

ILLEGIBILITY AND TRADITION IN EXPERIMENTAL POETRY¹

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Abstract || Starting with the experimental poetry of the past few decades, this work defends the impossibility of drawing a clear line between literary continuity and rupture. Due to the diverse experiences of subalternisation that it has faced, Catalan culture has both celebrated the concept of continuity and associated rupture with extinction. The article examines this approach in the belief that cultural transmission can also be built from discontinuity, interruption and counter-discourse. The justification of this hypothesis will be based on the study of uses and readings of Gabriel Ferrater's poetry by authors such as Carles Hac Mor, Vicenç Altaió and Víctor Sunyol, and on the study of the semiotic dimension of illegibility in the texts of Miquel Bach and other poets.

Keywords || experimentation | tradition | canonicity | illegibility | rereading | literary rupture.

Due to the diverse experiences of subalternisation that it has faced, Catalan culture has both celebrated the concept of continuity and associated rupture with extinction. The article examines this approach in the belief that cultural transmission can also be built from discontinuity, interruption and counter-discourse. Understanding poetry as a phenomenon integrated into a system - relational rather than autonomous, functional rather than self-sufficient - necessarily entails a review of the concept of experimentation. Experiments always take place with regard to a previously established canonicity, whether in order to dismantle it, deny it or reread it. As pointed out by Pierre Bourdieu (2010: 74), understanding the stylistic features that constitute the originality of the works of a time period is inseparable from understanding the stylistic redundancies - or, if you prefer, the continuities regarding the stylistic tradition -, in such a way that the perception of differences always involves the previous perception of similarities. To accept this would mean a reconsideration of the notion of tradition (or cultural transmission) and, above all, the concept of literary rupture, which we have so often associated with experimentation, based on the rather naïve premise that any aesthetic change of direction implies an eradication of the past.

I will formulate this proposal starting from the concepts of legibility and illegibility. Although certainly many times tradition has been associated with legibility and rupture with illegibility, here I will defend the ability of the illegible to become an agent of cultural transmission. As a starting point I will take, on the one hand, the uses and readings of Gabriel Ferrater's poetry by authors such as Carles Hac Mor, Vincent Altaió and Victor Sunyol and, on the other hand, the semiotic value of illegibility in the texts of Miquel Bach and other poets².

Discussions about tradition do not only involve situating and understanding a particular literature on a diachronic axis, but rather examining how the notion of authentication in the cultural sphere has been built. There is a certain consensus on the fact that experimental writing confronts traditional aesthetic values and norms (through plays on form, hybridisation of codes, or variation in the canonical discursiveness of each generation), but perhaps we should also ask ourselves whether this confrontation is not part of experimental production *outside* of tradition (is it possible to exist outside of all tradition?), but rather whether it shows the variability of the concept of prestige *inside* that same literary domain. On the other hand, the idea of tradition is closely linked to those of transmission and legibility/illegibility. Experimental poetry plays with illegibility, both on a formal and graphic level (with texts that are hard to read, that are blurred, that cannot be understood, that are indecipherable...) and on a notional level (with the denouncement of the *dictators of meaning* that dramatised so well the writing of Carles Hac Mor), and, of course, compromises the ability of transmission of a shared

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2 | The considerations that he proposes are derived, on the one hand, from the concept of rupture more as reconfiguration than destruction that is proposed in the volume *Poètiques de ruptura* (Muntaner, 2008) and, on the other, from works in which I have approached the idea of experimentalism in relation to tradition (Pons, 2012a, 2012b).

knowledge that all literature theoretically contains: it is impossible to transmit that which cannot be read. So then, does experiment truly fracture this transmission? Or is it a case, on the contrary, of inflection rather than rupture?

For critics like Harold Bloom, rupture is not possible while writing outside of tradition is still inconceivable. Diametrically opposed to Bloom's ideologies, Raymond Williams believes that the concept of tradition, due to its selective or exclusive character, has come to substitute the historical or inclusive perception of the idea of national literature³. On the same lines, and with regards to the Catalan situation, Oriol Izquierdo (1993: 190) states that the creation of a literary tradition always involves "una certa operació d'imatge" that transcends the literary sphere in order to lead to the construction of a country. On the other hand, Aleida Assmann recalls (2008: 156) that the term *traditio* has its origins in Roman inheritance legislation, which used it to designate the transfer of property, rights, obligations, authority and power between a donor and a receiver in order to fill the gap that is created by death and which threatens the continuation of communal living⁴. Following these reasons, tradition would therefore be equal to a *production of continuity*.

This is the point that I would like to question. I understand that the inevitability of tradition is not equivalent to the existence of a continuity between the literary past and present: tradition can also be built (and interpreted) based on discontinuity, interruption and counter-discourse. It should be remembered that Bloom himself, despite being a stolid defender of the immortality and durability of those he considers *great masters*, distances himself from the harmonious visions of tradition proposed by T. S. Eliot in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" and by Northrop Frye in *The Critical Path* in order to defend a more unsettled concept of the literary past. For Eliot and Frye, tradition is inclusive and - to the extent that each individual's conscience or talent can, once integrated, bring about small changes - allows for freedom. Conversely, for Bloom (1974: 530-531), this freedom is illusory: to think that there is a simultaneousness - which is founded on the great works - into which each new poet is incorporated is nothing more than an idealization. For the author of *the Anxiety of Influence* the adoption of a contemporary outlook entails a vision of tradition not as a constant, but rather as a dialectic between repetition and discontinuity. Foucault had already proposed (1997[1969]: 13-15) a notion of history in which, as soon as the subject that was able to guarantee continuity is dead, it can only base itself on discontinuity. María José Vega (2008: 140-41) observes the influence of Foucault in contemporary comparative literature (Said, Greenblatt), in particular regarding the idea that discontinuities and ruptures serve to establish the hegemony of cultural orders. These cultural orders assert themselves through the definition of external

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3 | Bloom states: "What happens if one tries to write, or to teach, or to think, or even to read without the sense of a tradition? Why, nothing at all happens, just nothing. You cannot write or teach or think or even read, without imitation" (1974: 532). It is worth mentioning that subsequently, in his reflections on the canon, Bloom uses this argument to unjustly accuse those critics that he resentfully names as not taking tradition into account (there is nothing more untrue: to be precise, feminists, neohistorians and postcolonialists always keep tradition present; but they reread it politically). For his part, Raymond Williams writes: "This development [literature understood as a selective category] depended, in the first place, on an elaboration of the concept of "tradition". The idea of a "national literature" had been growing strongly since the Renaissance. [...] But, within the specialization of "literature", each was re-defined so that it could be brought to identity with the selective and self-defining "literary values". The "national literature" soon ceased to be a history and became a tradition" (1996: 266).

4 | Furthermore Assmann states: «There are two possible concepts of tradition, a strong and a weak one. The weak concept of tradition is descriptive and retrospective. It is used where a continuity of motifs, ideas, topoi, etc., is retrospectively discovered. The strong concept of tradition is a normative one and refers to the production of continuity with the intent to counter the erosion of time, decay, and forgetting» (2008: 167, underlining is mine).

areas (the Foucauldian example par excellence is that of madness as an area outside of reason, but experimental poetry could be another of these *zones of exclusion*) that, in reality, are defined from a position of power and guarantee the strength and stability of the system⁵.

From a different point of view, the observation of the procedural aspects of canonicity is proof of the eventuality of the separation between tradition and rupture, given that, at the time of canonisation, the *modus operandi* of the practices commonly considered *untraditional* is similar to those others seen to be traditional. In this sense, as stated by the Italian poet Lello Voce, tradition and avant-garde art do exactly the same: they act through a process of selection, preservation and transmission⁶. As we will see later, the canonisation of texts that can be classified under the label *experimental poetry*, which occurs through the awarding of literary prizes, the editing of complete works or, simply, critical attention, justifies the use of expressions such as *tradició avantguardista*, *tradició de la ruptura o tradició de les avantguardes* (Pons, 2012b). To deny the validity of these expressions would be equal to defending the avant-garde as something resistant to preservation, existing outside of all systems.

At the same time, in the Catalan literary sphere the perception of an oxymoronic opposition between tradition and rupture seems to have taken hold. A count of the number of times that the expression “tradition and modernity” appears in the titles of studies on literary works, periods and authors seems to be the best proof of this. This discussion has manifested itself both in the radical rejection of tradition and the denouncement of the ills of discontinuity. Here, on the one hand, among the contemporary creators there are those that deny any impact of tradition on their work, like the dancer and choreographer Marta Carrasco, whose ironically titled piece *Tradiquè?* (2005) was published in a monograph in the periodical *Pausa* dedicated to theatre and tradition. Similarly, other equally provocative expressions are found throughout the text: “Però quina tradició *ni qué niño muerto?* [...] No tinc en compte cap mena de tradició a l’hora de posar-me a fer un espectacle” (2005: 79). Additionally, in a creator who, like Carrasco, has choreographed shows based on the works of Salvat-Papasseit, Rodoreda, Brecht and García Lorca and who, therefore, cannot be suspected of “starting from nothing”, these types of statements must be understood to be a provocation aimed at building a deliberately disoriented self-image. On the other hand, discontinuity is perceived to be the endemic threat to Catalan culture. Jordi Llovet states that the difference between Catalan literature and English, French or Italian literature is that, while the latter have spread like a *continuum* of cause and effect, Catalan literature “pateix unes batzegades i unes interrupcions tan enormement brutals que difícilment [...] es pot parlar de la literatura catalana com una literatura formada per

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5 | Mercè Picornell (2012) has also analysed in depth the attempts to ensure the continuity of Catalanian culture in the period 1960-1970 with the creation of margins that, in contrast, generate the illusion of a stable centre.

6 | «Tradition works thanks to a selection, which as far as it is concerned aims towards preservation and subsequent transmission, which is supposed to be endless [...]. Now, if you carefully look at it, at least from a certain point of view, avant-garde seems to have been working following similar ways. It aims to occupy the center of the symbolic chess board and by removing at least in principle any aesthetic-cultural value (in a word: market value) from everything that isn’t avant-garde, selects and does nothing but set up a norm again which aims to make itself absolute» (Voce, 1996: 117).

fites contínues [...]. La literatura catalana és plena d'intermitències" (2006: 115). For his part, Víctor Martínez-Gil, in reference to the appeals of Eugeni d'Ors to the Holy Continuity, emphasises the Catalan tendency towards the "sensació de no tenir tradició" and the explanation of their own history "com una dolorosa ruptura" (the validity of the term *decadence* is a sign of this) and he suggests, as a counterexample, the confidence of Portuguese historiography in its own literature (2010: 124-125)⁷. Conversely, there are those who have taken the opposite path and consider these interruptions a provocation with the potential for rebellion.

¿Com es pot crear una identitat a partir de l'absència de referents, o més aviat, a partir dels referents d'una tradició d'exclusió i subordinació, una identitat sense i fora d'una tradició? ¿Com usar de manera productiva una tradició i una herència? ¿I com usar de manera subversiva una tradició, per tal de donar-li la volta i fer-li dir l'indicible? —es pregunta Josep Anton Fernández (2004: 203) parlant de Maria-Mercè Marçal.

Giuseppe Grilli's essay *Indagacions sobre la modernitat de la literatura catalana*, subtitled *Continuïtat i alteritat en la tradició literària*, deals aggressively with the problem of tension between continuity and rupture - or between canonisation and marginalisation. In this way he relativises the otherness of Joan Brossa and strives to present him as an author that, far from being original, contradictorily «rebutja, provocativament, qualsevol lligam amb la tradició», and at the same time makes

regressions romàntiques a la poesia patriòtica, en la qual, de manera gairebé descarada, segueix fins a superar-lo amb tota seriositat un Ventura Gassol, o bé, amb pur experimentalisme, torna a evocar els jocs de paraules, la buidor o la trivialitat de la poesia popular prebarroca del segle XVI (1984: 212).

Also, in reference to the textualist writing of Biel Mesquida and Quim Monzó, he detects «una dissipació temàtica i formal que en la història de la literatura catalana només pot parangonar-se a la irresponsabilitat dels poetes culterans i pseudoculterans del segle XVII» (1984: 215-216) and, furthermore, describes as naïve principles and values such as «la imaginació al poder, l'alliberament gai, la crisi del marxisme, l'escriptura com a diferència, els autors de la biblioteca del papà com a personatges...» (1984: 216). Grilli concludes that:

La novel·la *freak*, a Catalunya encara més que en d'altres indrets, només estableix amb la literatura una relació de recíproca instrumentalització: és deliberadament més vulgar que el *puterio* de les seves cobertes. Només caldrà esperar el tomb de la dècada i es veurà que l'experimentalisme es fa clàssic, la cultura i la pràctica de la contestació s'estableixen com a cànons d'un nou esteticisme i floreixen escoles d'imitadors a l'entorn d'uns autors encara massa joves (1984: 216).

Not so fast. I find some of Grilli's arguments convincing, particularly

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7 | Joan Ramon Resina carries out a critical rereading of the term «Decadència» (Decadence), which he suggests substituting with disappearance, in relation to the pairing of continuity/discontinuity. He observes that «the decadence of Catalan literature in the early sixteenth century precluded the formation of a Catalan national culture [...] at the time when other European cultures were developing into national cultures. Once again, the principle at work in the Catalan case is discontinuity» (1995: 286). Resina concludes that the centralising process that contributed to the creation of European nation states in the 15th and 16th centuries pushed towards the outskirts cultures - such as the Catalanian culture - that have only ever been unofficially recognised by history. He observes that «the myth of remote continuity notwithstanding, the modern nation state is as fleeting a structure as any other product of the social life of human beings» (1995: 301).

those that insist on the inevitable connection between avant-garde productions and the tradition into which they are inserted - even when they are integrated disruptively - and the others that underline the pendular dynamic between opposition and establishment. However, I am not sure that the systematic relevance of literary experimentation can be deactivated through the observation of its connections, for the simple reason that no literature exists outside of a network. No-one can devalue the *Poema de la rosa als llavis* by Salvat-Papasseit because of its use of troubadour elements. Every literary artifact is interconnected, and the use of these connections to discredit certain works (because of their supposed lack of originality) and at the same time defend others (because of the strength of continuity that they represent) would be an unfair use of double standards. I believe that, conversely, what defines the otherness of experimental poetry is precisely its way of dealing with the past with which it is conversing without ignoring it. Perhaps the key, in short, is that in experimental writing the relationship - whatever it is - with tradition becomes conscious, premeditated. Experimental poets treat tradition not as a naturalised heritage to be blindly adopted, but rather as a contingent with which the dialogue is often implicit - *secret*, if you prefer - but always deliberate⁸. Ultimately, as stated by Manuel Ollé, the perception of tradition as «l'herència patrimonial d'una sèrie d'autors, de llibres i de procediments literaris prestigiosos i modèlics que ens llega el passat i que nosaltres transmetem al futur», cannot help but be considered “ingènua i anacrònica” (2001: 7).

The casuistry that links the experimental corpus with intertextual palimpsest and with appropriation that allow for critical readings of tradition is very extensive⁹. In this particular case, Carles Hac Mor's book of poetry *M'he menjat una cama* (2004) illustrates the distinctive features (and the difficulties) of cultural transmission that chooses the path of illegibility. Through the evident intertextual play with Gabriel Ferrater's *Menja't una cama*¹⁰, in Hac Mor's book there is a complex interpretation that pretends to see Ferrater's title as an imperative. «Menja't una cama» (Eat your leg) is, in effect, an imperative phrase, the threatening character of which is mitigated however by its origins in the popular saying «si tens gana, menja't una cama», which turns it into an unconnected discourse and, therefore, distances it from Ferrater's expository I. But the reading of poetry has some interpretative conventions that mean that we do not feel offended by the appellative nature of certain statements, in the same way that we have learned, for example, the eventuality of identification between the lyrical I and the biographical I (an eventuality that, of course, has been called into question again due to the re-emergence of the art of oral poetry). These conventions aside, Hac Mor deals with poetic language as through it were a daily language, that is, he prioritises the communicability and connotative nature of the message, and so obeys the imperative quality of

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8 | In a similar sense, Manel Ollé (2004) defends the need for the emergence of rereadings of tradition that question its static and distant character, and gives as examples the defence by Enric Casasses of authors such as Juli Vallmitjana and Joan Vila Casas.

9 | I have dealt with this subject in Pons (2007), among other works.

10 | And other obvious intertextual games: Jordi Marrugat (2009: 103) observes that *M'he menjat una cama* collects together the rewriting of many fragments from a previous book by Hac Mor, *Cabrafiga*, published in 2002.

Ferrater's statement. However, at the same time he is *disobeying* it, given that, if we consider the readings of Xavier Macià and Núria Perpinyà, the title *Menja't una cama* «diu molt sobre la insolidaritat dels homes i la necessitat de saber-se espavilar enmig d'un món on cadascú s'ha d'empassar els tràngols més difícils sense l'ajut d'altri» and, in a perhaps more debatable interpretation, «sobre la necessitat d'anteposar el compromís individual al compromís històric» (1987: 37). It is difficult to find in the nonsense poems of *M'he menjat una cama*, created from derivations and unpredictability, any vestige of this hierarchization of compromises.

So then, ¿where does Hac Mor sit in respect to his predecessor Ferrater? Is he correcting him, paying homage to him, playing with him? Or doing all these three things at the same time? Jordi Marrugat notes the double provocation that is represented by *M'he menjat una cama*. It exists, on the one hand, towards the language and the writer, given the frequency of popular proverbs used in order to send the linguistic code «a pastar fang» (2009: 201); on the other, towards those poets that have tried to imitate Ferrater through so-called poetry of experience (2009: 103)¹¹. What *differentiates* Hac Mor would not be established, therefore, only in relation to Ferrater, but also in relation to a section of his followers. What follows is a long game of readings and counterfeits of a poet whose canonic value has, at the same time, remained intact.

Conversely, *M'he menjat una cama* is a book that has won the Cadaqués a Rosa Leveroni prize and has been published in one of the most classic prestige collections of the Catalan publishing market, *Els Llibres de l'Óssa Menor*. It appears, therefore, wrapped in cellophane layers of distinction that the various paratexts (the previous reference to the cover, the reference to the jury members on the acknowledgements page...) try to underline. A distinction, however, that is ironically called into question by one of the three quotations with which he begins the book, identified as: «Nota d'un jurat de premi literari»: «Significats atzarosos. Collage retallat. Manca de gràcia, d'imaginació, de disseny intencional. Histèria descontrolada» (Hac Mor, 2004: 9)¹². *M'he menjat una cama* appears therefore as a contradictory object that both confirms and denies its quality at the same time. The assessment, produced by this unknown member of a jury, is not too far off the opinion expressed by the critic Jordi Galves, who assured *La Vanguardia* that *M'he menjat una cama*

pasma por su falta de contención. No estamos hablando de la desmesura en el buen sentido surrealista al que se quiere acercar sin conseguirlo. Los motivos son claros: el empacho hermético le lleva a la disolución, al reblandecimiento de los sesos ante la confusión y el no poco desvarío (2004: 8).

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11 | I am ignoring the fact that the poetry of experience label should probably be revised (what experience?; why are only certain moments and pretexts considered experience?; does designing a concrete poem not involve experience?; would it not be better to talk of a transcended daily life that is expressed in an intentionally straightforward style, in a rhetoric of proximity?). Whatever it may be, it is a poetry about which Marrugat expresses himself forcefully, because he believes that «implica l'assumpció de la ideologia burgesa conservadora i de l'ordre jeràrquic de la institució literària en tant que el poeta s'autoconsidera un ésser de sensibilitat i cultura superiors que pot explicar millor que els altres les coses sense interès que li passen. Això creu que li dona el dret d'imposar el propi jo sobre la seva societat, fer-li llegir les pròpies misèries i masturbacions mentals tot anihilant els altres com a massa amorfa i inexpressiva de la qual només se n'espera l'admiració incondicional» (2009: 103).

12 | Carles Hac Mor has explained to me that this «Nota d'un jurat» is real: it refers to a manuscript presented by the author to the Gabriel Ferrater prize (which he did not win) and that it was found between the pages of one of the original copies that they returned to him. According to another version (published in Xargay, 2004: 26), the note is from a member of the same jury that awarded him the Cadaqués a Rosa Leveroni prize. It doesn't matter. The important part, as Ester Xargay observes, is that «podem veure la nota del membre del jurat com a condensació de la teoria dominant sobre què és o què ha de ser la poesia; i en l'acceptació del contingut de la

If Galves does indeed appear astonished by the illegibility of the text, he also recognises that Hac Mor has assumed “la condición caníbal, antropófaga, que supone la praxis de una poesía verdaderamente contemporánea», and that “hincando el diente al propio yo en lo que él denomina ejercicio de despintura, realiza su gran vocación exclusiva hacia la sinrazón, la nada, la desaparición, el borrado mágico» (2004: 8).

And yet, despite the radical character attributed to him by critics¹³, Hac Mor claims that “tot és intel·ligible” and that “M’he menjat una cama és potser el llibre en què dic menys coses, però és el llibre que en diu més” (Bombí-Vilaseca, 2004: 2). In the same way, he separates the book from instinctive writing and recognises its traditional character: “la literatura, i sobretot la catalana, no ha sabut incorporar el llegat de les avantguardes. Jo he intentat, potser per la meva formació artística, incorporar dins de la tradició de la poesia catalana aquests elements avantguardistes que no hi són” (Bombí-Vilaseca, 2004: 3). *M’he menjat una cama* finds itself, therefore, at that apex between what is unacceptable and what is distinguished, between recognition of a literary past and cancellation of this past through a path of unreason that is clear from the first poem:

POMES PERES GROSELLA
figues i vinga glaçons
del banc i corrents
prosseguir amb les fronteres
comprovar astorats que cou
s’entolla de xafigor o sovint
s’hi adaptarà i a llarg tret
reconèixer-lo al pic de l’obscuritat
desusadament il·lustrat a la melsa
(Hac Mor, 2004: 11)

To say that Hac Mor subverts readings of tradition would be a simplification, because it would imply that this tradition has a *endret* - that is, an unambiguous interpretation that only a few brave people dare to distort. Tradition can be read in many ways. In reality, what Galves understands to be *confusion* and *delirium* is the most *traditional* aspect of *M’he menjat una cama*, because it creates a point of contrast - and, therefore, of contact - both with Ferrater and - if we consider Marrugat’s reading - with a sector of those poets that look to him as their master.

Read together with Ferrater’s hypotext and the current of inspiration from him that certain poets “of experience” represent, the *nonsense* of “Pomes peres grosella” becomes part of a reading of Ferrater’s work that does not take into account the explicit referentiality, but rather the elements that remain hidden: those elements, so that we are all understood, that “A l’inrevés” - a poem that the author of *Les dones i*

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nota per Carles Hac Mor, hi podem trobar una actitud derivada de la poètica en evolució d’aquest autor. I val a dir que la seva poètica en procés té poc a veure amb les idees dominants sobre la poesia” (2004: 26). On this point, also see Costa-Pau (2004: 12).

13 | According to Sam Abrams, *M’he menjat una cama* is “l’aposta més radical de l’autor contra el sentit del poema” (2005: 13).

els dies critically compared to *Huckleberry Finn*- brings together in the expression “No diré res de mi”, despersonalising only at first sight. The *nonsense* of Hac Mor therefore takes on the value of a meaning that, although not *non-existent*, we could qualify as *demolished*. Here is a good moment to recall the title of the essay *Enderroc i reconstrucció*, in which Hac Mor defends an undogmatic understanding of tradition: “La tradició —també la de les lletres catalanes— és molt important, i fins i tot és imprescindible, i tanmateix, si es converteix en un seguit de dogmes, tot just engendrarà clixés si fa no fa dissimulats” (2007: 131).

Hac Mor’s stance is not unusual. It is important to remember that in the critical discourse surrounding Catalan poetry in the second half of the 20th century, Ferrater became a polysemic significant - or with a tendency to be, in the words of Pere Gimferrer (2001: 361), *misunderstood*-, uncomfortable and difficult to categorise, and who was also the object of contrasting readings within the creative sphere. Vicenç Altaió, for example, recalls that when, in the early Seventies, Ferrater was invited to do a public reading, he was surprised by the way the poet marked the rhythm of the verses with his foot and the syllables by banging his hand on the table. At that time, he saw him as an author that had come, “sense mestratge voluntari”, in a literary school that had few supporters “en el món de l’autonomia formal, del radicalisme polític i de les textualitats, cap a on els més jovencells ens inclinàvem” (2008: 26). But two years later, Altaió attended a reading by the textualist group TXT in Paris, and saw that those young French group members read the poems in the same way as Ferrater, marking out the rhythm, making use of the dimensions of pure textuality, and it was then that he understood “per què Gabriel Ferrater pertanyia també a les pràctiques textuals” (2008: 27).

Explico això —conclou Altaió— amb la mateixa perplexitat que ho vaig sentir, perquè Ferrater era model per als poetes [...] de la generació que ens precedia: Marta Pessarrodona, Narcís Comadira, Francesc Parcerisas. Realment no sé si eren ells o nosaltres qui llegíem bé Ferrater. Ferrater ha quedat al mig, esmicolat (2008: 27).

If some authors carry Ferrater to experiential grounds, others - Hac Mor, Altaió - take him to experimental ones¹⁴.

On the other hand, we must not forget that the *counter-sense* actions carried out by Carles Hac Mor also can be read on a sociopolitical level. This is what Julià Guillamon proposes, for whom, in the post-utopic era of the late Seventies, the aesthetics of the absurd and the illogical offered the opportunity to upset those who, from the new power, were working hard to defend the need for compromise and resignation. The Neo-Dada movement of the Eighties would therefore be one of the consequences of the transition to democracy

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14 | At the same time, it would be necessary to see to what point the polarisation described by Altaió is operative. Pessarrodona, Comadira and Parcerisas recognise Ferrater’s mastery in various ways that would be unfair to identify with a monocolour and acritical acceptance. See, for example, the testimony of Narcís Comadira, for whom Ferrater’s real legacy is freedom: “¿Poden existir realment seguidors de la poesia de Gabriel Ferrater que no siguin purs epígons mimètics, ridícules caricatures? A part de William Cliff, que escriu en francès, no en conec cap. [...] [Jo] el declarava mestre però no seguia el seu magisteri. I li dedicava un poema [Un passeig pels bulevards ardents] que, reconeguda o no, marcava una inflexió del realisme. Era el resultat de la llibertat heretada de Gabriel Ferrater” (2001: 360).

in the cultural sphere¹⁵: a type of reaction to the saturation caused by the gravity of discussions about Marxism and psychoanalysis. From this point of view, nonsense writing would be a new manifestation of the rhetoric of disenchantment.

But Carles Hac Mor and Vincenç Altaió are not the only ones to converse with Ferrater. If Jordi Garves spoke of the cannibalism of contemporary poetry, Víctor Sunyol makes and unmakes the poem “Posseït” by Ferrater - that some critics have read with the idea of cannibalism - through an act of swallowing and expulsion that transforms the original. In a series of slides presented in a Powerpoint file, Sunyol breaks “Posseït” into fragments, isolates verses and even single words and, as a result, obtains thirty six new poems¹⁶. Each one of these poems highlights a different quality of the hypotext and, at the same time, registers the eye movements in the act of reading, for which it may be considered the represented cristalisation of a moment of perception. In this way, if Sunyol’s *new* poem “Sec més lluny que estimar-te. / No sóc sinó la mà amb què tu palpeges” emphasises the contrast between two forms, direct and indirect, of assertion, other poems isolate adjectives and first person pronouns (“meu / mi / me / em”), or phrases (“saciada de tu”), or use cacophony (“cucs / cos / cos / sóc”) (figures 1, 2, 3 y 4).

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15 | “The Catalan Neo-Dada movement of the Eighties grew, like the original, from disillusionment. It manifested itself discontinuously in the work of a half dozen writers, in the most varied of hybridisations: romanticism, situationism, conceptual art, postmodernism” (Guillamon, 2008: 24).

16 | The origin of this experiment goes back to a literacy Assaig in 1980 in which Sunyol hoped to bring different readings of the poem based upon graphic elements, and it finishes with the article «Tres apunts sobre ‘Posseït’ de Ferrater» (Sunyol, 2011). I refer briefly to these three works in Pons (2012c).

Sóc més lluny que estimar-te.

meu

mi

me
em

No sóc sinó la mà amb què tu palpeges.

cucs

cos

saciada de tu

cos

sóc

Figures 1, 2, 3 and 4, Víctor Sunyol, *Posseït*

This is a process that has been used by other conceptual authors, such as the American Ronald Johnson, who dedicated himself to deleting parts of the first four books of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* until it became a new book, *Radi Os* (1977); or Jen Bervin, also from the US, who worked with cancelling out Shakespeare’s sonnets; or Scotland’s Peter Manson, who in *English in Mallarmé* (2007) plays with homography to rewrite the poems of *Mallarmé*, deleting every

word that is not also an English term (even though words such as *coup*, *main*, *porter*, *chair*, *pour*, *comment* etc. have different meanings). In the case of Sunyol, the play on white space that leaves words suspended creates a feeling of floating, unfinished, that *sunyoliza* Ferrater and that, contrary to the interpretations that see him as a stable author of reference, rereads him as abstract poet. This poem is one example:

Sóc
faran
trobaran

ets
has

excites
vas
refuses

sóc
palpeges

Figure 5, Víctor Sunyol, *Posseït*

Perhaps Sunyol's experiment is a new way of reminding us of what other critics such as Jordi Julià, Xavier Macià and Dolors Oller have seen: that Ferrater is not, despite the concise profile of his imagery, an obvious poet. In exactly the same way we can refer to the interventions that Sunyol himself performed in *lowery pore* (2003) on Ferrater's poems «Amistat del braç», «L'oncle» and «Dits», which compress and «anagramitza» (the expression is from Serra, 2002) until they become three haikus gathered together under the title «Retalls»:

RETAGLLS

ELS ULLS AL CARRER

Vora la porta,
tota la sang del món
abalançada.

Se'n duen el seu fàstic.
Però les mans tremolen:
Que no fos meu.

DE COMIAT

Van prémer l'ombra:
llagimeig que plovia
dels bruscos túnels.
(Sunyol, 2003: 20)

Hac Mor and Sunyol consciously absorb their predecessors in syncopation, through Dadaist-type games, combinatorics and deletion, resources that turn tradition into an itinerary of discontinuities, meanders, disappearances and reappearances.

Other poets dramatise this discontinuity by applying different forms of violence and commotion to the code. So, in *La llengua suspesa* (1986) Vicenç Altaió reflects «sobre una llengua que, en una primera significació, no passa l'aprovat —està suspesa— i, segonament, dins la metàfora, una llengua que es troba en el buit, resta en *stand by*, absorta, abstreta, atònita, embadalida...» (Carreras, 2004: 41). But this *stand by* is not the same as paralysis, because the *error* that was caused by *academic* failure takes on epistemological value and becomes a doorway to certain unexpected directions. It is an exploitation of the error that could be compared with the practice of digital artists who work with the aesthetic possibilities of the *glitch* (error in an information system) based upon the corruption of data. A practice that has also been used by such experimental poets as the American Jackson Mac Low, who investigated error in his *Barnesbook*, composed from texts by Djuna Barnes (Dworkin, 2003: 108-109). In the case of Altaió, his poem entitled «Erròtica», a combination of *Eros* and *error*, ends with the warning «Eva evita qualsevol conversa filològica» (2004: 369): an avoidance that, ironically, only serves, hand in hand with Pompeu Fabra, to call together all of academia and, consequently, *all* philological conversations. The piece «Fe en l'errata» works so that out of mistakes there emerges, through suggestion and substitution, the important difference:

On diu
24 en lloc de 21
ha de dir
Mare en lloc mare [*sic*],
.....
Ell ha de dir Ella
talment exili ha de dir el lloc de la fe,
o bé,
el Pare en lloc del meu pare
o una recuperació de l'anterior.
(Altaió, 2004: 370)

The disturbance of errata has meant that poetry no longer is a place of certainties, intimate or socialised, but rather it has become a statement that is best not trusted. In a study on the work of the poet Susan Howe, author of books of verse that lie along typographically maddening lines, which step upon and obstruct each other, Craig Dworkin associates disturbance with violence (because noise, on interrupting the transmission of information, bothers us), but also with a potential for a new social and political order, given that Howe is programmatically recovering a series of “historically repressed” voices that interfere with the harmony of the hegemonic voices (2003: 39-40).

From this disturbance that suggests the possibility of a different sense of the almost total incommunicability proposed by zaum poets, there

is only one step to be taken. It is the step that is taken, for example, by Damià Huguet in the “Crotolari” section of *Ofici de sords* (1976), a series of four unintelligible poems, the first of which says:

Tal·luts espidanyats, donnes de gic,
s’estrunyen suran d’aferegats torruts
cerbant refels ofuquissats d’avíc.
Sacunys espalls, tuvinejats com ruts,
esfanten nots furcits de clas esfic
perquè les cills esgantin fenecats fucuts.

Ruïses d’allot tuvinegen iscots.
(Huguet, 1994[1976]: 123)

In the same way that the code here is both unrecognizable and familiar - the whole statement together has no meaning, but the articles, preposition, conjunctions and morphological rules are from Catalan -, the poems are traditional from the point of view of a productive discontinuity. It is precisely the illegibility of the verses that open up dialogues not only with such classic essays as Cortázar’s *glíglíco* or Lewis Carroll’s *Jabberwocky*, but also with the coetaneous Catalan culture of hermetic poetry, about which Huguet, it seems, was ironically writing¹⁷. We can read several poems in the same way: Miquel Desclot’s «Sirventès», included in *Viatge perillós i al·lucinant a través de mil tres-cents vint-i-set versos infestats de pirates i de lladres de camí ral*, which recovers a particular reading of the trobar clus (Pons, 2012a); Ponç Pons’ poem «És ver que mai no strunc que nic però», printed in *Al marge* (1983), which finishes its transmental gibberish with a solemn verse: «Jo no t’he enganat mai i açò me basta» (Pons, 1983: 47); certain poems from *Entreparèntesis* (1978) by Víctor Sunyol («Clarosos llerons d’endesa / paortien al cler dels malartes...») (1978: s. p.); the medieval-style language of some of Carles Hac Mor’s texts; or the issue 0 that in 1984 was published by the revue *CAPS.A*, created in Mataró by the artists Jordi Cuyàs, J. M. Calleja and Jaume Simon, that is written in Latin in order to (ironically?) avoid problems of interpretation¹⁸. More than simply humour, eccentricity or a conceptual exercise, these illegible texts oblige us to redefine what we conventionally understand to be the object of reading: decipherment. In a conversation with Roger Chartier, Bourdieu asserts that the metaphor of the cipher is typically the metaphor of the reader:

Hay un texto que está codificado, del cual se trata de despejar el código para hacerlo inteligible. Y esta metáfora nos conduce a un error de tipo intelectualista. Se piensa que leer un texto es comprenderlo, es decir, descubrir en él la clave. Mientras que, en verdad, no todos los textos estan hechos para ser comprendidos en este sentido. [...] Hay toda suerte de textos que pueden pasar directamente al estado de práctica, sin que necesariamente exista la mediación de un desciframiento en el sentido en que lo entendemos (2010: 255-256).

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17 | Joan Mas states that these poems are an explicit parody of some of the authors of the El Mall group: “[Huguet] s’oposa explícitament a una determinada estètica que a començaments dels 70 semblava que havia d’esdevenir hegemònica: la d’una poesia culturista, hermètica, arcaïtzant i intencionadament neoformalista. Xavier Bru de Sala i Ramon Pinyol n’eren els autors més representatius [...]. Precisament aquest poemari [*Ofici de sords*] s’obre amb una referència a *La fi del fil* (1973) de Bru de Sala i es tanca amb una secció, el “Crotolari”, que és una paròdia directa i despietada d’aquesta estètica. Es tracta de poemes construïts amb mots aparentment arcaïcs, que podrien procedir de clàssics medievals, però que en realitat són pura invenció de l’autor, sense significat. Per a ell la gratuïtat d’aquests poemes és la mateixa que la dels primers llibres dels autors esmentats» (1994: 17).

18 | J. M. Calleja recalls: «La primera idea era explicar la història de la CAPS.A. El problema era llavors: «En quina llengua ho fem? En català o en castellà?» En aquell moment això encara era molt vigent. Potser ara no ens ho hauríem plantejat. Vam decidir fer-ho en llatí, com a llengua mare de les llengües amb què ens relacionàvem. Així no hi havia problema d’interpretació» (Darder, 2010: 46).

Seen like this, illegibility would not be a flattering strategy of hermetism, but on the contrary, an anti-elitist manoeuvre. But it must be remembered that circulation of this type of text is restricted. Bourdieu himself proposed that the literary field is the *locus* of two processes of hierarchization: heteronomous hierarchization, which would impose itself were the literary field to disappear and writers remained subject to the common laws of the economy and power, and which is reflected in success markers such as the number of editions a work has; and autonomous hierarchization, which is produced independently of market laws and which can lend a specifically literary prestige, as defined by peers (the other writers)¹⁹. If the consumer of these games is the same literary community, the anti-elitism of these anti-literary practices should always be considered relative.

In this plan for opacity, the “Poemes-totxo” included in *Guillaguí* (1978), by Miquel Bach, represent a special case for the fluctuations between legibility and illegibility. In the “Poemes-totxo” unintelligibility is not born from the construction of a nonsense language, but rather from the agglutination of the text until it forms a compact block from which punctuation signs, capital letters and spaces between words are deleted. The book contains a prologue by Joaquín Molas that, interpreting these textual blocks as symbols of the post-war oppression, returns to them their illegible nature²⁰. The critic attributes to popularism, although not to Joyce or Dadà, the linguistic games in *Guillaguí*, since popularism, Tzara and Breton are ruled, so he says, by the same laws (Molas, 1978: 7). The contextualising exercise of the prologue allows us to make two somewhat opposing discoveries: on the one hand, in criticism the search for genealogies that, with the excuse of where the artistic artifact is located in the historical paradigm, make certain literary expressions “less surprising” is common; on the other hand, and contrasting with the previously mentioned assessments made by Giuseppe Grilli, Molas’ sociohistorical reading shows that experimental writing maintains its destabilising and aggressive character even when a family resemblance is looked for.

We were talking, however, of fluctuations. The second part of *Guillaguí*, entitled “Lectura a peu de pàgina”, reproduces the same poems as the first, this time in a typographically uncompressed layout (see the comparison between the two formats of the same poem in figures 5 and 6). As a result of this expansion, the formal radicality is attenuated, but in exchange it makes more visible the hardness of the images, hidden in the first part by the difficulty of deciphering the primary meaning of the text. Now the words recover their individuality and make visible the child obliged to gather dung in a basket, the war amputees, the train of Catalonians marching to the front, the civil catacombs of the air raids. Just when the reader has got used to illegibility, in a surprising invasion, legibility acquires a

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19 | “The level of recognition given by fellows (defined, in a perfectly circular way, as those who only recognise as criterion for legitimacy the recognition of those that they recognise, or more precisely, that seem to them to be worthy of being recognised and worthy of recognising them - which explains why the avant-garde always tend to appear to external, more or less hostile, observers to be clubs of mutual admiration)” (Bourdieu 1989-90: 16).

20 | For Molas, the book is «una meditació sobre els anys de la postguerra» (1978: 5) and the bricks are a form «que, en termes gràfics i ideològics, pretén de simbolitzar el monolitisme agressiu, pesant, de la interminable postguerra» (1978: 7-8).

terrible dimension: it unmasks the way in which the poet “rebutja una per una les diverses opcions que li ofereix la societat on viu” (Molas, 1978: 6): the alienation caused by religion, work, politics...

HE TRO BA TUN DOLL QUEM SAG NA
 quan anava col·legi que ja no se'n recorda gaire un
 dia va sortir massa tard i a ca seua el van renyar
 perquè duia esbotzada l'espardenya i no volia anar a
 aplegar fems amb el senall i la paleta que déu n'hi do
 del que en pagaven mentre ell corria enganxat pels
 carrers darrera els camions fins el dia que el cotxe-
 cisterna el va ruixar de la pulmonia dels peus xops
 sa mare el va deixar sense sopar poca-vergonya que
 no sabien donar només disgustos i prou cabells grisos
 li'n sortien quin patir la mareta pobra dona que no
 els veuria crescuts que ja seria morta si hagués viscut
 l'avi llenyataire no li hagués caigut el roure al cap
 esberlat a trossos per terra quin patir tota la pell se
 m'esborrona

HE TROBAT UN DOLL QUE EM SAGNA

quan anava a col·legi que ja no se'n recorda gaire un
 dia va sortir massa tard i a ca seua el van renyar
 perquè duia esbotzada l'espardenya i no volia anar a
 aplegar fems amb el senall i la paleta que déu n'hi do
 del que en pagaven mentre ell corria enganxat pels
 carrers darrera els camions fins el dia que el cotxe-
 cisterna el va ruixar de la pulmonia dels peus xops
 sa mare el va deixar sense sopar poca-vergonya que
 no sabien donar només disgustos i prou cabells grisos
 li'n sortien quin patir la mareta pobra dona que no
 els veuria crescuts que ja seria morta si hagués viscut
 l'avi llenyataire no li hagués caigut el roure al cap
 esberlat a trossos per terra quin patir tota la pell se
 m'esborrona

Figures 5 and 6, Miquel Bach, *Guillagui*

The cases we have seen here speak of the impossibility of marking out a clearly defined border between the experimental and the traditional, between rupture and continuity. For some the crucial moment in this impossibility is postmodernism and the promotion of the genre of pastiche, which blurs the line between old and new²¹. In either case, the illegibility caused by Dadaist nonsense, by fragmentation, by linguistic alienation, by zaum or by agglutination has aporetic effects: it brings together at the same time both the tradition of rupture - which Octavio Paz spoke of in *Los hijos del limo* - and the impossibility of rupture. Experiment cannot be extracted from a tradition with which dialogue, either complacent or unfriendly, is inevitable. Therefore, perhaps rupture should not be considered the impossible imperfection of a past, but rather a rereading - demystifying, playful or scathing - of that past. It may be added that this is not specific to experimental literature, since all literatures must necessarily converse with their respective diachronic paradigms. This is certain. However, it is precisely for this reason that the context in which this dialogue is produced cannot be avoided. In recent Catalan culture, marked by attacks on credibility and by subordinating politics that not even the discourse on standardisation has managed to dispel, the concept of continuity has become practically untouchable and has established itself, what is more, on the level of symbolic imagery (renewal of the flame of language, human chains to defend social causes...) The literary historiography competition, with the development of a scheme involving generations that relinquish their cultural testimonial to each other, has been key in the construction of this illusion of continuities. Experimental poetry acts precisely against this intangibility. It shows that cultural transmission is also possible through interruption, cut-offs and the apostasy of models that the same act of rejection still maintains, paradoxically, present. A different question, which would

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21 | Lello Voce speaks of «the exhaustion of the normative function of tradition at the moment when it crashed with postmodernism and with the postmodern period, in which the pastiche has given us one more chance [...] that has situated itself beyond the bipolarity avant-garde/tradition» (1996: 116).

have to be broached in another study, is whether this transmission is uniquely realised in a restricted field, recognised only by its producers (creators and critics), or if it is capable of going further than that. If the audience for experimentation is the self-same literati, what influence does it achieve in the social sphere? Are we talking, to pay tribute to the title of Joaquim Ruyra's story, of a drama in a fishbowl? Can it escape the fishbowl?

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