



Joan Margarit

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by Anna Crowe

Joan Margarit i Consarnau was born in 1938 in Sanaüja, in the la Segarra region of Catalonia. He is a post-war poet. His voice both severe and comforting — seems an appropriate one for the times in which we live. Given the political circumstances at the time, he published his first poems in Spanish but the 1981 publication of *L'ombra de l'altre mar* (The Shadow of the Other Sea) established him in Catalan-language poetry, to which he brought a mature and unique expression. Margarit's poetry searches for the truth and passionately confronts the worst that life can throw at us: "everything that is dirty, noisy, ugly, tired and violent". (*Noves cartes a un jove poeta*, 2009) (New Letters to a Young Poet).

The volume *Els primers freds. Poesia 1975-1995* (The First Frosts, Poetry 1975 - 1995) brings together, as the poet himself put it, "all the poems from that period which I wished to save from being forgotten", previously published in the volumes *Crònica*, *L'ordre del temps*, *Llum de pluja*, *Edat roja*, *Els motius del llop* and *Aiguaforts* (Chronicle, The Order of Time, Rainlight, Red Age, The Motives of the Wolf, Etchings). A writer of poetry and prose; an anthologist and translator (he has translated the poetry of Thomas Hardy and Elizabeth Bishop); Margarit has been a practising architect all his life. It is therefore hardly surprising that his poetry has a clear location in space and time, in a specific place and circumstance, and that it is deeply rooted in the present. These architectural calculations are, however, balanced with an emotional intelligence. Risk often appears in his poetry as a result of the tension between rationality and sentimentality searching for an equilibrium. In the poem *Seguretat* (*Càlcul d'estructures*, 2005) ('Safety', Tugs in the Fog), architectural imagery is used to remind us that "you know / that the man who's installing a safety net has no net". In *Primer amor* (*Els Motius del Llop*) ('First Love', The Motives of the Wolf), in which Margarit speaks about his wife, danger enters the home: since the poet was a child he has owned a knife which he has kept hidden. "I hid it, the first thirty years/behind books of poetry and, later/inside a drawer, in amongst your knickers/and amongst your stockings".

Margarit describes the poet's task as that of an architect: it consists of building a solid structure. A poem has to achieve solidity through the least number of words and "from this exactitude comes its power of consolation" (*Noves cartes a un jove poeta*). The imagery in his poetry is extremely powerful. The bird, for example, appears in different circumstances which allows the different nuances of this image to be perceived. In *Del viatge de noces del pare i de la mar* (*Càlcul d'estructures*) ('About My Father and Mother's Honeymoon', Tugs In The Fog), swallows fly above the walls of Àvila like "black bullets [...] with news of the first deaths". In *Fred de juny a Forès* (*Casa de Misericòrdia*, 2007) ('Coldness of June at Forès', House of Mercy), in which he confronts old age, the "fierce swifts / [...] / make noise like knives" in "the landscape of our death". The nightingale's song that Uncle Lluís recorded on the edge of the river Ebro in 'Uncle Lluís' (*Càlcul d'estructures*)

becomes the Uncle's voice and the voice of all the dead, showing the futility of war. The poems *La merla* and *Perdiu jove (Càlcul d'estructures)* ('The Blackbird' and 'Young Partridge', Tugs in the Fog) speak of Joana, the poet's handicapped daughter, and of his wife, Mariona Ribalta. The poems exactly reproduce the movements of a bird whilst at the same time showing the complex emotions of loss and suffering. The blackbird is "Witch or princess. Maybe Death". The fragility of the wounded partridge on the brink of death reminds him of the fragility of his daughter, already dead, and the warmth of her hand in his. This same fragility is emphasised in *Excursió (Estació de França, 1999)* (Excursion) by the hand of his wife, wrapped in a leather glove "that was waiting for a sign/like a bird, to emerge into the cold". The poet makes us feel the psychological cold of "the mists of Aiguafreda [...] / on the Day of the Dead".

Joan Margarit is one of the great love poets, of love and all its subtleties. In the prologue to *Poesia amorosa completa* (2001) (Collected Love Poetry), Sam Abrams writes that Margarit belongs to the group of poets in the Catalan poetical tradition who "have worked for almost a century to counteract the devastating effects of Platoism, idealisation and implausibility".

A poet of verisimilitude and reality, almost by definition, Margarit has expanded upon and enriched the theme of love. In his poetry the reader finds difficult, desperate and tepid love; obstinate, sad and placid love; love for parents, children and friends; love in literature and in music; old love and love which is able to face up to death. Margarit dedicated an entire collection to his daughter: The volume *Joana* (2002) chronicles the last eight months of her life. Poems such as *Nit de juny, El present i Forès* and *L'espera* ('June Night', 'The present and Forès' and 'The Wait') are full of tenderness, desperation and honest suffering but also hope and acceptance. As in a Rembrandt, the darkness and shadows infuse and intensify the light. Joan Margarit reminds us that it is not death we have to understand, but life.

In *Seguretat* the poet states "I need pain against oblivion". The collection *Estació de França* is imbued with the spectre of the Spanish Civil War and the memory of the difficulties of life in its aftermath. The poet also recalls in this collection his childhood and his difficult relationship with his father. The night train to Paris which the poet and his wife used to catch left from this station in Barcelona. In this collection there is an abundance of arrivals and departures as well as the pain and joy of love and sex. In *Barcelona amor final* (2007) (Barcelona, Final Love) — a trilingual edition in Catalan, Spanish and English — we find the impoverished and sordid streets of the 1950's under the dictatorship, the insalubrious port, the darkness of the metro, Montjuïc with its large terraces where his Uncle Lluís used to dance, and the great cemetery where Anna and Joana — his two dead daughters— are buried. The city of Barcelona is alive and breathes in these poems, almost as if it were another character. His poetry shows us that what is important is to not to forget the past.

In the poem *Els morts* ('The Dead'), he remembers his younger sister who died of meningitis in the dark post-war cold, his father's fear and imprisonment as a Republican soldier, and Joana's death. The memories are played out through the framework of a children's game with a relentlessly repetitive refrain — "Knock on the wall, who is going to fall?" —yet end with a tone of gracious acceptance. The title poem of his penultimate collection, *Casa de Misericòrdia* (House of Mercy) states plainly that "a good poem/however beautiful, has to be cruel/ There is nothing else. Poetry is now / the final orphanage, the last house of mercy."

Happiness, always won through adversity, shines through these poems: out of the dark corners of childhood; the memories of betrayal and indifference; old age, grief and suffering. The title phrase 'strangely happy' is repeated in three of the book's poems. In the introduction to its Spanish translation (2009), the Mexican poet Pedro Serrano says "*Misteriosament feliç* means having come into emotionally distressing situations and come out of them. The poems are the journey and proof of having come out the other side". As readers, upon entering into these poems we assume the danger

and participate in the happiness, leaving changed and comforted.

Translated by Katherine Reynolds