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The Catalan canon

All the world's experts who have devoted their time to establishing the canon of a particular literature, and literatures as a whole, have based themselves on three suppositions, which are seldom disputed. A list of canonical titles must be drawn up: a) on a historical basis, that is, by considering the tradition of the entire scope of this literature, from its origins to the present day; b) on an aesthetic basis, that is, by considering the formal and intrinsic values of literary works, and c) by looking at the correlations that can be established between texts from a literature in a specific language and the texts written in other languages which, nearly always as a result of their translations, are able to influence the way in which major works of literature in the country in question are shaped.

A well-constructed canon —such as the different ones established by critics from the English-speaking world in particular, from William Covell's *Polimanteia* (1595), to Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon* (1994)— has no value whatsoever if the author who has defined it has not taken into account this threefold dimension.

As far as the first and second of these questions are concerned a priori, Catalan literature is, unfortunately, in a situation which is far from comparable to the one encountered in England since Chaucer, in Italy since the Duocento, or France since Chrétien de Troyes. In these three cases —to which we can add German literature from the period of the Enlightenment

and *Frühromantik* onwards—, national literature, or literature in its own, different language, has developed as a continuum of causes and effects which can be perfectly defined and analysed, an interplay of reliefs and contrasts, and even major revolutions (such as the one signified by the appearance of Petrarch in Italian literature, Goethe in German literature and Baudelaire in French literature), but always forming a sequence in which the precursors explain their descendants. Aesthetics which were already considered outmoded, such as French neo-classicism, have even re-emerged alongside the boldest modern forms, as is the case when we compare the French *poètes maudits* with the Parnassians.

There may be clashes, sharp contrasts and conflicts between the “ancients” and “moderns” —the famous *Querelle* has not yet faded away— however, the body of these literatures can be presented with a perfectly clear logic, and, more importantly, uninterruptedly.

The case of Catalan literature is very different. It has an undisputed founder, the true father of the literary tradition, Ramon Llull. However, as the centuries have gone by, this tradition has suffered a number of setbacks and interruptions of such enormity that, even today, we can hardly talk about Catalan literature as a literature of continuous goals, which send forth their own reflections and voice. Catalan literature is full of interruptions, and it could not be otherwise if we bear in mind the vicissitudes of history which have preceded all the forms of our cultural and political lives since the end of the Middle Ages or the end of humanism at the latest. The union between the Kingdom of Aragon and the Kingdom of Castile could have been very productive —as was the friendship between the Catalan Jordi de Sant Jordi and the Castilian Marquis of Santillana, in the 15th century, who were friends at the court of Alfonso the Magnanimous— but our literary output after this alliance (between two political powers but by no means between two languages) brought Catalan literature to a period which was not completely unproductive, but not comparable with the literature produced in modern times in the other cultured nations around us. We only have to add the persecution of the Catalan language as the result of our defeat during the War of the Spanish Succession and Philip V seizing power, to understand that the political context of Catalonia and the situation of its language was bound to lead us to a situation of enormous disadvantage and great adversity.

The Nova Planta decrees implemented in the Catalan-speaking regions between 1707 and 1716 sidelined our language and, as a result, the literature produced from then onwards (as had been happening to a great extent since the Castilian-Aragonese alliance, a fact referred to earlier) became purely symbolic and had scant aesthetic quality: it is a literature which cannot claim to be part of our literary canon, and if this has ever happened, in a gesture of laudable patriotism, it has done so more as a show of benevolence rather than a result of a serious consideration of our literary output.

This void which in fact spans part of the 17th, the entire 18th and much of the 19th centuries, gave rise to the enormous problems experienced by our literature when attempting to put together a continuous canon, a sequence, as we said previously, of causes and effects. Catalonia had to wait for the phenomenon of the *Renaixença* to occur, associated with the rise of nationalist movements throughout Europe, to regain its position among first-rate literature, which was perfectly comparable with the other literatures on the continent, although a series of dysfunctions are perfectly visible if we begin to make comparisons: when France and England were experiencing the dawn of a literature which was urban, modern and separated by its own volition from the tradition of Romanticism, Catalonia (precisely as a result of the connection between nationalist politics and the romantic spirit) still seemed trapped by an aesthetic which had already become outmoded elsewhere.

This brings us to the third aprioristic question which we mentioned at the beginning: it is difficult to establish a correlation between our literary output during the last 150 years and that

of the independent countries in our geographical area; the lack of political autonomy and the absence of a solid literary tradition during the centuries of the Modern Age and the scant contact between our literature —one of those which Kafka would have considered “minor”— and the greatest literatures in our neighbouring countries made it difficult for Catalan literature to measure up to the vast body of Western literature. In order to remedy this situation, it was necessary for our writers to look northwards (as the generation of Catalan art-nouveau artists, or *modernistes*, did at the turn of the 19th century) or, aesthetically speaking, turn towards something which never fails: classical references. In fact, the endeavours of the so-called *noucentista* generation (from the first decade of the 20th century) played a major role in this, and Catalonia has not yet shown its gratitude or restored them to their rightful place. In view of our interrupted tradition and lack of solid influences, the *noucentistes* made the works of Shakespeare, Goethe, Ibsen, Dickens, Dostoyevsky, Milton, Hölderlin and Tolstoy their own through translation, not to mention, of course, the classics in the strict sense of the word, which were almost non-existent in Catalan until The Bible, Homer, Virgil, Sophocles, Seneca, Plato and Aristotle were translated, in the middle of the 20th century.

We could, therefore, say that no factors worked in favour of the expansion of our literature following the major episode during the Middle Ages in our region;

but that many efforts, a great deal of determination and many theoretical, political and economic initiatives as splendid as those of Prat de la Riba, Eugeni d’Ors and Francesc Cambó helped us palliate the effects of a tradition which has always encountered stumbling blocks: this is how the great pleiad of *noucentista* poets emerged. If their works had been widely translated into the languages of European culture, the Catalan literature of the early 20th century would today rank among the greatest on the continent.

After getting over the last stumbling block and one of the many interruptions the country had undergone —the Spanish Civil War— Catalonia now faced a triple challenge: to recover a tradition that was partly lost —forgotten due to its remoteness in time—, to redouble the efforts of critical bodies (journalists, magazines, universities, etc.) in order to guarantee quality literature and stand decisively alongside the neighbouring countries in order to learn the lesson we seem to have ignored due to the changing fortunes of history. As happened on other occasions, the current uncertainty surrounding our literature —an uncertainty which nowadays affects many other literatures— can quite easily become a literature of such quality as the one dating from more propitious and glorious times, providing we take the above factors into account. There is no shortage of symptoms in this regard, quite the contrary in fact II