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T he Soul of the Earth and the Value of Art

Joan Miró, Rodolf Llorens, Antoni Tàpies, Eduard Nicol...

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abstract

This paper puts side by side philosophy and artistic creation in Catalonia in the twentieth century. We have to grasp how art and philosophy are able to generate and share thought and expression: a vision and a unique understanding of reality. This is a key reflection to understanding our times and reflects on the meaning and value of art and philosophy, humanism and the human condition in a society doomed to noise, to urgencies, and to lack of dialogue.

key words

Art, creation, Eduard Nicol, Antoni Tàpies, Catalan philosophy, Joan Miró, Josep Soler, Rodolf Llorens.

What is the meaning of art? What do aesthetic ideas offer us? Is there a shared view of these issues in 20th century Catalan culture? Which philosophers, painters and musicians provide us with guidelines for responding to these questions? What does it say about our present? What is the nature of the links between philosophy and art? These are some of the questions we find in the concerns that motivate us to research and reflect on the subject and to write this article¹. A reflection which means thinking about our world and ourselves in good company.

1 Article that continues some of our most recent work, including: “Eugeni d’Ors i la Filosofia com a música” (*Quaderns de Ciència i Filosofia*); “Manuel Milà i Fontanals, poeta” (*Serra d’Or*); “Joaquim Ruyra i l’estètica. La imaginació, la ciència i la creació” (*Revista de Catalunya*); “Consideracions sobre la bellesa en l’estètica catalana contemporània” (*Col·loquis de Vic*, 14); “Lo real, lo irreal i lo humano. Releer a Zubiri” (*Cuadernos Salmantinos de Filosofía*) and “Europa en la filosofía d’Eugeni d’Ors. Continent o contingut?” (*Col·loquis de Vic*, 15).

Artists and philosophers work from language. From a language that, as Eduard Nicol said, is expression because human beings are given to expression. We need expression to live and to be: “Every language is virgin and procreative at the same time. It is an organism, a living being; [...] Men *encounter* what seems to be a *made* language, but which is *being made*. [...] The diversity of languages is the greatest richness of men; it is a literally poetic fact that never ends. Languages are distinct ways of being men. [...] With the word, a living being begins to be a man” (Nicol, 2007, pp. 72-73). The human being starts from an ontological inadequacy that obliges him to seek and create meaning and value, to understand and become intersubjective in order to assert himself and share. And to ensure that this meaning and this value are a “process of life”. In the words of Antoni Tàpies: “the need to understand myself and also to understand the whole of life. I believe it is a feeling that has endured. Understanding painting or art in general is a way of coming to know oneself better and of going beyond the usual consciousness of ordinary life to the benefit of a more profound state, with the end of glimpsing the global reality” (Tàpies, 2008, p. 319).

Language is not mere communication or transmission of information or ideas. Language is a living process and a process of life. Language is living and understanding. Creation and seduction. Every language, every metaphor, opens a way of understanding and sharing for us. As Jean Baudrillard said after the post-modern adventures: “The function of language and of signs is not to communicate or inform, or to transmit – all of this is secondary –, but to captivate. [...] Symbolic exchange is seduction itself” (Baudrillard, 2010, pp. 24-25). This was defended by Joan Maragall when he spoke of the “living word”, of the need of poetry to flee the inertia and automatisms of life and of thought as a process of spiritualization of matter (ideas that d’Ors, Pujols and Roure-Parella would later pick up).

For Nicol, the word makes us into creators through expression to which our way of being is given in order to develop (to form and transform itself). Joan Maragall talks of the spiritualization of matter because he considers that it is necessary to resolve the division between body and consciousness and connect knowledge of the specific with what is universal. Jaume Serra Hunter sustains that: “The spirit [...] [is] profound reality, [...] the root of the roots of everything we are and experience. Humanising science and spiritualizing life are two committed things in contemporary thought” (Serra, 1934, p. 149). And for Joaquim Xirau a strong culture must have a philosophical knowledge that reveals to us the value of reality and the meaning of life itself as the obligation of the human being is to come to realise his human plenitude. These are guidelines that we find very present in Catalan artists, philosophers and thinkers (and this is the true meaning of wisdom). Antoni Tàpies and Francesc Pujols lead us to a welcome reinterpretation of Catalan thought since Lull. Tàpies (following the

teaching of Ferrater Mora) writes: “as Ferrater Mora rightly observes, mysticism does not attempt to eliminate the world, but to enlighten it. [...] Ramon Llull is the great model of the mystic and at the same time of the scientist, philosopher, and poet, of the contemplative man and the man of action” (Tàpies, 2008, p. 257). And, especially in the case of artists (Joan Maragall, Antoni Tàpies, Josep Soler), this process of spiritualization of matter is a process in which the erotic impulse is accompanied by pain.

In expression and thanks to it, therefore, the human being becomes increasingly more human. He shares a logos in which he must acquire his own voice. He opens up to an interdisciplinary dialogue (between the arts, sciences and philosophy) to better understand reality and himself and to move, as Tàpies says, to a “fuller consciousness”. To humanise himself and act.

However, the 20th century was the century of world and civil wars and of the holocaust. When the enlightenment project and the idea of progress of the 19th century was defeated. The historical moment when it was necessary to rethink historicism to achieve a vision of the qualitative time of life. Thus, philosophers and artists have had to rethink the idea of “full consciousness” or of “spiritualization of matter”.

In Catalonia, and since Joan Maragall, this critical consciousness of reality has been developing. It has done so through Eugeni d’Ors and Antoni Tàpies who (like Benjamin, Scholem and Rosenzweig in Germany) have sought, once the lineal view of history, time and memory had failed, the angel of history (of life). The angel of each moment. And this happens when the classical concept of civilisation has fallen. D’Ors dramatises it well through the desire to be buried in Vilafranca del Penedès (resolving philosophy in music) and Tàpies (after seeing the need to demolish the overvaluation of the human being, destroying it with the whole of humanism in the Western sense of the concept) took it to the maximum degree of abstraction of the human figure, which, from the sixties: “appears to be enlightened with another light. A worthy light that dissolves man in the total universe. It is something that gradually acquired great importance, like a kind of backdrop to the whole of my work. I wanted to show that we are united to every detail, every thing, every tree, every animal and every mountain in nature. Man is a kind of natural development of this primitive order” (Tàpies, 2008, p. 322). Xènius, Tàpies and Torres Garcia (like De Chirico in Italy) do not erase the human figure but dissolve it into the angel: “it was about transforming it and dissolving it into cosmic matter. More than a disappearance, it was a question of transfiguration” (Tàpies, 2008, p. 323). In Octavi Fullat’s reflection and Joan Roure-Parella’s work, philosophy and humanism are also resolved in aesthetics, as happens in the music of Josep Soler (in whose background we find Plotinus, Plato, d’Ors, Gödel and Penrose), in a

logos that opens us to mystery and beauty, to the lost unity (although they do so using very different methods, influences and disciplines).

Philosophy and art, Llorens and Miró would say, means daring to think. Freeing oneself from stereotypes and prejudices. Learning to live and to have one's own voice. Learning to make oneself responsible for life in a task which is constant and that, if we accept it, will never abandon us because if we lose spirit we are no longer slaves to the language of others but to our own: "Let us dare to climb the mountain where the Sphinx, the lover of wisdom, still appears in the path of walkers, not for them to give it just one more response without being mistaken once again but to breathe fresh and healthy air, to stretch their legs, in order to oxygenate their brachial tubes; and for the incomparable pleasure of being able to look back and contemplate the path trodden by the men pursued, harassed and tormented by the Sphinx and mutually torn apart with reasoning. Let us look back, however, not as the tired walkers do to justify their exhaustion and lack of courage to continue the march but, rather, to build up the strength to confront the roughness and ruggedness that lie ahead" (Llorens, 2010, p. 182). And this is the challenge also posed by Josep Maria Terricabras only a few years ago with the book *Atreix-te a pensar* (Dare to Think, 1998).

No artist creates from nothingness. Art is rooted and, at the same time, universal. It is an effort to understand and a lucid view *in, of and from* reality. And it is poetic because of the effort involved and the horizons glimpsed; because it endeavours to jump the wall of ephemeral quotidianness and make our passage through life fruitful; to strongly link the biological and the cultural in order to make humanisation of existence possible. Every language is organised sensibility, a way of understanding, living and seducing. Linguistic plurality is the plurality of life born of the biocultural constitution of the mode of the human being.

Joan Miró fully understands this when he explains the background to his vocation; when he says that his is an art sprung out of an artistic impulse born in a physical impulse that clings to the luminosity of the lands of Tarragona and Majorca, dialectically linked to the cosmopolitanism of Paris. In 1920, and in Mont-roig, Miró said to Picasso: "Europe and the countryside. Two stimulants to our sensibility and brain." In this respect, and following the philosophy of Ramon Turró and Rodolf Llorens, for Miró the strength of art, poetry and philosophy is a strength "of physiological roots." Plenitude of life that springs from the struggle. Struggle and responsibility. It is not an elegant flourish (an artifice) but a branch that oxygenates the vital breath (breathing). As Dalí said: "I need the localism of Portlligat, just as Rafael needed that of Urbino, to reach what is universal taking the road of what is specific" (Dalí, 2002, p. 83).

By humanising the local and the individual through art we open ourselves to the universal and to dialogue with others. We can speak with our

own voice, share and contrast the meaning and value of life. And for this reason, reflection on time and on how we confer or understand qualitative and irreversible time is a constant theme (in the background or quite explicitly) of aesthetic reflection in Catalonia (Josep Soler, Joan Maragall, Eugeni d'Ors...). Together with the centrality of the notion of consciousness, in contemporary Catalan culture time has been a transversal subject since the early works of Eugeni d'Ors to the last works of the composer Josep Soler², including *Lo fugaz y lo eterno* (The Fleeting and the Eternal, 1942) by Joaquim Xirau³, the works of Joan Roure-Parella on the meaning of time in the American continent (1967) and the work of Eduard Nicol in which time is omnipresent (especially in works such as *La agonía de Proteo* [The Agony of Proteus, 2004]). And it is a very alive and important subject today, fundamentally because of the advances in physical sciences.

The human being is a mode of being accustomed to the word born of sound, which breaks silence, lends depth to silence and returns to silence. Of the word which is expression and poeticises reality to humanise it: to live with greater plenitude and to develop. And the word generates a link between what is biological and what is cultural, between the individual and the collective. It is a process of life of memory and time. "With the use of the word, man transforms matter. [...] Linguistic science is the biology of the word. The word is history" (Nicol, 2007, pp. 74-75).

The word is born of sound as are, with it and through it, consciousness and intersubjectivity. The living metaphor where we create, develop and share existence. The order that becomes expression, body and shared clothing. And in the establishment of this metaphor the artist plays a fundamental role as he can, through a maniacal and vocational effort, open and make more lucid our view and sensibility. As the philosopher Rüdiger Safranski has recently said, the philosopher and the artist share the effort to break the limits of the obsolete metaphor to create a stronger metaphor more open to generating new processes of life and transformation. They share, as Nicol would say, the fact that they are constantly formed and transformed and that they take on a way of forming and transforming themselves. Therefore, all the cited authors defend the living word and living values, life and expression as a process, as a path of organisation and self-organisation, of evolution and co-evolution towards complexity. But in the 20th century, artistic (philosophical and scientific) vocation clashed with the commer-

2 See: E. D'Ors (2009); *Las aporías de Zenón de Elea*. Madrid: Encuentro; J. Cuscó and J. Soler (1999); *Tiempo y música*. Barcelona: Boileau / Fundació de Música Contemporània.

3 Joaquim Xirau also approaches the subject of the dimensions of time in *Amor y mundo* (Barcelona, 1983).

cialisation of values, art and sciences. And it also clashed with a marked division between wisdom and society, between education, politics and economics, with the speculative hyper-realisation of life: “But the values are those, as Schönberg has already directly or less directly stated, that have gradually disappeared from the cultural world of the West and, with the attempts undertaken for some time to rationalise and make them into just one more piece of data, they have gradually relinquished that which drew them together and was their most intimate essence and maintained them as living ‘objects’” (Soler, 1999, p. 21).

And it is then when we must listen once again to Miró, who said that through the metaphor matter takes on life and the biocultural (human) being rediscovers himself while rediscovering the place he lives and universalises his view. With good reason, in an interview with C.J. Cela, he said: “Matter has no end, it is like the earth. Matter! Within the spirit. Without the spirit nothing can be done: it is the secret, it is the spark [...]. The spirit is the nature that vivifies everything.”⁴

It is necessary to relearn how to live (relearn the *why* and the *how* of life). We know that climate, soil and craftsmanship play a decisive role in a good wine. Moreover, geography, economics and art are also important for a country. And in the same way that a wine or a language personalises the human capacity to live (to look, understand and share), a work of art speaks of a humanised space universalising itself from the specific.

Art is born out of the view, reflection and praxis which is possible through the efforts of individual people, out of the effort to specify and synthesize. Through the constant task of people who assume the memory of the space they inhabit because they want to actively participate in it. Of people who make the effort to speak with their own voice. Because tradition is living memory (in motion). Of people who make the effort to flee from stereotypes, from prejudices, from overcrowding and the maelstrom of everyday life.

Art is born with generosity because it is an effort that, inevitably, we make for others, and because it recognises those who have preceded it. With a generosity in which life is sought at its maximum level of plenitude. Life to make it more human. Paraphrasing Miró’s previously cited words, to “spiritualize it.” And doing so demands humility, effort and passion. This is its recipe! Anguish and temperament: “the seed must be formed within the artist, as within the earth, to be productive,” he said to Josep Francesc Ràfols in 1920. And this is why Catalan artists have an advantage in relation to others as their medium is hostile to them. The artist lives badly in Catalonia and is despised and to over-

come this he must possess a strong personality and great perseverance which, in the end, will always favour art: “young Catalan painting is better than young French painting [...]. After this pain and scorn, we will be purer.”⁵

The artist’s task is shared by philosophers and scientists. They all have the same concerns, enthusiasm and field of work because with them we advance by looking ahead (being creators). And because the scientist, philosopher and artist, as Pujols said in relation to the *Noucentisme* of Eugeni d’Ors, must clearly understand that we cannot ignore reality. In Miró’s words: “Everything is contained within reality.” In 1904 (Miró’s words are from 1919) Pujols opened his book of poetry with the sonnet “A vós” (To You) addressed to “Reality”, in which we read: “I gesture before You with my heart, / As does the Charmer before the Charm, / As does the Admirer before the Beautiful, / Who, included in the beautiful gesture, feels happy [...]. Despite being evil as I am, and tormented / By the condemnation we all bear, / I see You, in the immensity / Of your endless beauty / And it is a great comfort for those of us walking thus, / To see You, who is Reality.”

When we make these people dialogue we obtain a rich and complex landscape, a human landscape with complicities and dialogues that make us more conscious of the space where we are born and live. And in the Catalonia of the 20th and 21st centuries this dialogue is very fruitful when we place Miró alongside Antoni Tàpies, Francesc Pujols, Miquel Barceló or Eulàlia Valldossera. They are all contributing to the map of the artistic sensibility of this country, and between them there is a network of interesting connections that, in their turn, establish a network with scientists and philosophers which lucidly interlinks with the context and our present.

25 years after their death, Joan Miró and Rodolf Llorens still challenge and corner us (keeping history alive). Every time we approach their work our consciousness is questioned through a lucid and simple view (through a line that at first sight can seem infantile to us). Through a view that disconcerts us and obliges us to reflect on what surrounds us and on ourselves. At the same time, Miró’s work opens the doors for us to an understanding of contemporary Catalan art and its concerns and judgements.

Miró is exceptional for what he does and what he reflects on. He clearly understands the position of the artist in contemporary society and the difficulties of art. Miró’s energetic and also fragile line is the result of a titanic effort to achieve the maximum degree of freedom and synthesis to transmit the

5 All the references to Miró’s correspondence in this article can be consulted in the book: *Epistolari català. Joan Miró 1911-1945*. (Barcelona: Barcino, 2009).

vibration that comes to him from reality. To achieve a work in which the dialectics between (1) the specific and the ideal, (2) the capacity to hasten reality and not fall into dogma and (3) wild imagination and rigorous understanding are resolved in “victory”.

“Mont-roig, which is the earth, was very important to me. Majorca is poetry, is light,” explains Miró. And it is in this dialectic where vibration, the movement that gives voice to life, grows (developing and withdrawing). Where expression is a symphony of the complexity it transmits to us, that talks to us and questions us. And expression is the materialisation of the aforementioned dialectic, which Miró locates between “extreme pride” (which makes us imagine a work that always surpasses us) and “extreme humility” (which must accompany its realisation). In the words of Rodolf Llorens, the “servitude and grandeur” of philosophy, thought and human creation. We will only reach grandeur if we start from humility, abstraction if we know the specific, and understanding if we accept ambiguity. Miró talks of “extreme humility” to reach “extreme pride” and Rodolf Llorens of “servitude” to reach “grandeur”. Clearly, both oppose the *Noucentisme* of Eugeni d’Ors that starts from the “grandeur of intelligence”. Miró and Llorens are creators who believe in dialectics as a source of life and that neither reality nor consciousness are of a single piece (or lineal). “Only those who have really served and fought know and can say the value and the whole merit of the adversary” or “words that are not cartridges without bullets. That they possess servitude to kill and the grandeur to defend life” are some of the conclusions in the book *Servidumbre y grandeza de la filosofía* (Servitude and Grandeur of Philosophy) published in exile by Rodolf Llorens in 1949 (and reissued in 2010 by Leonard Muntaner in Majorca). Because of these things there is in almost all Catalan creators a strong concern for education, which attaches great importance to individual effort (to the specific and to language), something remarkable in the tradition of Ramon Turró, August Pi Sunyer, Rodolf Llorens and Joan Roure-Parella⁶. “La Ben Nascuda’s knowledge is equally useful and practical and always accompanied by emotion and human content. [...] Perhaps because she is practical she is also specific. [...] Calling a spade a spade. But more than clear and distinct, Eugènia wants ideas to be clean and determined. [...] The intelligence of La Ben Nascuda does not refer to a simple and isolated specific, which is a form of pernicious abstraction and simplification, but a composite, complex and relational specific, like cherries in a basket [...]. An overall vision.” (Llorens, 1977, p. 215).

6 On these issues, we recommend the third part of the book *La Ben Nascuda* by Rodolf Llorens, which is the response that Llorens published in 1937 to *La Ben Plantada* by Eugeni d’Ors. It is worth noting that, in keeping with the aforementioned philosophers, there are authors such as Salvat-Papasseit and Prudenci Bertrana.

Art emerges from the philosophical gaze of the owl looking at us in one of Miró's untitled paintings. The owl reflected in this undated painting symbolises the human view capable of searching for the soul of matter and breaking, in this way, the silence of reality giving it expression (as also happens in the magnificent painting "Personnage et oiseau dans la nuit"). In works like these, Miró manages to recover the "innocence" of the child's gaze. A living gaze interested in all that surrounds it and in knowing more and more. A gaze that, as Giralt Miracle has rightly written, returns us to the fantasy of children and to the strength of human imagination, which is represented in a visual poetry stripped of vanity and full of games between what is playful and what is lyrical. Moreover, Rodolf Llorens, as we have just seen, seeks this return to children and to the strength of the popular word of living tradition.

Fantasy, imagination, playful capacity and the lyrical and poetic possibility are primordial factors for Miró and are very well reflected in his work in the guise of childlike innocence. His is a gaze that has realised and accepted that only the human being is capable of giving the word to life. And the strength of the word (through languages, music or art in general) is great, although it seems to us a "natural fact". The human being is the only one able to create legends and stories, of humanising the world through his ability to express, which allows him to share, communicate and dialogue with reality and with others.

The ability to be surprised at the immensity and complexity of life, of unfolding imagination and the game (in cognition and praxis) are some of the things to be defended in this tired society with "too much of everything." And Miró shows us the importance of all of them.

Every artist breaks the silence of reality and of contemplation giving life to the vibrations he perceives and that move him to create: "I believe that tomorrow we will have no school that ends in "ism" [...]. In the free spirit every thing of life will produce its different sensibility, and we will only want to see, through the canvas, the vibration of a spirit, a very heterogeneous vibration [...]. After the contemporary liberation of the arts we see artists emerge without any flag with the strings of their spirit vibrating in different types of music." Let us enjoy the expressive line of Miró, the synthesis with which he manages to show reality with just a few lines (like those of "Personatge i ocell en la nit").

Individually and collectively (as a country), Miró shows us the importance of finding the juncture of the specific and the global, of the national and the universal and of the individual and the intersubjective. Miró approaches this dialectic as the challenge to find one's own voice, which involves taking responsibility for one's own life and the space we inhabit. In 1922, in a letter to Joan Francesc Ràfols he wrote: "I am more convinced than ever of my aesthetic

ideas and immensely growing love for artistic Catalan identity or against the false Catalan Frenchification.” And this is so because two years before he was quite convinced, as he wrote to Enric Cristòfor Ricart, that “it is necessary to be an international Catalan; a parochial Catalan does not have and will never have value in the world.” And to achieve this we need to go to Europe, to Paris; Catalonia and Spain are provincial. Moreover, in Catalonia the people who stay usually stagnate: “they are mummified” in life. Being patriotic, he will say, is acting abroad. And, as we have said, Joan Miró emphasises this vision when he says: “Without spirit nothing can be done: it is the secret, the spark, the only reason for existence.”

I think it is worth examining his work to rediscover these approaches, to realise how this dialectic is expressed in art, how it is communicated to us and how we can understand it. To imbed it in our sensibility. 25 years later, Miró is very alive. Humanism is still a challenge. 25 years after his death, Llorens’ philosophical view still helps us to fight for this humanism which is not utopian but enthusiasm for life because, as he rightly wrote in an article “Realitats” (Realities) in 1930: “Is the world so perverted that those who still believe in a better world are utopian? Everyone may answer this as he pleases, as it suits him or as he has been made to believe; although there are those who think it counterproductive, I am optimistic, I have a great faith in the future and I feel the breath of life which is joy and hope, trying as far as possible not to be offended by this other sticky ‘living’ of present Civilisation.”⁷

Joan Miró and Rodolf Llorens are good travel mates in our question about the meaning and value of art, the word and the gesture that poeticises reality in order to seek in it the plenitude of life. Good travel mates and sons of a historical period full of miseries but also of hope and enthusiasm. Of struggle for the ideal and life. Two sons of a country we have been on the point of losing and a memory that must allow us to work better in our present, if we know how to accept it. And as Xavier Serra explains very well when analysing our most recent cultural past: “The rich Catalan intellectual life of the pre-war period was for these new generations, in the best of cases, a list of names stripped of the swarming of life” (Serra, 2010, p.15), until today!

In Catalan culture, writers, philologists and historians are usually recognised. Language and history weigh heavily (too heavily). Scientists, artists and philosophers are in second and third place. The authors we have cited show that if we want a great culture and country, this cannot continue so. They are masters of dialogue linked to individual effort (for whom the erotic effort of

creating does not make them forget filial love and the action in and for the present). Therefore, we hope that, all together, we will recover the wisdom that, as Ferrater Mora says, helps us to look at things distanced from immediacy and, above all, is characterised by pursuing things with firmness and constancy. They walk in projects of fruitful dialogue in and for culture because a strong culture is creative, enterprising and committed.

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