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"Amb ronca veu": Reality and Morality in the Poetry of Joan Vinyoli

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"AMB RONCA VEU": REALITY AND MORALITY
IN THE POETRY OF JOAN VINYOLI

EULÀLIA BENEJAM COBB

Joan Vinyoli died in Barcelona on November 30, 1984, shortly after the publication of his last book of poems, *Passeig d'aniversari*. He was seventy years old. Although Vinyoli had been publishing poetry since 1937, it was only forty years later, near the end of his life, that he began to receive the kind of recognition that he deserved. His last work was awarded the Premi de la Generalitat de Catalunya, the Premi Ciutat de Barcelona, the Premi Cavall Verd of the city of Palma, and the Premi de la Crítica Serra d'Or. One year after the poet's death, Spain's Ministerio de Cultura awarded to *Passeig d'aniversari* the Premio Nacional de Literatura 1985.

Vinyoli's 50-year poetic career is marked by two major developments. The first takes place in the early 1960's when, abandoning the post-symbolist strains of the 1930's and 40's and the preponderantly abstract mode of the 50's, he comes into his true voice with an increasing attention to everyday reality. In the second stage, which begins in the mid-1970's, Vinyoli continues his use of concrete discourse to express a strongly moralistic orientation. This combination of everyday language and reality with overwhelming metaphysical concerns allows Vinyoli, near the end of his life, to reach his zenith as a poet.

Both in the quantity and the quality of his work Vinyoli shows an inverse pattern to that of many writers, who slow down or deteriorate with age. Two decades after his first book of poetry, *Primer desenllaç*, appeared in 1937, Vinyoli's slow-flowing trickle of poetic production suddenly became, compa-

ratively speaking, torrential. Whereas in the 26 years from 1937 to 1963 he had published roughly 150 pages of poetry, between 1963 and 1979 he published about 300.

Still more striking than this increase in volume, however, is the qualitative change that accompanies it, particularly with the publication in 1963 of his aptly-named collection, *Realitats*. This alteration can best be described as the sudden appearance of concrete, everyday life and language in a poetry that had long been dominated by abstraction.

Vinyoli himself was well aware of this change in direction, which he seemed to regard as a kind of poetic mid-life crisis (he was 49 when *Realitats* appeared).

He decidit escriure
poesies concretes. Envelleixo, calen
realitats, no fum...

he announces in a poem entitled "A les tres copes dic això".¹ The word "fum" aptly designates the symbolist mists of Vinyoli's early career, and the vague, abstract landscapes of his poems of the 1950's. Whether or not Vinyoli also meant to dismiss his early work as relatively insubstantial, his critics agree that the quality of Vinyoli's writing made a quantum leap when he turned his back on "fums".²

Although in the texts published after 1963 one can still find the formless, other-worldly landscapes of the poems of the 1950's, and plenty of references to the darkness of night, the hardness of stone, the cry of the wind, on the whole Vinyoli

¹ Joan Vinyoli, *Poesia completa 1937-1975* (Barcelona: Editorial Ariel, 1975), 213. (Subsequent references to this source will be cited in the text).

² See for example Gabriel Ferrater, "Joan Vinyoli", *Reduccions*, 20 (September, 1983), 78.

tends to allude more and more to concrete reality. Furthermore, he abandons the self-consciously poetic discourse of the early work in favor of an earthier, more direct language.

At the same time, Vinyoli appears tempted to exchange his *poète maudit* self-image in favor of a more ordinary persona. This conscious descent from Olympus into the ordinary is strikingly evident in the first three stanzas of another poem from *Realitats* entitled “Estiu” (*Poesia completa*, 207, 208):

Diumenges a la tarda,
de taula eixint, havent dinat,
em poso fresc, estalvio paraules.

A mi que ja no em parlin d'anar a fora,
que enlloc no s'està bé com a casa.
Jo, ara, m'adormiré tranquil·lament
al balancí, rera el balcó mig tancat
per por dels corrents d'aire sempre
perillosos.

A fora, l'empedrat alena foc,
el temps s'empereseix, en l'aire brunzen
els mosquits de la sang — la bèstia pesa.
Tot això és — com dir-ho —
calent i gras i regala suor.

Before *Realitats* Vinyoli's language is often oratorical and sententious in tone. In his vocabulary, trimmed down to Racinean proportions, the same words and images appear over and over: rock, tree, fire, sea, and sky, and always “el crit”, the poet's cry. After 1963, however, the poems explode with the sights and sensations of the physical world, and Vinyoli's vocabulary is transformed accordingly. Suddenly there are tools, and drinks and dishes, and smells of shrimp and “carn a la graella”. The

former amorphous "bèsties del silenci" (*Poesia completa*, 157) turn into donkeys and chickens and goats — the braying, bleating, cackling menagerie of a Catalan *masia*.

Another surprising aspect of Vinyoli's work of the 1960's is the occasional appearance of human beings in the poems. In the earlier poems, except for a rare, sketchily portrayed, ever-weary peasant or woodcutter, the lonely poet is the only figure we see, now wandering lost in darkness, now transformed into a storm-battered tree.

The appearance in "Plaça vella" and in "El mecànic i la seva família" (*Poesia completa*, 215, 218) of identifiable human characters represents an extreme case of Vinyoli's trend towards concretization. Both poems take place against the backdrop of an old town square, closely described even to the shirt hung out to dry, the thirsty dogs, and the prices on the restaurant menu. Nowhere else in Vinyoli's work do such living, breathing human creatures appear.

But if man is banished from the scene, here and there his beasts, his tools, the ordinary implements of daily life serve to support the poet's meditations. The vague landscapes of the mind are replaced by city streets at rush hour. Occasionally there are allusions to specific places, such as Pals and l'Empordà (*Poesia completa*, 264). Sometimes in the poems of the 1970's a lovingly crafted description, a carefully noted detail dazzles the reader among the "fums" and mists of Vinyoli's continuing preoccupation with death and despair. Many of these concrete references appear to be drawn from childhood memories: the shoebox full of blackberry leaves and voracious silkworms (*Poesia completa*, 265), the curtain made of beads that rang with the sound of freedom to the child's ears (*Poesia completa*, 215).

Other poems refer to the poet's daily life. In "Dies al

camp"³ he evokes the farmyard with its manure smells, the rooster chasing the hens, and the hand tools that sit rusting in a corner while the modern farm machines roar over the fields. The poem entitled "Ramat", (*Obra poètica*, 44) which resounds with Maragallian echoes, describes sensual reality to make a philosophical point:

Vénen les cabres d'olor fosca,
estossegant, negres, vermelles,
darrera els boccs amb davantal de cuir
— que no les prenyin totes.

Menjar formatge, beure vi,
sota una alzina, amb el celatge al fons
— roig, gris, morat —, i no sentir cap veu,
diré que és mitja vida.

L'altra mitja,
la mort va rosegant-la amb dents de llop.

After the mid 1970's, however, despite his resolve to keep his eyes wide open to see clearly the things of the world ("Tenir els ulls ben oberts / per mirar netament les coses / consuetes del món", [*Obra poètica*, 149]) Vinyoli returns once more to his old universe of night and stone and fire. The texts grow shorter, the vocabulary more reduced, the words become opaque. Vinyoli seems consciously to want to shrink his art, to encapsulate his old obsessions with time and death and loneliness into a minimal form:

No tornis, alba de la joventut.
No tornis, vespre de la joventut.

³ Joan Vinyoli, *Obra poètica, 1975-1979* (Barcelona: Editorial Crítica, 1979), 51. (Subsequent references to this source will be cited in the text.)

Deixeu-me estar com ara estic:
 sol amb l'amic
 que he anat fent de mi mateix.
 En mi ja el somni creix
 de la darrera solitud.

(*Obra poètica*, 162)

Thus the Vinyoli of the late 1970's renounces the world and begins the long farewell that will mark the zenith of his art and bring him unquestioned recognition as one of Catalonia's most important contemporary poets.

The respect with which Vinyoli is viewed today in Catalan literary circles derives not only from the quality of his work but also from the fact that he incarnates the ideal of the quintessential lyric poet, both by virtue of his introspective work and of his life, which he dedicated entirely to poetry. All his critics agree on this point: Vicent Andrés Estellés writes that Vinyoli's tendency towards lyricism and metaphysics reached its peak in his last decade.⁴ Francesc Parcerisas, in his prologue to *Passeig d'aniversari*, refers to Vinyoli as "the strongest and most impressive voice in contemporary Catalan lyric poetry".⁵ Salvador Espriu once called him one of Catalonia's few true poets, one who would do honor to the lyric of any country.⁶ Vinyoli himself, pressed by an interviewer to say whether he was a symbolist or a realist, declared, "sóc un poeta 'líric' i prou".⁷

⁴ Cited by Anonymous, "Falleció en Barcelona el poeta y traductor catalán Joan Vinyoli", *El País* (December 1, 1984), 26.

⁵ Francesc Parcerisas, prologue to Joan Vinyoli, *Passeig d'aniversari* (Barcelona: Editorial Empúries, 1984), 10.

⁶ Salvador Espriu, "Obra poètica de Joan Vinyoli", in Joan Vinyoli, *Poesia completa, 1937-1975* (Barcelona: Editorial Ariel, 1975), 422.

⁷ Isabel-Clara Simó, "Joan Vinyoli: la paraula en el temps", *Canigó*, 659 (May 24, 1980), 20.

A linguistic analysis of Vinyoli's poetry confirms its essentially lyric quality. According to Roman Jakobson's analysis of linguistic messages⁸ the poetic function of language centers, although not exclusively, on the message itself, rather than on the sender or the receiver.

The various poetic genres include one or more other linguistic functions alongside the predominant poetic function. Epic poetry, for example, centers on the third person, uses the preterite (the historical tense, according to Benveniste)⁹ and is strongly oriented towards the referential function. Lyric poetry, on the other hand, centers around the first person, the sender of the message, and uses the present and the perfect (which blends past and present in a phenomenological unit). The conative function, centered around the second person, is marked by the use of the imperative. Jakobson further distinguishes two modes of conative poetry, the supplicative and the exhortative, depending on whether the first person is subordinate to the second, or vice-versa.

The most cursory analysis of the roughly 200 poems that Vinyoli published since 1975 reveals the preponderance of the first person, as well as the repeated use of the present and the perfect. Sometimes verbs are altogether absent, so that the poem is reduced to its lyrical essence: the interjection or "crit escrit" in the poet's own words¹⁰ (I am omitting *Llibre d'amic* from consideration. Published in 1977 but written two decades earlier, its publication, according to Sala-Valldaura, was delayed not

⁸ Roman Jakobson, *Essais de linguistique générale* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1960), 215-219.

⁹ Emile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, tr., M. E. Meed (Miami: University of Miami Press, 1971), 210, 221.

¹⁰ Joan Vinyoli, *A hores petites* (Barcelona: Editorial Crítica, 1981), 111. (Subsequent references to this source will be cited in the text.)

for literary reasons, as Vinyoli states, but for personal ones).¹¹

A careful look at the poems of the last decade, however, shows that in approximately 25 % of them Vinyoli uses the imperative-sometimes in the first person plural, but most often in the second person singular. Thus in these poems, the conative function, although it remains subordinate to the poetic one, occupies a high position in the hierarchy of linguistic functions. Since they emphasize the sender rather than the receiver of the message, Vinyoli's conative poems may be further classified as exhortative.

Typically, lyric poetry of conative character concerns the lover's pleadings with his beloved, but this is not true of Vinyoli's work. Although some of his love poems are in the present, most are in the past — often the preterite, the historical or "epic" tense, as shown by "Projectes de felicitat":

Ens vàrem perdre en el pas
 inacabable i únic
 de l'un a l'altre...
 I vam morir, mai no morint
 com de cremades d'últim grau.
 (*Obra poètica*, 60)

Only in "L'hort petit" do we find a typically urgent lover's imperative:

... Empelta'm
 de tu. Segrega't. Tu, empelta't
 de mi.
 Qui ara, el tronc?
 Qui la branca inserida?
 (*Obra poètica*, 114)

¹¹ Josep M. Sala-Valldaura, *Joan Vinyoli* (Barcelona: Editorial Empúries, 1985), 40.

Most conative love poems are supplicatory in nature, and the second person, although he or she may not be named, is nevertheless felt to be a definite entity. But in Vinyoli's conative poems the second person is not only nameless but diffused, so that it is not clear whether the poet is addressing himself or all mankind. And the content of his imperatives is not erotic but moralistic, in some cases didactic.

In these poems Vinyoli tells the reader — or himself — how to live and how to write poetry. Since for Vinyoli the two processes — becoming a man and becoming a poet — constitute a single problem, he is able to remain a lyric poet and avoid dull didacticism. For him art is a way of life, and consequently he makes no difference between ethics and poetics.

Indeed, in many of Vinyoli's poems it is difficult to tell whether he is talking about writing poetry or about living life, since both processes are informed by the same principal values: lucidity and authenticity. Hoarsely, "amb ronca veu" (*Obra poètica*, 30), the aging poet enjoins, exhorts, commands us to look fearsome reality in the eye. For example, "El guany" uses the metaphor of the sea to urge a fearless plunge into the abyss:

Mai no et rendeixis.

Gira't del costat
on abans veies el penell
que et feia creure en l'últim crit
del gall dels boscos.

Entra
mar negra endins i baixa al fons.

Quan pugis, coraller, i t'hagis tret
el feixuc escafandre,
t'hauràs guanyat una mar llisa
i el vol del gavià.

(*Obra poètica*, 38)

The poem is predicated on a double system of metaphors: the call of the wild rooster can stand for either personal or artistic idealism, and the final reward may be interpreted as inspiration for the poet, and peace of mind for the man.

In Vinyoli's works, the quest for lucidity — whether in art or in life — requires the willingness to plunge into fearful darkness or to look truth, no matter how horrible, squarely in the eye. In the aphoristic "Saviesa", he admonishes us to light the light of reason and extinguish the fires of passion, so as to become aware of their insubstantiality:

Apaga el foc,
encén el llum,
busca el teu lloc
i mira el fum.
(*A hores petites*, 43)

Towards the end of the poet's life, selfless love enters into his panoply of commandments for the good life. In *Cants d'Abelone*, he addresses his own heart, and advises it to remain open to selfless love:

... Cor, no et precipitis
a voler més, no et tanquis
per molt que faci mal.
Estima
sense voler ser correspost.¹²

In these overwhelmingly dark and despairing poems, love can sometimes be a refuge against the horrors of existence:

Bastim, doncs, una tenda contra el vent,

¹² Joan Vinyoli, "Cants d'Abelone", *Reduccions*, 20 (September, 1983), 26.

siguem un simulacre de l'amor
i acabarem per ser tan sols amor.¹³

The same sharp will to authenticity that enables man to live a worthy life is necessary for the poet, if he is to be receptive to inspiration. The hard edges evoked in "Sílex" have unquestionable moral resonances — the hand that grasps the stone has an equally strong grip on hard-edged reality:

Agafem-la ben fort, la cantelluda
de sílex, fem en torn un ample cercle,
per quan tot d'una hi surti al mig la flor
del ser-mirada-intensament. Fem-ne paraula.
(*A hores petites*, 41)

Certain of Vinyoli's conative pieces are more strictly concerned with poetry than with ethics. In his brief *ars poetica*, "La gaia ciència", Vinyoli states that the values of poetry are emotional rather than intellectual. The poet must put aside calculated effects and surrender to the primacy of the word:

Malfia't sempre de la recurrència
i no segueixis càlcul: fon-ho tot
en el gresol incandescent del mot:
única llei de la gaia ciència.
(*A hores petites*, 45)

But in the end, Vinyoli's Weltanschauung encompasses both life and art, and the same precepts that obtain for the man obtain for the artist. In "El graner morat", the poet seems to

¹³ Joan Vinyoli, *Passeig d'aniversari* (Barcelona: Editorial Empúries, 1984), 17. (Subsequent references to this source will be cited in the text).

say that the solution to the hopelessness of life resides in paying attention to small things, carrying out humble tasks:

... Tanca't en el graner
 morat de la tristesa.
 Fes compte que potser el més important
 és collir nous o bé ensacar avellanes,
 fer un tast de vi, passar d'un cove a l'altre
 castanyes.

Mira, pesa, palpa
 la finor de les glans.

(*Obra poètica*, 41)

But the three final imperatives and the allusion to the sensual quality of the acorns turn the weighing and the handling into writing, and the acorns into words.

Silence is a condition necessary for life as well as for poetry, and Vinyoli's works often contain either injunctions, such as "Necis, calleu", ("Insensata remor", [*Obra poètica*, 165]), or invitations to silence. In "Elegia de Vallvidrera" silence at first seems like a means to regain peace at the end of a long life. But the vividness of the images rediscovered through silence suggests that its main virtue is that it facilitates art:

Anem ara, en silenci, recobrant
 pel riu del temps quiet totes les coses.
 Redescobrim els camps: observa la masia
 els ànecs i les oques al bassal,
 el safareig a un angle sovellós
 del pati...

(*Passeig d'aniversari*, 37)

The increasing longing for silence eventually leads to a longing for death. Although, as we have seen, Vinyoli's erotic works are hardly ever supplicative, nevertheless one of his most ur-

gently imperative poems is a call to lovemaking – but the lover is death:

No triguis, mort, és de nit
 i estic desassossegat,
 deixa-ho tot, fica't al llit
 i salva'm de soledat.
 Palpa'm, toca'm l'erigit
 somni de l'home encarnat.
 Fem-nos l'amor, oh infinit
 orgasme, i tot acabat.

(*A hores petites*, 99)

Although Vinyoli always presents death as final, the poems written after 1980 insist on the impossibility of life after death. Nowhere does he more violently deny eternal life than at the end of one of his last poems, “Vespre a la cafeteria”. In verses that by their rhyme and meter as well as by their very words mock that hymn of faith known to every Catalan, Maragall’s “Cant espiritual”, Vinyoli negates the existence of God and of eternal life. To Maragall’s plea for a spiritual rebirth:

I quan vinga aquella hora de temença
 en què s'acluquin aquests ulls humans,
 obriu-me'n, Senyô, uns altres de més grans
 per contemplar la vostra faç immensa.
 Sia'm la mort una major naixença!¹⁴

Vinyoli answers:

I no pensem que hi ha cap Faç Immensa
 a l'hora greu de l'última partença.
 Quan els depredadors hauran tornat no-res

¹⁴ Joan Maragall, *Poesies* (Barcelona: Sala Parés Llibreria, 1929), 177.

el nostre cos, tindrem l'omnipotència
de ser ben morts. No imploris mai clemència.
Ningú no et sent dins l'eternal fluència.

(*Passeig d'aniversari*, 19)

Despite his assertion that it is necessary to look death and nothingness bravely in the face, fear surfaces time and again in Vinyoli's poems. One solution is to fight this fear. In "Paisatge amb llops" the poet urges us, lambs frightened by the howling of the wolves, to transform ourselves into vultures and devour fear.¹⁵

Hedonism is another answer to the despair induced by mortality. The clearest summons to enjoy the pleasures of life while attempting to ignore the darkness that awaits us comes in "Els grans afores":

Gaudim, ara, gaudim a gratient
d'aquestes matinades de la terra,
vermelles, altes i prometedores;
llaurem, ara, llaurem pausadament les gleves
del goig... Mirem sols de reüll
la basardosa flor de la tenebra.

(*A hores petites*, p. 87)

Against this fear that infects every pleasure, the only solace comes from friendship. Vinyoli's poems abound in invitations to drink, to conversation, to a shared silence. Near the end of his last collection of poems, "Elegia de Vallvidrera", Vinyoli's final imperative is addressed to his friends:

Beguem el vi de la collita pròpia,
que sé com està fet; vaig veremar el vinyet

¹⁵ Joan Vinyoli, *Domini màgic* (Barcelona: Editorial Empúries, 1984), 19.

de ceps d'amor, d'anhel i de recança,
 mirant el mar, i vaig premsar el raïm
 amb peus de caminant, i va passar en el cup
 els dies justos.

Ara, amics, anem
 a celebrar l'àpat companyonívol;
 de res no cal parlar, que la guspira
 de l'esperit es manifesta als ulls
 i som un tot sabent-nos solidaris.

(*Passeig d'aniversari*, 43)

This poem illustrates Vinyoli's tendency, at the height of his poetic powers, to use concrete imagery to convey moral ideals. The food and wine which the poet, shortly before his death, invites his friends to share constitute a metaphor for his art, and for his life. As in his other conative poems, Vinyoli tells us both how to live, and how to make poetry.

In the works of his last decade, this lyric poet obsessed with death turns moralist. Using the words and images of ordinary life, “amb ronca veu”, he delivers his farewell admonition: both life and art must be approached lucidly, without regard for the consolations of pleasure or religion. But as we stare unflinchingly into the void, the presence of old friends around the table can help us bear the sight.

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