

THE EXISTENTIAL LANDSCAPE. ON THE GEOGRAPHICAL VALUE OF THE WORK OF JOAN MARAGALL

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ON THE IDEAS AND THE THOUGHT OF JOAN MARAGALL

A key figure in the Catalan arts, Joan Maragall i Gorina, worked in many registers as poet, journalist, essayist and translator and displayed a prodigious intellect that incorporated successfully, and within the context of his age, the widely differing and complex geographical scales of Europe, Spain and Catalonia. Maragall, a member of the generation of *Modernisme* (albeit that his inclusion within the Catalan artistic movement has been qualified in a number of senses, see Terry, 2000; Marfany, 1976), worked predominantly in the creative production of poetry. A body of work in which the critics (Fuster, 1976) find significant reflections of Goethe, of Novalis and of Nietzsche –authors whom he translated, as he also translated Homer.

Any present-day interpretation and appraisal of the hugely significant, complex intellectual figure of Joan Maragall necessarily requires a consideration of the context of the age in which he lived and worked (that is, the last four decades of the nineteenth century and the first of the twentieth). Maragall was, moreover, a multifaceted author of an immense curiosity and a very broad range of interests, which means that if we examine him solely in terms of the facet of his literary (and, specifically his poetic) output, we run the risk of oversimplifying our subject. Furthermore, his position as a Catalan intellectual who tackled, both directly and openly and in a manner that was firmly founded on dialogue, the age-old problem of the relationship of Catalonia with Spain makes him an author of great importance when dealing with this question –and not only, I believe, from a historical perspective. Paradoxically, his breadth of registers and his complexity as a creative force have given rise, on more than one occasion, to skewed readings of his legacy; both from what we might refer to as «centralist» (from a Spanish perspective) and «peripheral» viewpoints (that is, from a Catalan perspective). In short: Maragall's potential as an intellectual and thinker was great, but perhaps little appreciated and insufficiently exploited in the broadest of senses.

This «critical wilderness» acquires a greater magnitude if we bear in mind that, on occasions, some of the critics that have dealt directly with Maragall's thinking have done so from what might be deemed biased, in some instances, or highly polarized stances, in others. Eugeni d'Ors is one of the best examples of this latter approach. His manner of dealing with the writer and his stinging critique of certain aspects of his thinking does not stop him from placing Maragall «at the highest point of *misty romanticism*» (appraisal of Jordi Maragall, the writer's son, reported in Trías, 1985: 14). A highly simplistic expression, in my mind, and in itself revealing of a very limited appreciation of the writer, and in particular of his complex and subtle nature.

In an attempt to get closer to the writer, a number of notes by the writer Joaquim Ruyra in his literary portrait of Maragall, as well as a number of complementary reflections by Josep Pijoan, a person who had close dealings with him, provide us with interesting insights in our endeavour to form an idea of the intellectual and human talents that Maragall possessed:

«The characteristics of Maragall's talent were his great powers of intuition and his marked repugnance for analysis. (...) He rarely argued: he simply put forward his ideas; but he knew how to do so by drawing upon a remarkable gamut of good sense, honesty and charity, and with recourse to such eloquent words of thinking, that he would immediately overcome hearts and intellects. He was an excellent manager of public opinion; an exceptional journalist, worthy of the greatest trust. Never did he allow passion to cloud his view, nor partisan interests to lead him from the straight and narrow (...). His criteria, oriented at all times to an ideal of nobility and justice, were imperturbable.» (Ruyra, quoted in Pla, 1981: 14-15)

THE LANDSCAPE, THE CENTRAL CONCEPT IN MARAGALL'S WORK

The key to our understanding of Maragall as a «landscape poet» lies in the unique interaction between *sentiment* and the *landscape* that we find in his work. In this respect, he was clearly different from earlier authors, and in his day, and in the context of Catalan literature at that time, this quality was truly innovative. In the words of Pla:

«For the first time in Catalan, and in a way that was to be permanent, Maragall used the landscape in his description of human sentiments (...). It was quite a revelation. This meant that in the literary field, Maragall discovered the landscape of the country, he explained to people in an intelligible way what everyone had seen so many times. [Because] this is, definitively, the very essence of poetry: presenting to others what they have already experienced or seen, but have not known how to express for themselves. (...) For this poet the landscape is never a separate and isolated complement to the sentiments. Landscape and sentiment are two elements that are intertwined and which fuse together in his poetry. (...) In places these two elements fuse through being contemplated: he allows the landscape to penetrate his interior with intensity. Elsewhere he projects his inner life on to the landscape, and on coming into contact with it something is born in a process of transfiguration (...). For Maragall the landscape forms part of human intimacy in a way that is necessary and unavoidable.» (Pla, 1981: 119-120).

Maragall's personal discovery of the landscape occurred at a time (the beginning of the last third of the 19th century) that was to coincide with the start of the excursionist movement in Catalonia (Roma, 2004). Maragall did establish certain links with this movement (Nogué, 2005), but he was never to be an active member in the way that Verdager and other contemporary Catalan writers and intellectuals were. In fact, neither the urban environment in which he had spent his infancy nor his precarious state of health, which was to dog him throughout his life, were propitious to close contact with nature such as that which fostered the nascent excursionist movement.

Scholars of Maragall's work agree in identifying his *Elogi de la paraula* (1903) and his *Elogi de la poesia* (1907) as providing the best compendiums of his thinking, and together they make up his 'theory of the poetic word: «Everything related to Maragall always leads to the man that formulated the principle of the living word, and with this, in some way, to his concept of pure poetry.» (Carles Riba, quoted by Terry, 2000: 131). Along similar lines, Trias claims that «Maragall's philosophical conception acquires its clearest formulation in the aesthetics of the living word, as he himself concludes in his eulogies, in particular in those of the *word* and of *poetry*.» (Trías, 1985: 69)

Maragall's principle of the *living word* (as it was called by Carles Riba) is not, nor does it seek to be in any way whatsoever, a formal theory or a body of organised doctrine. It was simply his extremely profound reflections, written in a literary register but with a vibrant passionate tone, in which the writer raised the underlying question as to the *raison d'être* of *language* (be it the «word» or «verbal act», or even, as Maragall suggested, «poetry» or «art») as the superior form of expression, in man, of emotion and sentiment. Let us observe, as a complement to the transcribed text, how (and with what simplicity) Maragall explained such a complex idea in a letter to Carles Rahola, dated 1904:

«Since what else is art or poetry, if not the *general human emotion*, experienced with such intensity by the individual which means it can be expressed in such a personal way? Dante or Shakespeare, did they say anything new? I believe not. But nobody has said it like them. Here is the artist, as I see it.» (Maragall, 1981: *Epistolari*, OC, I: 1068)

Thus, what underlies this principle is not so much the word in itself, as a verbal act, but the reality in which it is sustained. And it is not necessary, here, to be fully familiar with the work of Maragall to realise that, in his case, his attitude in principle as a writer is that of constant attention to life, to the world, to the reality that surrounds us; because he knows that only here will he find his anchor, his *raison d'être*, the creative act. In short, according to Maragall the observation of this «connection with reality» is the necessary condition so that we can aspire, in any creative form, to authenticity (as opposed to the artificial, false and the merely apparent).

And yet, beyond his writings for a public audience, Maragall's passion for *what is real* is made most manifest in his letters; above all in the correspondence he maintained with Josep Pijoan, who was particularly close to the writer. For example, in May 1903 he tells him: «The ideal situation is what we said to you: *to reach a level of artistic consciousness that gives us the force to eliminate remorselessly all that is artificial, even if we are left with just four words sung with real emotion (...)*» (Maragall, 1981: *Epistolari*, OC, I: 1017). And in another letter written at a later date, he includes a quote from Novalis: «*Poetry is the absolute*

reality. This is the origin of my poetry. The more poetic it is, the more truth it holds.» (*Ibid*: 1018)

Within this «absolute reality» Maragall had to find a place for the landscape. It is worth recalling here an interesting observation made by Pla: «the more intimate [the poetry of Maragall] is (...), the more closely connected it is to the landscapes of the country. Maragall did not once invent a landscape. (...) His landscapes are precision perfect, reflecting the acutest realism» (Pla, 1981: 118). Maragall places us in the situation (and one that is not especially common) of not having to renounce a geographical reading of his poetry simply because of its lyricism; nor are we to think that lyricism and subjectivity are incompatible with realism. But, rather, quite the contrary: their lyricism should serve as the perfect gateway (albeit one that is not often crossed) to other paths of exploration of reality, beyond the usual objective or descriptive canons. Canons which, as geographers, we often call into question but which we rarely dare renounce.