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O n the Philosophers' Exile and Pere Coromines' *Desterro*¹

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abstract

This article suggests a reconsideration of the term “exile” as it is referred to the Catalan thinkers since the armed conflict of 1936–1939. “Inner exile” is a label whose use frequently obeys to ideological and personal considerations rather than to an objective characterisation. Thus, what serves to discredit some authors is neglected for others who enjoy a positive characterisation. This is also the case of “exile”. Pere Coromines [1870–1939] stands here as an initial example.

key words

exile, inner exile, Pere Coromines.

1. By Way of Introduction: An Uncomfortable Question

In order to contextualise what I will say about some key figures in Catalan culture and, above all, to indicate the direction of my current work on essays *in Catalan* and their possible and difficult standardised acceptance, I will begin with a question expressed by Marta Pessarrodona. In the introduction to *França 1939. La cultura catalana exiliada* (France 1939. Catalan Culture Exiled), her coherent, useful and ambitious book on a very complicated issue and which has the particular merit of having been produced at all, she writes: “I have also repeatedly asked myself why important figures at a political, intellectual and artistic level, such as Lluís Nicolau d’Olwer or Pere Coromines, are so unfa-

1 Pere Coromines, as the author explains in the text, opts for the use of this word, *desterro* (banishment), instead of the word *exili* because of its connotations. The word implies the fact of being forced to leave one’s own country or land. (Translator’s note).

miliar to the general public. *Why are they so unfamiliar to the Catalan general public?*" (Pessarrodona, 2010, 15). Firstly, it is very difficult to answer this question without a widely shared determination to find a clear ideological cross-over approach within intergenerational and interdisciplinary collaboration. I believe it necessary to state the following: our awareness of the European tragedy of the years 1930-1945 is *distorted*. How and why? What must we do? As the diagnosis can take time, we must begin work on it immediately and also apply palliative remedies. First, a purification. There are too many people who evaluate without any groundwork; there is, among us, a terrorism of rumour, classification and interested suspicion, and, let us be honest, in many cases elements of petty backbiting. Citing specific cases is risky because you attract problems, so I will avoid this as much as possible. In this respect, the notion of "internal exile", which is perhaps inevitable in some, very few, cases must be handled with extreme precaution. Otherwise, we will always end up being misled by a specific kind of people, those who always occupy the centre stage in all situations and, at the same time, want to exploit the glory and power of all the winners and smear the honour and dignity of all the defeated². We must calmly activate

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- 2 Pere Lluís Font [1934] speaking about Francesc Gomà [1915-1998] on the occasion of his death states that, in contrast to his *masters* and *companions* (Serra Hunter, Xirau, Roura Parella, Nicol, Casanovas or Ferrater Mora) who went into exile, he opted for internal exile as did the Carreras Artau brothers, Font i Puig, Mirabent, Maragall or Calsamiglia (Lluís 1998, 10, 179-180). There is something that does not fit with this way of speaking. Pere Coromines, as we will see, says that he does not like the word *exili* (exile): "it reminds me of something pedantically literary" (Coromines 1972, 1260). "Internal exile" is an *oxymoron* or *contradictio in terminis*. If we want to say something else, we do so, but what exactly do we want to say? Was it a country where many people who were there felt as if they were abroad? In the expression "he *opted* for internal exile" the verb "to opt" complicates things even more. "To opt" is a verb of will; it involves a purpose, "to decide on *one* of the alternatives possible" (Dictionary of the *Institut d'Estudis Catalans*). We have been getting into a not very innocent muddle, I think, over adding and removing people within highly flexible canons, adaptable to the circumstances. When the *Quaderns de l'Exili* was reprinted, Joan Sales [1912-1983] wrote an excellent preface, some introductory words (from April 1982; he would die in November of the following year) and encountered some restless young people. One of these youths reproached him for ending up in the Dominican Republic, which was not a democratic country. Joan Sales responded brusquely: "Listen, young man, what do think things were like? *They did not want us anywhere.*" The posture, which was mainly one of not getting involved and waiting for who knows exactly what from this distancing, turned tragedy into a rather pharisaic game. F. Gomà says that "*my two masters are Joaquim Xirau and Pere Font i Puig*". And he differentiates them from other professors at the Department of Philosophy (Gomà, 1988, 63-77). This statement by F. Gomà demands a very accurate reading. It corresponds to the opening lesson of the academic year 1984 of the *Societat Catalana de Filosofia* delivered at the *Ateneu Barcelonès*. Miquel Siguan [1918-2010] said to me, upon leaving, that the superficial and pleasant tone of the lecture concealed an almost generalised scorn for everything and everyone. What is even more serious is the total absence of accurate documentation on what was so bitterly judged. Gomà's practices and the mystification of the Club Xirau need a very careful revision because it is a way of doing which always moves between highly personal

what we could call the Yehoshua programme or device, named after the Israeli novelist, also cited by Marta Pessarrodona, who recommends that whenever we consider wars or similar events, it is very useful *to look at* the literature prior to the conflicts (Pessarrodona 2010, 18). We need plenty of good humour and patient work to attain an overall view of the tragedy of European violence and the meaning of the indulgence of human weakness that Karl Löwith used to find in Italians (Sales 2010a).

We are still in the midst a very long crisis that began with the enormous foolishness of the 1914 war and the enormous error of the Treaty of Versailles. I remember a conversation with Jaume Bofill i Bofill [1910-1965] during the end-of-course dinner in the university restaurant. He told me, in reference to his father, Jaume Bofill i Matas [1878-1933]: "when they were about to construct a European country, Europe went mad for that generation." The task of those who, like myself, are coming to the end of our professional life is now to help establish international teams of professors and researchers to train young people to confront successfully the whole of European violence. "*Memory divides us*," as Marc Bloch said and the historian Jordi Cassases likes to repeat. Internationality can alleviate most of the still very present heightened tensions surrounding almost everything; if shared, they can be better neutralised. Is there perhaps a short cut? I think so: by selecting brief texts and making young people read them, using them for something similar to the purpose for which they were written rather than burying them in oblivion or regarding them as museum pieces. What should be promoted? Anything that nourishes the spiritual organism of free people. Where? To what end? One in general: to recover the abundance of civility that we have glimpsed at brief moments in the life of our people; and many in particular: as many ends as there are fields that differentiate themselves as crafts in human activities. We must become accustomed to working more every day with the material of our predecessors.

value judgements without too much foundation and general global views of a provincial and resented elitism. Maria Rosa Borràs [1936-2008], upon starting her evocation of Manuel Sacristán [1925-1985], stated: "There is a way of becoming interested in the thought and works of the intellectuals from the past (and the present) which seems quite futile and consists of reducing the trajectory of life and thought to stereotyped schemes that always externally record events and ideas. This reductionism achieves classifications and assimilations according to pre-established trends that calm the spirit of those seeking to research past and current heritage. However, I believe they are approaches that always remain in the exteriority, on the surface, and even have as a result the death or dissolution of what has been studied. In my view, it is a way of 'consuming' culture without any assimilation, without the ability to understand what has been studied, because it is a destructive form whose only concern is to be able to label and, above all, to hold on to the external image of people, thereby reduced to the anecdotal spectacle and the impoverishment of the meaning and purposes of their thought, which, moreover, is in this way dissolved into the nothingness" (Borràs 2004, 161).

The problem is not the repeated and weary question of whether Catalan philosophy exists or not and its level of quality. The affected repetition of the question is an absurd demand resulting from the weird supposition that we deserve to have everything and in large quantities, along with great quality and good value. Always demanding and never expressing gratitude. We cannot ask for more and people study the way they study. Contrary to what we may think, the problem in general is not the lack of studies and publications; these have been repeatedly produced and are often of good quality. There are more studies than we may think, but these are all too often started and restarted. And all too frequently, those produced by “some” have little to do with those of “others”. The real truth is that people do not read or notice what is produced but are more concerned with what is not produced.

Here I will refer to Pere Coromines [1870-1939] and on future occasions to Jaume Serra [1878-1943], Joaquim Xirau [1895-1946], the “Xirau Club”, Joan-David Garcia Bacca [1901-1992], Eduard Nicol [1907-1990], Joan Sales [1912-1983], the *Quaderns de l'Exili* [1942-47], and, more briefly, to Josep Pallach [1920]. Perhaps to some other people, but not too many. I want to gradually present the defeat and understand the varied reactions according to the age of the person, from Pere Coromines' 69 years to Josep Pallach's 19 years. We must understand “them” rather than being overly concerned with ourselves. What was lost was different in each case as was the moment of life lost. At one extreme, Pere Coromines, in his old age, lost the realisation of the ideals for which he had suffered since his youth; at the other, Josep Pallach, who was a Leninist-Trotskyist of the POUM, was defeated, in his youth at the age of 17, first at the hands of his Leninist-Stalinist companions in the PSUC. The tragedy is certainly the defeat of April 1939, but also that of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 23rd August 1939 and 1st December 1939. The tragedy is European violence. Between Coromines' and Pallach's experiences there is a whole gradation of nuances and an accumulative diversity of reactions. “We had lost the war.” Like being in Aristotle, defeat is expressed in many ways.

2. Pere Coromines (1870-1939): “reconstruct out of the ruins of disaster the most indispensable structures of what we have lost” (23rd January 1939)

Jorge Luis Borges wrote that a book that necessarily possesses a given merit is not a classic, but rather a book that human generations, moved for different reasons, read with a prior fervour and a mysterious loyalty. I think that in order to begin to be able to respond to Marta Pessarrodona's question we must start to suspect that all of us have some lack of basic loyalty and we must investigate how to diagnose it. What Claudi Ametlla says about Pere Coro-

mines is quite helpful to get us started: "One day he gave an awful speech in an academic centre, and the day after he gave the Sermon on the Mount in a community centre" (Ametlla, 1963, 286). We must ask: for Claudi Ametlla what were academic centres and what were community centres? And, above all, ask ourselves if now, after so many socialisms of all possible varieties, in our culture we still have an unresolved refined distinction of this kind. I am afraid so. I am afraid that we have made the distinction increasingly sophisticated. It is highly possible, I think, that Pere Coromines is great and noble because he knew how, and was enthusiastic enough, to give the Sermon on the Mount in "community centres". If we add this to a reflection, which I will abstain from assessing, by Alexandre Galí about Jaume Serra Hunter, I think we will see it more clearly: "it is important to know that with this spiritualist philosophy of a dual idealist and realist background, Serra Hunter was the philosopher of the literate workers of the *Ateneu Enciclopèdic Popular*, where for several years he gave university continuing education courses and where he always had an open platform. With the aphoristic vagueness of his philosophy and the technology that gave a semblance of neatness and depth to his style, apparently he served these workers a kind of bread of the absolute or the categorical which they yearned for in this world of falsehood and misery. At least, this was the position of many of our workers, in the ongoing innocence of a highly rudimentary and enraptured training" (Galí 2004, 178). Around 1963, when I was studying the history of early philosophy with Joaquim Carreras Artau at the University of Barcelona, one day I was reading a book about Plato on the Sarrià train when the passenger next to me, in a very friendly tone, told me he knew things about this author, about Plato, because he had attended the lessons of Jaume Serra to whom Alexandre Galí refers. The anonymous "literate worker" ended with a melancholy "because these things used to be done." I have always been very aware of this figure in connection with Jaume Serra and I have strived to ensure that the now links with the then. Loyalty surely advances through meetings, continuities and persistence. The work of Pere Coromines is well edited by his son Joan, both the *Obres completes* (Complete Works) in Catalan in a volume published by Selecta (1972) and the work in Spanish in a volume published by Gredos (under the name of Pedro Corominas, 1975).

We must talk about the philosophers' exile and I begin by referring to Pere Coromines who never liked the word *exili* (exile) and who is not, let us say, a "fully paid up", professional or canonical philosopher. His dislike of the word was expressed in his *Diari de la Diàspora* (Diary of the Diaspora): "I do not like the word *exili*. It has the effect for me of something pedantically literary. *Desterra* (banishment) is not a Catalan word, because it ends in an o, but as it sounds better, Castilianisation or not, I like it more than the other. Moreover, *desterrat* (distanced from your land, dispossessed of your own land) sounds better to me

and is perfect in meaning and sound. When I went to the *Institut d'Estudis Catalans* I wrote *El Cant del Desterrat* (The Chant of the Exiled), a coldly rhetorical composition. Who could have told me, when I wrote it, that I would sing this song, not rhetorically, but for real, twice in my life?" (Coromines 1972, 1260). So there is a pedantry surrounding the word, a possible rhetoric around the fact and an actual one that has to do with defeat and persecution of the conquered by the conquerors. It is appropriate, above all, to newly locate the 1939 exile in the "actual" harshness of the repression and threat "beyond the Spanish frontiers" (Folch-Serra, 2006, 18) hovering over the Spanish republicans, in particular the most notable, in France after 1940 and anywhere that Franco's agents could act and did. The threat could be very intense for the President of the State Council, in the case of Pere Coromines, or the Vice-President of the Catalan Parliament, in the case of Jaume Serra, as it was with the Director of the Bank of Spain, Lluís Nicolau d'Olwer, and was carried out with Lluís Companys.

Pere Coromines' quality as a "philosopher" should not be challenged. In any case, it is not worth our while detaining ourselves much in these kinds of things that belong to the type of study that Maria Rosa Borràs calls a "destructive form that is only interested in labelling." In addition to his participation in the first *Societat Catalana de Filosofia* (1923), which should be rescued from Galí's irony about the men of the Left (Galí 2004, 9-10), his initiative of the Philosophical Lectures at the *Ateneu Barcelonès* in 1928 and 1929 is also important³. But it is above all, we think, the scope and dignity of the view that the whole of Pere Coromines' writing offers that should be the subject of a painstaking study. The writings that in the *Obres completes* are classified as "essays" and range from *La Vida Austera* (The Austere Life, 1908) to *El Diari de la Diàspora* (1939), are worthy of attention, particularly what he says about the 19th century. The Spanish edition contains valuable legal and political philosophy writings. A few years ago, I pointed out the philosophical functionality of *Jardins de Sant Pol* (Gardens of Sant Pol, 1927, 1951; Sales 2003). The narrative certainly merits new approaches. I was told that Maria Aurèlia Campany had thought about arranging a theatre production based on Tomàs de Bajalta's trilogy (*Silèn* [1925], *Pigmalió* [1928], *Prometeu* [1934]). Is his prose stilted? Taste is always a complex affair, but we think that Sagarra's curse has been excessive in its effects.

The Hispanic perspectives of civility, heavily explored during the so-called transition, always get stuck in the same things and always taint the same type of people. Pere Coromines, writer of the Statute of Núria, Catalan Minister of Justice, President of the State Council of the Spanish Republic from

3 Pere Coromines [Prologue], J. Serra Hunter, J. Farran i Mayoral, J. Xirau [et al.], *Conferències filosòfiques: professades durant l'exercici 1928-1929*. Barcelona: Ateneu Barcelonès, 1930.

May 1936, belongs to this group. The great tumult of the transformations in the two main channels of metamorphosis has been, above all, the mutation of "blue" officials into "red" officials of many different tonalities, and the mutation of "black" pre-Vatican II clergymen into grey post-Vatican II clergymen and ex-clergymen (ex-priests, ex-friars, ex-monks, ex-brothers, ex-seminarists and ex-novices) that have provided many radicals of highly diverse radicalisms and who now all still yearn for their youthful momentum. All this has meant, and still means, so much noise that this intermediate, generous and noble group has always been tainted first for being audacious and later timid.

1939 finds Pere Coromines at the end of his life. He was then 69, which at the time was quite old. On 6th January 1938, he became very ill from a stroke; the rehabilitation was interrupted by electricity cuts from April 1938 when the Battle of the Ebro, the doctor and the family obliged him to move to France. In 1938, in Barcelona, people who fell sick died for any reason. In La Rochelle, some days before embarking for America, he wrote: "the first time, after being absolved in the Montjuïc trial, the Government, for no reason, exiled me to Hendaye. I left for Hendaye accompanied by my mother. She was 60, but I had not yet turned 27. The land of France then treated me well... I have a sweet memory of that first exile... Now for the second time I have come to France and everything seems to me grim and desolate, and now I am the old man and the youths are my children, and I suffer for them and for myself" (Coromines 1972, 1260).

The couple and five of the children embarked in mid-October 1939 on the *Massilia* and disembarked on 5th November 1939 in Buenos Aires. The moral and political influence of the Catalan politician and writer is admirable because he managed the difficult task of uniting the two groups of Catalans in Argentina, which soon proved very useful (Coromines, 1972, 1262 and 1271). He died in the early hours of the 1st December 1939. The exiled life of Pere Coromines was very brief; it was the end of a life.

As we mentioned, we need to disseminate brief writings, precisely and painstakingly annotated editions, among a young public. A good thing, for example, would be to do so with *El Diari de la Diàspora*. The whole Coromines-Vignaux family is exemplary as shown by the fact that his son Joan Coromines decided that the Foundation should bear his father's name. The people who run it should be more aware of this. On 23rd January 1939, Pere Coromines, upon finding out that Barcelona would fall, wrote his reaction to the disaster: "In the night, the collapse has been absolute. I am without hope and this has caused a crisis in my soul. The forces of adaptation to reality, so vital in my spirit, have given me a kind of resignation in the desolation... Farewell, Barcelona! Farewell Catalonia! Farewell, Republic of my loves and my dreams! My heart is detached from you as when a fingernail is pulled from the flesh. Poor and old, separated

from most of my children, I will begin a new life, amputated from the affection that until now has been the comfort and joy of my life. And I have begun to mentally reconstruct out of the ruins of the disaster the most essential structures of what I have lost” (Coromines 1972, 1253).

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