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JOURNAL OF CATALAN INTELLECTUAL HISTORY,
Issues 9&10, 2015 | Print ISSN 2014-1572 / Online ISSN 2014-1564
P. 127-129
<http://revistes.iec.cat/index.php/JOCIH>

Xavier Serra: *La filosofia en la cultura catalana* [Philosophy in Catalan Culture] Afers, Catarroja, 2013, 210 pp.

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In his essays on the new philosophical historiography taking shape in Catalonia, Xavier Serra sets himself apart from, fixes boundaries to, defines, dismantles, inspects and analyzes the recesses of the history of Catalan philosophy, from the more or less prominent thinkers to the relatively minor ones. More than inspect it, he exhumes and dissects this philosophy, and strips it to the bone; with the eyes of an entomologist he peers into the darkest corners. He even scrutinizes the work of the most undistinguished of academic philosophers, or the translations undertaken by Cambó's Bernat Metge Foundation in order to analyze the imprint they have left to this day and to show the effects of the ravages of the Civil War, and the ensuing exile and the Francoist repression which sought to eradicate the whole of Catalan culture. "They were many things that suffered destruction with the arrival of Franco," Serra notes.

In the preface he begins by saying: "Contemporary Catalan philosophy – and I suppose the reader agrees with me on this – has been undistinguished and minor in character, and has had a very weak speculative force. It is a philosophy, when all is said and done, of imitators and disseminators, working, furthermore, in an environment dominated by mistrust and arthritic survivals." As Nietzsche said, thinking is mostly a biological matter, of the guts, the body; one often thinks, or always thinks, with the blood and liver, while attempting to disguise it as "civility." However, Xavier Serra, rather than playing down and lessening the impact of his strong assertion about the weakness of philosophy in Catalan culture – of its undistinguished and minor status – reaffirms it with "the exceptions to the rule" (which they are not): "Someone such as d'Ors, or Fuster, or Pujols, is unclassifiable and they cannot even be considered as 'philosophers', as they do not conform to the rules and routines of the "guild of practitioners'." Serra notes that most of the specialists in the field have limited themselves, sooner or later, to following in the footsteps of the currents and schools that emerged in the British Isles or the United States, in metropolitan

France, and in Germany and Austria before 1939. Following Fuster, even imitating his “vitality”, he notes that “language is a decisive factor when it comes to explaining this geographical exclusivity. Once Latin had been put aside as an instrument of intellectual communication, certain other languages – English, French, German – took on plethorical possibilities for sustaining culture (...). The [philosophical] disquisitions of the last few centuries have been in these languages. And it is not always an easy or straightforward matter to make them available in other languages.”

To translate these writings from French, English or German into Catalan ought not to be such an arduous task were it not for other, more deep-rooted factors, which have helped to undermine and ruin the possibilities for our literature and philosophy. As Serra puts it, “the other causes of this minor status are to be found in political or religious conditioning, or the vicissitudes of academic organization and of the policies of publishers.”

This being the basis, the excellent thinkers are given the same attention as the shoddy, and the positive aspects have the same weight as the negative aspects. Obviously, the image that results in the case of these subsidiary cultures does not fit into the scheme of “universal history.” And it is exempt from the “viscosity of panegyrics.”

There is a diagnosis in the chapter entitled “Opening or closing borders” about the intellectual folly which prevailed in the Valencian Country in the nineteenth century (the Principate was not immune to this either). An intellectual folly which was “very profound, in fact extremely profound, and impossible to dispel. It was a folly that pervaded all the institutions of the country (...). For Fillol, a professor of “General Literature and Spanish Literature”, the “native language” was an affliction and rotten from its inception”. In his “Notes per a una rectificació” (“Notes for a Rectification”) and “La filosofia al País Valencià entre el 1919 i el 1939”, (“Philosophy in the Valencian Country between 1919 and 1939”), among other things, Serra tells of the failed championing of humanism by Joan Lluís Vives in the postwar period. And there are also “La filosofia catalana durant la II República i les primeres dècades del franquisme”, (“Catalan Philosophy during the Second Republic and the First Decades of the Franco Regime”), “Les traduccions de filosofia en català (1900-1960)” (“Translations of Philosophy into Catalan (1900-1960)”) (“Joan Crexells, Carles Cardó, Jordi Arquer), and “Les traduccions d’assaig en l’edició catalana contemporània” (“Translation of the Essay in Contemporary Catalan Publications”) (Jordi Solé Turà, Miquel Adrover, Joan Francesc Mira, Josep Palàcios i Joan Fuster, Josep Lluís Blasco, Joan Leita, Gustau Muñoz, Manuel Carbonell, etc.). Serra also indicates the origin of these writings and provides an extensive bibliography of Catalan philosophy.

One possible conclusion as regards translations, which is worth seeing against the background of the political arena that was “opened up” during the so-called “transition”, is that “with the statutes of autonomy of the Balearic Islands, Catalonia, and the Valencian Country, a possibility emerged – one insufficient in itself, but real nevertheless – that had been blocked off many years before, that of education: universities, colleges, schools of all kinds. It was necessary to respond to new needs, this time strictly educational ones. Speaking of “cultural normality” “would be excessive and inappropriate. The “normality” which we enjoy – as much as we do enjoy it – turns out to be terribly abnormal and precarious. And, for that reason, it was necessary to be ever-vigilant in any way.” During the dictatorship, books in Catalan had been banned, in many ambits the language had been prohibited, translations were prohibited, and when the publication of some little book or other was allowed, it had to be a book of religious devotions or something localised and folkloric. In this way it was made clear that our language was useful only as a local peculiarity for the aggrandisement of the “whole”, which was the Spanish motherland, Castilian in character. In the state, only the Castilian nation, language and culture had the right to exist and be universally recognized. As is happening right now in the Valencian Country, in the Western Fringe (the Catalan-speaking border area administratively in Aragon), and the Balearic Islands (and there attempts to bring this about in the Principate too), the process of destruction continues in order to complete the work only half done by the former dictatorship.

Serra’s book highlights the fact that contemporary Catalan philosophy has had “weak speculative force”: “at the end of the twentieth century, therefore, Catalan literature still showed a clear deficiency in the field of the essay. And the lack of translations was just one aspect of the problem. Too often Catalan authors still preferred to publish in Spanish, seeking an illusory wider readership.” And this is how Serra concludes his text, and in my opinion, after the analysis, the exhumation, the diagnosis and the exploration, the foundations are put in place to construct a philosophy in keeping with the times, a philosophy which, as well as being devoted to reproducing the embalmed museum pieces of history, connects with present-day philosophical currents and strives not only to understand the world but also to transform it, analyzing the problems of current-day totalitarianisms, of feminism, of environmentalism, of pacifism, of the movements of stateless nations, of alternative social movements for social change. One concrete action for a philosophical normalization in Catalonia, to my mind, would be to translate Ferrater Mora’s *Dictionary of Philosophy* into Catalan. As if we were a normal country, made up of free women and men able to study and live fully in Catalan (for example, the cinema, the law-courts, legal documents, philosophy classes, nuclear physics, telecommunications ...), as if we were living in a democracy and had our own structure as a state.

