

## ARTÍCULOS RESEÑA

### THE HOME OF THE GAZE: POETIC IMAGERY AND INFLUENCE IN PERE GIMFERRER'S, *NOCHE EN EL RITZ*

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Although Pere Gimferrer's anthology, *Noche en el Ritz*<sup>1</sup>, has about twenty pages of poems as compared to a hundred and forty-five of prose, it is most tempting to discuss this as a collection of poetry, for Gimferrer is first, last, and always a poet. When he says of Fritz Lang, «se le murió un ojo bajo la caligrafía candente del fuego en las trincheras» or later that the director's remaining eye, «enciende el monóculo como una brasa viva» (67), it is impossible not to consider the portrait a sort of prose poem. In fact, these scattered gems are not unlike those luminous pieces of Josep Vicenç Foix's, steeped in Ovid, that find classic roots to surrealism. Like Foix in «Gertrudis» or «Del 'Diari 1918'», Gimferrer delights in showing us how he can transform one object into another. In another passage, he tells us that the day he discovered Rafael Alberti, there was «una gargantilla de luz en las copas de los árboles, bajo el aguacero solemne» (99). No one with sense would want to try to pretend that this is less of a poem than Ezra Pound's pithy haiku-drenched, «In the Metro»: «The apparition of these faces in the crowd; Petals on a wet, black bough».

The essays and brief selections from Gimferrer's two-volume *Dietari* are imagist assaults by a poetic performance artist who rushes on stage, hurls an image at his readers, and rushes. They are

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<sup>1</sup> Barcelona: Anagrama, 1996, 165 p.

slides and eight-by-ten glossies of culture; words provoked by pictures; miniatures smudged in word pastels; photos forged in quick-silver verbal emulsion. It is as if Gimferrer had taken Pound's imagist manifesto and applied it to the essay — he uses exactly the right word, creates new rhythms, and gives himself up to absolute freedom in the choice of subject matter, from Vicente Aleixandre's lyrics to Frank Sinatra's voice, to Marilyn Monroe in bra and panties. Above all, he is enthralled by the image, as only post-photographic, post-cinematic (post?) poets can be. He dedicates new images to previous ones, and turns that process into a metaphor for writing, especially for writing literature about literature, which — and there is no shame in this — is what interests him most. One guesses the relentless «writers from life» — from Dickens and Hugo to Juan Marsé and Hemingway — interest our Barcelonan far less than Borges, Benet, or Nabokov. Oh, make no mistake — Gimferrer has *read* them all — but literature consciously cultivated from traditional starts and then urged into weird hybrids impresses him the most. Like T. S. Eliot, he seems ready to see that a writer can be most original when drinking in traditions and making them his own.

Two recurrent images in the prose deserve special discussion. First, the gaze recurs in almost every piece. Brando's Fletcher Christian is defined by his eyes: «...es unos ojos... Los ojos de Fletcher Christian ven los temporales del Cabo de Hornos, la carne de los marineros cuando enrojece bajo el látigo, y la piel dorada y dulce de las muchachas de Tahití» (72). It is through Brando's gaze that the poetry of the film is created and transmitted to our own. The gaze equals artistic transformation, the order imposed upon the world by the poet's gaze, as Wallace Stevens would say. Or perhaps it is even more dramatic. Perhaps the poet really is «un pequeño dios» as Huidobro insisted.

Later, Gimferrer asks if a snapshot of Carl Sandburg and Marilyn Monroe dancing together is not, «¿un poema visible?» (78). In describing a photo of Billie Holiday later still, Gimferrer focuses on the eyes: «pero los ojos, casi de perfil, no parecen mirar ya sino a un vacío que amenaza» (95). The fascination with viewing an instant of life as a temporary photo echoes a line of poetry from the first section, where the poet looks out the window on a March scene, remembering the art and literature that have trained his eyes, and dedicates an entire line of poetry to say, «Veo» followed by «con otros ojos, no los míos» (20). Later he notes, «El

crystal delimita, entre lluvia y visillos, / la inmóvil fosforescencia del jardín». Later still, eyes reappear tellingly in the poem's conclusion:

y son ciertas las luces, el sordo roce de espuelas y correaje,  
los ojos del alazán y tal vez algo más, como en un buen cuadro.

In another selection, the poet tells of coming upon the unexpected spectacle of a bus tipped over on its side on the Barcelona street, Balmes, and of associating it with civil unrest in Hungary. «El autobús volcado, incongruencia óptica en la modorra sofocada de la calle, era una vislumbre del desorden en un mundo —Barcelona o Budapest» (80). Life becomes a poem. Elie Faure speaks of artistic forms as vases or pots, possibly of delicate or beautiful form. But once you plant a tree within the form, nature will inevitably shatter through artifice. Similarly, the image of a bus on its side shatters and adolescent's neat categories of the world: «Quizás en este mismo instante, un niño camino del colegio tiene un atisbo del desorden posible» (81). The image becomes political commitment, a call to arms: «...la libertad nos hace signos pálidamente» (81).

The second recurring image is the image itself, and how it can be preserved. many of the prose pieces begin or end with references to photos; and the portraits become symbols for the difficulty of capturing anything tangible of our artistic myths, the fragility of what we think we know about high versus low culture, Azorín versus Borges, Proust versus George Raft, in a world where photographic Marilyn Monroes dance with Arthur Miller, Albert Einstein, and Carl Sandburg. Famous anecdotes about authors that we have all heard are like photos published in *Hola* or the *Enquirer*, Gimferrer tells us, gaudied and smudged by many, but often completely misleading, capturing a moment that is no more true than the fan magazine façade of a movie star's perfect life.

The connection between poem and visual image is made apparent in quick reference to cinematographer Néstor Almendros, written when that revolutionary of filmic language, perfecter of the use of natural light, was still alive, but the reference today makes a fitting epitaph: «Mi amigo —Néstor Almendros— sabe que, como el poema, la imagen es un arte de inmovilizar el instante» (59).

The meta-imagist discourse of the piece lies in knowing that it is Almendros who served as Robert Benton's cinematographer for *Kramer vs. Kramer* — whose images are jump cut into this discussion of photos of Gimferrer himself, captured by a friend who turns out to be Almendros as well: Almendros, the poet of light, the De Chirico of filmic chiaroscuro, who proved himself no slouch with word poems himself, when he asserted that films made in black and white have a hard time being frankly tasteless: «Los colores chillones, con frecuencia vulgares, de la realidad de hoy desaparecen, haciendo sitio a una elegancia perfecta, la de un esmoquin» (*Días de una cámara*, 280).

One last image repeated with the unsettling insistence of something very important is that of Gimferrer entering into an author's house. Over and over he tells of the first time he went to this or that admired writer's residence, or how he was received intimately and at a key moment (such as when he first met Foix, or when he visited Vicente Aleixandre at Velintonia for first and last time). It is clear that this insistence has nothing to do with name dropping. To the contrary, Gimferrer makes sure to tell us that his friendships with many of his idols were largely epistolary, intellectual and poetic rather than born of shared cups, for example. I think that entering the house of a poet for the first time comes to symbolize reading profoundly of the poet's works; opening himself up to the flow of influence, entering into the poetic residence in the City of Words. He tells these anecdotes again and again to create a physical image of what it means to enter into a poetic realm. Once we have browsed with him the inside of Foix's library, lined with classics, which Foix had bound and inscribed on the spine in Latin, we can ill forget Foix's classical formation. Knowing that as a youth, Foix read entirely, «libros para formar el carácter... los estoicos» we respect and re-evaluate Foix's subsequent experimentation, understand better his attempt to order nature with his intellect, feel more deeply the hard monosyllables of *Sol i de dol*. If we sit with Gimferrer at Aleixandre's deathbed and hear that the dying poet distracted himself from suffering by repeating the mantra: «yo soy el dolor», we know with Gimferrer that Aleixandre was a genuine poet in life and in death.

The lyricist is explicit in the seven poems, first in Castilian and then in Catalan, that rend open the work. The selection is bold, a chronological knife that cuts through Gimferrer's stylistic and the-

matic concerns in both languages and exposes for us a cross-section of the living plant of his poetry.

In «Escoltant» (Listening), the poet probes the origin of the song he hears in his head, but fears to lose too soon:

<p>Aquesta cançó, ¿pot venir de la petxina, de la perla? ¿Véns d'alguna invisible merla, cançó que no podré sentir?</p>	<p><i>That song, might it come from the conch, from the pearl? Dou you come from an invisible blackbird,/Oh song that I will not always hear?</i></p>
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Poetry whispers incessantly in the persona's ear, attempting to spill over into more prosaic aspects of life. The mention of the blackbird perhaps inevitably pulls our thoughts to Wallace Stevens, a poet well-known to Gimferrer, and who was certain no order existed until the artist imposed it on a scene, or to Foix, with his attempt to impose intellectual control on nature, and his openness to stunning influences from any quarter. «Me exalta el nou i m'enamora el vell», wrote Foix, and this could practically be the subtitle for *Noche en el Ritz*. The attempt at order is explicit in Gimferrer's «Primera visión de marzo»:

Atención:

bajo el viento de marzo la plaza en trance vibra  
como un tambor de piedra.  
Mar o libro de horas,  
se trata de ordenar estos datos dispersos.

The poet then concludes, «ordenar estos datos es tal vez poesía».

It should come as no surprise, then, that in the rest of the book, Gimferrer relentlessly imposes a kind of poetic order on messy life in which literary traditions give solace against the chaos of reality, photographic and poetic images detain amorphous vital forces for a moment's epiphany, eyes are a metaphor for poetic vision, and entering the house of an artist becomes the equivalent of drinking deeply from the author's work. Readers of *Noche en el Ritz* must thank its author for opening up the door to «Can Gimferrer», welcoming us in, inviting us to look around, and even putting us up so elegantly in the guest room, just off the library.

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