

Maria-Mercè Marçal

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by Fina Llorca

Maria-Mercè Marçal (1952-1998), known primarily as a poet, but also a professor, translator and literary critic, dedicated her work—and a decided feminist militancy in the cultural sphere—to exploring the meaning of the female experience for the world in which she found herself. She was able to warn us of the lack of symbolic representation of this experience, and out of it constructed a powerful voice.

The title of the 1989 collection of her complete poetic works, *Llengua abolida* (Abolished Tongue), alludes to the voice of women, silenced throughout history in the same way as the culture of oppressed classes and the history of stateless peoples. The volume united her first five published books: *Cau de llunes* (Den of Moons); *Bruixa de dol* (Mourning Witch); *Sal oberta* (Open Salt); *Terra de mai* (Neverland), included in *La germana l'estrangera* (Sister, Stranger); and *Desglaç* (Thaw). Not part of the volume was *Raó del cos* (Reason of the Body), which appeared posthumously in 2000, and gathers her final poems. Her premature death at 45 years motivated this volume, though it was never revised by the author. In addition, she wrote a novel that earned multiple awards, *La Passió segons Renée Vivien* (The Passion According to Renée Vivien).

Marçal insisted on the cultural importance of welcoming and attentively deciphering women's words. If anything that hasn't been written down seems not to exist, it is urgent for silenced history to be reestablished. Thus, Marçal looked for and found occasions, often collective, to present, review, and reevaluate the work of her contemporary Catalan female poets. She also dedicated herself to the poetry of female authors from other traditions: Emily Dickinson, Adrienne Rich and, above all, Sylvia Plath offered her models of a great formal rigorousness, a theoretical frame in which to situate her own uncertainties and intuitions, and a potential for subversion that she incorporated into her own work. She was greatly impressed by the strong poetic words of Akhmatova and Tsvetaeva, who did not give up their symbolic daring even as they observed formal guidelines. Renée Vivien fascinated her because of the passionate involvement with literature that they seemed to share, and also because of the beauty and perfection of the lines with which she sang her affirmation of lesbian love.

These female literary references influenced Marçal, even more so because of the translations that she prepared and published. Besides the Russians and Renée Vivien, she translated Marguerite Yourcenar, Colette and the Italian Leonor Fini.

To create her own poetic voice she incorporated her university studies in classics, even as she dedicated herself unwaveringly to the Catalan language tradition, one that she did not hesitate to

recognize was made up almost entirely of masculine voices. She was able to appropriate lines by male Catalan voices and answer them in her own work, in her own words, and from her own perspective. She took lines from Rosalía de Castro, a foundational figure in Galician poetry, which she used as a point of departure for several poems. Lorca is, especially in her first poetic period, the only clear and explicit reference in the Spanish language.

In Marçal's writing we continually find female figures of other artistic fields aside from the literary, mentioned by first and last names, as in the dedications and citations that are scattered around her work: besides the writers, we find references to artists from Frida Kahlo to Meret Oppenheim, and the actress Anna Lizaran.

As Maria Àngels Anglada wrote, Marçal is able to express her imagination with a great command of the craft. She masterfully works this craft with sonnets and Sapphic verse, songs and sestinas, and with stanzas of eastern origin, such as the tanka or the haiku, which had already captivated other Catalan authors before her.

To construct her own symbolism, from the first this poet and researcher of words draws from the wells of her experience of an original natural world where each thing takes on meaning, a landscape made of earth and water, trees and grasses, fruits, flowers and animals. In popular culture she found a safe and fertile space to put down roots. She develops the symbolic potential of the four primordial elements, of the sea as a space of voyage and return, and dedicates herself to other undervalued languages, such as that of astrology or tarot cards. She often turns to mythology in order to gather keys to understanding the place of women in history and culture. She does the same with sacred texts, oriented by the reading of thinkers on religion, from the medieval mystics to Simone Weil or the contemporary Luisa Muraro. All of these elements, and her reflection on texts by major figures of the twentieth century, such as Luce Irigaray or Maurice Blanchot, novelists such as Djuna Barnes, Virginia Woolf or the Austrian Ingeborg Bachmann, and various feminist thinkers, form a wide-ranging cultural grounding that, interacting with her own life, crystallizes in her poetic work, and in her one rich, complex novel.

In her poetry she constructs not only "the autobiography of her soul," but also a feminine experience shared with primordial experiences: in *Bruixa de dol*, love and solitude, one's very identity, enjoyment and pain, relationships between women; in *Terra de mai*, homosexual love; in *Sal oberta*, maternity; all of this experienced and poetized in first person. In *Desglaç* she develops the idea of filiation, the relationship with the father, both symbolic and real, and the pain of his disappearance; and in *Raó del cos*, the relationship with the mother, and her own death and sickness. One always finds the strand of the search for meaning difficult and contradictory, going beyond clichés and the already familiar.

Elsa Morante wrote that great works of poetry—understanding poetry as the best of literary creation—are still too modern for their meaning to be fully explained to contemporaries. This may occur in Marçal's case, especially for the work of her poetic maturity, which is found in her last two books. The new generations of poets and readers, as Morante suggested, are already incorporating and reassigning the meaning of Marçal's innovative aesthetic and intellectual mastery.

Translated by Robin Vogelzang