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“Remaining for the moment without an audience”: The Literary and Civil Commitment of Carles Riba

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Abstract. Carles Riba (1893–1959) wrote several articles in which he showed his commitment to literature and reflected on the role of literature in society, as “Socrates in front of the judges” (1926), “Politicians and Intellectuals” (1927), “Literature and Rescuing Groups” (1938) and the presentations of the *Revista de Catalunya* (1939 and 1955). Many of these texts were written in turbulent political contexts: the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera (1923–1929), the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) and the post-war period under Franco (1939–1959). The aim of this paper is to study these articles and analyse Riba’s view of writers and intellectuals.

Keywords: commitment, intellectual, literature, criticism, Carles Riba

1 Introduction: juvenile impulses

“I started [writing]”, recalled Carles Riba in 1953, already 60 years old, “for external motives: for it was in fashion among my teenage fellows, for some of my first essays had gained some success, for I wanted to say certain things in a certain way I deemed more efficient, etc” (Riba, 1986: 254)¹. The first known poems by Riba date, indeed, from his adolescence, from when the writer was 15 years old: mainly love, or rather infatuation, poems as well as circumstance poems, like the ones that other teenagers wrote and have always written both to delight their litterateur colleagues and to captivate a girl (Malé, 2010: 15–18). But, at the same time, this young poet also took on the translation of Virgil’s *Eclogues* (1911), an endeavour that went beyond simple amusement or the sheer fashion of a few well-composed lines. His version of Virgil revealed a firm literary vocation that would not take long to be confirmed by time.

Also proof of this incipient vocation is the speech that Riba read, when he was not yet 19 years old, at the Floral Games Literary Awards in 1912. Beneath a bunch of impassioned romantic ideas about poets and poetry, the novel writer outlined the stages that, according to him, the “poet-adolescent” went through from his first chant,

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¹ “Vaig començar [a escriure] per motius externs: moda dins un grup d’adolescents companys, un cert èxit, entre ells, dels primers assaigs, ganes de dir unes certes coses d’una certa manera que m’apareixia més eficaç, etc.”

the most turbulent of them being that of “theorisation”, that is, the stage where the poet becomes aware of his poetic minstrelsy. This stage becomes sharper after visiting the “master poet” – young Riba had met Joan Maragall – because, in spite of the enlightened ways to follow shown by him, the “poet-adolescent” cannot help but feel the rebellious spirit characteristic of youth; and he exclaimed:

Accepting at twenty what is established because it is established — somebody has highlighted— gives away a lack of vitality and even some degree of selfishness of spirit [...]. He who does not libel all of what his ancestors have constituted, and does not throw new formulas of perfection into the world, implicitly assumes the uselessness of his coming. (Riba, 1988: 11–12)²

The “new formulas” were, once the juvenile poems and the poems of Maragall’s influence were left behind, the poems of *Estances* (*Stanzas*), with which young Riba materialised – as we have seen him recall around 40 years later – his will “to say certain things in a certain way I deemed more efficient”. He wished for his own original way, with topics and poetic procedures different from the ones used by the authors of his generation and the preceding one, away from the sentimentalism and realism characteristic of many of them.

2 The quest for clarity

These first and juvenile impulses towards writing were qualified by Riba in 1953 as “external motives”. Another one would be the social and political atmosphere of the first quarter of the 20th century, ideologically led by Enric Prat de la Riba (until his death in 1917), who – with the cooperation of Eugeni d’Ors – encouraged the intellectuals of the time, of Josep Carner’s generation and the younger of Riba’s generation, to participate in an ambitious project for culture and the country. But the involvement of the writers in such a project did not result in the creation of a literary group or movement. Each one of them – Josep Carner, Josep Lleonart, Josep M. López-Picó, Guerau de Liost, among those born in the 1880s; Riba, Joaquim Folguera, Carles Soldevila, J.V. Foix, among those born in the 1890s; and many others – followed their own and unique literary trajectory. Nevertheless, most of them converged on some synthesisable aspects in Ors’s idea of the “well-made work”. They also converged, with their writings, on the cooperation with the task of language depuration and reform led by Pompeu Fabra – one of the axes of Prat de la Riba’s national project – in the common aspiration to create a literary form of Catalan, which would be “a modern language, the living expression of a spirit both modern and alive”, as Riba claimed in 1918 (Riba, 1985: 81)³.

It is worth insisting that the participation of the writers in the mentioned project did not lead to the creation of a literary current, tendency or programme. Their commitment consisted, instead, in establishing publishing companies and producing magazines, carrying out translations and writing manuals, teaching courses and getting involved with the new institutions being created – besides the strictly political commitment some of them made.

A few years later, in 1922, Eugeni d’Ors – recently removed from the administration – gave a speech in Castelló d’Empúries, where he denounced the state of prostration and decadence that, according to him, the culture in Catalonia started to experience. Riba, in a letter to his friend Josep M. López-Picó on the 3rd October of that year, berated Ors for his lack of self-examination and for not contemplating his share of liability, as an ideologist, for the failure to attain the desired goals; and he reminded him of the role of pioneering and transition they had to assume as a generation in order to build a culture comparable to the other European cultures: “There’s few of us in Catalonia, but if we want our grandchildren to walk free of shame on the forum or under the Brandenburg Gate, then the few of us need to sacrifice and make manuals bound in boards and translations

² “Acceptar als vint anys el que ja és establert, per tal que és establert —ha remarcat algú— acusa una manca de vitalitat i àdhuc un cert egoisme en l’esperit [...]. Qui als vint anys no injuria tot el que els antecessors han constituït, i no llença al món noves fórmules de perfecció, reconeix implícitament la inutilitat de la seva vinguda”.

³ “un idioma modern, expressió viva d’un esperit així mateix modern i viu”.

for a daily wage and copies of historic and literary archives. This is pure Ors doctrine, in which we have all believed” (Guardiola, 1990: 210)⁴.

With the establishment of the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera in 1923, Riba and many other intellectuals were forced to stop teaching at the Universitat de Barcelona and the Escola de Bibliotecàries (School of Librarians): “I have been dismissed from my post as a teacher”, he wrote to his mentor Karl Vossler in 1924, “not just me, but a hundred others too; but I had the honour to be among the first. The purpose? Fighting Catalan nationalism where it holds not only its maximum strength but also its maximum *raison d’être*: culture” (Guardiola 1990, 285)⁵. This did not make him give up his commitment, and the cultural construction in Catalonia did not stop either, despite all the impediments imposed by the dictatorship. Also in 1923, for instance, the Fundació Bernat Metge, created the previous year, and where Riba was one of the first collaborators, started the publication of translations of the Greek and Latin classics. Because, just as it was happening contemporarily in a great deal of the Western countries, one of the mainstays of the new culture to be built had to be the return to the Greco-Latin Antiquity as an “educating force and principle”, in Riba’s words, written with complete conviction (Riba, 1988: 125)⁶.

It will be precisely the Fundació Bernat Metge where Riba will be able to retake his work as a teacher in 1925, of classical Greek, with the objective to prepare new translators. However, in his classes, he did not restrict himself to teach the Greek language but he made time with the more advanced students to discuss some of the most relevant works by the Attic writers, like *The Apology of Socrates* by Plato. As he explained in a report about his task at the foundation, these classes represented “excursions that, escaping from pure philology, we have made to mankind’s problems, eternal and, thus, current: the only, after all, that given their living interest, justify the fatigue devoted to the study of the classics” (Torné, 1996: 68)⁷.

From these classes about Plato’s *Apology* emerged the article “*Sòcrates davant dels jutges*” (“Socrates in front of the judges”) (1926), wherein he posed the problem of the role of the intellectual in society. From the exemplary behaviour of Socrates when being judged by the Athenians, when he opted to remain faithful to his convictions without failing to remain subject to the Laws of the City, Riba derived a principle: “A duty intensely felt at the very centre of awareness of one’s values has to become necessarily a mission, an unavoidable mission directly referred to the main first cause” (Riba, 1985: 327)⁸. This principle, founded on the concepts of “duty” and “mission”, is what should preside over the task of any intellectual who truly wants to influence the community to which he belongs, especially when this community’s rights and freedom are in danger. The fact that Riba at the time was very aware of the political situation of the country, which was under a dictatorship, is revealed by the printed dedication addressed to patron Francesc Cambó, with which he decided to headline the first volume of his version of *Parallel Lives* by Plutarch, in which he expressed his hope for the “high aspirations” with which he had tackled his translation to be fulfilled, aspirations that, “in a time of harm and shame”, had become “even more than a joy, a duty” (Plutarch 1926, XLI)⁹, a duty towards the country and the culture, towards the national project started at the beginning of the century.

Riba discussed, in his article on Socrates, that the latter’s relation with the City, his office of grandmaster, could have result in political action, but that he refused it “so that at least someone remained as a guardian of the eternal concepts, of the great realities – his main disciple would have said the Ideas – of Justice

⁴ “A Catalunya som quatre gats: però si volem que els nostres nêts passin sense vergonya pel Fòrum o per sota l’Arc de Brandenburg, cal que tots aquests quatre gats ens sacrifiquem a fer manuals en cartoné i traduccions a jornal i còpies de paperots d’arxiu. Això és pura doctrina orsiana, en la qual tots hem cregut”.

⁵ “He estat destituït del meu càrrec de professor [...], no pas jo sol, sinó amb una centena més; ara, he tingut l’honor d’ésser dels primers. ¿La finalitat? Combatre el nacionalisme català allà on té no sols la màxima força, sinó la màxima raó d’ésser: en la cultura”.

⁶ “força i principi educador”.

⁷ “excursions que, escapant-nos de la filologia pura, hem fet cap a problemes de l’home, eterns i per tant actuals: els únics, al capdavant, que per llur vivent interès justifiquen la fatiga esmerçada en l’estudi dels clàssics”.

⁸ “Tot deure intensament sentit en el mateix centre de consciència dels propis valors, ha d’esdevenir per força una missió, una missió indefugible i directament referida a la causa primera”.

⁹ “en temps de dany i de vergonya [havien esdevingut] més encara que una joia un deure”.

and Law” (Riba 1985, 328)¹⁰. This way, he made a difference between the role of the politician and the role of the intellectual in society, a difference he would delve further almost a year later with two articles precisely entitled “*Polítics i intel·lectuals*” (“Politicians and Intellectuals”) (1927), both written as a result of two polemics with two writers, Gaziell and Josep Pla, respectively, with the participation also of other writers (Medina, 1989: 63–67). Riba highlighted the “task of illustration and upholding and modelling” for the people to be carried out by the intellectual, as opposed to the “work of ordering and guidance” to be performed by the politician (Riba 1986: 272)¹¹.

The tasks fulfilled by Riba out of commitment with culture – writing manuals and translations, teaching courses, collaborating with magazines and publishing companies, etc. – put him, obviously, on the side of the intellectuals, and he contributed to safeguarding the great “Ideas” with his translations of classical works (Plutarch, Xenophon), carriers of “living, perennial principles” (Riba, 1988: 130)¹². But regarding the task of the intellectual as a model, on what would be his “duty” and his “mission”, being Riba a writer and essentially a poet, what was the role of literature? – he made only one allusion, in a general reference to art, in “Politicians and Intellectuals”, just after admitting that, to do his job, the intellectual needs to go down the streets and mix with the people: “it cannot be said that I preach ivory-tower seclusion. But to lock oneself away, now and then, to produce a work of beauty or of pure speculation, even a work that only justifies itself...” (Riba 1986: 273)¹³. He wrote this a few days after finishing the poem “*Ventall: a penes a la Mallarmé*” (“Fan: barely Mallarmé’s style”), a sonnet of circumstances (written for an exhibition of fans), which – above all – was meant as a poetic divertimento, that is, a work of beauty justified by itself. This characterisation was applicable to other compositions of the second book of *Estances (Stanzas)* (1930), of which “Ventall” was a part, and to some of the *Tres suites (Three Suites)* (1937), two works that also include poems of “pure speculation”.

From this, should it be inferred that Riba contemplated poetry as an autonomous realisation in relation to his commitment with the cultural and national project? In order to try to answer that question, his last quoted words need to be placed in the precise moment of his poetic trajectory, a trajectory that, let’s remember, had begun for “external” motives but that obviously had evolved, especially towards the end of the first decade of the century.

On the one hand, the deepening, as a critic, of his reflection about the poetic fact and language, fostered by the reading of Romantic and Symbolist poets, and also of idealist critics and theoreticians like Francesco de Sanctis and Karl Vossler; and, on the other hand, more and more profound direct contact with the classics, with Humanism, especially through the translation of the *Odyssey* and, later, of the Greek tragedies, led Riba to assign a personal and at the same time transcendent (but not yet religious) sense to poetry and to live its creation as a process in which he felt intimately involved. This is why sincerity became a recurrent topic in his articles (Malé, 2001: 197-232).

But this evolution underwent a crisis, the one generated by the bad reception (with few exceptions) of his first book of *Stanzas* (1919). The accusations of cerebralism and obscurity made him aware of the distance that separated his poetry from the Catalan readers, to the point of reaching the dilemma of whether to stop writing or to write a kind of poetry more affordable to the audience. It was Carner who advised him to stay true to his creative ways (Riba 1986, 355). These ways he retook hesitantly, with poems written at a very slow pace and which reflected a crisis not only poetic but also vital, while getting closer to the post-symbolist poetry models (Paul Valéry, Jorge Guillén and Rainer M. Rilke), which shared as a characteristic the distance from the reading mass. This happened halfway through the 1920s, when ideologically left-wing cultural currents started to emerge in Catalonia and criticised literature based in an “ideal of perfection” and advocated for its approach to the audience, that is, the people (Castellanos, 2002: 8–9; Malé, 2012: 382–384).

¹⁰ “perquè almenys algú restés a la guàrdia dels eterns conceptes, de les grans realitats —el seu deixeble màxim hauria dit les Idees— de la Justícia i del Dret”.

¹¹ “feina d’il·lustració i de sosteniment i d’exemple”; “obra d’ordenació i de guia”.

¹² “principis vivents, perennes”.

¹³ “no se’m podrà dir que jo pediqui el recloïment dins la torre de vori. Ara, tancar-s’hi de tant en tant, produir una obra de bellesa o de pura especulació, baldament sigui una obra que només es justifiqui per ella mateixa...”.

Riba defended himself against the accusation of obscurity – not only addressed to him but also to other poets like López-Picó or even Carner (Medina I, 1989: 282) – with the speech preceding the public reading of some of his poems in 1929 (Riba, 1988: 92). He attributed the accusation, on the one hand, to the little knowledge of the autochthonous literary language – and here it must be taken into account that the Catalan audience did not receive instruction in their own language or of their own language, nor consequently its literature, a lack only slightly alleviated during the Republican period – and, on the other hand, to the fact that there was no consolidated literary tradition or, as he would specify years later, of counting on “a little mass of operating tradition”, in contrast, for instance, to the one that the French audience had, who before reading Valéry had been educated with the poetry of Hugo, Vigny, Mallarmé, etc. (Riba, 1986: 259)¹⁴.

After this reading – which according to the chronicles was a success– between 1929 and 1931 Riba wrote some of the poems that most closely abided by what he had characterised as “a work of beauty or of pure speculation” in “Politicians and Intellectuals”, where formal elaboration prevailed. As he himself confessed to Jorge Guillén in 1931, in those years, he had felt a “deep tendency to lock my poetry increasingly more in itself” (Guardiola 1990, 390)¹⁵. But this seclusion did not last much longer. Because Riba, unlike Valéry, did not give “value of pure *exercice* to the act of writing” (Valéry, 1957: 643)¹⁶: poetry was form, certainly, but also content of experience, an experience that, despite its intimate and personal origin, Riba longed would also be useful to others. For this reason, in 1927, he had criticised the poets who fell in “oblivion of what belongs to all and is useful to all”, of the “unanimous feelings” (Riba, 1986: 12)¹⁷, and in 1932, he stated that in authentic poetry “there is always something individual, a feeling, vision or dream that appears endowed with universal value” (Riba, 1988: 125)¹⁸.

Nevertheless, especially in these years, Riba gave utmost importance to the poetic form and technique, but only inasmuch as they also contributed to the construction of the literary language. Because, in a speech read also in 1932, during the Republic, Riba defined himself as a member of “the so-called Prat de la Riba generation”: the generation that had “felt the formulation [...] of the duty of being Catalan” and had been trusted with the command to “save the language”; and to do it with “a kind of literature that, with the ambition to add something to Europe, had among us all the dignity, all the power, all the plenitude as a social fact” (Riba, 1988: 124)¹⁹.

This last aspect, for the moment, was just an aspiration, a longing. Because Riba was aware of the little social incidence that, at the time, had such elaborated poetry as his, in front of an audience little accustomed to language and thought complexities. In spite of everything, as a poet, Riba prioritised the mentioned ambition of a work both demanding and at the European level, though he admitted this work could “remain, for the moment, without an audience” (ibid.)²⁰.

3 Literary commitment and the Spanish War

This high literary aspiration was reinforced by the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. If, as an intellectual, Riba did not take long to put his commitment to the Republican government into action assuming positions and accepting missions (Medina I, 1989: 91–97), he conceived the creation of his literary work as a part of this commitment. However, this was not in the sense of writing literature at the service of the circumstances of the conflict, like the revolutionary sectors demanded (Campillo 1988). Riba did not pass over the fact that the war

¹⁴ “amb poca massa de tradició operant”.

¹⁵ “honda tendència a encerrar mi poesía cada vez más en sí misma”.

¹⁶ “une valeur de pur *exercice* à l’acte d’écriture”.

¹⁷ “oblit del que és de tothom i val per a tothom”; “sentiments unànimes”.

¹⁸ “hi ha sempre alguna cosa d’individual, sentiment, visió, somni, que apareix dotat d’un valor universal”.

¹⁹ “a la generació dita de Prat de la Riba [que havia] sentit formular-se [...] el deure d’èsser catalans [i de] salvar la llengua [en] una literatura que, amb l’ambició d’afegir alguna cosa a Europa, tingués entre nosaltres tota la dignitat, tota la força, tota la plenitud com a fet social”.

²⁰ “restar de moment sense públic”.

conferred a political dimension to any cultural manifestation. In fact – as he pointed out in “*Literatura i grups salvadors*” (“Literature and Rescuing Groups”) (1938) – this dimension in Catalonia was inherent to any realisation at least since the 19th century, especially in the literary field, inasmuch as literature, together with language, had always been arguments put forward in political claims. But, in 1938, talking politics meant talking about “saving the country”, and this meant that the writer “needs to have taken sides [...] in order to carry out his salvation action for the community”, be it “for the doctrine contents of the work he gives the community”, or “merely for the exemplary efficiency of the rules according to which the work is created” (Riba, 1986: 281)²¹.

The second option was Riba’s, inasmuch as, when creating his work, he followed the authenticity and the mentioned plan of a “well-made work”. And this commitment to literature was, indiscernibly, a commitment to language incarnating “the same form of the Catalan soul and thought” (ibid., 283)²². As a man of letters, as a poet, during the years of the war, his mission and his duty – retaking the concepts in the article about Socrates – had to be continuing with his work and enriching a literary language ready to go for “all the conquests”, even if this could surpass the expectations of an audience less than ready literarily and linguistically. With his poetry, thus, Riba assumed the role of the author who “does more than is rigorously requested from him, and he goes so far, if there need be, that he remains for the time being without an audience” – as he had already said in 1932– a sacrifice, “which, by essential duty, every writer with an authentic message needs to be willing to make”, with the hope, nonetheless, to contribute with his work to the “improvement of the linguistic culture of the mass” (ibid., 280)²³.

Riba complained more than once about the anomaly of feeling the dutiful urge to create a kind of literature that, aiming at the highest level and rigour, could not find a place among a great deal of the Catalan readers. But convinced of his duty and his mission, he never eluded them, not even after the Republicans’ defeat, during the first and very hard post-war years spent in exile. “We, the emigrated intellectuals, do not neglect the maintenance of the figure and action of our cultural and literary institutions in order to save the spirit of Catalonia”, he wrote in a letter just 2 weeks after having had to leave the country and still uncertain about where he could settle down with his family in France (Guardiola, 1991: 24)²⁴. Moreover, he had this to say a month and a half later: “My faith and the idea of our duty do not, however, falter at all” (ibid., 43)²⁵.

This duty towards the national culture, materialised in many actions destined to help the exiled intellectuals, led literarily, in his case as a writer, to the first of the *Elegies de Bierville* (*Bierville Elegies*) finished in a few days. All the poems in this work – edited clandestinely in Barcelona in 1943 and, a second time, 6 years later in the diaspora, in Santiago de Chile – reflected the effort of formal elaboration made by Riba to create poetry of profound personal significance, inasmuch as it related the inside journey of a man in the search for his essential origins and his transcendence. All of Riba’s poetry, from then on, show – in a greater or lesser degree – this transcendent character, already explicitly religious.

But on the preface of the second edition of the *Elegies*, while linking poetry to transcendence, Riba did not cease to link it to his own and concrete historical circumstance. In his humanistic concept of literature, poetry represented “a method for thought and knowledge; for discovering myself and the world” (Riba 1986, 253)²⁶; and the *Elegies* recreated poetically this internal way towards his own knowledge, but “at a given moment in time, in a given place on earth”. Because the poetic persona present in the 12 poems was that of the writer exiled after the war, a man dispossessed of everything that constituted his life, who had to exile for “having freely said

²¹ “de salvació de la pàtria, [i això implicava que l’escriptor] ha d’haver pres partit [...] per tal d’exercir la seva acció salvadora sobre la col·lectivitat, [ja sigui] pel contingut de doctrina de l’obra que li lliura [o] baldament només sigui per l’eficàcia exemplar de les regles segons les quals l’obra és realitzada”.

²² “la mateixa forma de l’ànima i del pensament catalans”.

²³ “fa més que en rigor no se li demana i avança tant, si molt convé, que de moment resta sense públic; [una renúncia] a què per deure essencial ha d’estar disposat tot escriptor que porti un autèntic missatge, [amb l’esperança de contribuir amb la seva obra al] millorament de la cultura lingüística de la massa”.

²⁴ “No negligim, els intel·lectuals emigrats, de mantenir la figura i l’acció de les nostres institucions culturals i literàries per tal de salvar l’esperit de Catalunya”.

²⁵ “No em defalleixen, però, la fe, ni la idea del nostre deure”.

²⁶ “un mètode de pensament i de coneixença; de descoberta de mi mateix i del món”.

yes to certain things I considered in accordance with my condition and said *no* to others I judged contrary to it” (Riba, 1984: 213)²⁷.

The *Bierville Elegies*, thus, were the work of an author who had “taken sides”. Despite containing a clearly personal experience, they also had a community dimension, explicitly reflected in the ninth elegy, with a topic unmistakably political, wherein the poet assumes the role of the intellectual who – repeating Riba’s words applied to Socrates – within the polis reveals himself “as a guardian of the eternal concepts [...] of Justice and Law”. This becomes patent in the lines where he vindicates “freedom” as a search “of what is true and what is fair”, freedom which “if is defeated somewhere [...] / the whole world suffers” (ibid., 230)²⁸.

Riba, finally, also took sides when claiming, in the preface of the *Elegies*, that “I wanted for that precious knowledge”, knowledge of himself, “an expression in the language, *mine*, from which, [...] from my first day, I had been receiving forms for my feelings and for my thoughts” (ibid.: 213)²⁹. Writing the poems in Catalan, therefore, as an act of free and full *will*, was also proof of his commitment (Riba 1986, 357).

This idea of commitment would later become recurrent in Europe, shaken by World War II, with figures like Sartre, who would ask the writers not only to take sides but also to create socially committed literature, *engagée* (Sartre 1948). Coetaneously, regarding Spanish literature, the poets of the *Generación del 36*, having gone through the Civil War, would write works of deep social character during the post-war period (Ilie, 1973). And in Catalonia, in the height of a period of Catalan language and culture prosecution, some sectors would begin to claim – like at the end of the 1920s – a clearer kind of poetry closer to the people (Samsó, 1995: 7–21).

Riba was not unaware of all these voices. But, back in Barcelona, after confirming to exiled Xavier Benguerel (by letter, on 18 August 1948) that “we live, humiliated, amongst enormous events”, he pointed out the need for the things that, every so often, “help us wonderfully to be free in a little world of our own”, things like memories or poems. And he confessed: “This is why I refuse to write the poetry that our time seems to demand from us: I fear I would give the others less than now, and that I would debase myself” (Guardiola, 1991: 345)³⁰.

He wrote this more than a year after starting to compose the sonnets of *Salvatge de cor (Wild Heart)* (published in 1952), which, together with his narrative poems of *Esbós de tres oratoris (Sketch of Three Oratorios)* (1957), show the evolution of a kind of poetry tied to the personal, physical and spiritual adventure of Riba, created again with a high level of demand, quite away from the ideological – and often affordable – literature that was spreading around, although together with other tendencies, and which, in any case, was the one that the country’s difficult situation would seem to “claim” the most.

This does not mean that Riba, as a writer, did not take sides in the post-war period: he did it repeatedly with his actions (participating in the clandestine reconstitution of the Institute of Catalan Studies, taking part in poetry congresses, becoming the president of the Catalan PEN Club), with some of his texts (like the presentations of the *Revista de Catalunya* in 1939 and 1955), sometimes with his silence and, above all, by never ceasing to write in his own language.

Poetry, however, he had the need to “refer it to original experiences of mine” (Riba, 1984: 277)³¹. But his longing was still for poetry to also have plural sense and reach, or rather, an equally personal significance for every possible reader. He believed that poetry had to “be a path, and also paradoxically a structure, of truth [...] of any kind”, and that if this truth “is authentic for one, [...] will equally be so for everybody”. Under Riba’s

²⁷ “en un donat moment del temps, en un donat lloc de la terra”; “per haver lliurement dit que *sí* a unes determinades coses que considerava en acord amb la meua condició i dit que *no* a unes altres que jutjava contràries a ella”.

²⁸ “la llibertat [com a recerca] del que és ver i el que és just, [una llibertat que] si enlloc és vençuda [...] / tota la terra en sofreix”.

²⁹ “volia per a aquella coneixença preciosa [de si mateix] una expressió en la llengua, de la qual, *meua*, [...] des del meu primer dia, jo havia anat rebent formes per als meus sentiments i per als meus pensaments”.

³⁰ “vivim, humiliats, enmig d’esdeveniments enormes”; “[aquelles coses que] ens ajuden meravellosament a alliberar-nos dins un petit món nostre. [...] Per això em resisteixo a fer la poesia que sembla reclamar-nos el temps; tinc por que donaria menys als altres que no pas ara, i que jo mateix m’hi enviliria”.

³¹ “referir-la a experiències originals meves”.

humanistic vision, what counted was “the construction and total growth of man, of *one* man, in *his* time”, and if this man wrote poems, “none of the problems or the wishes or the modes of the time will be strange in them” (Riba, 1986: 261)³². For this reason, he never felt so comforted as when he received letters or articles from people who had read him and confirmed, then, that his verses had become “already material for the life of others who, by commenting on them, added them to their construction of themselves” (Guardiola, 1993: 274)³³.

But these were a few chosen readers. Because, was there, in the 1940s and the 1950s, an audience for Riba’s poetry? And the question could also be posed about the poetry of J.V. Foix, Salvador Espriu, Joan Vinyoli, etc. Besides the great restrictions of edition and distribution – and, thus, of reception of the Catalan books – linked to the difficult situation of the language, there was the persistent problem of the limited reading habits diagnosed by Riba in the 1920s. This problem was worsened, during the post-war period, by the increasing trend – more spread in cultures like the North American, however – of producing both consumption literature and reductions and vulgarisations of great works, which minimised the effort on the part of the readers (Torre, 1958: 240–241).

4 Poetry in the post-war period

Riba decided to refer to this issue in 1948 when he justified why he published another versified translation of the *Odyssey*, that is, of a classic work which was, to a great deal, an example of “pure” poetry – Riba uses the expression in a very wide sense – and it therefore required a kind of reader with certain aptitudes beyond “the insensibility and [...] the banality of the mere novel devourers”. In spite of there being prepared readers, admitted Riba, they were just a “happy few” drowned by a “mob” for whom “literature has descended to entertainment or daily stimulant” (Riba, 1986: 227)³⁴. Why, then, redo in poetry form his first version of Homer’s epic poem if it would hardly find an audience apt to read it and appreciate it? Because in Catalonia, by the end of the 1940s, there was indeed a nucleus of readers who maybe could just read that *Odyssey* “in his fundamental narrative aspect”, but who most of all would appreciate it as “a monument to language itself, for which we so much expect” (ibid.)³⁵; an audience committed, like the translator himself, to the national culture and the language, then prosecuted and which, in Riba’s words, “now more than ever should be elevated” (Guardiola, 1991: 357)³⁶.

But the attitude of these readers, or a part of them, in front of the translation in verse form of a universal and “timeless” classic, did not necessarily have to be the same as it was in front of a contemporary work of strict “pure” poetry, like *Salvatge cor (Wild Heart)*, or like *Les irrealms omegues (The Unreal Omegas)* by J.V. Foix, to give another poetry title of scarce success (Medina I, 1989: 127–130; Guerrero, 1996: 370). The audience remained reticent to and found difficulties in front of difficult poetry, which added to the belief that the situation of the country and the culture demanded a kind of literature closer to the people, as we saw earlier. Riba considered that this belief had been reappearing since the Renaixença period (19th century) for reasons not so much literary as social and even patriotic, and that it had conditioned Catalan poetry: “The poets have committed with their audience, and the audience with their poets, for interests partly foreign to poetry itself”, which had imposed on the authors “demands”, “limitations” and “services”. He, however, chose to be free from them when writing his works, despite the fact that this meant “remaining, for the moment, without an audience”, because he hoped that those readers would be the preparation of a “future audience”: “When this exists, our

³² “ésser camí, i alhora paradoxalment estructura, de veritat [...] de l’ordre que sigui, [i si aquesta veritat] és autèntica d’un, [...] serà igualment de tothom”; “la construcció i la creixença total de l’home, d’un home, dins el seu temps”; “cap dels problemes ni dels anhels ni dels modes de l’època no hi seran estranys”.

³³ “material de vida ja per a d’altres que, comentant-los, els afegeixen a llur construcció d’ells mateixos”.

³⁴ “la insensibilitat i [...] la banalitat dels simples devoradors de novel·les”; “feliços pocs [ofegats per una] turba [per a la qual] la literatura ha descendit a entreteniment o a excitant de cada dia”.

³⁵ “en el seu aspecte fonamental de narració, [però que sobretot l’apreciaria com] un monument de la llengua pròpia, per a la qual a tant s’aspira”.

³⁶ “ara més que mai, cal enaltir”.

poetry”, that of the Catalan poets committed not to the audience but to literature, “will doubtlessly be more human, more elemental, more free and generous, it will perform a less spectacular, but deeper, social action” (Riba, 1986: 260)³⁷.

Elucidating whether this new audience ever developed and whether Riba’s poetry has been able to perform the profound social action he expected would be a matter for another paper, with results maybe not so unpredictable.

Translated from Catalan by Gemma Fors Soriano

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³⁷ “Els poetes s’han compromès amb llur públic, i el públic amb els seus poetes, per interessos en part estranys a la poesia en si, [la qual cosa havia imposat als autors] exigències, [...] limitacions [i] serveis”; “restar de moment sense públic”; “[un] públic futur. [...] Quan ell existirà, la nostra poesia serà sens dubte més humana, més elemental, més lliure i generosa, tindrà una acció social menys espectacular, però més profunda”.

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