



Joan Vinyoli: A Unique Poetic Quality

by Josep Maria Sala-Valldaura

As is usually the case with good poets, Joan Vinyoli (Barcelona, 1914 - 1984) produced a body of work that is exemplary, even in its sheer uniqueness. Although some unfortunate historical circumstances, such as the Spanish civil war (1936 - 1939) and the subsequent repression of Catalan culture, were common to all the poets belonging to the generation of 1936, their aesthetics and ideology were so different that later generations of authors had a variety of teachers from whom to learn their craft.

During the Fifties and even into the Sixties, Catalan literature was marked by a sense of commitment, testifying to and denouncing the political and social injustice of the times. Because of this, the lyricism of Joan Vinyoli's experimental poetry set him somewhat apart from the mainstream. But, perhaps for that very reason, the past twenty years have seen a steady growth in his stature among Catalan poets and his reputation with young writers and Vinyoli has now become one of the key figures of post-war Catalan poetry, along with Pere Quart, Salvador Espriu, Gabriel Ferrater, and some- what further back in time, J. V. Foix, Carles Riba and Josep Carner.

Joan Vinyoli ranks among the most vital of these distinguished poets, standing with those who consider poetry as "a gamble where the stakes are the life or death of the spirit"; in other words, poetry as a "total adventure". But in addition to this affinity with the poetry of Joan Maragall and Salvat-Papasseit, Vinyoli's work - particularly the earliest poems - is nourished by symbolism and even the romantic tradition. Thus, it is not surprising that the last quotation he used in a poem should be from Hölderlin.

All that lasts
is built by poets.

The reality which is his point of reference can only be fully understood if one recalls that Vinyoli identified closely with use of symbolism in poetry:

Poetry shuns appearances
and makes reality its own.

According to Vinyoli himself, his use of symbolism is the influence of the poet Carles Riba, who introduced him to the work of Rainer Maria Rilke. Though Vinyoli paid homage to the Austrian poet by translating his work, his own poetry gradually moved away from metaphysical reflection towards poetry that was more urban and more closely related to daily life. Vinyoli's early links with Rilke and Riba also explain the fact that there is a certain parallel between his work and the work of poets who strive to express themselves through suggestion, who try to explain the meaning of existence to themselves and others. Although Rilke wrote the following words, they could well describe Joan Vinyoli's position in life: "Basically the only courage asked of us is that we be brave when faced with the strangest, most surprising, most inexplicable things that could happen to us".

His loyalty to romantic and symbolist form and concepts is clearly evident to scholars of Vinyoli. One

writer said that we should thank him for having been faithful to himself and to the Rilkean concept of poetry. Other writers feel that in contemporary Catalan poetry Vinyoli's work is an incomparable example of the poetry of experience phrased in Rilkean terms. We might even add that Vinyoli's romanticism becomes yet more evident when we realise that the "totalizing yet simultaneously existential scope" of his poetry is often rooted in the struggle between desire and reality. He shares with Baudelaire his symbol of the poet as an albatross and in Vinyoli's opinion poetry's power of evocation borders on the ineffable. (This explains why Vinyoli's poetry bears a certain resemblance to the work of Juan Ramón Jiménez and, more especially, St John of the Cross). The following fragment from a poem by Vinyoli is a good example of this.

Sometimes words are like a spring,
speaking the secrets of the world.

These secrets, revealed by the language of poetry, are contemplation, which is almost always of a pessimistic nature, as well as the passage of time and events. Vinyoli had a very high opinion of poetry and the poet's craft and once wrote that "I experience poetry more as an almost religious mystery or a 'spiritual exercise' than as a profession".

If words make a strong enough impact on our minds and manage to endure as Hölderlin believes they would - , then poetry becomes the richest form of song, even a life force. The lines which conclude Joan Vinyoli's complete works of poetry illustrate this clearly:

So much so that the arid
winter which began this poem
has become, while writing, fertile June
joyous, positive, unbounded,
and all the wheat has become the bread of life.

Still, the romantic and symbolist roots of this reflective, experiential verse do not preclude other literary and philosophical sources. Vinyoli is by turns a mystic, an existentialist, a hedonist, an erotic poet...and it is by no means unusual to find allusions to Taoism, Heracliteanism, Stoicism, or Platonism in his work.

As a result, the tone of Joan Vinyoli's poetry is predominantly elegiac, although it occasionally bubbles with enthusiasm and exhilaration. It almost certainly explains the endings of many of his poems, endings which are full of strength (I am not certain whether they could actually be considered cathartic) and usually burdened with disenchantment, regardless of whether they began as reflections or the recounting of an experience. Vinyoli's career was once summed up as a gradual crumbling of experience. The passage of time and the inexorable loss of vitality so poetically chronicled in his last books only served to make the disenchanting, elegiac tone of his work stronger, leading to the conclusion that it is impossible to attain one's desires and testifying once again to the yawning gap between dreams and life.

In terms of subject matter, Vinyoli sometimes chooses to fight against the pessimism and scepticism that is so widespread. Many of his poems are reflections on poetry itself, exalting Life and Words whether separately or in combination; many others are songs of small moments, the joys of the little things in life; still others recount the joys of love, although gnawing away inside these poems are those premonitions of the final solitude, the ultimate lack of communication that lurk within all human life. Whether in exhilaration or yearning, the poetry of Joan Vinyoli flows steadily through those arteries that connect the inner and the outer worlds.

Thus it is not surprising that Vinyoli uses nature as a symbol and often make it a metaphor or

analogy of something that belongs to his most "intimate" gallery of experiences or thoughts, if he mentions the forest of his childhood, it is usually to reflect upon something, most likely something related to the idea of exile (Baudelaire's albatross or, even more obviously, Plato's cave). With *Realitats* (1963), he began moving closer to our daily, shared reality and his settings are almost always urban or suburban. Streets, dark entranceways, inner courtyards, dirty sidewalks, messy rooms, cheap restaurants and nighttime corners of the city serve as a framework or an anchor for poems about accepting life as it is in all its cruelty and misery. Once this existence has been accepted human efforts can be sublimated so that pain is overcome and man becomes capable of a creative act that transcends death itself.

A third, and perhaps even more symbolic, setting in Vinyoli's work and inner world is the sea. Water symbolizes time and the unknown - as in Plato, it carries us "towards the gods" - and can serve as a symbol of Vinyoli's entire career as a poet, during which he throws his poems into the lake of reality time and time again just one throws a pebble into a pond:

always tracing circles
in case after many years, a lifetime, you might feel
- though you may never be certain -
that you have succeeded in drawing an acceptable circle.

The different periods in Vinyoli's poetry

Vinyoli's career as a poet is like a concentric circle: each book is an extension of the last, rippling gently into change. The only exception is his first book (1937 - 1948) and this is explained by the critical situation of Catalan culture at that time. Although there is a definite unity to Vinyoli's work, it can nevertheless be divided into three distinct periods. The first began with *Primer desenllaç* (1937) and *De vida i somni* (1948) and ended with *Les hores retrobades* (1951) and *El callat* (1956), when he reached the peak of the symbolism to which he had been introduced by Rilke and Riba. Having found his own voice, the poet now set out to examine the essential themes of poetry: the meaning of life; man's role in the world; the impossibility of attaining full knowledge and happiness; loneliness, the passage of time; inevitable death...

Realitats (1963) and a good part of *Llibre d'amic* (published in 1977, but written between 1955 and 1959) belong to a middle period when Vinyoli's work was characterised by his acceptance of an outside world which he invariably identified with the presence of an "other" and with the daily grind of city life. He now treated his subject matter and his recurring themes in a more personalized way, although he did not completely eschew the dream-like quality and symbolism of his earlier work.

Tot és ara i res (1970) marks the beginning of a third, more prolific, period, labelled by some authors as his "realist or concrete" period and by others as his "allegorical" period. His work during these years is filled with many meanings and open to a variety of interpretations. His acceptance of reality and the "other" gradually becomes a painful acceptance of senility and death: of man's defeat. Still his lust for life and his love of language frequently shine forth in *Vent d'aran* (1976), *El griu* (1978) and *Cercles* (1979). His last books *Cants d'Abelone* (1983) which is a deeper exploration of themes already examined in *Llibre d'Amic*; *Domini màgic* (1984) and *Passeig d'aniversari* (1984) emphasize the impossibility of either emotional or rational communication with the outside world (an "other" or Nature) and underline the pain of resigning to a loss of vitality and the gradual victory of death.

Joan Vinyoli's poetry is a richly emotive journey through the inner depths of contemporary man. His slightly syncopated rhythms emphasize the emptiness he feels; an emptiness that is clarified and intensified by the use of a series of symbols taken from nature ("night", "the sea", "trees", "wind", "birds"...) all of which are well-known in modern poetry:

Lost in the shadows,
Rooted in the void,
The light of the stars
The quiet of the wind,
set all my leaves to trembling.

Translated by Deborah Bonner