



The poetry of Joan Maragall

by Arthur Terry

'LA VACA CEGA' ('THE BLIND COW')

[...]

But what happens if the landscape is centred on a living creature, human or non-human? This is the case of 'La vaca cega' (The Blind Cow), one of Maragall's best-known poems, but one whose effect is quite hard to describe.

Once again, Maragall shows himself to be a master of syntax. It is obvious how, in the first half of the poem, the movement of the meditation is broken several times by an isolated phrase: 'És cega', 'la vaca és cega', 'ella cauria'. In the second half, on the other hand, this pattern is much more irregular. At one point, there is another short phrase: 'i beu calmosa' but instead of interrupting the movement, this acts as a springboard to the next phrase: 'Beu poc, sens gaire set.' And this is because it is no longer a question of marking the pause between one stage and another, but of pushing the meditation in a new direction.

In his review of the volume which contains this poem, Maragall's friend Soler i Miquel remarked on the 'sentimientos *tácitos*' which are a fundamental feature of its technique. This comes out above all in the sequence of adjectives: 'sola' (twice); 'cega' (twice); 'no amb el *ferm* posat d'altres vegades'; 'l'herba fresca' (this belongs to the world of which the cow is deprived); 'l' *esmolada* pica' (the course of time); 'afrontada'; 'calmosa'; ' *enorme* , l'embanyada testa'; 'un gran gesto *tràgic* '; 'les *mortes* nines'; ' *orfe* de llum'; 'camins *inoblidables* '; 'la *llarga* cua'. Most of these adjectives do not convey any visual sensation; on the other hand, even those which seem merely descriptive, like ' *ferm* posat', can have a moral implication. Such implications, for the most part, are merely suggested; to use Soler i Miquel's phrase, they are tacit, rather than explicit. However, there is one exception to this: the phrase 'amb un gran gesto *tràgic*'. And here one has to recognize that it is the poet, not the animal, who is conscious of the tragic element. In other words, it is the poet who, in the course of interpreting his vision, creates the 'tragedy' (and incidentally the animal's 'resignation'), just as in other poems he comes to personify the inorganic elements of nature. At the same time, one has to admire the tact with which Maragall carries out his interpretation, the way in which what in other poets could lead to all kinds of false pathos is treated with an absolute lack of exaggeration. There is no suggestion that the animal's blindness is anything out of the ordinary, just as there is no attempt to blame the person responsible. In a letter to Soler i Miquel enclosing the poem, Maragall describes it as 'una flor de salut ociosa' —a 'flower of idle health'. What he means, I think, is that the absence of any desire for exaggeration is only possible if one has achieved a position of physical and mental equilibrium. It is this state of health, in the widest possible sense of the word, which ensures the sincerity of his compassion: a restrained compassion which corresponds in a way to the resignation of the animal itself. When he comes to the final vision of the cow as it goes off —'vacil·lant pels camins inoblidables, / brandant llànguidament la llarga cua'— Maragall foregoes any attempt to theorize: the only part of the experience which remains to him is his renewed awareness of the mystery of life. In other words, by ordering his reaction to the spectacle of the animal, he has managed to transmit something of the life-giving force of the sadness which comes from compassion.

'ELOGI DE LA PARAULA' ('IN PRAISE OF THE WORD')

AND 'ELOGI DE LA POESIA ('IN PRAISE OF POETRY')

[...]

The reference to the 'noia amb la veu viva' should remind us of a similar anecdote in one of his two major statements on poetry, the *Elogi de la paraula* (In Praise of the Word), which dates from 1903. (The other is the *Elogi de la poesia* [In Praise of Poetry], completed in 1907.) It would be wrong to think of these two essays as comprising a poetic theory: Maragall's method does not depend on logical argument, but in defining as carefully as he can certain key terms like 'sincerity' and 'people'. (In this he resembles certain nineteenth-century poet-thinkers like Emerson and Carlyle, both of whom he had read.) Though the *Elogi de la poesia*, unlike the earlier essay, is framed in openly Christian terms, —he claims, for instance, that the struggle for perfection in poetry reflects the struggle of divine creation itself— the manner of exposition is essentially the same. Almost everything in these essays, in fact, depends on *tone*, which makes them difficult to summarize. On a logical level, they are easy to fault. Maragall's belief in the value of intuition perhaps goes too far in neglecting the technical side of poetry; his faith in the 'people' as the receptacles of true poetry merely extends a longstanding Romantic illusion; his belief that genuine poetry can only exist in fragments goes against the idea of a long poem and incidentally produces a quite wrongheaded view of a poem like the *Divine Comedy*. However, to insist on such defects is somehow to miss the point: the whole force of the essays is to direct one's attention to the dignity and importance of poetry as an instrument of ethical regeneration. Or as he puts it in the *Elogi de la poesia*: 'Now you see what we can do, for good or ill, in this matter of verse, which seems a frivolous game, and is a matter of life or death for the spirit.'

'CANT ESPIRITUAL' ('SPIRITUAL SONG')

[...]

Two years after the *Elogi de la poesia*, between November 1909 and February 1910, Maragall wrote what was to become his best-known poem, the 'Cant espiritual' (Spiritual Song). Many critics have taken this to be his swansong, his last important statement of his beliefs before his death. However, the evidence suggests otherwise: the play *Nausica*, his last major work in verse, was not completed until August 1910, and several of the essays he wrote in the last months of his life contain statements which are directly related to the poetry. There are two main reasons for taking this wider picture into account in discussing the poem. One is that all Maragall's later works, as he himself recognized, tend to deal with a single theme, roughly the belief that there is no fundamental contrast between the spiritual and natural worlds, that in some way this life and the next contain one another. The other, which I shall come to in a moment, is that there are certain things in the poem itself which are not clearly defined.

Taken as a whole, the 'Cant espiritual' is a poem about personal immortality, more specifically, about the terms in which it is possible to imagine survival after death. Perhaps the first question we should ask is why Maragall wrote it at all; surely his doubts are answered by the doctrine of the Resurrection of the Body, in which he constantly affirmed his belief? One possible answer is that he needed to make true to his imagination something he already accepted as an article of faith. Whatever the truth of this, the poem does not finally affirm any religious or philosophical position, though critics sometimes speak as if it did. What Maragall *does* affirm is his delight in the beauty of nature as perceived by the senses, and his feeling of being rooted in human experience. There is nothing hedonistic about the first part of this: he is not saying 'earth flatters my senses', but 'earth is beautiful to the eyes of the Christian who has already experienced something of the divine peace':

'...si es / mira, amb la pau vostra a dintre de l'ull nostre' (if one looks at it with your peace within our eyes). He is also aware that his senses themselves —which of course he wants to perpetuate— are divine gifts: 'el cos que m'heu donat' (the body you have given me).

What troubles him, on the other hand, is the thought that earthly life, even when its pleasures seem sanctioned by God, is apparently invalidated by death and by the need to believe in a supernatural existence which is totally different from this one.

Later in the poem, Maragall imagines a way of resolving his mental conflict:

“aquesta terra, amb tot lo que s'hi cria
és ma pàtria, Senyor: i ¿no podria
esser també una pàtria celestial?”

(this earth, with all that grows in it, is my homeland, Lord, and could it not also be a heavenly home?)

The justification for this appears in the line: 'Ja ho sé que sou, Senyor, però on sou, qui ho sap?' (I know you *are*, Lord, but where you are, who can tell?). Since created things remind him of God, might it not be that God is in some way present on earth? And in the last part of the poem, Maragall prays that this might be so. If it were, the life of the senses need not be broken by death; death would not be an end, but 'una major naixença' (a greater birth).

This summary, however, leaves out a number of important points. If there were time, I could show how certain details of the poem are a reworking of previous attitudes expressed in the essays and correspondence, especially the idea that there is a constant transaction —a sense of interacting lives— between earth and the afterlife. At the same time, there are important differences of tone, as if the optimism and self-assurance of the earlier writings were now being more severely tested —perhaps, as some critics have suggested, under a growing premonition of death. There is certainly evidence in the poem of a desire to push the philosophical consequences of such ideas to the extreme. In practice, this means that Maragall is concerned with the weighing of alternatives, and it is this which lies behind the one really obscure passage of the poem.

No one seems to have examined the philosophical implications of the third stanza, perhaps because of a certain vagueness of expression which makes it difficult to follow Maragall's thought with any precision. There are, in fact, two associated lines of thought here. The first is contained in the allusion to Goethe's *Faust*: 'Aquell que a cap moment li digué 'Atura't' / sinó al mateix que li dugé la mort, / jo no l'entenc, Senyor...' (He who at no moment said 'Halt' save to that which brought him death, I do not understand him, Lord). (In the play, it is Faust himself who says this.) Here, he seems to be saying that the experiences which give value to life are those which remain in the memory. At the same time, there is a certain ambiguity in Maragall's treatment of memory which is part of his own dilemma at this stage. This is elaborated in the rest of the stanza, which introduces the idea of a universe in which everything is predetermined:

“O és que aquest 'fe etern' és ja la mort?
Mes llavors, la vida, què seria?
¿Fóra només l'ombra del temps que passa,
i la il·lusió del lluny i de l'a prop,
i el compte de lo molt, i el poc, i el massa,
enganyador, perquè ja tot ho és tot?”

(Or is this 'making eternal' already death? But then, what would life be? Would it be only the shadow of passing time, the illusion of the far and the near, would the reckoning of the much and the little

and the too much be deceptive, since already all is all?)

Maragall presents this alternative view of the universe only to reject it in what follows. It might seem at first sight that he was only continuing to play with the symbol of Faust, though there may well be an influence of Spinoza, whom he had been reading in 1908. Unfortunately, there is no detailed evidence of Maragall's reaction to Spinoza. But he cannot have read far in Spinoza without coming across his famous phrase *Deus sive natura* (literally, 'God or nature'), by which he claims that God and Nature are one and the same, and that the universe is composed of a single substance. At one point we read that 'it is not of the nature of reason to consider things as contingent but as necessary', and from this Spinoza deduces that 'it is through the imagination alone that we look upon things as contingent both with reference to the past and the future'. This is surprisingly close to Maragall: to the reason, 'tot ho és tot' (all is all), because for the reason there are no contingencies. Distinctions and differences are only apparent, though to the imagination they may seem real. This, again, is close to the sense of the poem:

"[Fóra la vida] la il·lusió del lluny i de l'a prop,
i el compte de lo molt, i el poc, i el massa,
enganyador, perquè ja tot ho és tot?"

([Would life be] the illusion of the far and near, would the reckoning of the much and the little and the too much be deceptive, since already all is all?)

As often with Maragall, it is difficult to be certain whether there is a genuine influence or not. If what I have suggested is true, it strengthens the impression that he is defending the imagination against the intellect. What is more, it would be interesting to find him *rejecting* Spinoza, since readers who have found the poem pantheistic—a description which Maragall refused to accept—have often assumed that this was *because* of Spinoza.

The more one studies the 'Cant espiritual', the more one realizes that it is only one of several attempts to deal with a common theme. Carles Riba, for example, makes a comparison with 'El Comte Arnau', the last part of which was completed in 1909, arguing that the 'Cant espiritual' is partly an attempt to embody the conflict of the earlier poem in a directly Christian form. And I myself would argue that it bears an interesting, though perhaps less obvious, relation to the other major work of this period, the verse drama *Nausica* .