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The influence of French aesthetics on Francesc Mirabent

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abstract

The importance of English and Scottish Philosophy for Catalan Philosophy has often been a subject of study, whilst another more powerful influence has very seldom been noted: French Philosophy. Francesc Mirabent's aesthetics, in particular, are established in an intense relationship with the professors at the University of Sorbonne, through whom he will be able to penetrate the European debate on aesthetics. We have attempted to briefly determine the thematic links that bond Francesc Mirabent with the principal French aesthetes in the 20th century.

key words

Francesc Mirabent, French aesthetics.

Francesc de Paula Mirabent i Vilaplana was born on the 21st of November, 1888, in Barcelona, into a modest family. Because of that, his youth was marked by his struggles to maintain and improve his family's financial situation, which led him to create his own company that imported pharmaceutical products.

The initiative he showed in business paralleled his life-long intellectual vocation. In 1907 he began to regularly contribute articles to several Republican and liberal newspapers, such as *El pueblo*, *El radical*, *La unión republicana*, *El liberal*, until 1911 when he started to change genres, abandoning journalism and writing several novels, almost all romances.

In 1916 Mirabent earned his secondary school diploma, allowing him to enter the University of Barcelona, where Jaume Serra Hunter was his main mentor. From that moment on, he began to study the philosophy of common sense, writing his doctoral thesis on the subject of *British Aesthetics in the*

*Eighteenth Century*¹. This was also the start of Mirabent's identification with the Barcelona School, and he began his most productive period as a professor at the University of Barcelona, alongside other professors such as Pere Font i Puig, Joaquim Xirau, the Carreras i Artau brothers, Francesc Gomà...

We have found various links between Francesc Mirabent's aesthetics and the French aesthetes of the late 19th century and early 20th. Particularly when Doctor Mirabent began to travel more frequently to Paris. On these trips he would meet with the aesthetes at the Sorbonne, who kept him informed on the European aesthetic debate.

Most noteworthy among those French aesthetes were Victor Basch, who was the first Chair in Aesthetics at the Sorbonne, and Charles Lalo, who succeeded him, as well as other professors including Raymond Bayer and Étienne Souriau.

We have divided these links into three points, allowing us to connect these early-20th-century French aesthetes and see how they can form a cohesive unit, which could also include Francesc Mirabent himself.

Personal and academic link

There was constant intellectual exchange between Mirabent and these French philosophers. In Mirabent's papers, archived in the library of the University of Barcelona, there are 88 letters of his correspondence with Raymond Bayer and 15 to Charles Lalo. When we take into consideration the possibility that some of the letters have been lost, the obstacles presented by the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and World War II, as well as the fact that communication in that period was a slower process, we are looking at a correspondence practically uninterrupted over twenty years.

- A) Among the papers bequeathed is ample academic documentation on the various courses in aesthetics given at the Sorbonne, with syllabi, lectures and even summaries of books, which were later used by Mirabent as the basis of his classes at the University of Barcelona.
- B) In a letter dated 1924, Victor Basch advises Mirabent to continue researching the 18th-century British aesthetes, as precursors to Kantian thought. This would prove to be a particularly relevant suggestion, arriving as it did in Mirabent's formative period, and we will see how he follows Basch's indications closely. In fact, this is the line of investigation that he will follow in his main book: *De la Bellesa*, published in 1936².

1 Francesc Mirabent. *La estética inglesa del siglo XVIII*. Barcelona: Editorial Cervantes, 1927.

2 Francesc Mirabent, *De la bellesa*, Barcelona: Institut d'Estudis Catalans, 1936.

- C) In 1927 an article on his book *La estética inglesa del siglo XVIII* is published in Paris, in the *Revue d'Histoire de la Philosophie*³, further evidence of not only his contact with the Parisian intelligensia, but even a certain degree of recognition of his work.
- D) In 1937, Mirabent presents, at the Ninth International Philosophy Conference in Paris, a paper entitled “Les valeurs esthétiques et le jugement du goût”. Shortly afterwards, he assists the 2nd International Aesthetic Conference, also held in Paris, where he speaks on “Vérité et réalité dans l'expérience esthétique”. It is worth noting that he presented his papers in French.
- E) Also in 1937, he is appointed a member of the Committee of International Conferences on Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art. It was Charles Lalo and Raymond Bayer themselves who nominated him.
- F) In 1948 he was appointed a member of the administrative committee of L'Institut International de Philosophie, with its headquarters in Paris, and the Spanish delegate to the journal *Bibliographie de la Philosophie*⁴. He also participates in the 10th International Philosophy Conference in Amsterdam, where he presents the paper “L'Esthétique et l'Humanisme”⁵.
- G) In 1949, he attended the Conference of French-speaking Philosophy Societies in Neuchâtel.
It is interesting that Mirabent attended this Conference, because it means that he was so well-regarded as to be invited just like fellow philosophers working in French.
- H) That same year he attended the *Goethe Veranstaltungen*, which takes place in Frankfurt, as a representative of the Department of Philosophy and Letters at the University of Barcelona.
- I) Finally, it is important to remember that he was also a member of the American Society for Aesthetics, with its headquarters in Cleveland (Ohio).

All considered, one is left with the impression that Mirabent, within the realm of aesthetics, ended up taking on more institutional and representational responsibilities outside of Spain than within, and particularly in France.

3 *Revue des livres. Revue d'Histoire de la Philosophie* (1927), p. 465.

4 A journal created by l'Institut International de Philosophie (I.I.P.) following the Conference devoted to Descartes.

5 Mirabent, F. “La Estética en el X Congreso Internacional de Filosofía”, *Estudios Estéticos y otros ensayos filosóficos*, Barcelona: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones científicas. Instituto Luís Vives de Filosofía, 1957, Vol. I, p. 339-348.

French philosophical influences

Mirabent constantly quoted French authors in his writings. He displayed a thorough understanding of the work of Ribot, Jouffroy, Delacroix, Maine de Biran, etc., and clearly acknowledged the influence of their ideas on him.

For example, Mirabent explicitly continued on the concept of emotion laid out by Ribot:

“We believe emotion,” he wrote, “is an affect belonging to the general classification of sentiment –just like pleasure and pain, fondness and passion, and characterized by a brusque, unexpected and intense psychological movement; in short, Ribot’s version”⁶.

In addition, Ribot was very knowledgeable on the studies of sentiment⁷ and the philosophers of the *Einfühlung*⁸, which Mirabent dealt with extensively in the fourth chapter of his book *De la bellesa*, entitled “Del sentiment estètic”⁹.

On the other hand, Mirabent quoted Delacroix’s consideration of sentiment as being far superior to sensorial pleasure, because it abandons somatism and embraces spiritualism¹⁰. He also writes of play as an end in itself¹¹, just as Delacroix had. And later he even publishes an exhaustive study on the author, entitled “Delacroix, o la inquietud de lo estético”¹².

From Main de Biran he takes the need to limit sensualism and consider the subject a “substantial entity”, instead of seeing it as merely an intermediate element between sensation and the metaphysical absolute. He also published a study on this author: “La estética en la metafísica de Maine de Biran”¹³.

6 Mirabent, F. *De la bellesa*, p. 136.

7 Theodule Ribot, *La Psychologie des Sentiments*, París: Libraire Felix Alacan, 1922.

8 Theodule Ribot. *La Psychologie allemande contemporaine (1879)*, París: Ed. L’Harmattan, 2003.

9 F Mirabent. *De la bellesa*, p. 101.

10 *Ibidem.*, p. 155.

11 *Ibidem.*, p. 112.

12 Mirabent, F. “Delacroix, o la inquietud de lo estético”, *Estudios Estéticos y otros ensayos filosóficos*, Barcelona: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones científicas. Instituto Luís Vives de Filosofía, 1957, Vol. I, p. 71-77.

13 Mirabent, F. “La estética en la metafísica de Maine de Biran”, *Estudios Estéticos y otros ensayos filosóficos*, Barcelona: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones científicas. Instituto Luís Vives de Filosofía, 1957, Vol. I, p. 221-247.

One of the most revealing moments, in terms of his intellectual tendencies, is when he points out his immediate sources for his theory on “sympathy”. Firstly he mentions Jouffroy, whom he links to Maine de Biran:

“This branch, which was originally presented indifferently, as a general attitude of mind, acquires its first differentiation in the work of Jouffroy, a French psychologist from the first third of the 19th century who, in 1826, taught a course in Aesthetics in Paris, in which he stated that the sentiment of sympathy is the fundamental aesthetic sentiment. Jouffroy is one of the most illustrious men in the school of Royer-Collard and, consequently, was influenced by Scottish philosophy, which brings together the investigative value of psychological analysis with the normative value of the spiritualist doctrines from which originate the purest moral essences. Moreover, Jouffroy comes into contact with the metaphysical theory of Maine de Biran, and that reaffirms his spiritualism, which leads him to distinguish between Psychology and Physiology and to state that the self is revealed directly through the activity of consciousness”¹⁴.

This spiritualist tendency, widespread in France, will also become one of the characteristics of the aesthetics of Mirabent and, in fact, it will also be common to several members of the Barcelona School.

And, finally, it should be also pointed out that many of the authors quoted by Mirabent –from Descartes¹⁵ to Bergson¹⁶– belong to the French philosophical tradition.

Thematic Similarities

Earlier, Mirabent studied the aesthetes of Great Britain in the elaboration of his doctoral thesis¹⁷. But many French aesthetes had also used the British aesthetes as references in their studies. Thus, the fact that Mirabent began in the field of aesthetics inspired by British philosophy can be considered a characteristic that, instead of separating him, actually brings him closer to a significant group of French aesthetes to which his teachers, or the teachers of his teachers, belonged.

14 Mirabent, Francesc. *De la bellesa*, p. 121.

15 Quoted in *De la bellesa* up to 9 times. See the index of authors, p. 299.

16 “A propósito de Bergson”, *Estudios Estéticos y otros ensayos filosóficos*, Barcelona: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones científicas. Instituto Luí Vives de Filosofía, 1957, Vol. I, p. 278-287.

17 Mirabent, Francesc. *La estética inglesa del siglo XVIII*, Barcelona: Editorial Cervantes, 1927.

Victor Basch undertook the translation of several works by German philosophers on the theories of the *Einfühlung*, introducing the new trends in German aesthetics into France, allowing Charles Lalo to incorporate them in a broadening of his aesthetic perspective and, as a result, Mirabent was also exposed to them.

We find a concurrence in the explanation of the *Einfühlung* as identification, following the guidelines of Volkelt and Lipps, which Basch had contributed before Lalo, and Lalo before Mirabent.

“Lipps –wrote Mirabent– points out two primordial and unyielding elements of the *Einfühlung*: a) the instinct to imitate foreign movements and attitudes, either of people or objects and b) the innate and reciprocal connection between states of consciousness and organic modifications. It is, therefore, a link between the classic theory of imitation and the modern theories of emotions, which are significantly influential to the theory of the *Einfühlung*. Note the fact that Volkelt and Lipps go to lengths to stress the prevalence of emotion over the intellectual mind, and particularly to distinguish *Einfühlung* from all possible confusion with association, representation and with analysis or introspective observation; instead associating it with joy, pleasure, glee, and this leads them to say that ‘beauty is the identification of our life with an object’[...]”¹⁸.

Lalo had written:

“Le contenu propre de mon *Einfühlung* esthétique c’est l’ensemble de mon état intérieur, ou la manière d’être de mon attitude interne, d’où émane chacun des actes de ma volonté et de mon activité. Ou, plus brièvement : il consiste dans la personnalité que je vis dans l’objet perçu avec lequel j’identifie mes états affectifs... Je les vis doublement: en lui, en moi; c’est une identification”¹⁹.

And also:

“Une foule d’œuvres de la plus grande valeur ont été consacrées dans les dernières années à l’analyse de cette idée. Les plus importantes sans contredit sont la récente Esthétique de Lipps, et le Système de l’Esthétique, de Volkelt”²⁰.

18 Mirabent, F. *De la bellesa*, p. 123-124.

19 Lalo, Charles. *Les sentiments esthétiques*. Paris: Félix Alcan, Éditeur, 1910, p. 68.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 54-55.

Mirabent and Lalo also concur in their criticisms of the lack of clarity in the definition of *Einfühlung*. It is not enough to specify what it isn't, nor can we be satisfied with general definitions filled with vagaries, such as the ones offered by Volkelt and Lipps. When we are unable to find positive definitions, ones that are not merely the negation of other terms, the explanation remains incomplete.

On this subject, Mirabent wrote:

“The negative definitions that Volkelt and Lipps give us of the *Einfühlung* (I, it is not association; II, it is not perception; III, it is not intuition; IV, it is not a derivative somatic movement nor a reflex; V, it is not mere imitation or representation) can be understood and even accepted. But the positive definitions are complicated, filled with exceptions and interpolations, and inevitably lead to confusion and obscurity”²¹.

And in Lalo's *Les sentiments esthétiques* we find these passages:

“Or, en réalité, il n'y a de valeur esthétique que dans ces tous complexes qui engagent toute notre personnalité intime. L'*Einfühlung* n'est donc pas une association”²².

“Cette imitation intérieure, mais qui ne suppose nul modèle ; -ce symbole, mais qui ne représente que celui qui la pense ; - cette extériorisation de notre sensibilité qui crée en nous une sensibilité nouvelle dont nous serions incapables sans elle ; -cette exaltation et cette profondeur de la vie affective qui exclut les plus exaltées et les plus profondes des impulsions sensibles, comme celles de l'instinct sexuel ; -qui se produit même lorsqu'elle est physiologiquement impossible, comme lorsque les hommes sont censés éprouver des sentiments féminins et les femmes des impulsions toutes masculines ; -cette identité enfin dont les deux termes se distinguent et s'opposent à la fois, et qui est si bien réciproque, que dans les résultat el ne doit plus rien rester de propre à chacun deux êtres, bien qu'elle soit l'exaltation suprême de leur individualité, -c'est l'éternel “je ne sais quoi” chargé faute de mieux d'expliquer tous les faits”²³.

In the writings of Mirabent there are also numerous quotes from Lalo's work and direct references to the French author:

21 F. Mirabent *De la bellesa*, p. 125.

22 Charles Lalo. *Les sentiments esthétiques*, p. 60.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 82-83.

“Lalo says sincerely and keenly that when one takes on the study of the *Einfühlung* one believes he has a clear notion of it; but as he advances in his study, that notion becomes confused and contradictory.”²⁴

“As regarding aesthetic sentiments, Th. Ribot and Ch. Lalo have written noteworthy monographs that serve as guides, placing this problem in an historical and doctrinal context. But in the specific point of sympathy, we find ourselves faced with a fact that surpasses the strict field of sentimental life. On one hand, we have seen that the origins of sympathy stem from moral tendencies and the remotest and semi-instinctive emotional movements; on the other hand, the most qualified commentators of sympathy introduce intellectual elements that make it even more complex and harder to define this sentiment generally referred to as “sympathy””²⁵.

“We note, first of all, the accuracy of Ch. Lalo’s charge that the *Einfühlung* is a first step towards mysticism[...]

“The aesthetic sentiments, meticulously studied by all aesthetes –and notably by James Sully, Victor Basch and Charles Lalo [...]

And we have even found a concurrence in the order in which certain concepts are explained:

Mirabent, for example, places the subject of play and the sexual instinct within the larger subject of aesthetic pleasure, following the same order as Lalo in *Les sentiments esthétiques*, Chapter III (“Le pensée esthétique proprement dite: Les sentiments esthétiques”), where he discusses play²⁸, and in Chapter IV (“La conscience Esthétique”), where he talks about the sexual instinct²⁹.

The ordering of Mirabent’s first chapters (“On Aesthetics, philosophical discipline”) coincides methodologically with Basch’s (“Method and Sentiment”), before they both begin to study the criticism of Kantian judgment: Basch entitles the following chapters “Theoretical reflective judgment” and

24 F Mirabent, *De la bellesa*, p. 123.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 122.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 126.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 156 -157.

28 Charles Lalo, *Les sentiments esthétiques*. Paris: Félix Alcan, Éditeur, 1910, p. 187.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 239.

“Aesthetic reflective judgment”³⁰, which Mirabent sums up with a chapter entitled “On aesthetic judgment”.

In this aesthetic context of the early 20th century at the Sorbonne, we also find the precedents of one of the definitions we consider most original to Mirabent, when he defines sentiment as “substantial energy of the soul”³¹.

Lalo had already defined sentiment as “energy”:

“ Bien des synonymes peuvent exprimer cette irradiation indéfinie d’une source d’énergie intense dans tout notre être ; et les théoriciens les ont multipliés à plaisir : spontanéité de la vie, jeu harmonieux des facultés, expansion de notre personnalité, libre développement de l’imagination créatrice : aucune de ces formules ne l’épuise toutes en approchant ”³².

This conception of sentiment as energy that Mirabent uses is, therefore, very close to the notions of the French *énergie*. In spite of the originality of his use of these terms within the Barcelona School, we can see their roots in several French esthetes such as Lalo, Ribot, Bergson, Jouffroy, Lamennais...

Without denying Francesc Mirabent his originality, since he created his own definition and developed it over several chapters, it seems clear that the consideration of sentiment as energy was definitely one of the subjects of debate among the French esthetes. Within this current of study on sentiment, he took the subjectivist direction from Victor Basch’s commentaries on Kant. On one hand, he is already familiar with the Germanic investigations of the *Einfühlung*, and now, on the other hand, he knows Basch’s work on the last of the Kantian critiques, which allows him to maintain the spiritual framework in which to situate beauty, truth, kindness and continue the spiritualist trend common to both the Barcelona School and several French esthetes.

We can say, therefore, that Mirabent arrives at the European debate on Kantian judgment via the French translations and interpretations, primarily by Lalo and Basch. But the similarities do not stop there. We have seen how they share many points of reference and similar themes. And when Lalo and Basch introduce Mirabent into the aesthetic debate on the theories of the *Einfühlung*, he rediscovers the subject of sentiment that he had previously tackled in his

30 Basch, Victor. *Essai critique sur l’Esthétique de Kant*, Milton Keynes: Kessinger Publishing, 2010. Pages 108 and 151 respectively: “Le jugement réfléchissant théorique” and “Le jugement réfléchissant esthétique”.

31 F. Mirabent, *De la bellesa*, In Chapter IV “Del sentiment estètic”, Point VIII “Del sentiment com a energia substancial de l’ànima”, p. 101.

32 Charles Lalo. *Les sentiments esthétiques*, p. 153.

study of the British philosophers and enriches it with the theories of Lalo, even coinciding directly in many of the criticisms, argumentations, vocabulary and explicit quotes.

Our goal with this article has never been to question Mirabent's identification with the Barcelona School (with which he himself professed "affiliation"), nor deny the impact of British philosophy on him, nor much less detract from the work carried out by Mirabent, starting in 1939 at the University of Barcelona, to revitalize the subject of aesthetics, nor his later collaboration with various Spanish colleagues. But we do see clearly in Mirabent an intellectual who over time acquired an aesthetic discourse of his own based on his interaction with the French aesthetes, with whom he would collaborate throughout almost his entire academic life, holding important posts and maintaining constant contact, a contact which, furthermore, was the basis for an unprecedented process of internationalization of the aesthetics made in Barcelona.

Translation from Catalan by Mara Lethem