

TRADITION AND INNOVATION IN VICENT ANDRÉS ESTELLÉS

ESTELLÉS'S PRIMARY ACHIEVEMENT IS THE EASE AND SURENESS WITH WHICH HE KNITS TOGETHER TRADITIONAL AND MODERN TONES AND MOTIFS.

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A persistent goal of modern North American poets—one perhaps most successfully realized by Ezra Pound—has been to recapture the pure fire and impact of classical lyric poetry. In the United States, despite some brilliant successes, this attempt has usually been frustrated by a combination of unbridgeable cultural distances and a leadenly academic notion of “classicism”. It can, I think, be argued that Catalan poets have had better luck, for they inhabit a world whose links with the classical past are far more tangible and accessible. Literary tradition enters Estellés’s work—as it does modern Catalan poetry as a whole—in at least two guises. One is the troubadour tradition that culminated in Ausiàs March, whose abrasive lyricism and obsessive treatment of sex and death often seem to find a modern echo in Estellés. The other is that of classical Mediterranean literature, which of course includes such figures as Sappho, Catullus, Horace and Ovid. Although in a few pages one can hardly hope to treat either of these links in sufficient detail, I hope my examination of one poem from the volume *Horatians* will suggest both the classical element in Estellés and his conception of Mediterranean cultural tradition as a whole:

LV
the night rises like one of sappho's hymns.
i've talked a lot with my father.
often i recall those silences too
that swelled naturally, like a tranquil pregnancy.
i've talked to him about all the things
a person talks about with a good friend.
my father was my best friend,
without ever ceasing, however, to be
my father, there was no rigidity
in our varied daily relationship.
i think this was shown by
my adolescence. ovid's pleasant
drivel amused me, the poor guy,
scandalizing even the kindest
gods, but i couldn't
do it, i still felt some last twinge of shame.
my father worried about
my health. maybe the fatherland
or caesar or western civilization would need me
some day; i had to be
ready just in case. i've
had girlfriends and mistresses. i never
thought of getting married and becoming
a peaceful husband, a prudent paterfamilias
like so many men i see. when my father
died, i went on living like
before. maybe i wrote better or drank
more or went in more for the pleasures
of the bed. now i think i could have made
some compatriot happy by discreetly
dedicating a poem to her, giving her
a child, strolling with her beside
the sea, the wheat fields, the vineyards.
i'm about to get sad. at dusk
my eyes glisten. i always wait for
my father's return or
maybe my return home to him
to eat some cracked olives
a bit of cheese some
almonds a glass of wine
a little of each
nothing at all
polished off
in silence
he
and
i.



Both the title of the volume in which this poem appeared and its allusions to Sappho and Ovid clearly indicate its conscious links with classical verse. At the very start, in a single line set apart from the rest of the poem, Sappho's name is uttered almost ritualistically and her work is evoked in the image of a darkening evening sky. For modern poets, Sappho must suggest a starkly purified lyric energy that serves as a kind of standard for all of us.

After this opening evocation, Estellés begins his own discourse in a very different key. His tone at first is casually expository, slowed by long phrases like "i've talked to him about all the things / a person talks about with a good friend." The thoughts tend to double back and qualify each other, as in "without ever ceasing, however, to be / my father," thus further slowing the movement and making it more ruminative. Ovid's name is then drawn into this series of memories and contemplations. Unlike Sappho, however, he appears not as a talisman but as an integral part of the poem, signalling a shift into the swifter and more ironic tone of the lines that follow. Estellés parallels Ovid both in his sarcastic treatment of the state and his insertion of slangily colloquial language within an otherwise serious elegy, as in "the poor guy, / scandalizing even the kindest gods, but i couldn't / do it." In a political sense, the association of the apparently straight-faced words "fatherland" and "caesar" with "western civilization", a cliché of fascist propaganda in

postwar Spain, also bring Estellés close to Ovid's mocking attacks on the pompous rhetoric of Augustan Rome.

At the same time, this section reveals the speaker's divided attitude toward his father, an attitude both ironically distanced and full of longing for the simple convictions the father represents. The irony is carried by phrases like "peaceful husband" and "prudent paterfamilias." This tension between loving evocation and gentle mockery dominates the poem's central section, but gradually dissolves under the impact of the poet's intensifying grief and his wistful longing for traditional peasant certainties. Estellés's tone becomes more self-revealing and his rhythmic units shorter in "maybe i wrote better or drank / more or went in more for the pleasures / of the bed." Though these lines still retain something of the ironic tone that precedes them, their basic feeling is one of desperation and bitter regret: "now i think i could have made / some compatriot happy by discreetly / dedicating a poem to her, giving her / a child, strolling with her beside / the sea, the wheat fields, the vineyards."

In this context of quickening intensity the word "compatriot" becomes friendly and loses any sarcastic sense it might have had earlier. The rhythm becomes more lyrically patterned as the short, repeated parallelisms ("dedicating," "giving," "strolling," and "the sea, the wheat fields, the vineyard") draw us into a realm of undulating incantation. Just when this

incantation is at its singing peak, Estellés suddenly stops short with two brief, unadorned depressive statements that form a kind of low point in the poem. These are then softened and dissolved in the remembered shared rituals of eating and drinking. Here the enumeration of traditional Mediterranean foods —almonds, cheese, olives and wine— becomes a kind of healing ritual that links the father with a world that both preceded and will survive him. Like the landscape of vineyard, sea, and wheat fields, the ritual meal is at once real and stylized, everyday and immortal.

This poem, then, like *Horatians* as a whole, is "traditional" in its deft evocation of classical poetry in a variety of keys. These keys range from ironic to fervently elegiac, and the phrasing is firmly ballasted with details at once realistic and suggestive of earlier cultures. What is, obviously, modern here is Estellés's freedom to follow a subjective train of associations that lead him from one mood to another without formal transitions. Another modern element is his equal freedom in moulding the poem's formal elements to its shifting emotional pitch. Estellés's primary achievement, then, is the ease and sureness with which he knits together traditional and modern tones and motifs. He speaks with his own thoroughly contemporary voice and at the same time evokes an entirely Mediterranean literary and human landscape so that it seems the freshest and most natural thing in the world. ●