

Seven Arguments in Defence of Poetry: Resisting the Madding Noise

Rafael Argullol

‘Seven Arguments in Defence of Poetry: Resisting the Madding Noise’ could easily have been titled ‘Seven Arguments in Defence of Utopia: Resisting so Many Platitudes’. In both cases, the ‘arguments’ are situations and attitudes, as well. The question of silence, of origin, of timelessness, of purification, of pause, of whimsy, of mirth. There is a mutual dependence between these elements, and I believe that they serve to define both the coordinates of the poetic fact and the intimation of a kind of rebellion or resistance.

I mention silence, first and foremost, because poetry is inextricably linked to silence. Even in the anatomical sense. Poetry is a verbal trickle that falls drop by drop from silence, defining the boundary of silence. It is important to say this now, at a moment when we find ourselves whirling around in a frenzy of noise.

If we were to envision a topography of writing, the literature of information – of the communications media – would be at one end of the spectrum, and poetry (as far as I understand the meaning of poetry) would be at the other end. Expository writing is necessarily linked to the noise of everyday life through an internal need, while poetry in fact expels itself from that noise, because its natural inclination is one of introspection and enquiry, far removed from the realm of information, which has become one of the most venerated goddesses in our modern world.

Because of this very essential nexus between poetry and silence, the classifications typically used to determine whether a poem is avant-garde or traditional suddenly become obsolete. As we all know, poetry is governed by rhythm and whimsy, but it is most definitively determined by something else: its dialogue with silence. Perhaps this sounds shocking in our day and age, but it really is nothing new. The intimate communion between poetry and silence dates back to poetry’s very own foundational myths, starting with the Orpheus myth, which incorporates all the phases of the poetic fact. Silence was one of Orpheus’s most fundamental qualities. As a poet and primordial musician he was the person who charmed the forest and silenced the beasts. Though he himself was occasionally subjected to great turmoil, he was

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nonetheless directly connected to the magic of silence. Traveller on a road to hell, victim of mutilation at the hands of the maenads, the resurrected hero Orpheus is song and silence.

In this sense, poetry is comprised of words that walk along the borderline, advancing along a razor's edge: on one side, there is the absolute; on the other side, nothingness. Decomposition and recombination, death and resurrection. The sound of poetry is a sound in the middle of silence. Poetry has always been this, and now more than ever in a civilization beholden so slavishly to superficial rhetoric. In the face of all this surface noise, poetry allows us a kind of immersion that was best described by Friedrich Hölderlin in the final verses of 'The Archipelago': 'Then in your deeps the tranquillity let me remember.'¹

The silence of the 'deeps' is deeply linked to the sound of our origins. Poetry is a return to our origins, but through a paradoxical perspective of evocation and nostalgia: our origins are standing before us. As such, poetry is a return to the homeland of the future, which implies a kind of circularity. In contemplating the word 'poet', Osip Mandelstam offers the best definition I have ever heard: the poet, he says, is the master of the echo.

The poet struggles with the various forms language takes on, in the hopes of trapping that primordial sound, but he must resign himself to its reverberation, its echo – something akin to what the scientists have said about the sound of the Big Bang as it continues to expand through the universe. Through the reverberations, we can discern the primordial sound, or at least have the sensation that we have captured it.

In a very similar way poetry must also confront this question of errant sound. As such, it can never be the absolute work of one author. It is more like a flow, a current that passes through time and space, finding interlocutors in different traditions, cultures and languages. The history of poetry is that of a circular chorus with many, many masks. The echo travels always. All it needs is an interpreter who knows how to listen.

The act of listening inevitably prompts expression. For this reason the echo redirects us, even if only temporarily, to our origins and to the vision of a second birth. Perhaps this was what Rainer Maria Rilke was talking about in the *Duino Elegies* when he talked about how he 'followed his roots into that violent source-world'.²

The circularity of poetry, which we witness here, shows us how poetry really has very little information to share with us. If we were to compile, in a computer file, the entire history of contemporary poetry, we would discover that the subjects are in fact quite few. Poetry is governed by a deep sense of timelessness – a concept that is diametrically opposed to the 'what's hot' culture so prized in our day and age.

Poetry is more vertical than horizontal. Its truth lies in its eternal need to doubt. For this precise reason, the knowledge we glean from poetry is so different from the knowledge offered by science. Scientific logic is cumulative and linear: each new step overpowers and surpasses the previous phase. This is not the case in poetry. The truths of Hölderlin or Rilke do not overpower or surpass the truths of Sophocles or Shakespeare. Of this we can be certain: an old poem is never older than a modern poem, and a modern poem is never more modern than an old poem.

In our modern age, we have grown accustomed to thinking of time within a cer-

tain structure, through an historicist, linear vision. This way of thinking, however, cannot be applied to the continual flow that sustains poetry. The topics are few: love, death, nostalgia, joy, the fleeting nature of things . . . topics that go round and round like a water-wheel whose central axis is the human condition. In this circular movement, the interlocutors engage in their dialogue through thousands of languages and cultures.

This continual process of returning, and most especially the vertical ambition of poetry, give rise to the purification of form that the poetic fact demands. Poetry's point of tension reminds me a great deal of one of the most admirable platonic myths ascribed to Socrates in *The Banquet*. For Socrates, Eros is not the god of the ancient beliefs, as his dialogue companions maintain. Eros is an intermediate force, a mediator between heaven and earth, a tension that exists in an uneasy balancing act between plenty and poverty, between Poros and Penia.

In the very same way, poetry is concerned with the most abundant experience of the human condition, but uses only the most austere means: the greatest wealth of expression requires the starkest austerity and economy of form. Before all else, man is a being who names, a being who shapes. The most distinguished human passion is that of creating names and shapes, and poetry is the distillation of this passion.

Because of the necessary tension between abundance and want, poetry is forever hovering at the boundaries of existence: the attempt to express the inexpressible is what makes it an evocative craft. Poetry wishes to evoke the experience of love, of mystical union, of death, but in this very evocation poetry inevitably brushes against the inexpressible, as if its secret vocation were that of the tightrope-walker who crosses the void, filled with hope. Paul Celan was able to synthesize this extreme tension in five fleeting verses: 'A Nothing/we were, are, and shall/remain, flowering:/ the Nothing-, the/No One's-Rose'.³

Slowness. Pause. The purification of form in poetry is a spatial experience that finds a correlation in a different temporal experience. Poetry drastically alters the underside of time. The vertigo flows through slowness, pause. And if Mandelstam considered the poet to be the 'master of the echo', Baudelaire would have seen him as a 'master of memory'. When they invoked the Muse, the Greeks were not terribly far removed from this notion.

Nevertheless, the poet can only be the master of memory as long as the memory is the master of the poet. This involves a struggle and a kind of grace. The poet struggles in the labyrinth of the memory trying to find his heart and his way out. And so he follows the path laid out for him by language. He listens to words and he walks with words. But he needs the grace of memory in order to survive.

Memory is selective, aristocratic, arbitrary, revealing itself only to those who pursue it with intensity. Only then does it concede the grace that is vital to poetry. To achieve this grace a man must listen to the world in a different way. Vertigo and noise are deafening. Only the ear that is lying in wait knows how to listen through the thunder. Only the ear that pauses can listen to men and catch a glimpse of the shapes to come. This experience of pause involves both the poet as well as the reader.

Giacomo Leopardi, in his poem 'The Infinite', offers a marvellous description of the essence of this pause, most especially in the intermediate verses, when the poetic

voice, facing the infinite night, feels overwhelmed by the sensation of uncertainty and apprehension. Precisely at this moment of peril we witness the emergence of the redeeming trait exercised by the mastery of memory.

The sound of the wind that the conjuror hears creaking through the branches of the trees is what leads to the transfiguration of the annihilating beauty of the infinite. When he compares the two sounds – the sound of the infinite and the sound of the wind – the poetic ‘I’ travels through the past and the present, through dead matter and living matter, somehow transforming everything into one throbbing organism. And what was overwhelming now becomes pleasurable: ‘And my thought drowns in immensity, and shipwreck is sweet in such a sea.’⁴

This leopardian proposal leads us directly into the question of whimsy that is present in the background of poetry. Poetry can be everything that it is because it is also a game. A very serious game but a game nonetheless. A game of the imagination so beautifully placed in bold relief by Leopardi: the thing that surpassed rational understanding was transfigured by the imaginative game.

Aristotle perceived this early on in the *Poetics*, when he declared that poetry was superior to history simply because the latter catalogues what has happened (what *was*) while the former encompasses what might be, could have been, or once was a possibility. Poetry is a game of possibility. Any possibility at all. And since it is a game, poetry reflects what lies at the deepest level of all, in silence, and elevates it to levity and flight. In this way all that is poetic breaks into our lives in the form of sensual pleasures and a heightened appreciation of sensitivity, and the idea exists only through sensation, and depth only manifests itself in the waves that break on the water’s surface.

One poem that reflects this game with a mysterious kind of complexity is ‘The Cemetery by the Sea’ by Paul Valéry. In this poem, the man looks out at the sea that is his home and is caught in the spell of the motionless noon. The sun, falling vertically on the sea, casts its absolute whiteness upon the world. Existence is spellbound, immobile. And man inhabits that immobility with an obliterating fascination. He cannot survive this fascination.

To escape and live, man needs shadows, nuance. Absolute contemplation destroys everything. Action becomes essential if one wants to live fruitfully in contemplation. For this reason Valéry introduces the symbolic figure of the swimmer, the man who breaks the spell by acting, by crossing the horizon line of sensation. As he glides through the water when he swims, the swimmer rescues the spellbound soul who contemplates the noonday. This vertical midday light leads to revelation, and it is beautiful but uninhabitable. As the hours wane, the colours and the nuances fan out and open wide. Life opens. We need the body, we need the senses if we want to perceive the spirit. We need the vicissitudes of the body if we want the spirit to grow.

This is poetry’s favourite game: to exhort the man to inhabit the world in a different way. Orpheus was killed and quartered but when he was made whole again, he lived a *vita nuova*. Poetry forces us to peer beyond the frontier and to return changed. This is the meaning of every *vita nuova*, from the age of Dante to our time. In the name of this capacity for moral rejuvenation and spiritual resurrection, I reclaim the attribute of all that is gleeful. The poetic impulse resides in all that is gleeful. A different disposition.

Goethe, in an epigram, once wrote 'If the eye were not sun-like it could not see the sun; if we did not carry within us the very power of the god, how could anything god-like delight us?'⁵ We are able to celebrate all that we see because it also resides inside of us; and we can celebrate all that resides inside of us because we recognize it in the shapes of the world. Poetry is the mediator of this process. It allows us to catch a glimpse of utopia, it grants us the gleeful spirit of aspiring to a *vita nuova* without being slaves to eternal procrastination.

In another epigram Goethe wrote about this: 'Tell me, how do you live? I am alive, and even if man were given hundreds and hundreds of years to live, I would still want a tomorrow exactly like today.'⁶

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Translated from the Spanish by Kristina Cordero

Notes

1. From Hölderlin (1988).
2. From Rilke's *Elegies* (2000).
3. From *Poems of Paul Celan* (2002).
4. 'The Infinite' by Leopardi (1966).
5. From Goethe's *Selected Verse* (1982).
6. This is my own translation: I looked through several volumes of Goethe's verse and never found this quote anywhere in the Epigrams or Venetian Epigrams.

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