

DOING IT WITH MIRRORS:
PERE GIMFERRER'S *LOS ESPEJOS / ELS MIRALLS*

MARGARET PERSIN
Rutgers, The State University

The well-known Catalan writer, Pere Gimferrer, is a member of the group designated by José María Castellet as the «novísimos», a group which includes but is not limited to members of the «senior» heading — Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, Antonio Martínez Sarrión, and José María Álvarez — as well as the «coqueluche», which includes not only Gimferrer but also Félix de Azúa, Vicente Molina-Foix, Guillermo Carnero, Ana María Moix, and Leopoldo Panero¹. In this article, I wish to concentrate on Gimferrer's collection entitled *Els miralls / Los espejos*, published originally in 1970, and which later was anthologized with two other of his later works in the collection *Poesía 1970-1977*, and put into circulation by Visor in 1978.

As Gimferrer himself indicated in an interview that appeared in Federico Campbell's *Infame turba* (Barcelona: Lumen, 1971), *Els miralls* represents a change of direction for him as poet: namely, it is his first work to be written in Catalan. The author states: «Imagino que las razones y circunstancias de este cambio no son siempre fáciles de entender para los no catalanes, y menos aún para un latinoamericano (...) *Els miralls* es un libro de replanteo; es, casi, un ensayo o discusión teórica sobre la poesía; se trata al mismo tiempo de un libro de poemas y de una indagación sobre

¹ See Castellet's *Nueve novísimos*. This nomenclature caused a polemic, and the anthologist was accused of «creating» a generation of writers for commercial reasons (among others) which did not in fact exist. See Rubio and Falcó for illuminating commentary upon the *novísimos* anthology; also Debicki, «novísimos».

el sentido de la poesía. Lo que he escrito después también es distinto. Existe, pues, una ruptura más profunda que un mero cambio de idioma» (73-74).

Thus it would seem that this contemporary writer makes a break with the fruits of his initial artistic efforts, to establish an entirely new direction for his verse. Although there can indeed be noted elements of structure and thematic threads that had not appeared in his earlier collections, it is also evident that *Els miralls* does indeed contain echoes of the past, in both an individual and collective sense, as well as intertextual links to other contemporary artistic works, whether verbal or visual. The title is a case in point. In it, the poet makes reference to the mirror, an object of ambiguous conception. Cirlot comments that it «is the instrument of self-contemplation as well as the reflection of the universe. (...) It is a surface which reproduces images and in a way contains and absorbs them» (201). Thus, the mirror symbolizes the power of reflection, in both senses of the term —as meditation as well as reduplication upon or of an object exterior to itself. This same observation can be made as well for this collection of verse, since Gimferrer attempts to formulate his reflections upon the art of the poet and the art of the poem. But he does so in such a way as to establish links with voices and other artistic forms that are outside the limits of his own texts, but manages to keep the collection's focus on the question of textuality and the questionable value of the poetic word and language in general. But in pointing to the collection's reflective nature, the poet also underlines the difficulty of the writer's (impossible) task, namely, to force language to refer to something outside itself. As Fanny Rubio has commented, there is evident «el sentimiento de inutilidad de la literatura, de la poesía, la pérdida de la fe en el valor activo de la palabra poética» (76). But this seeming futility does not lead to total nihilism. As Andrew Debicki notes, in speaking of the poetic of the «novísimos» as a group, «Its poetics and its poetry are grounded in a vision of the literary text as an open-ended system rather than a closed and fully explainable work. Gimferrer, Carnero, and several of their contemporaries are more skeptical than their predecessors about the efficacy of poetic language in discovering reality. These younger poets view the text as revealing only whatever reality it can build with words — which explains

their metapoetic bent. This attitude, however, brings them to a view of poetry as creative play» (40).

An aspect of this «view of poetry as creative play» signalled by Debicki is the format that Gimferrer chose for the 1978 edition of his work, which both illuminates and complicates the reception of the text by the reader, an effect that does not escape the purview of the author, and which continues the leitmotiv of reflection established by the evocative title of the collection. It is a bilingual edition, Catalan and Spanish, in which the author himself serves both as his own translator as well as commentator upon the product. The product as such is not the definitive one, since the reader is yet another link in a chain that leads to uncertain signification. As Gimferrer comments, «En este caso el traductor es el autor; debe pedir, pues, doble indulgencia por su trabajo. O tal vez no, en rigor; apenas he pretendido traducir, si por tal cosa se entiende recrear el original, crear un poema equivalente» (29). The author then goes on to state that «El texto castellano que ofrezco al lector no pretende, pues, otra cosa, que ser un calco fiel del texto catalán, y facilitar su lectura a quienes no conozcan dicho idioma». Thus it is clear, based on his own explication, that the poet's intent is to foreground the original Catalan version of his work. But in the refracted image of the translated text, the reader is brought face to face with the impossibility of that task, and the impossibility of the perfection and oneness of the sign (See title page). The Spanish version reflects only imperfectly the Catalan text. In addition, the poet also states that he has made several corrections to the Catalan version of the poems, and thus, «esta edición bilingüe es, pues, por ahora, la edición definitiva de mi poesía posterior a 1969». In so stating, the poet effectively establishes the mirror-image text as the 'author'-ative one, but also undermines that very authority with the phrase «por ahora». The image of/in the mirror becomes that of the mirage.

The collection opens with two citations from other writers. The first is from Joan Brossa, which states «Un juego de espejos permite ver el otro lado del poema», and the second is from Wallace Stevens, «Poetry is the subject of the poem». Here one can clearly discern a very decided metapoetic dimension, a characteristic which has been identified as central to writers of this particular

group², and which obtains in this collection as a whole. The opening poem, entitled «PARANYNS» in Catalan and «CELADAS» in Spanish, in point of fact does indeed establish a series of snares for the reader, as the title would indicate. This single opening text duplicates the edition as a whole, as well as the function of the poet translator. It has a bipartite structure, wherein the poetic voice offers a vision of the artistic task in the first part, only to comment upon it and ultimately put that vision in question in the second. The poet creates a reflected image of other authors creating, and draws upon examples taken from many sources. Apollinaire, Juan Gris, Goethe, Hölderlin, Rimbaud, Pavese and Yeats are named directly, while other authors and texts are re-created in a more oblique fashion. The speaker juxtaposes different worlds, such as that of Orfeo and his love, Eurídice, with a more contemporary and rather jarring context:

El mundo de Orfeo es el de detrás de los espejos: la caída
de Orfeo,
como el retorno de Eurídice de los infiernos, las bicicletas,
los chicos que venían de jugar al tenis y mascaban
chewing gum.

The image of reflection and the reflection of images plays a central role in the questioning of the value of language and representation. The poetic speaker makes reference to various art forms, verbal as well as visual, in a kaleidoscope of forms, colors and perspectives reminiscent of surrealist art³:

perspectivas cubistas,
como los recortes de periódico de Juan Gris,
celadas
cuando el fondo es más nítido que la figura central,
en primer término, algo deformada, enteramente reducida a
ángulos y espirales — los colores son más vivos en los
ventanales del crepúsculo (39):

² Although Castellet held that this group of writers represented a break with previous generations, succeeding critics have downplayed or even denied this view. Their decidedly metapoetic stance ties them most firmly with the immediately preceding generation of Spanish poets, the so-called «second generation of post-Civil War poets». See Debicki's articles.

³ In the survey conducted by José Batlló, Gimferrer himself makes reference to the influence that he felt upon his work by poets of the surrealist era.

Gimferrer's description of the art form known as collage takes on a metapoetic dimension from various perspectives⁴. First and foremost, it brings attention to the process of artistic creation; it lays bare the underseams of how art 'means', whatever the medium, and thus draws attention to textuality as the prime focus of the text. And secondly, by focussing on collage, the poet points to the vexing problems of the representation of reality and reference, as well as the role of the producer of that hybrid art form. As Marjorie Perloff comments, «each element in the collage has a dual fuction: it refers to an external reality even as its compositional thrust is to undercut the very referentiality it seems to assert» (49). Thus, one can grasp the significance of the snares to which the speaker refers in the title of the text. The reality to which the speaker refers in this text is not the reality of all of our days, but rather the reality that is encapsulated in words. Moreover, the words to which the speaker makes reference fulfill not a mimetic function, but rather a semiotic one. They communicate a value not associated with the world of objective reality, but of art, a sphere twice-removed from the reader's grasp. This sphere is twice-removed, since the speaker refers the reader to art's process by making reference to words and contexts that are not his own but rather of other writers and artists (Remember that the text begins with «Dicen que Apollinaire escribía / reuniendo fragmentos de conversaciones / que oía en los cafés de Montmartre». In one very important sense, then, these words are even three or four times removed from the reader). Thus, the form of collage is evident not only by reference to visual art, but also in the pattern of pastiche in the text which the speaker creates from the words of other writers — there are snippets included in French, German, and English — and also in the posture of the poetic voice as well.

These snares are entrapments not only for the receiver of the text, but for the producer as well. Perloff further comments that «As the mode of detachment and readherence, of graft and citation, collage inevitably undermines the authority of the individual self, the 'signature' of the poet or painter» (76). The speaker of the poetic text is well aware of the quicksand upon which his

⁴ Timothy Rogers studied the technique of collage in Gimferrer's earlier collected works, *Poemas, 1963-1969*.

text is based. At the close of the main section of the poem, the speaker elucidates upon some lovely fictional characters, and stops to comment upon the questionable 'author'-ity of his posture:

las que se bañaban desnudas en las novelas de Pavese y las
 llamábamos chicas topolino,
 (no sé si habéis conocido el topolino: era un coche de moda,
 o frecuente, en los *happy forties*).
 Pero ahora ya soy más viejo, aunque decir viejo sea
 inexacto, pero el color del gin con naranja
 où sont où sont the dreams that money can buy? (41)

The speaker now not only fulfills the function of poetic voice but also that of commentator as well, where he directs his comments directly to his audience, in the form of 'vosotros', and thus indirectly makes reference to the textuality of his work. In essence he lays bare the frame of his composition, by placing himself outside that frame of reference, even removed in time, and comments upon the linguistic reality that he has created in the collage of his own creation and those of other artists. But in so doing, he undermines and ultimately relinquishes his authority over textuality. The poetic voice has been ensnared in a trap of its own making. It is significant that this part ends with a question framed in two languages — French and English —, neither of which had been targeted by the author in his opening commentary as those that would express in their own way his two versions of a similar text.

In Part II of the text, the speaker continues his questioning stance in regard to textuality, but views the text from yet another entirely different perspective, namely, as a product that fulfills distinct functions for very different kinds of receivers:

Este poema es
 una sucesión de celadas: para el
 lector y para el
 corrector de pruebas
 y para
 el editor de poesía (41).

Here the text is viewed as not so much an artistic product as much as a social or even commercial one, which simultaneously

entraps and is entrapped by a series of snares, only glancingly evinced on the surface level of the text. Once again, the reality to which the speaker refers is ephemeral, since this reality is linguistic and textual, in both the literary and coldly objective sense. The text is only an object, to be held in one's hands; this limited and more limiting perspective of course deprives the text of its originality, its creativity, and its connectedness with other texts and with art in general.

The text ends with the speaker voicing his lack of power and authority in the process of signification:

Es decir,
que ni a mí me han dicho lo
que hay detrás de las celadas, porque
sería como decirme el dibujo
del tapiz, y esto
ya nos has enseñado James que no
es posible (41).

The disempowerment is evident in his hesitation and use of paraphrasis, «Es decir» as well as «sería como decirme», in the forceful use of negation, «ni a mí», and the decentering of authority through the use of the impersonal, «me han dicho». The poetic voice recognizes the snares of textuality at its many levels, but is unable to disencumber himself from their grasp. His final attempt at explication is to make reference to yet other mirrored art forms — «el dibujo del tapiz» —, only to admit, once again using the words of another, that to see what lies behind and beyond the «celadas» is an impossible task.

One could view this opening poem of *Els miralls* / *Los espejos* from a very pessimistic perspective, and arrive at the conclusion that the poet views artistic creation as totally derivative at best, or almost completely moribund at worst. But this view, I believe, is off the mark. Rather, I prefer to look upon both the structure and the content of this poetic text as the poet's commentary about art within its contemporary social, political and cultural context. Art in general and poetry in particular no longer need be fettered by artificial frames of reference, whether temporal or prescriptive. The snares of the title serve as sign posts to the creator(s) and receivers of the text, and mark the points at which the func-

tioning of intertextuality is at its most obvious. As Jonathan Culler comments, «Intertextuality thus becomes less a name for a work's relation to particular prior texts than a designation of its participation in the discursive space of a culture: the relationship between a text and the various languages or signifying practices of a culture and its relation to those texts which articulate for it the possibilities of that culture» (103).

Based on this reading, the reader can then proceed to the succeeding poems of the collection, and look upon them as yet other perspectives in the poet's meditation upon poetry and all verbal art as differing yet connected reflections of and upon a much larger system that we know as culture. The text that follows «PARANYS / CELADAS» is one entitled «SISTEMES / SISTEMAS» and begins with «La poesía es / un sistema de espejos / giratorios, que se deslizan con armonía, / desplazando luces y sombras en el probador» (43): The third text «SEGONA VISIÓ DE MARC / SEGUNDA VISIÓN DE MARZO» may be read as solely within the context of this collection, or as a once again further refracted image of the author's own «Primera visión de marzo» which hails from *Arde el mar* (1966). This latter poem ends with

Así nosotros
 movemos nuestras lanzas ante el brumoso mar
 y son ciertas las luces, el sordo roce de espuelas y coreaje,
 los ojos del alazán y tal vez algo más, como en un buen
 cuadro (35).

The «Segunda versión» enters in dialogue with the poet's previous stance, and declares at the end:

Nunca he vivido la distancia entre lo que queremos decir y
 lo que decimos realmente,
 la imposibilidad de captar la tensión del lenguaje, de esta-
 blecer un sistema de actos y palabras,
 un cuerpo de relaciones entre el poema escrito y su lectura.
 Quizás un discurso eliotiano en ocasiones, pienso
 que este poema pone realmente en peligro
 uno de los niveles de mi poesía: es decir, que el discurso
 muestra aquí a un tiempo las dos caras del espejo. Lo cierro,
 y da la vuelta:
 de noche, con luz, en la oscuridad dorada, en las calles o
 en la muerte,

como el rumor del bosque y los árboles que en él caen ta-
lados en silencio.
—¿dónde, sino en mi corazón? (49)

And one final example of the many that find expression in this paradoxically original yet pastiche collection. In a poem entitled «INTERLUDI / INTERLUDIO» the speaker offers a cryptic message of ekphrastic leanings where the allusion is to fiction as well as cinema:

Construir un montaje
un film de espías
Sherlock Holmes en el bosque

Amigo Watson
me han herido
dame la mano
amigo Watson (55)

The power of Pere Gimferrer's collection *Els miralls / Los espejos* is founded upon the power that it derives, ironically, from the decentering of authorial voice, the breaking of limits, and the questioning stance that it communicates in regard to language as a closed system of signification. In the final analysis this collection of verse embodies and exemplifies the ideological and ethical posture that the poet sees as central to poetry's function: «Toda poesía que no persiga la contravención expresa o tácita del sistema represivo de la sociedad, debe ser considerada como cómplice de este sistema» (Rubio 79). The collection ends with a query:

¿El giro
se ha cumplido en sentido inverso, y así la música
restablece el silencio y la pintura el vacío —y la palabra el
espacio en blanco? (87)

This questioning stance represents the poet's coming to terms with his own view of language as slippery and deceptive, and art's place in a much larger cultural system. Pere Gimferrer's poetic voice faces not the void but rather the rapture and oneness that is beyond all language.

WORKS CITED

- Campbell, Federico. *Infame turba*. Barcelona: Lumen, 1971.
- Castellet, José María, ed. *Nueve novísimos*. Barcelona: Barral Editores, 1970.
- Cirlot, J. E. *A Dictionary of Symbols*. New York: Philosophical Library, 1962.
- Culler, Jonathan. *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981.
- Debicki, Andrew P. «Una poesía de la postmodernidad: los novísimos». *Anales de la literatura española contemporánea* 14.1-3 (1989): 33-50.
- . «Three Moments of post-Civil War Spanish Poetry». In Salvador Jiménez-Fajardo and John C. Wilcox, eds., *After the War: Essays on Recent Spanish Poetry*. Boulder: Society of Spanish and Spanish-American Studies, 1988.
- Gimferrer, Pere. *Poemas 1963-1969*. Madrid: Visor, 1970.
- . *Poesía 1970-1977*. Madrid: Visor, 1978.
- Perloff, Marjorie. *The Futurist Moment: Avant-Garde, Avant Guerre and the Language of Rupture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986.
- Rogers, Timothy J. «Verbal Collage in Pere Gimferrer's *Poemas 1963-1969*». *Hispania* 67.2 (1984): 207-213.
- Rubio, Fanny and José Luis Falcó. *Poesía española contemporánea (1939-1980)*. Madrid: Alhambra, 1982.