

Words in Freedom

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In Catalonia at the dawn of the twentieth century, Jacint Verdaguer was the most relevant public case to exemplify the poet's fight to defend his freedom. In contemporary Catalan literature, freedom of speech is sometimes understood by certain authors as a license to express ideas that otherwise would generally not be considered acceptable. Is this the freedom Europeans have fought for since the times of the Enlightenment? Is freedom the denial of any limits?

Keywords: literature and censorship / Catalonia / Catalan literature / freedom of speech / Verdaguer, Jacint / Bauçà, Miguel

UDK 821.134.1.09:351.751.5

Dans NYC tout disparaît d'un jour à l'autre, il n'y a ici que de bref passages.
(Hélène Cixous, *Manhattan: lettres de la préhistoire*, 2002)

Und kein Mensch weiß, wovon ich rede, wenn ich davon rede.
(Thomas Bernhard, *Die Ursache*, 1975)

There are more than a few intellectuals that try to invalidate any criticism of their points of view in the name of freedom of expression. "Everything is permitted" thus becomes the only valid slogan, and anyone that doubts it is directly exposed to ridicule. Literature is consequently in a situation that is diametrically opposed to its position in the past, when censorship could even alter the moral content of a novel. Shocking or sensational content is tolerated – at least insofar as it does not affect the foundations of power. However, it is not simply a matter of greater tolerance. Sheltering behind the independence of art, racism and incitement to violence are creeping into literature and the media, along with the feeling of a permanent yet undefined threat that could affect the happy world in which we live. The title – *Who's afraid of the truth?* – contains two elements that provide food for thought. The first is the concept of truth, and who the guardians of truth are. The second, perhaps less obvious, is the political exploitation of fear.

A grain of sand

The dwarfs in Velázquez's paintings are disturbing. They are men and women prevented from developing to the full by narrow-mindedness and the miseries of life. Adults the height of children with deep furrows on their faces, they are forced to smile, play the fool, and dress like youngsters; they are grotesque figures that show how the hand of power can transform. The painting *Las Meninas* (The Maids of Honour) is palpable proof of how artistic expression slips through all controls and – particularly if the painter works at the king's court – is able to tell the truth about repression, and to tell it, moreover, in such a way that we can still read and understand the message centuries later.

Lack of freedom is a brake on full development that forces people to live a truncated life – but can the imposed limitations break a person? “All the waves of the sea / cannot crush a grain of sand” (Verdaguer 11), wrote Jacint Verdaguer in the series of articles “En defensa pròpia” (In Self-Defence), which appeared in *La Publicitat* between 1895 and 1897.

“I have too much faith in the crowns that Jesus Christ places on *those that are faithful unto death* to believe in the crowns of this miserable life, which shed their leaves if they do not grow thorns” (Verdaguer 71), proclaimed Verdaguer in his article “Llorers espinosos” (Thorny Laurels, *La Publicitat*, 5 August 1897). His mastery of rhetoric reveals the classical, religious education he received. On 21 March 1886, at the opening of the refurbished monastery in Ripoll, the Bishop of Vic, Josep Morgades i Gili, placed a laurel wreath on his head and crowned him prince of poets. Shortly afterwards, the bishop, along with Verdaguer's patron, the Marquess of Comillas, began a deliberate, well-organized campaign to discredit him in public. However, the *captatio benevolentiae* of Verdaguer's articles was much more effective. He knew how to win the newspaper's readers – and consequently the people – over to his side using merely the weapons of a good poet. The laurels of fame are ephemeral. Every poet is booed one day or another, and their names pass and eclipse each other “like the waves of the sea”. His crown, however, soon not only lost its leaves but became a crown of thorns, according to Verdaguer. That Sunday of celebration in Ripoll he called Palm Sunday, which precedes the Passion. Poverty-stricken, pursued, and slandered, he hinted at a comparison with the figure of Christ. It is a rhetorical means to move readers and finally convince them with the implacable arguments of a good analyst. “In the cruel uncrowning, as in the crowning, the important thing, the only essential thing, was to please the marquess and make him happy. Behind his name they hid their actions then and still hide them

now, in the same way as the marquess also hides his actions behind them” (Verdaguer 72).

After his visit to the Holy Land, Verdaguer devoted body and soul to distributing financial assistance to the poor, which the Marquess of Comillas provided each month. The twenty-five or so families that received money when he began administering these alms soon increased to around three hundred, as he described in his first series of articles titled *Un sacerdot calumniat* (A Libelled Priest). Somewhat embarrassed, the marquess decided to dispense with his services. Immediately the Bishop of Vic sent him an invitation to retire to a place of retreat in order to recover “your health that is suffering from excessive dedication to your priestly duties”. Consequently, according to the marquess, *everyone* began to think that the prince of poets, the great national poet, the author of the two great epic poems *L’Atlàntida* (1877) and *Canigó* (1885), was suffering from mental illness. In order to diminish his influence, he was taken from Barcelona by force with the aid of the police and was installed in a place of retreat in the province; his books were confiscated. In addition, he was forbidden to say Mass, thus depriving him of his only means of earning a modest living. However, the poet was wise enough to make it known that “everyone” that considered him mad was only a friend of the marquess and needed the favours of a rich, influential man, just as the marquess needed the support of his admirers. This is the conclusion that Verdaguer openly set out in his article “Llorers espinosos” and it gained him the sympathies of a large number of readers of all classes.

Verdaguer’s confrontation with the bishop and with his patron finally became a struggle for freedom in the face of the injustice and oppression exercised by those in power. The poet’s funeral in 1902 was the scene of the largest demonstration that had ever taken place in Barcelona. In any event, in 1898, while the second series of articles was being published, Verdaguer accepted the mediation of the fathers at El Escorial and backed down in his attitude to the bishop. One month later, his permission to practise his priestly duties was restored.

“There is a God” was Verdaguer’s final, irrefutable argument. The truth exists. Beyond humankind is the *ultima ratio*, which assures man that by merely obeying the voice of his conscience he will do good. To disobey the bishop is to disobey God. Truth always triumphs.

Verdaguer’s conflict had a wider political background. The struggles of the various left-wing working-class movements and the violent actions of different anarchist groups were a constant factor in Catalonia during the first three decades of the twentieth century and resulted in implacable reactions from the authorities. The many complexities of the conflict

between freethinkers and conservatives culminated in the Spanish Civil War of 1936.

Verdaguer thought that social instability could only be combated with decisive actions based on Christian charity. His position, which preceded everything that happened in the twentieth century, combined the structures of traditional society with the intuitive feeling that more fundamental, revolutionary changes were on the way. It is not surprising that his truth – which God, according to Verdaguer, would sooner or later confirm – was so convincing for so many people. Verdaguer owed his popularity to his capacity for in-depth analysis of the times in which he lived, inside and outside the frontiers of his own language. In this fight with the censor it was certainly the poet that won.

What is most interesting from today's point of view is the poet's absolute conviction that he was in possession of the truth, that his conscience came from God, and that he was acting in accordance with an unalterable principle. Every theoretical reflection on censorship must start from this premise: who is the guardian of the truth? To invoke the name of God today, in the secularized societies of Western Europe, is not altogether convincing. However, even in the case of Verdaguer it is very clear that the fact that the Supreme Being controls his conscience is nothing more than a rhetorical weapon: Verdaguer used it to consolidate his position when he found himself in collision with those wielding power.

Jacint Verdaguer's articles, written in Catalan, were printed in a newspaper that was published entirely in Spanish, and he was the only contributor for whom an exception was made to respect the author's original language. Fifty years later an article such as "En defensa pròpia" would no longer be publishable in Barcelona, and not only for this reason; the persecution of the Catalan language after 1939 is a well-known fact. The complex, well-organized structure of Franco's repressive regime aimed not only to remove political opposition, but also to eliminate all linguistic and cultural diversity in Spain. After Franco's death, democracy returned to the country, but the experience of his dictatorship has meant that freedom of expression is still regarded with special respect. In any case, I would like to explore the limits of freedom and to show some very specific cases of persons that claim that everything is permissible.

Love for a dead neighbour

The abuse of media power and the use of facile oratory by demagogues are not unusual when people try to cling to positions of power. The Spain

of the Franco regime's well-known slogan “*una, grande y libre*” (one, great, and free), supported by the more reactionary sectors of Spanish society and with the thinly-veiled backing of the Church, is still an influential political option. However, it is also true that this incitement to hatred does not try to conceal its extremism and therefore arouses considerable antipathy.

It is even more curious to observe, however, that interpreting freedom of expression as a licence to give vent to the most repressed feelings – the sort of insults that the tongue hesitates to utter, knowing that it is saying something that should not be said – can also be seen in contemporary Catalan literature. Moreover, it is no less surprising to find that this option also has its enthusiastic followers. In the article “El pitjor dels insults” (The Worst of Insults) published in the newspaper *Avui* on 15 March 2007, Abel Cutillas (1976) explained that his book of aphorisms *Viure mata* (Living Kills) (Juneda: Fonoll, 2006) “tried to cross the red line that for us was the genocide of the Jews. One of the aims was to unmask the inevitable priest, zealous guardian of radical evil, in the hope that he would hurl the appropriate blasphemous insult at me. That was what actually happened, and I can therefore consider that I succeeded” (27).

With these words he defended himself against the criticisms provoked by the publication of a selection of his aphorisms in the magazine *Benzina*. In fact, the controversy arose from a single sentence, which is hard to read in any neutral way: “The Holocaust was, to a certain extent, a tribute to the Jews: it acknowledged them as the chosen people” (*Viure mata* 13). The first person to respond was the Israeli historian Idith Zertal (*La Vanguardia*, 9 August 2006), saying that there was nothing original in this idea because it contained precisely the essence of classic anti-Semitism. It should be noted that Idith Zertal is the author of the book *Israel's Holocaust and the Politics of Nationhood*, which takes a highly critical view of the politics of the state of Israel with regard to the memory of the Nazi extermination and calls for the atrocities to be understood in their historical context and not to be used to condition current politics.

Instead of unanimous rejection, though, the cynical views of the young philosopher were defended by the historian and director of UNESCO in Catalonia, Agustí Colomines (*Avui*, 2 September 2006), who labelled Zertal an “intellectual tourist”. This sparked a heated debate that even now, in the autumn of 2007, is still far from over. However, let us look at the first argument put forward by Colomines: because Zertal is unable to read Catalan, she is not qualified to offer an opinion on such a clear, simple sentence written – like all aphorisms – to be read as it stands. If we demand from the outset that a lyrical poem should be able to move us or

affect us on its own, as an independent text, why should we not expect an aphorism – the literary dart *par excellence* – to be able to do so too?

Cutillas' controversial sentence can be criticized without any requirement of knowing the original language in which it was written. It is quite clear, moreover, that the book contains a considerable number of other aphorisms that work thanks to the same mechanism of simple, vulgar provocation, of "trying to cross the red lines that every culture has and considers uncrossable" ("El pitjor" 27).

He argues that all that remains in this society of fluid values are radical evil and the guardians that, like the earlier priests, protect this boundary that makes it impossible to achieve complete freedom. Is this the freedom that we Europeans have dreamed of at least since the Enlightenment? The freedom of not recognising any limits?

The answer is a difficult one. In his article "El pitjor dels insults", Cutillas refers to the case of Hannah Arendt and says that she too was rebuffed when she presented Eichmann not as a bloody monster, which is what he was supposed to have been, but as a simple official incapable of reasoning, like any German father. Slavoj Žižek points out that considering that evil might be merely a question of bureaucracy is the weakest of Arendt's reflections. An independent subject, as postulated by Kant, *a priori* cannot say that he is simply obeying an order. If the subject is truly independent, he is able to resist any order imposed from above.

The subject's independence means going against ethics based on the Supreme Being. Freedom, seen in this way, does not recognize any authority, and tries to find a way of satisfying its own desires *unconditionally*. Nazism, on the other hand, is the perversion of this logic: everything, even the worst crimes, can be justified if they lead to the attainment of a supreme objective – the good of the entire nation. The independent subject may be unconditionally good or unconditionally bad, but this will always be as a result of his own decision and without wishing to qualify either the goodness or the badness by a superior purpose – which would serve as justification or as an excuse for everything he does. Independence means a radical break with all utilitarian ethics. To be absolutely responsible, to assume full liability for all one's actions: that is independence or freedom. Very seldom is freedom understood so unconditionally.

Anyone that denies man his freedom – the capacity for independence – is therefore someone that sees man as a cruel beast that needs the whip in order to conform. In this argument, man only abandons his worst instincts if there is good to guide him and he fears punishment enough to dare to explore the dark paths of his deepest nature. Precisely this supposition, that man is incapable of being independent and at the same time not perpetrat-

ing evil, is confirmed by those that confuse freedom with a situation in which everything can be said or done, particularly those things that are *ethically* dubious and therefore prohibited or proscribed. In this way, the free man is supposedly the man that dares to utter “the worst insults”.

We can find another example of the false interpretation of the meaning of freedom without going beyond Catalan literature. Miquel Bauçà's book *El canvi* (The Change, 1998) is “an exceptional, unclassifiable book that covers one by one all the great aspects of the human state” according to the blurb on the back cover of the 1998 edition. Summarising the exceptional nature of this book – and at the same time intervening indirectly in the controversy surrounding Cutillas' aphorism – Enric Casasses noted: “For Bauçà, the Spanish Civil War was worse than Hitler's massacres: many Jews were killed, but they were not exterminated; they are still around, and in positions of influence.” (“Prejudicis pobletans perversos” *El Quadern*, 29 March 2007, literary supplement of *El País* in Catalan). In this interpretation of history, according to Casasses, “The Poles, like the Jews, ended by winning the war” (8).

The Marquis de Sade, in the interpretation that first Lacan and then Žižek denounced as an impasse, seems to have really guided the hand of the artist that dared cross the boundaries in the way Miquel Bauçà does:

The Taj Mahal is a stone monument dedicated to pure lust. The Escorial is the same thing dedicated to the lust for repression: that is why it is shaped like an instrument of torture. . . . For example, much is heard about people that as children were the victims of sexual harassment and say it is terrible because when they grow up they themselves become the perpetrators. On the other hand, not a word is said about a child that has been forced to live in a diglossic situation. (*El canvi* 413)

The metaphor of the temple of lust is constructed with the *tertium comparationis* of “to rape”. The figurative and literal meanings are linked in order to flex the rhetorical muscles to the maximum. Does this comparison work? Are the real harassment and the *linguistic harassment* to which children are subjected in any way connected? Does it give rise to that invisible suture that brings two distinct terms together in a single, indivisible metaphor? This can be proved again with similar example from the same book:

For example, at school I sang [the Falange anthem] *Cara al sol* and other similar songs and it seemed as normal to me as it must seem to a child in Thailand to be sodomised by a tourist from Stockholm or Barcelona. (82)

The disgust I feel on reading this argument is not only because it makes light of appalling suffering but also because it is constructed as a false syllogism. Rhetoric, the poet's weapon, is used here for the purpose of distortion. Among weak readers or skimmers, an enthymeme is unfortunately just as effective as any well-constructed argument. This skill in constructing rhetorically false truths is in fact what is used by the most ferocious anti-Catalanists. We could say that the extreme defence of Catalanism by some people uses the same instruments as those used – historically and currently – to pursue and censure Catalan identity, which is a sad story indeed.

However, we must persevere with our analysis and show how the removal of any limits in these instances of such audacious insults and abuse is not *unconditional*. It is not a matter of statements by an independent person that says what he thinks, because he thinks what he thinks in order to obtain a type of satisfaction that will make him feel bigger than he is alongside the smallness of everyone else.

Bauçà's attempt to embrace the entire world in an eclectic dictionary is in itself a sign of grandiloquence, and what is more it is not original. *Dictionary of the Khazars* (1988) by Milorad Pavić was acclaimed worldwide. From the outset it seemed that the success of this unusual novel was due to its "innovative form"; that critics and readers alike admired it solely for its metafictional aspects because it could be read in a different way from traditional novels – in a multifaceted way. The context in which the book was written does not seem to have been of any relevance in its international success. Bosnia in 1992, however, removed all possibility of observing post-modern micro-truths as a mere theoretical subject. The paranoid vision of close neighbours was no longer a literary matter but the driving force behind an escalating violence that became increasingly obsessive and acute. As David Damrosch noted in *What is World Literature?* (2003), *Dictionary of the Khazars* is a precise, controversial intervention in the cultural debate of those uncertain times that culminated in the wars in Yugoslavia. A decontextualized reading of this work, on the other hand, transmits the fear instilled by all those that are different, and also accepts paranoia as a universal principle. Our neighbours could steal our possessions, make us disappear, and make us dissolve, like the metaphorical Khazars, in other cultures. This vision inherent in the text was widely applauded. It is these images, which function at a level not altogether articulated, that make the novel so attractive, rather than its narrative technique. The book owes its worldwide success to the fact that it justified, in metaphorical language, being afraid of others – something that would be unacceptable in an open, straightforward statement.

Reading of the silver copy, which Pavić allows for in his novel, should provide a different interpretation of this literary edifice fitted with many doors. The poet of a devastated world, Pavić has constructed the book with his own passions and prejudices, hoping that readers will find the way out that he is unable to follow or maybe unable even to see, suggests Damrosch.

In his 1943 speech, Goebbels asked the Germans to enter a *Totalkrieg* and suggested that they give up ordinary pleasures in exchange for the supreme joy of serving the motherland. This is the example that Slavoj Žižek uses in a conversation with Glyn Daly to try and make the Lacanian concept of *jouissance* clearly comprehensible. Awareness of having made the great sacrifice of renouncing what we had provides the greatest of pleasures.

In his book, Bauçà believes that the time has come for Catalonia to perform this penance: “*Penance. To do.* On these days, we Catalans should do penance. Give up going to the theatre, going dancing, etc.” (*El canvi* 415).

The pleasure of penance in this case is “to keep the object at a certain distance in order to sustain the satisfaction derived from the fantasy” (Daly114). In the case of Catalonia, the “little object *a*” is independence. The routine reference to this possibility has become an undefined idea that serves to keep at bay any real move towards attaining it. Thus, on the one hand, it prevents the goal from losing its status as an ideal and, on the other hand, the eternal promise that has yet to be fulfilled makes it possible to mobilize the masses and install political leaders that eventually, some day in the far distant future, will achieve the country’s full independence. However, to enable this impossible dream to work, it is also necessary to find a specific person that is responsible for it not having yet materialized; in other words, to create the figure of the Other that threatens *our* complete satisfaction. If we can remove that Other, our wishes will come true. The dream of a multicultural harmony that is the flagship of globalisation operates in much the same way. It is routinely invoked, but there are always intolerant, small-minded people that make it impossible for those of different colour or religion to be able to live together in the ideal community.

It is not easy to accept that the Other is really different. The answer, in fact, was already provided by Kierkegaard, as Žižek rightly points out. To love our neighbours we must forget about all their particularities and love them as abstract beings. It is only death, that great equalizer, that produces universality. This love for the dead neighbour totally excludes any specific identification – and so we end by loving the Other that we previously censured.

When the curtain of this hypocrisy of politically correct language comes down and people decide to call a spade a spade, the show may be even gloomier, as evidenced by these examples of a type of contemporary Catalan literature that brandishes the slogan “Anything goes.”

Words in freedom

I am spending a spring morning in 2007 walking near La Pedrera with Boris Pahor. He is ninety-four years old and has come to Barcelona for twenty-four hours, all on his own, just to give a talk to an audience that does not even fill the room. “It was not worth the trouble,” he tells me with a touch of self-deprecation. “The only ones that came to listen to me were elderly ladies that know it all. What can I tell them that they haven’t already seen and experienced? Systematic persecution of language, violence, and abuse of power – long before the war and the concentration camps described in his 1967 novel *Nekropola* [translated into English by Michael Biggins as *Pilgrim Among the Shadows*, Harcourt, 1995] – are also well known to them.”

When Pahor returned home from a tuberculosis sanatorium, where the war had continued a few more months for him (*Spopad s pomladjo* [Grappling with Spring], 1958), Trieste was separated from its surrounding area by a far from metaphorical iron curtain. It was then that he started to write, publish, and fight against the blindness of another regime, the communism of Tito’s Yugoslavia. His writings, published in Slovenian in the Trieste press, did not, he tells me, have any impact on the other side of the curtain. The obstinate silence – plus tight control of the media, zealous publishers, and intellectuals’ fear of very real reprisals – almost managed to snuff out the spirit of hope that his articles might have kindled. These stifling post-war years were a painful repetition of the anonymity of a prisoner whose name was exchanged – literally and unconditionally – for a number that was shouted in German, and only in German. From the first beating he endured he learned the notions of German that were to enable him to distinguish the sounds of a number that had replaced his persona.

Would the author of the article published in *Avni* on 15 March 2007 have understood the impotence of someone that is denied even his name? I fear not. He is incapable of realising the impact of political violence on one person, in the singular. Moreover, with that the young *thinker* adopts – without even realising it! – the awareness of a cogwheel. He only sees the machine, its implacable turning. His reflections are written down to be

read by “men” in the plural (the masculine plural, to boot); notes for the troops.

Those that have seen Claude Lanzmann’s film *Sboah* will remember one of the early scenes. An elderly man, one of the survivors the director discovered in Israel after years of research, is looking for traces of Treblinka in the vast Polish forests. All that has remained is a rectangular clearing, with edges that are too straight. When I read the second verse of Paul Celan’s poem “Engführung” – “Gras, auseinandergeschrieben.” – I find in it, in the full stop that ends this brief thought, a reflection of the clearings in Eastern Europe, where rainfall is abundant and the trees of oblivion grow strong.

The memory moulds our memories: the step that separates the immediacy of our experiences is the step that separates us from the past. The past is present within us – it cannot be otherwise – as a memory, and this memory has the structure of our discourse. We tell ourselves what has happened; we construct a story that is plausible and, if possible, acceptable to what we are. We are what we are because we see our image reflected in a mirror. We *identify* ourselves with the image in a mental mirror that shows us how we would like to be. What we are has a lot to do with the way we explain where we come from and the things the people of our ethnic group have done. All this is not merely a question of the past; it shapes our present face. The story of ourselves is a construction; in other words, we all take part in it. It only becomes a myth when nobody questions it.

In Catalonia, the Civil War and the dictatorship are the history not only of persecution but also of collaboration with the Franco regime and a resigned compliance. To assume responsibility as a people for our present face means not censoring our memory and also facing up to the unheroic features of the past. This is the way to ensure that history is history and not an apology for power based on amnesia (not to say directly on censorship), as Walter Benjamin denounced in his thesis on the concept of history.

Marinetti’s *Words in Freedom* and the name of his artistic movement – Futurism – promised us that we would be able to live without the past. Literary (or philosophical) faith in the new man also took root in the twentieth century as a political idea: versatile, able to mould himself to different ideologies. Nature knows only the future; it obliterates the Treblinka clearing and the villages in the forests of Kočevje: the Jews and the Germans. Our cosmopolitan, urban society shuns any thought of death and lives only in the future. “Europe, today, is full of hope, for it promises or proposes, witch-like, an even larger framework for satisfying our non-existential desires. Nobody will be able to resist it” (Bauçà 88). It is a layer of opaque

paint that stifles our conscience. We need to make an effort to think like independent persons. Perhaps our only consolation is Jacint Verdaguer: “All the waves of the sea / cannot break a grain of sand” (11).

Translated from Catalan by Joanna Martínez

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