

Jaume Pont

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by François-Michel Durazzo

We present here a short journey through the poetry of Jaume Pont (Lleida, 1947). This account aims to highlight the absolute continuity and consistency of a poetry without ups and downs whose real importance has, at times, not always been fully understood but which, as time passes, has established itself with real clarity.

Thirty years separate *Límit(s)* (Limit(s)) and *Enlloc* (Nowhere) - the last poem by Jaume Pont, published in 2007. Thirty years during which Pont's first images of post-surrealism have been refined and distilled to express, with exceptional accuracy, the very essence of the poem. The celebration through art of what is at the heart of human life and what arouses the most violent emotions: the prospect of death, love affairs, a mystical experience, the surprise of a sensual experience, the inexhaustible capacity of language to express what is timeless.

In this regard we should mention, for it is extraordinary, his debut poem *Limit(s)* (1976), the first anthology of the later entitled series *Raó d'atzar* (Fate's Reason). This poem clearly shows the demand for a poetic art which subscribes to the modern tradition started by the visionary poet Rimbaud. This voice, which is maintained throughout each passage of the poem, indicates the "urgent causality of the poem" in an "introduction" where the figure of a poet is sketched: a poet who feels "almost pregnant with words", who "gets his hands dirty", and who is drunk on the subject of the poem and drunk with desire for the "prostitute" that is poetry. Here we find the exaltation of a young man who, as a Spanish lecturer at the University of Poitiers in 1974 and therefore far from his native land and the final stages of the Francoist dictatorship, discovered, after several abandoned attempts in Spanish, the possibility of putting his language - Catalan - to literary use. Written in France, *Limit(s)* is an example of these early experiments with the métier of poetic language. These are experiments in which musings based on surrealism or its precursors, such as Apollinaire or other foreign literature (especially in German and English) resonate strongly. With regards to the poet's prosodic choices, we find he distances himself from classical meter with little freedom in the verse form. In principle, Pont has faith in the power of words, which act as the backbone of the poem. Talking about *Limit(s)* in an interview with Miquel Alzueta he claims to have "not tried to bring the words into an obliging relationship, either syntactically or conceptually: [on the contrary, it is a question of] subjecting them to tension between one and another, a tension under which they find themselves compromised." Since then, this tension has been the trademark of Pont's poetry, mostly devoted to the celebration of love: a love which serves as a synonym for death. Poem IV, for example, evokes the act of loving thus: lovers lying on a bed, almost touching, so close there is friction between them, and looking into each other's eyes; its verbal, and also poetic, understanding only reaches its full capacity when the poet unites them both in a calligram which allows us to see their two bodies together. Thus, *Limit(s)* pursues the exploration of passion and love and its mirages and misdemeanours, as shown by allusions to Gilles de Rais, a poem written in homage to Pasolini

and references to Georges Bataille – a great influence on the young Pont. The author's voice is an intense presence in the contemplation of corporeal matter: "*l'ivori consum del teu cos*" ("ivory-consumption of your body"); "*la fallica mà*" ("the phallic hand"); "*l'arc caigut*" ("fallen arch") of bodies struggling until dawn. In this way a series of literary motifs, almost always taking sensuality to the extreme, fill up a decidedly elegiac poetry.

This breakthrough – the search for an eternal moment in an ongoing game that is constantly trying to fix the gaze of Parmenides on the river of Heraclitus – is even more characteristic of the next piece by our poet. *Els vels del eclipsi* (The Veils of the Eclipse) is a book where the feeling of unity from the first to the last poem is of great importance. Aside some reflections on the poetry of Pere Gimferrer, of whom some as yet unpublished verses from 1980 serve as an epigraph, Pont carves out an identity all of his own. Four years after *Limit(s)*, he sought to put into practice – in his own words – "a theoretical approach on the fate of the poet, poetry, and by extension, art in general." By invoking John Donne and Ezra Pound the book allows us to catch a glimpse of the exaltation of meaning and poetic function, beyond the figure of the eclipse and the false appearances of veils. His approach was unified by emulating Pound's words and through burning passion underlined in the epistrophic quote "*m'elevast*". As indicated by the scope of its title, *Els vels de l'eclipsi* is a meditation on the power of the metamorphosis of love. Passion and memories run right through the book, from the arousing *Inici* (Start) until *la Fi* (the End). However, the introspective tone of the dialogue – putting into question the experience, time and intangibility of our lives – introduces decisions which are developed in later books as aphorisms and the continuous distillation of the aesthetics of the fragment. Only in the certainty of the erotic moment, reflected by the familiar voice of the poet, can we glimpse eternity in immanence.

With regards to the images in the preceding poem, this is a change in which we discover ones as surprising as those we found in the first collection: "*l'úter llefiscós de la mare-pare*" ("the mother-father's slimy uterus"); "*esfínters en putrefacció, tumors violacis, / llangardaixos, butllofes de pus a l'ésser*" ("rotting sphincter, violet tumour/lizards, blisters of pus on the being"). Yet these are always rendered coherent through a series of literary connections encompassing authors from both the past (March, Manrique, Aldana, Villon) and present (Lautréamont, Breton, Foix and Gimferrer). The use of traditional forms such as the sonnet or tanka complements a creative standpoint which aims to renew them whilst introducing a refreshing and dual-purpose poetry of bodies in love, still open to connections with Baroque aesthetics. *Els vels de l'eclipsi* is also a reflection on a world of dualities and oppositions that, aspiring to a conciliatory synthesis of opposites, represents an act of faith in the celebratory and redemptive power of the word. From now on the eroticism and sharp discourse of *Limit(s)*, as well as the post surrealist richness of its imagery, will remain attached to the affirmation of a conscious and deliberate metaphysical reality. According to the critic Àlex Broch, *Els vels de l'eclipsi* is "a manifestation of both metaphysical and vitalistic poetry, of research and attempts for knowledge [...], an affirmation of life despite the constant presence of death and the insurmountable."

With the publication of *Jardí bàrbar* (Savage Garden) in 1981, Pont extended his evocation of love and death. They are linked, as is always the case in his work, to physical limits and tangible concepts that render them accessible to us. What counts from this point onwards is the deepening of these life experiences and their profoundness "*Cap moviment for a de nosaltres*" ("No movement outside of us"). The subject imposes its reign, all whilst offering its vitalistic power to the lovers. In this poem love (and with it the most overwhelming limit of all – death) extend both the search for the "ontological limits of human existence" and the exploration of the most extreme border of the word – silence. The discovery of Ungaretti and José Ángel Valente's *Punto Cero* made a significant contribution, breaking the possible solitude of Pont's poetic destiny within a Catalan context. Whilst his voice is stated with absolute singularity, despite affinities with poets such as Antoni Clapés or

Antoni Marí, Pont knows to which poetic tradition he belongs. Coming from post surrealism inspired metaphysics, his voice resonates in Catalonia with the accent of poetry very similar to that found on the other side of the Pyrenees, with poets such as Yves Bonnefoy and Philippe Jaccottet. Nevertheless, Pont's originality (with its distance and union, ascent and descent) makes the 30 poems that make up *Jardí Bàrbar* into an existential journey, that rejects no opacity, whatever the density of the experience in question. The word is used to exercise a function of creative evocation and to become 'otherness' – a key word in Pont. The poet expresses, but above all he creates. He believes, as did the poets of silence, from Du Bouchet to Guillevic, that the world evoked in the poem has an ontological value governed by the law of life and its oscillation between light and shadow, fire and ash and, after all, love as the essence of life and death.

Despite being different to the books that precede it, as it has its roots in the literary tradition of al-Andalus, *Divan* (1982) continues to celebrate love and insist upon merging seemingly irreconcilable opposites. The poem makes the experience of love sing out in a cacophony of voices that extol sensuality and perception based on Epicurean wisdom. Here we are able to appreciate some elements of the erotic experience already seen in *Limit(s)*: water; a kiss; drunkenness. However, this time they are associated with a Mozarabic figure, Zahra, and the celebration of a Catalan region which recognizes that some of its strongest roots are in the literary footprints of al-Andalus, that of inland Catalonia. With *Divan*, Pont tries to bring the poetic image to its maximum visual and emotional intensity, the erotic force of which makes evident the mysterious relationship between the appearance of language and the body of love. The words seem to gain density in their suggestive power: that is, not just in what they say but also, especially, in what they do not say, what they hint at or what they whisper. The voice of *Divan* is indeed one of confidence, of the whispered aside to the beloved, but also, without any doubt, it is the voice of a narrator who assumes a poetic tradition by rereading it and recreating it with the present as a starting point.

The fifth, and final, collection in the series is the one which gives its name, *Raó d'atzar*, to the series. It is a book that seems to echo all previous records of the poet's voice, thus justifying its eponymous function. More than ever, we find sensuality and the power of words, strong images, typical of a mystical quest that has become one of basic elements of Pont's work since his first poem. The epigraph of Joan de la Creu, which, more than a quote, establishes a framework for poetics about the act of creation itself and the relationship between the poet and the word. As in some of the reflections already seen in *Limit(s)*, it maintains an inner voice in search of an authentic understanding of love. As always in Pont's work the word, far from constituting a kind of ontological generator that would support the categories of rational or sensory experience, wants to reveal that which cannot be named, the most indescribable of human experiences and that which, therefore, is outside the boundaries of art. This is emphasised in the Georges Bataille quote which serves as a point of entry to the whole book: *L'essentiel est l'extrême du possible* ("The essential is at the extreme limit of the possible"). In the end, this search seems to be completed with "*Hímnica del somni*" (Hymnic Dream) where the voice has found a state of equilibrium for its opposing elements. Throughout this five-part series, united under the title of *Raó d'Atzar*, the poet's concerns are often manifested in clear opposition to some of the hegemonic poets of Catalonia and Spain at the end of the last century. In particular to those left in the wake of the 1950's generation and writers such as Gabriel Ferrater, the Spanish-language poet Jaime Gil de Biedma and of what have been termed poets of experience.

Some critics read *Vol de cendres* (Flight of Ashes), published in 1996 by Editions 62, as a step backwards in the sense of a renunciation of the prolific and surprising images of his first books, as if in his maturity the poet had abdicated this experimental mood and over the years had, alas, become wiser. The same was also said of Valente, from the same ranks of experienced poets, when *Fragmentos de un libro futuro* was released in 2000, a work that evokes the destructive passage of

time. *Vol de cendres* is a long poem written about the death of Pont's father in which a subtle narrative brings the reader to bear witness to human anguish and to the light going out in the eyes of an expiring body. It is a book about death, of course, but above all *Vol de cendres* is about the irrefutable experience of love, whose memory survives in the poetic word. It is precisely this memory that, time and again along the way, finds an elegiac voice which it makes its own. A symbolic poem, *Núvols* (Clouds) closes a triad of poems which narrates a primordial experience of childhood: one of children who whilst lying on the ground watching clouds, play with their creative powers by giving each one a name. Thus, the imaginary gives a dreamlike form to perception and with it a metaphor for learning about life.

All these elements culminated in the masterpiece that is *Llibre de la frontera* (Book from the Border) (2000), a work in which the aesthetics of translation and the apocryphal recreation of Arabian poets in the Middle Ages are not simply rhetorical figures nor, in a more general sense, do they serve just to build up clichéd aspects of literary history to pad out a sensuality-filled contemporary poetry. Here the poet uses his position as scholar and literary critic to build a gallery of faces and voices that mask the twists and turns of the polymorphic poet. Each of these faces and voices is actually an echo of voices he has previously used: a kind of bridge between original motifs and new images that take the form of an old and unpublished poet. If it were possible to venture an interpretation of this apocryphal anthology, perhaps we would say that the poet himself is distilled into their imaginary faces as a series of literary heteronyms. With this literary strategy the author's voice gets lost amongst the age-old record of the most ancient poetry and the geography of al-Andalus to best highlight the universal character of the language we call poetry. So, far from being rooted in the Catalan, or more widely the Hispanic, tradition, a large part of this sublime work's exceptional value lies in the unique way in which it gets close to the Catalan landscape. Deeply universal, it permeates a pan-european medieval background in which the many connections with poetry and the mysticism of the poets of al-Andalus are often forgotten. It is poetry that takes off not only from the moment the poetry and the poet himself are read, but also takes flight from the intellectual aspect of historian, the fictitious biography, critic and essayist. All of this forms a game of mirrors *mise en abîme* and the last mirror is the reader. One of the greatest achievements of Jaume Pont is to make us, the reader, a participant in the profound experience that led him to this revelation of tradition, poetry and culture.

Translated by Katherine Reynolds