

The power of the word: manifestations of power in poetry, Spain, 1936.

An analysis of the symbiotic relationship of power and language in the poetry of three male poets writing in Spain in the year 1936: José María Castroviejo, “A vosotros, obreros rojos”; John Cornford, “A Letter from Aragon”; J.V.Foix, “A LA ENTRADA D’UNA ESTACIÓ SUBTERRÀNIA...”. Poems printed below the article.

Nineteen thirty-six was a key date in Spain, when governments were counted in months rather than years. It was the year of Generals Mola and Franco’s *alzamiento* [uprising] against Spain’s albeit shaky yet democratically elected Republican government, leading to a three-year Civil War and thirty-six years of repressive dictatorship. It was a year that not only brought people from the same town and even family into bloody conflict with each other, but also opposed many diverse nationalities. In analysing the symbiotic relationship of power and language in the poetry of three male poets writing in Spain during this year—the fascist, José María Castroviejo, English member of the International Brigade, John Cornford, and Catalan civilian, J. V. Foix—I will examine their contrasting cultures, linguistic groups and ideological beliefs. All three are writing about the same conflict in the same year, and all overtly or discreetly participating in a masculine dialectic of power through language. The poems are originally written in three different languages, two of which can be described as languages of empire while the third occupied a more ambivalent position at the time.

While acknowledging the apparent inability of literature to wield power in any practical sense, certainly in the case of liberal societies, Michael Hanne has noted that within authoritarian states, “[l]iterature is *required*, by a combination of censorship and patronage, to contribute to the maintenance of power as constituted at the time” [Hanne, 1996, 19]. A similar situation exists in the case of societies either at war or facing the threat of war or destabilisation, but the methods used to ensure that literature remains in this subservient role are often unarticulated, issued more in the form of *patriotic* coercion than by any clear edict or ruling. Nevertheless, the existence of propaganda ministries in wartime governments is proof that ideological strategies can be as consciously deliberated as military ones. This is because generally, in a conflict situation, what is being fought for is as much the imposition of an ideology or set of prevailing beliefs regarding the history as much as any economic or material gains. In fact, these trophies are safeguarded not by arms but through ideological hegemony. In a stable society, the relatively free flow of ideas within certain constraints does not threaten the established power structure or economic wellbeing of society’s status quo. This explains, for example, why censorship under the Franco regime became progressively more relaxed over time, even allowing publishing initiatives in previously prohibited languages such as Catalan to go ahead within ten years of the dictatorship being imposed. Lyotard’s concept of “metanarrative” describes “certain overarching sets of religious, historical and political assumptions structured in narrative terms” [ibid, 12]. Even if, as Louis O. Mink

states, “histories are full of things that are not so, just as fiction is full of things that are so” [in Hanne, 1996, 34], the victor of such a clash of metanarratives wins the right to impose their own version of *objective truth*, which will inevitably be tied to the victorious group’s economic wellbeing. Such *metanarratives* or ideological mythologies, even if only expressed at a subconscious level, inform the conflicting world views of “the two Spains”. This ideological conflict is one of the causes leading to open war in nineteen thirty-six.

The reason that nationalist Spain harked back to a pre-Renaissance Romantic mythology, that of the Catholic monarchs, is inextricably linked to the nationalist model for society and its distribution of wealth. Foucault’s work on the individual focussed on “the effect of power that governs individualisation” [Bouchard et al., 1977, 138], which is a concept that can be directly applied to the ideological conflict consuming 1930s Spain. Burckhardt’s original (1860) formulation regarding the birth of Renaissance individualism is pertinent:

“Man [sic] was conscious of himself only as a member of a race, people, party, family or corporation—only through some general category. In Italy this veil first melted into air; an *objective* treatment and consideration of the state and of all the things of this world became possible. The *subjective* side at the same time asserted itself with corresponding emphasis; man [sic] became a spiritual *individual*, and recognised himself as such.” [Burckhardt, 1990 (1860), 98]

These words have been fiercely debated since—not least the circumstance that *woman* would have to wait virtually half a millennium longer to tear off a similar emancipatory veil. Yet this “discovery of the individual” remains valid, according to John Martin, in terms of Greenblatt’s concept of “Renaissance self-fashioning”, where the individual becomes “a site onto which broader institutional and political forces are inscribed”. It is possible to view the Spanish conflict in such terms. As a leading Falangist, García Serrano, declared, “We shall create a new mythology, which this time will be full-bloodedly romantic,” [in Labanyi, 1989, 36]. The fascist project was to resurrect a pre-Renaissance golden age that mirrored the epoch of Ferdinand and Isabela, the Catholic monarchs. The reason for harking back to an idealised Medieval Era was to attempt to prefigure and hopefully subvert the cult of the individual that supposedly began with the Renaissance. Fascist ideology required individuals to meld themselves into a single corporate identity, the *Falange*, or corps. Thinking and decisions occurred in a top-down direction, as opposed to the bottom-up, grass-roots nature of Republican ideals. Group identity on the nationalist side was exalted over any individualism, and solely the movement’s leaders, primarily Primo de Rivera and Franco, were raised to an almost Godlike status, only inferior to Christ and the Virgin Mary.

This ideological position can be seen in “A vosotros, obreros rojos”. The poem is unashamedly rhetorical. The nationalists’ happiness “ha brotado” in the workers’ blood. It has sprouted the way a shoot sprouts or a flower opens, blood oozes or a spring gushes. The image is intentionally graphic, poetically distracting from the ugly reality of war. Castroviejo speaks directly to his enemies. The “red workers” are addressed as if they were pack beasts, who have been utilised for a specific purpose and can now be discarded, as if part of their servile function were precisely to fight against the nationalist forces in order to hone the nationalist bayonets. The collectives mentioned—“you, red workers”, “thousand-times-stiff senilities” and “conservatives”—are all conveniently impersonal groups. Furthermore, he speaks from well

within the shelter of his own group. No individuals are mentioned, just “we, the youth of Spain”, a shining poetic image that assumes that all Spanish youth are nationalist. It is from within this safety in numbers that he can threaten death to an equally impersonal enemy. We can be sure that Castroviejo, literary editor of the ultra-conservative magazine *El pueblo gallego* and poet, never picked up a rifle or killed anyone before writing this poem. It is worth comparing these same attributes in another, equally instrumental, yet quite different poem, “A Letter from Aragon”.

John Cornford’s death on a battlefield in Spain at the age of twenty-one informs almost any reading of his work. It is natural to attempt to reconcile the poet’s short life with his work. The poem’s uncomfortable directness comes partly from the knowledge that the writer is (or at least appears to be) retelling events he has actually witnessed. As readers, we feel included in a documentary and it is because of this supposed authenticity that we authorise him to deliver his clearly instrumental message in its stark final lines. The language of the poem is unpretentious and bare, stripped of any pomp, like Cornford’s intent, as real as his reality there, to fight rather than merely talk or write—as was the case with other, more famous poets, Auden included. “Cornford’s allegiance to what he called ‘the dialectic’s point of change’ [Danson Brown, 2005, 190] (by which I interpret that he means his avowed commitment to communist ideals as a member of the Communist Party) is reflected clearly though still less blaringly instrumental—or emptily rhetorical—than Castroviejo’s. By putting the highly instrumental lines of the final stanza into the anarchist’s mouth, Cornford avoids exposing his propagandistic intent too self-consciously. The poem conveys the unromantic, day-to-day plainness, or shabbiness, of life in the trenches. It is a far cry from Castroviejo’s opaque “línea de combate” which suggests a storybook valour, revealing none of the muck and ugly fear of war. Even the ritual funeral volley fired over the coffin is “ragged”. The words are as bare as the coffin boards. Sentences stick out untidily like Ruiz’s big feet. The language is almost ugly, only the infrequent repetition of “This is a quiet sector of a quiet front” to bind it into any cohesive structure. Even the slightly annoying repetition of “ragged” and “grave” in the final two lines of the first stanza seem only to mirror the fact that “You could tell from our listlessness, no one much missed him.”

Cornford includes characters who are not solely defined by their collective, although two collectives, “they”, the nationalists, are solely represented as the ones who shell us, and “women”, only as fearful, screaming beings. He makes no attempt to humanise either. “We”, the republican forces, appear to have no unity, but are a “ragged” collection of individuals: one, Ruiz, who is dead and smells; others who unceremoniously “wrapped handkerchiefs around their faces” at a funeral; and a couple, “an Anarchist worker” and “A wounded militiaman” who play bit character roles. These are all imperfect characters yet strongly individual, and the poem consequently strikes much closer to the heart, in spite of its instrumental nature, than Castroviejo’s pompous rhetoric. The important difference between each poet’s perspective is the way they reflect society through the filter of their ideology: Castroviejo views this world at war in terms of corporate bodies while Cornford depicts a plurality of separate individuals marked by the conflict.

The two poets’ attitude to death is also vastly different. Foucault touches on an inevitable weakness in fascist ideology that can be seen in Castroviejo’s work: in talking of the relationship between writing and death, Foucault suggests that “this relationship inverts the age-old conception of Greek narrative or epic, which was designed to guarantee the immortality of a hero. The hero accepted an early death because his life, consecrated and magnified by death, passed into immortality” [Foucault, in Bouchard et al., 1977, 139]. Yet by naming the *obreros rojos*, and further

claiming (even ironically) that his newly awakened Spain is founded on their blood, Castroviejo is awarding them a place in history, supposedly the inverse of what he aims for. Foucault describes how continuing the story, as Scheherazade in the *Arabian Nights* extends her tale night after night, is a means of avoiding death. To fall silent is to die. This truth was brought home to the defeated Republicans in post-war Spain, whose challenge was to keep their stories alive, not to allow their version of history to die under Franco's censorship. Castroviejo faces the inverse problem of creating a victorious mythology: the so-called evil to be overcome must be described in large and fearsome enough terms for the eventually victorious heroes to be seen in a brave light yet not delineated so clearly as to award the evil a place in history.

In contrast to these two poets, J.V. Foix appears to shy away from any overt ideological stance. In the 20s and 30s, working as the foreign literary critic for *La Publicitat*, a biweekly Catalan newspaper at the opposite end of the spectrum to Castroviejo's *El pueblo gallego*, Foix had established himself as an avant-garde surrealist. Therefore, somewhat in the public sphere, he was conversant or at least aware of the political currents of the times, but always refused to take part in contemporary political debates. Nevertheless, Patricia Boehne sees his determined *Catalanisme* as containing a definite *political* stance in the broader sense of the word:

Exile was not an option for Foix. He was a Catalan, he continued to live in Barcelona, and he continued to be a Catalan, writing only in Catalan. His Civil War poems, scant as they are, are therefore the poems of one who remains behind the lines, one who observes, powerless. In their narrative quality they are similar to documentary photographs of that troubled time. [Boehne, in *Catalan Review*, June 1986, 28]

The poem studied here, signed September, 1936, can be seen to reflect the events of the preceding months. In Foix's home city of Barcelona, the *Generalitat* (Government of Catalonia)—dominated by the ERC (*Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya*, Republican Left of Catalonia)—had been struggling to control the union-based militias of the anarchist CNT-FAI and to a lesser extent, the socialist UGT, perceiving them as increasingly destabilising the economy through property expropriations, the so-called appropriation of bourgeois capital (bank robberies) and a “revolutionary tax” on large companies. Yet on 19 July, when Franco's *alzamiento* spread to the peninsula, it was the CNT-FAI militias and supporters who were key to defeating the fascist uprising in Barcelona. Therefore, on 21 July, after two days of fighting and an uneasy peace, Catalan president Companys offered to share power with the anarchists until such time as the then four-day-old war had been won in Spain.

Barely two months after these events, with open war a fact, Foix's poem appears to capture, as Boehne has written: “the ambience of vacationers travelling back to their reality from their beach holidays” [*Catalan Review*, June 1986, 36]. Yet this surreal, summer's-end atmosphere quickly transmogrifies into a nightmarish vision: “a departure from the Catalan dream, the halcyon days of the *Generalitat*, the joyous, heady days of *La Publicitat* and all they represented” [ibid]. If Foix refused to enter politics overtly, remaining slightly distant from the Republican cause, his determination to continue to write in Catalan, even at the expense of going unpublished for ten years, nevertheless had political connotations. The light-filled seaside trains make a melancholic transformation into the ominous image of the “torn flags wav[ing] beyond the wall”, a clear symbol of the war that encroaches on their lives. Boehne has identified Marta, a symbol for Catalonia, as representing the Catalan exile that began even at the war's start.

In this poem, the narrator starts from the lyrical “I” in contemplation of the scene, and is a silent witness “TIED HAND AND FOOT” as the scene changes. Shadowy groups are present, such as the “BEARDED CUSTOMS OFFICIALS” who seem to represent a sinister forewarning of Franco’s Spain—though Foix could hardly have predicted this. The narrator’s attention is more centrally focussed on Marta and her journey, “sleeping, blind of light and mind, / Dressed as a child, without voice or luggage”. He watches helplessly as she takes with her all the features of his country he holds dear, the “mountains and rivers, and starry pools / And icy, shaded springs in deep valises”. So the poem is intensely personal yet their relationship seems to navigate the scenery of war without specifically mentioning it. This is Foix’s protest—a shout aimed at both Republicans and Nationalists—not to destroy peacetime’s riches. However, through the “dim sentinel” he sees on “the mountain range in flames” conveying a futile warning, it is a protest that he knows has come too late. The flags of war close the poem.

So Foix appears to appoint himself as a civilian sentinel against the ravages of war. He is the only real pacifist among the three poets. Castroviejo is declaredly fascist. Cornford has come to Spain to fight. His commitment to fight for the Communist ideal makes him, even at twenty-one, a proponent of the killing, ugliness and destruction he claims to be denouncing in “A Letter from Aragon”. With his English Public school education, he functions (no doubt unwillingly) as both an innate mouthpiece for and presence of British hegemony throughout the British empire and other parts of the world. It is decidedly bourgeois money that has paid for his education and given him the skills in literature that let him bark his cause. It is also unarguably his parents’ middle class fortune that have paid for his leisure to travel to Spain and participate in this fight for liberty. The British working classes remain slaving in factories back in ol’ Blighty as the “Anarchist worker” of this poem is no doubt aware when he says: “Tell the workers of England...”

All three poets are acting within the *metanarrative* that can be written around their culture, their history and especially their language. In this sense, both Castroviejo and Cornford act from within certain subconscious “overarching sets of religious, historical and political assumptions”. These stem from the imperial histories that have formed them. Castroviejo is regurgitating fascist, romantic ideology based on belief in a Mediaeval utopia in which individual expression must be subjugated to the corporate identity under the rule of a single leader. His bland dehumanising of the “Other” and demarcation of them into subject groups that serve the purposes of “us” reflects the mentality of empire that existed in Spain especially in the seventeenth century in relation to their colonies in the Americas and Africa and perfectly fit with Franco’s objectives. Indeed, the group of *Africanista* generals, Franco, Mola and others, who perpetrated the revolt used the overt vocabulary of African colonial conquest to describe their attempted coup of Spain.

In a similar though less obvious way, Cornford effortlessly assumes a bellicose strategy when embarking on his fight against fascism. His casual attitude towards death, though used as a rhetorical device, nevertheless belies an ease and familiarity with a military approach that is an element in the British imperial attitude: to mount a campaign and *go* to war in another country, with no ill conscience at stretching out one’s influence beyond one’s own borders. The atmosphere of “A Letter from Aragon” could almost be supplanted into a Rudyard Kipling tale of British versus Boers without losing much in the telling.

J.V. Foix, while depicting the war that is occurring in his *own* country, tellingly resists any temptation to write a martial epic or deal with overt military themes. Yet the nightmare horror he manages to evoke in this dreamlike poem reaches far deeper into the reader’s psyche than either

of the other two poets. Most importantly, his is a stoutly *civilian* perspective. He approaches the conflict from the “I” point of view and remains firmly intimate in his treatment, thereby enabling greater reader identification with his subject. This is the result of particular cultural circumstances directly linked to Catalonia’s social and political past: Catalan society has had too much experience of being the exploited, the prohibited and the defeated to engage readily in campaign rhetoric. It is not that writers from within an *imperial* worldview cannot write in an intimate way, as myriad poets from Sappho to Auden testify, but that writers from within the cultural *other* may have a more immediate empathy towards certain subjects that caution them to be wary of engagement in too direct or superficial a manner. Nevertheless, it would be absolutely foolhardy to extrapolate a general rule from the study of just three poems by three separate writers.

Therefore, what is evident in these three poems is that each writer is exploring their creativity within a certain *metanarrative* or “overarching set of religious, historical and political assumptions” that predisposes their choice of subject matter and the treatment they give it. From the nationalist viewpoint, this tends to view the world in terms of corporate bodies and an “us” and “other” mentality that dehumanises the other and places it at “our” service. Though the British poet’s metanarrative also reflects this “us” and “other” perspective that is linked to Britain’s status as an imperial culture, Cornford’s personal politics predispose him to view the world in a more fragmented fashion. While accepting the overarching parameters of identity established by “us” and “them”, he sees individual characters and plurality where Castroviejo only sees dehumanised groups. In Foix’s case, we cannot say this. His work is consistently *intimista*, operating in a lyrical mode and I would suggest that his condition as a Catalan—often the historical *other*—makes him more wary of classifying the world into such groupings. In this way, these three writers, without claiming to represent a more universal truth or tendency, engage in this dialectic of power through language, often saying as much through the subjects they avoid dealing with as the ideology they consciously weave into their work.

Poems discussed:

A vosotros, obreros rojos

A vosotros, obreros rojos, nosotros, las juventudes
de España, hablamos:

Nuestra alegría ha brotado como una flor en vuestra
sangre.

Sin vuestra fuerza brutal y estimulante como un
chorro no habiéramos podido despertar el alma muerta de España.

¡Por vosotros estamos en línea de combate!

Preferiríamos romper todo de un golpe,
antes que entregarlo en las manos pegajosas de las
senilidades mil veces yertas.

Nosotros os combatimos fieramente...

Por eso precisamente os amamos.

La sangre llama a la sangre
y un día certero como una aguja, marcharemos
implacablemente unidos
por un sendero que golpeará el estremecimiento
de nuestras miradas.

Por eso los conservadores nos odian...

¡Dichosa España fundada una vez más
sobre la sangre de todos sus hijos!

A vosotros, obreros rojos, nosotros, las juventudes
de España, hablamos.

JOSÉ MARÍA CASTROVIEJO, 1936

To You, Red Workers

To you, red workers, we, the youth
of Spain, speak:
Our happiness has sprouted like a flower in your
blood.
Without your force, as brutal and invigorating as a
gush, we could not have awakened Spain's dead soul.
For you, we are in the combat line!
We would rather break it all in a single blow,
than deliver it into the sticky hands of
thousand-times-stiff senilities.
We will fight you fiercely...
That is precisely why we love you.
Blood hails blood
and on a day as precise as a dart, we will march
implacably united
along a path that will strike any shudder
from our gaze.
That is why the conservatives hate us...
Blessed Spain founded once more
on the blood of all her sons!
To you, red workers, we, the youth
of Spain, speak.

[Translation: Kevin Booth]

A Letter from Aragon

This is a quiet sector of a quiet front.
We buried Ruiz in a new pine coffin,
But the shroud was too small and his washed feet stuck out.
The stink of his corpse came through the clean pine boards
And some of the bearers wrapped handkerchiefs round their faces.
Death was not dignified.
We hacked a ragged grave in the unfriendly earth
And fired a ragged volley over the grave.
You could tell from our listlessness, no one much missed him.
This is a quiet sector of a quiet front.
There is no poison gas and no H.E.

But when they shelled the other end of the village
And the streets were choked with dust

Women came screaming out of the crumbling houses,
Clutched under one arm the naked rump of an infant.
I thought: how ugly fear is.

This is a quiet sector of a quiet front.
Our nerves are steady; we all sleep soundly.

In the clean hospital bed my eyes were so heavy
Sleep easily blotted out one ugly picture,
A wounded militiaman moaning on a stretcher,
Now out of danger, but still crying for water,
Strong against death, but unprepared for such pain.

This on a quiet front.

But when I shook hands to leave, an Anarchist worker
Said: 'Tell the workers of England
This was a war not of our own making,
We did not seek it.
But if ever the Fascists again rule Barcelona
It will be as a heap of ruins with us workers beneath it.'

JOHN CORNFORD, 1936

Reproduced from: Robin Skelton (ed.) *Poetry of the Thirties*, Penguin Books Ltd, London, [1964] 2000. pp. 151-2.

A LA ENTRADA D'UNA ESTACIÓ SUBTERRÀNIA, LLIGAT DE MANS I
PEUS PER DUANERS BARBOSOS, VAIG VEURE COM LA MARTA SE
N'ANAVA EN UN TREN FRONTERER. LI VOLIA SOMRIURE, PERÒ UN
MILICIÀ POLICÈFAL SE'M VA ENDUR AMB ELS SEUS, I VA CALAR FOC
AL BOSC

Escales de cristall a l'andana solar
On passen trens de llum cap a platges obertes
Entre murs transparents i coralls sarmentosos
I ocelles d'ull clarós en brogiment de brancs.

¿Ets tu, blanca en el blanc d'aquesta alba insular,
—Líquid l'esguard, atenta a músiques innates—
Que escrius adéus humits a la forest dels vidres,
Amb semença de nit per a un somni desclòs?

Te'n vas enllà del goig, al ribatge encantat
Amb gegants embriacs a l'espluga gatosa
I falcons dissecats a les roques senyades,
A un mar petjat pels déus en els nocturns furtius.

No puc heure't, dorment, orb de llum i ment,
Vestit com un infant, sense veu ni bagatge,

Entre tràmechs guardat per hostalers biformes;
 Els passaports són vells i sangosos els cors.
 T'emportes puigs i rius, els estanys estel·lars
 I fonts en bacs gelius en profundes valises;
 Un guaita tenebrós, des del serrat en flames,
 Em crida amb noms estranys i em fa que no amb les mans.
 Onegen foramur banderes esquinçades.

J.V. FOIX, Setembre de 1936

AT THE ENTRANCE TO A SUBURBAN STATION, TIED HAND AND
 FOOT BY BEARDED CUSTOMS OFFICIALS, I SAW THAT MARTA WAS
 LEAVING ON A TRAIN FOR THE FRONTIER. I WANTED TO SMILE AT
 HER, BUT A POLICE MILITIAMAN TOOK ME AWAY WITH HIS GROUP,
 AND SET FIRE TO THE FOREST.

Crystal stairs to a solar platform
 Where trains of light pass by open beaches
 Between transparent walls and twining corals
 And birds with light eyes in murmuring branches.

Is it you, white in the white of this island dawn,
 —Your gaze liquid, attuned to innate melodies—
 Who writes moist farewells on the forest of windows
 With seeds of night for a disclosed dream?

You are going beyond joy, to the enchanted shore
 With drunken giants to thorny cave
 And desiccated falcons on marked rocks,
 To a sea trod by the gods on furtive nights.

I cannot grasp you, sleeping, blind of light and mind,
 Dressed as a child, without voice or luggage,
 Between halberds, guarded by biform innkeepers.
 The passports are old and hearts are bloody.

You are taking mountain and rivers, and starry ponds
 And icy, shaded springs in deep valises
 A dim sentinel, from the mountain range in flames,
 Shouts to me with strange names and motions “no” with his hands.

Torn flags wave beyond the wall.

[Translation: Patricia Boehne]

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