism» of culture like other topics that are sent to us periodically - that

² [*Patufista*, from «Patufet», cartoon strip character; *llepaaltars*, religious bigot; *lliguer*, from Lliga, Catalan right wing political party. The above three adjectives try to summarize, through caricatures aspects of a certain Catalan tradition: the restrictive viewpoints, the traditionalistic and superficial religiousness, the social conservatism].

³ [*Mel i mató*: cottage cheese with honey, a typical Catalan dessert. It alludes to what is typical to folklore].

⁴ [*Ceba*: onion. This term often indicates, in tones varying from the cheerful to depreciatory, the most inveterate Catalanism].

these jokes are so easily spread, and some people like to publish them worldwide.

It should, therefore, not be surprising that there are so many people who, when faced with these parodies, however limited their awareness of spirit may be, are extremely sensitive and who react to the least provocation in this direction. And who when showing concern for our affairs, or honourably absorbed in many of the aspects of our history, cannot bear to be the butt of even the slightest; above all those who rightly know, that ours is not just any history. Not because it is ours, but because usually the interest we project onto it, is equivalent to the practice of certain human characteristics - be they virtues or defects - which certainly and rightly condemn all the «assimilations» of which our past has given multiple examples.

At this point we can begin to explain one of many Catalans' «more recurrent themes», apparently conservative, but which is not at all: the desire to carefully watch over our cultural, literary and artistic heritage, our popular treasures, our scholars, historians, philologists, our institutions, traditions and our monuments which, perhaps elsewhere, would seem useless mummifications, but which here, appear to participate in a special militancy and an enthusiasm, comprehensible only with the knowledge that they play a socially important role or a completely valid collective duty. We can also demonstrate that «to conserve» is not always synonymous with standing back and contemplating our navels or the conventional nostalgia of our past, or, still less, with the will to perpetuate one «system», but perhaps it is just the opposite. And today the «disputes», when they deal with Catalan issues, should be moderate because we cannot, for the moment, repeat with a silly mimicry that does not become us, the farce of practising a liberal or democratic kind of polemical ostentation.

The topicality of the problems of ethnic and national minorities which are debated in many parts of the world and have even been welcomed by councils and prominent places in the big international assemblies, should exempt us from dwelling on the point. But it is a good idea to remember that, far from being something for experts, they are considered, more than ever, subjects that involve a whole general philosophy and a wide vision of the world today. And since in fact every deep aesthetic also leans towards this view, those subjects interest the artists.

The artist is always looking for those final fundamental outlines, the more general justifications of things, the symbols that give them universal and lasting value. The very same thing occurs with the Catalan question. However much the artist may respect this issue, perhaps he does not need - he is not the person to do so - to enter into details of the many, many questions already sufficiently debated in our country to justify Catalanism, or frequently - and this is even sadder - to use it as a pretext for different ends. Neither does he feel the need for much research on whether Catalanism is a spontaneous deep-rooted sentiment among the popular masses, or if it has been instigated only as political tactics. Perhaps not even the linguistic aspect - like ethnic and geographical ties - would be strong enough for him if there were not an implicit idea of providing a true service to our people, and to the whole world - as is the case in reality. And he is clearly even less interested in the polemics, that are so external that it is now fashionable to debate them in the capital, where a subject for discussion is whether the opposition can flaunt the regional attributes and emblems. This is not because we are over worried about whether or not they are labelled as *opposition*, but because we believe, in all sincerity, that, besides being an accessory, this fact would be equivalent to limiting the Catalan question to its negative aspects and because the artist - we will never tire of repeating this - is always looking more carefully for the positive aspects than for the negative ones. Also before criticizing or analyzing past issues - even if they are reputed necessary - he likes to find the motives, the ideals that really direct us along new paths, useful to man, for the future. And, as always, - even if many think that he lives in a kind of limbo - he only gives himself up to the most realistic and to the most practical causes - furthermore, it is said of the Catalan that he is very much

so - even though, paradoxically, he prefers to absorb himself in wide poetic visions even though they seem too idealistic and even legendary.

It must be due to this «poetic» way of seeing reality - which, as is well-known, involves a large measure of instinct and stimuli that escape reason - that the artist does not even feel at ease with the versions of Catalanism instigated in those forms of «scientific» research applied to the history of Catalonia which are said to «contribute, objectively, to the destruction of many myths created out of nationalistic subjectivity, out of the imaginary legends that have embellished the life of kings and the role of the institutions of the feudal era»⁵. Perhaps he knows this kind of cold surgery (that people also wanted to apply to art) too well not to realize that, in the same way that art has never been explained to him in such a way, it is difficult to explain our spirit, which, like everything, involves very different forces as important as the exclusively historical ones, or even more. It is true as Lluís Nicolau d'Olwer wrote, that «Hercules neither founded nor could found Barcelona [...]. Hercules is a myth. False history deforms reality [...] myth sublimates reality and widens the spirit. Myth [...] is poetry. No patron would be more adapt for our active, daring, maritime city than the hero of whom poetry has said “He travelled across the immense earth and the sea, he endured many labours and achieved great feats”».

It would clearly be easy, and even unjust to reproach with the ignorance of our past those who, having been born after our civil war, have not had the opportunity of accurately getting our particular characteristics. In this case, instead of useless laments, it is better and more positive to let the poets and artists sing about them from time to time. Many of them, still separated from our traditional culture for different reasons, have perhaps never known that beautiful definition undoubtedly the key to understanding many of our apparent contradictions, which, in the words of the same poet Lluís Nicolau d'Olwer, says that Catalonia «has the luck of being liberal and traditionalistic at the same time, because its true tradition is liberty»⁶.

It is interesting to note how we have to go back, once more, to these sources which are more friends of troubadours and works of art than of scientists and politicians to explain the motives for the current trends and progressivism of our Catalan spirit. That is to say, to find reasons that justify it as something completely alive and that demonstrate that it can never be considered as an onus in the cultural problems nor a cause for derision or criticism by anyone who wants to show off. It is there to believe our particular patriotism in all eras has undergone the same as moral values in general, that have always been valid independently from the people that put them into practice, or of the actions of these people. And that certainly, something similar happens to those values, that is to say that, even though it is not a component whose presence alone will be sufficient for aesthetics, it will never be the case that aesthetics can do without it.

If the mission of artists and poets is to promote reflection, to provoke and attract attention to make known, to enlighten reality, in short, to exalt everything that makes us freer and more perfect as human beings, can we ever forget or underestimate the fact that the history of the formation of our country coincides precisely with the history of the conquest of liberty and with the advancement of democracy in the world? Is it necessary to remember that we can be proud - and we apologize to the scholars for giving banal examples, but we feel that it is interesting to contribute to their perpetuation - of having gathered, before any other race, the spirit of Peace and Truce, «the most humane and progressive of all medieval institutions», of having published the *Usatges*, of having elaborated the first political constitution in Europe which defends «the lands and men that belong to

⁵ P. Ardiaca, *El problema nacional català*, Edicions Horitzons, México 1961.

⁶ Lluís N. d'Olwer, *Del patriotisme i la democràcia en el procés constitucional de la Catalunya antiga*, Ateneu Barcelonès, Barcelona 1933.

no master», of having given the «guarantee of personal security, of property, of work and of the freedom of circulation and commerce protection for the foreigner, for the man with a different doctrine»⁷? How can today's artist, who tolerates neither gods nor masters, cease to be interested in a country that, through the words of Eiximenis, has said: «from now onwards, will have no more kings, nor dukes, nor counts, nor nobles, nor great lords; but everywhere, until the end of time, the justice of the people will reign and the whole world will be divided into, and ruled by, communes»? Or that which says «communities have never given anyone power over them except through pacts and laws»⁸? How can we forget the numerous formulas of our traditional customs inherent in the problems of the law, in the delegation of the powers given to our Parliament, in the rising predominance of the «popular arm», in the government formed through a pact? Clearly not to mention all those perhaps even deeper «philosophical constitutions», even though traditionally ours, those great syntheses of wisdom which we have agreed upon with the Jewish culture, with the Indo-Persian spirit and with the Arab philosophy. Or that, a special pansofian instinct, taught us the brotherhood between science and mystical theology as is the case with Llullo de Vilanova's thought, a formula which still today conserves such validity in the sharpest of wisdoms. Or of many other trends which have reached us from the East, which we managed to propagate and increase in our country, during the era of «the great bridge over the blue sea». When, for example, we encouraged «Italianism in painting and rising humanism in literature» so that the new meaning in life, widespread in Umbria and Tuscany, would fully penetrate into the House of Aragon, and that «substituting the Benedictine order in the same way that the beautiful Catalan substituted the Latin»⁹, would give rise to so many attitudes that, duly up-dated, have been adopted, even today, by the new generations: from the exemplary dialogue (perhaps reminiscently Indian and Buddhist) in everything, even the most insignificant poor thing of Nature, to the taste for nudity, as in communion with it or as a protest lesson.

The history of our country is really the history of the formation of some values, of a special way of understanding life and the society which continue to give a precise shape to the new anticentralist trends that seem to be outlined in the current European panorama. This is demonstrated by the fact that «everything represents an obstacle for Catalonia, at the time of the divorce between Spain and Europe or, in other words, whilst the pendulum sways in favour of the *castizo* side»¹⁰. It is the need for that «climate of freedom, vital factor», which in the tragic moments Antoni Rovira i Virgili¹¹ spoke to us about, a thought that, perhaps one day not very far from now, the contemporary Europeanists will feel obliged to rehabilitate.

The question involved is not that the Catalans have to play the Europe card now like someone looking for a medicine to cure a disease. It is not us who are ill neither are we trying to imitate anyone. The truth is that it is rather those who have discovered Europeanism now, those who, with the habitus of our age old democratic health, fortunately seem to want to play the card that we have inherited from the man forged from toil, erosion and the customs produced from dialogue - wisdom and dialogue have always been equivalent - emerged from the antique Mark. Pay careful attention: we do not claim to have the exclusive. We admit that many races have collaborated in the

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Eiximenis, *Regiment de Princeps*.

⁹ M. Trens, *Ferrer Bassa i les pintures de Pedralbes*, Institut d'Estudis Catalans, Barcelona 1936.

¹⁰ J. Reglá, *Història de Catalunya*, Editorial Aedos, Barcelona 1969. [*Castizo*: Spanish term used to represent what is pure Castillian Spanish].

¹¹ A. Rovira i Vergili, in «*Revista de Catalunya*», n. 82, 1938.

democratic process and that neither we nor others have ever completely achieved the final objective because obviously such a process is only an ideal. We have, of course, contributed largely in spreading this ideal but humanity will still have to fight for it indefinitely.

It would thus appear that being aware of our spirit, fighting to conserve it and putting it up as a symbol for all men, is a very universal mission for the artist and an unmistakably progressive cause. And it should not be a matter of principle - the proofs are within everybody's grasp - that it is our art - and the more imbued it is with these ideals and the clearer it sees them, the more so it is - which, after having avoided every *casticismo*¹², has currently caused more impacts and attained more successes in the world. And that, at the same time, the best artists and writers in the world - the list is endless - have understood and loved the Catalans and have shown their solidarity with them whenever necessary.

Time would appear to show that many men of our generation are in the right; men who, not long ago, were considered to be dangerous fanatics. Even their idea of wanting «to make the world Catalan», considered by many to be an insane megalomania, seems to us to be a perfectly valid symbol today.

The bourgeois *patufista* «seriousness» in commercial matters - there is a lot of this in Catalonia - does not repeat that we artists are deluded dreamers, that we are not «realists», or that we need more diplomacy and more concessions, that we should «keep our head on our shoulders» so as not to lose the «small markets» of the interior; that dreadful mentality that has for over thirty years preferred to sacrifice, as Ferran Soldevila¹³, correctly reminded us, all the big markets for example with the Eastern countries (with whom we had already reached an understanding) in exchange for an extended grey order and a still uncertain future. The great artist has always perceived true reality and does not believe in nostalgia or in absurd dreams of any sort. With unshakable universality and perseverance, he is not worried exclusively about the Catalans. He wishes his voice to be, as always, collective, almost anonymous. It is an instinctive desire which is not obsessed by borders but which, with an ardent sense of what is ours and due respect for it, wants to recuperate and try to perpetuate this ancestral chant which invites the whole world to fully share in the Catalan spirit and become «Catalanist». Because, for him this means simply keeping alive the essential impulse, both in love and war, in favour of humanism, democracy and freedom through which all the rest - from everyday problems to the most youthful impatience - would find their own solution.

(*El arte contra la estética*, Pianeta - De Agostini, Barcelona 1986, pp. 23-39).

¹² [*Casticismo*: Spanish term for caste discrimination].

¹³ F. Soldevila, *Què cal saber de Catalunya*, Club Editor, Barcelona 1968.