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## Incidències

Poesia catalana i esfera pública

editat per Elisabet Gayà, Maria Ruiz, Merce Picornell

# Capturing the Moment

## Identity and the Political in Narcís Comadira's Poems

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**Abstract** Narcís Comadira (Girona 1942 – ) started his studies in the monastery of Montserrat in the sixties but abandoned his religious career and became one of the youngest Catalans to join the then newly born Assembla de Catalunya the activities of which extended over the period 1971-1977, escaping the claustrophobia of Franco's Spain by going abroad as a Spanish Lector at Queen Mary's College in London between 1971 and 1973, and thus discovering new ways of thinking and living. This paper explores Comadira's personal, political and poetic development from 1970 to the years of the Spanish transition to Democracy.

**Keywords** Narcís Comadira. Catalan poetry. Spanish transition to democracy. Catalan nationalism. Assembla de Catalunya.

The Catalan poets who reached maturity during the period of the transition to Democracy constitute a very complex generation of writers who seem riddled with contradictions. They built their idea of place during the late 60s and early 70s, left behind the *realismo social*, assimilated some of the elements of the Beat and Hippy movements, discovered popular culture, enjoyed the *Nova Cançó*<sup>1</sup> and witnessed Franco's last wave of repression.

The development of their views, maybe not so much with regard to the poetic scene but rather as catalysts for their individual take on Catalan identity was also influenced by the modernising intentions outlined by Popes John XXIII and Paul VI during the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965); the events of May 68 in Paris (the general strike, student protests

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<sup>1</sup> As explained by Bernard, Bugaya and Figuerola: «La Cançó catalana, nascuda els anys seixanta i desenvolupada al llarg d'aquella dècada i la següent, va representar un revulsiu important per desvetllar consciències i per a acostar un nombre destacat de persones a un fenomen que, ultrapassant l'estricta àmbit de la producció i la interpretació artística, va saber canalitzar les ànsies de llibertat, en sentit ampli, d'un poble que la tenia prohibida» (1999, p. 48).

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and revolt against modern consumer and technical society); the World oil crisis of 1973, and the recession that followed it.

Of critical importance within the Catalan domain, one has to single out the Tancada de Montserrat (a public event that took place on 12 December 1970 in which a small group of these intellectuals locked themselves up in the Monastery of Montserrat near Barcelona in protest for the Burgos Trial when several members of the terrorist group ETA were condemned to death). The international impact of their action was such that some of the sentences were commuted. That success has been regarded as a key point of inflection and direct precursor to the constitution on 7th November 1971 of the *Assemblea de Catalunya* (a clandestine organization made up by 300 people from all backgrounds and social classes, illegal political parties and Catalan workers' unions) to which Joan Benet attributes the prestige that Catalonia acquired during the later years of the dictatorship, and which led to the recognition of its nationalist rights by the Adolfo Suárez Government (Batista, Playà 1991, p. 16). Characteristic of the artists, intellectuals and politicians involved in these events was their active participation in the fight for the defence of Catalan culture, which was supported both by a significant proportion of the general Catalan population and a small but not negligible section of the most politically-engaged sectors of the Church (Bernard, Burgaya, Figuerola 1999, pp. 13-17), to the extent that: «La reivindicació dels drets nacionals catalans i la lluita per la defensa de la llengua catalana i dels signes d'identitat nacional apareixen en gairebé tots els manifestos i proclames redactats llavors» (1999, pp. 18-19).

Narcís Comadira (Girona 1942) started his studies in the monastery of Montserrat in the sixties with the intention of becoming a priest, but later decided to abandon this career to become one of the young Catalans to join the then newly born *Assemblea de Catalunya* the activities of which extended over the period 1971-1977.<sup>2</sup> However, amongst these, Comadira was also fortunate enough to temporarily escape from the claustrophobia of Franco's Spain by going abroad and, like most of his close friends, was a Spanish Lector at Queen Mary's College in London between 1971 and 1973:

When in 1971 Professor José Manuel Blecua recommended me for the post of *lector*<sup>3</sup> at Queen Mary College, he was bestowing one of the best gifts I have ever received and for which I can never thank him enough.

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<sup>2</sup> The *Assemblea* reflected the changes in the economic situation of Spain by the time the first generation of children born after the civil war, like Comadira and his peers, reached the age of entry to university (Bernard, Burgaya, Figuerola 1999, p. 10).

<sup>3</sup> A teaching assistant in Spanish language and culture.

At that crucial time for Catalonia and for Spain, in the last - but no less bloodily destructive - dying throes of the Franco regime, the opportunity to get out of the country for a couple of years was immensely fortunate. Especially the chance to go to England and, on top, to be able to spend the two years in London, at that time enjoying a very special phase of its glory. (Comadira 2000, pp. 4-5)

In London and through the academic contacts at Queen Mary, Comadira got to know Juan Antonio Masoliver. At the same time Salvador Oliva (who knew him and his wife-to-be Dolores from Girona) was lector in Nottingham.<sup>4</sup> He also met Vicente Molina Foix who had been living in London for 5 or 6 years (until October 1970) but by then had taken up a 3-year job as a Spanish Lector in Oxford.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the number of youngsters of this generation who discovered freedom and were exposed to new ways of living was considerable. Nonetheless, despite having been born during the dictatorship and received Francoist education, when they turned to writing, many of them chose to write in Castilian while a few, including Comadira, decided to write in Catalan. The literary critic Jaume Aulet points out that, from 1970 (year of the Primer festival popular de poesia) onwards, there had been a substantial growth in the publication of books by young poets, such as Pere Gimferrer's first book in Catalan *Els miralls*, Joan Brossa's *Poesia rasa*, Francesc Parcerisa's *Homes que es banyen*, and three books by the not-so young J.V. Foix. In just one year, 1971, Vicent Andrés Estellés published three books. However, for Aulet, 1972 was by far the most significant year with the publication of Gimferrer's *Hora foscant*, Narcís Comadira's *El verd jardí*, Francesc Parcerisas' *Discurs sobre matèries terrestres* and, of course, the unexpected suicide of Gabriel Ferrater, who had been a powerful influence over the Girona group (Comadira, Oliva, etc.), Francesc Parcerisas and Marta Pessarrodona since the 60s but who became every young poet's idol after his death (Aulet 1997, pp. 139-151; Roser i Puig 2000).<sup>6</sup>

In fact, just before Comadira left Catalonia, Gabriel Ferrater had given him advice and «stressed the importance of a period of residence abroad, because, he said, it's a way of getting rid of home-grown tics» (Comadira

4 He was followed by Marta Pessarrodona who, after the suicide of her companion, Gabriel Ferrater, needed to get away from Barcelona and disconnect from the Catalan scene. By the time she got back to Barcelona a revolution had taken place at Seix Barral and Joan Ferraté (Gabriel's brother) was the Director. She went to work for him, they quarrelled, and she left.

5 Félix de Azúa & Julián Marías also went to Oxford as *lectores* after him.

6 *La llibertat i el terror* (1981) collects the poetry written by Comadira between 1070 and 1980. The books included are: *Amic de plor...* (1970), *El verd jardí* (1972), *Les ciutats* (1976), *Un passeig pels bulevards ardents* (1974 & 1976), *Desdesig* (1976), *Terra natal* (1978), and *Àlbum de família* (1980).

2000, p. 5) and, in agreement with his master, Comadira was willing to explore his own poetic voice and develop beyond the criticisms that he was getting in Catalonia because of his poeting preferences:

In Catalonia, the dreadful school system and the whole atmosphere of clandestine struggle had induced young poets to confuse a poem with a denunciatory pamphlet. Everything to do with tradition was set aside, through ignorance or through a distorted scale of values, and everything that entailed craftsmanship was ruled out, through incompetence, urgency or a misconceived modernity. Traditional verse forms, prosody, rhyme were looked upon as bourgeois and conservative if not thoroughly reactionary, at a time when to be reactionary amounted almost to being a fascist. (Comadira 2000, p. 5)

This pigeon-holing was not surprising if one considers some of Comadira's poems from *Amic de plor* (1970), such as the sonnet starting «Só cavaller sense cavall ni ase» (Comadira 1981, p. 20) obviously inspired by Ausiàs March, or the two poems under the title «Dificultats d'ofici» (Comadira 1981, pp. 26-27), which make direct reference to Josep Carner and J.V. Foix as masters, or such as «A Josep Carner» (Comadira 1981, pp. 62-63) and «Per en Gabriel Ferrater» (Comadira 1981, p. 84), from *El verd jardí* (1972). However, he personally regarded poems as «depend[ing] upon a personality and a moment in time: upon a lyric self (which is always changing), and upon its circumstances (which are always transitory)» (Comadira 2000, p. 4), as can be seen in «Jo»:

Sóc mascle i gironí. Mitja estatura.  
Cabell castany, ullets de marrec trist.  
Romàntic una mica, cosa dura  
en el temps que vivim. Prou ho tinc vist.

Mozart més que cap m'entabana,  
i, en versos Catalans Josep Carner.  
Crec en l'amor, la taula quan tinc gana,  
els plaers de la carn, que em moriré.

I si a estones em vaga de fer versos  
i confegeixo quatre mots dispersos,  
no ho faig pensant en un darrer sentit,

que no vull fer carrera de poeta.  
Lletraferit de la A a la Z  
en llengua fosca i en país petit!  
(Comadira 1981, p. 73)

It is evident that at this stage and regarding the crafting of the poem, Comadira coincided with his friend Salvador Oliva in favouring «metrical discipline and traditional forms, whereas Parcerisas and Pessarrodona were, to quote a comment by Gabriel Ferrater, ‘rather devil-may-care about prosody’» (Comadira 2000, p. 5). However, like the other three poets of his generation, especially after their trips to the UK, he considered that he was writing English poetry: that is, that his inspiration came from the British places he had visited and from the English and American writers that he had read (Comadira 2000, p. 5). The outcome of this exposure produced poems such as «Les ciutats», which Comadira would regard as «a manifesto» and «a carefully structured text, with strict metre, based on something real, which could be either contemporary or historical, and which would serve to formulate an observation with a moral import» (Comadira 2000, p. 7).

## LES CIUTATS

He llegit que Morosini,  
general ambaixador  
de Venècia, volgué  
endur-se les escultures  
del frontó del Partenó.

Va fer muntar una bastida,  
hi va fer grimpar els esclaus  
i, en el moment més difícil,  
algun puntal va fallar.  
Caigueren homes i estàtues.

Decebut, el general  
va abandonar el seu projecte.  
Ell les volia senceres.  
Els trossos allà escampats  
varen servir per fer cases.

Molts savis han meditat  
sobre el sorprenent misteri  
de poder crear bellesa  
a partir d'un bloc de marbre.  
Pocs sobre el camí contrari:

treure un carreu escairat  
del tors d'algun déu antic,  
convertir en grava una Venus,

poder trepitjar llambordes  
fetes de membres sagrats...

Així s'han fet les ciutats:  
construïdes lentament  
amb pedres que ahir van ser  
vides humanes: amors,  
sofriments que ningú no recorda.  
(Comadira 1981, p. 92)

Indeed, as the poet declares, «the poem discloses the contradiction between art and life, or, at least, discrepancies between them» but his intention is also to show that «every single life, if one's reading is attentive and sensitive (something which in itself is a formalizing operation), can be converted into art and into beauty» (Comadira 2000, p. 7). The traditional form is therefore in contrast with the poem's modernity, which «resides in acceptance of the smashing up of art - the statues - if the broken pieces can be put to the positive service of 'real life'» (Comadira 2000, p. 7). This concern became a constant in all of Comadira's production from those early days, and throughout his entire artistic career, as his paintings have always been poetic and his poems have always celebrated Art. As he explains, the conundrum is the following:

To make eternal, that is to make perfect, something that is transitory almost by definition, such as the beauty of a young body, to give it definitive final form, can only be achieved through death. Life is never perfect; only art can be; but art is never alive. The problem is insoluble. (Comadira 2000, p. 8)

But the observation of everyday life inspired some of his most charming compositions, such as «London NW3», «London SW10», «Interior» or «Doctor's garden», even though in this case, several experiences were fused in order to write it.

#### DOCTOR'S GARDEN

Set iardes per set iardes.  
La terra humida i negra.  
La tan sabuda gespa.  
L'esquelet d'uns rosers.

Sota el vidre entelat  
del mínim hivernacle,  
dos geranis esqualids.

Sis mesos de tenebra.

Tot moll i endormiscat  
dins d'una llum opaca.  
Els cucs a sota terra  
i les lleus teranyines.

Cirurgià, quan podes,  
unes gotes de sang.  
Únic vellut per ara  
al teu somni de pètals.  
(Comadira 1981, p. 112)

His early interest in the metropolis would develop fast and become increasingly potent with its culmination in the most ambitious piece of his English experience: the tribute to Gabriel Ferrater «Un passeig pels bulevards ardents», a poem which, according to the author «was a kind of poetry which broke with the basic tenets of realism, which was shot through with a mood of as-it-were visionary inebriation, full of direct or indirect quotations, the sort of poetry that Gabriel Ferrater would not have liked at all» (Comadira 2000, p. 16), but which embodied the young poet's new-found personal poetic voice. A journey on the London underground which drives the reader from the real into the subjective city, the poem is highly intertextual with references to Nietzsche, Eliot, Baudelaire, Dante, Montale, Jordi de Sant Jordi, Yeats, Apollinaire, Rosalia de Castro, Melville, the prophet Isaiah and the architectural historian Nikolaus Pevsner; it has visual allusions to Piero della Francesca, Mantegna, Seurat and even musical links to Bach and Schubert.

In contrast to life in London, which to him had become the quintessential example of the modern metropolis (O'Byrne 2014, pp. 72-86), by the time Comadira returned to Spain (to Barcelona to be precise), he faced a dark and dirty city, which had hardly experienced any meaningful changes. Nowhere is this clearer than in the closing stanzas of the «Notes per a una oda sentimental a Barcelona» (1976):

Ciutat hostil de tants moments perduts,  
d'ambicions, d'il·lusions cremades,  
ciutat hospitalària, dorment,  
de dies morts amb hores encantades.  
Seràs fidel a antics neguits ardents?  
Fes possible per tots una esperança.  
(Comadira 1981, p. 133)

Everywhere he found reminders of uncontrolled underdevelopment and



thus he realized that the ideas of counter-culture that he and his contemporaries wanted to import into Catalonia needed to be duly adapted in order to fit their new scenario – for a full study of the evolution of the perception of the city of Barcelona, refer to Guillamon (2001). Indeed, the oil crisis had sent Spain into a period of stagnation out of which the country only started to emerge around 1976. Its effects (the re-evaluation of community life, the hippy utopia, etc.) made young writers critical towards the world around them and, in literature, with Franco's death many had fallen into silence and introspection. Barcelona had thus become a shell in which the poor, the socioeconomic outsiders and the displaced suffered (Keunen, De Droogh 2014, pp. 124-138). In these early stages of the transition to democracy memoirs, both in prose and poetry, became a kind of refuge for many and indirectly boosted support for the Assembla de Catalunya, which organised demonstrations by thousands of people on the first two Sundays of February 1976 and on the 11th September (the Catalan national day) of the same year, proving the viability of a true coexistence of the totality of Catalonia's population, no matter its origin. But between 1979 and 1983 recession questioned once again Spain's ability to evolve, grow and succeed as the modern nation that everyone had dreamt. Similar *desencanto* was felt in terms of ideology both at a national and regional level and considerably affected the self-perception of writers, hence the negative attitudes that sometimes transpire from their public pronouncements. It needs to be borne in mind that, as Vilarós states, «es lógico suponer que las bases ideológicas y sociales que posibilitaron la tranquila transición política española estaban ya incubándose en los años del tardo-franquismo» (1998, p. 7). Indeed, the general attitude of accommodation and caution frustrated many:

Parecía que la muerte del dictador debería de haber dejado en principio vía libre a una práctica de realización de signo más o menos marxista pero, como bien sabemos, no ocurrió así. El colapso de los grandes proyectos utópicos de izquierda forma parte del gran pacto del olvido, siendo el momento de la muerte de Franco el que inicia de forma radical un presente nuevo: después del 75, españolas y españoles nos dedicamos con pasión desesperada a borrar, a no mencionar. Por consiguiente, en el período de la transición política de la dictadura a la democracia la sociedad española, aun votando masivamente el partido socialista, rechazó los presupuestos ideológicos dolorosa y pacientemente incubados en la rea franquista por los sectores izquierdistas. (Vilarós 1998, p. 8)

As for the specific case of Catalonia, and in the context of a desire for a smooth transitional process, nationalism took a much more conservative stance than that expected by the young generation. Unsurprisingly, therefore, some of the poets of the 70s and 80s, ashamed of the Spanish

Civil war, chose to either go along with the *Pact of Oblivion* and forget the misery they and their families had gone through, eagerly look outside Spain for their identification and for alternative ways of life, or remain in the country feeling unhappy and unwilling to be either Spanish or Catalan. Comadira's collection *Desdesig* (1976) could be regarded as a clear example of the subtle expression of intimate angst felt by our poet at the time. Unlike other poets, Comadira did not show much interest in vindicating the totality of Catalan literary heritage (almost destroyed by the censors), and chose instead to focus on reclaiming just a handful of poets he admired, such as Verdaguer, Foix, Carner, Riba and Ferrater, criticising others like Espriu and Pere Quart, and professing a preference for foreign mainly European writers whom he and his peers regarded as their true inspirational sources.

Thus Comadira's poetry came to be regarded as representative of the consciousness of the moment in which it was written and perceived as being fed by his personal selection of Catalan literature. What he said is that he tried «d'aprendre l'ofici de la mà dels últims grans mestres de la poesia catalana» (Comadira 1976, p. 2), that is, Josep Carner, J.V. Foix and Gabriel Ferrater and, because of his acknowledged interest in both «l'obra ben feta» (the work well done) and classical verse forms (Bou 1980, pp. 116-127), became connected to Noucentisme. However, he also pointed out that «m'agrada desconcertar. Hi frueixo. I més en aquest país de botiguers, on, per tant, tot ho volen tenir ben arreglat en els calaixos i amb les etiquetes ben posades. Com que a casa érem botiguers, sé de què va la història» (Comadira 1982, p. 26). Thus, it would be fair to say that his eclectic choice of masters has rendered him impossible to classify and that his great interest in stylistic, rhetoric and poetic forms (linked to his reputation as a traditionalist), coexists with the disconcerting content of some of his poems such as «Disset lires per un poeta avantguardista», from *Verd jardí* (1972), addressed to Pere Gimferrer.

Another way in which Comadira extended his desire to shock was through his attitude towards Catalan writers who wrote in Castilian and young Spanish writers in general. The years of dictatorship had damaged the always fragile relationship between Catalan intellectuals and those from other parts of Spain and thus the amount of contact that poets had with their Catalan contemporaries who chose to write in Castilian or with writers from outside the Catalan countries varied according to each individual. In their early poetic careers, the two poets from Girona, Narcís Comadira, Salvador Oliva and a few others, were much influenced by the guidance offered to them by José María Valverde (one of their lecturers at Barcelona University) who at their request gave them a series of workshops on poetry writing. However, whilst Comadira soon became acquainted with both Catalan and Spanish-speaking poets in the group and was willing to meet Spanish writers from elsewhere (he was especially

close to Carlos Ricardo Barnatán who lived in Madrid), Oliva consistently refused to have anything to do with those who did not use Catalan as their poetic medium.<sup>7</sup> This duality of attitudes was, in fact, quite widespread, but there was also a shared feeling that bridges would have to be built at some stage in their democratic future, and some fraternal and conciliatory initiatives were soon taken.

In this respect, a poet who personally made a sizeable contribution to the attempts at meeting with the others by hosting unstructured friendly gatherings in his home in Barcelona was Francesc Parcerisas. These meetings were regularly attended by Comadira, Vallcorba, Joan Maria Puigvert and Vicente Molina Foix and had particular significance, especially because they resulted in a much remembered further gathering in the home of Carlos Ricardo Barnatán in Madrid where they were joined by Julián Marías<sup>8</sup> and Luis Alberto de Cuenca.

On a more formal scale, meetings with writers from outside Catalonia also took place at big foreign events. In 1976, for instance, there was the celebration of the Biennale de Venecia collective exhibition «España. Vanguardia Artística y Realidad Social. 1936-1976» where Comadira participated giving a paper on «La poesia catalana jove» and where he coincided with Carlos Barral, Manuel Vázquez Montalbán,<sup>9</sup> Joaquim Molas and Guillermo Carnero.<sup>10</sup>

Characteristically, Comadira's view that «Els conceptes de Família, Estat, Pàtria em semblen rentats de cervell» (Busquets 1978, p. 1) would not limit itself to his public speeches but would also find poetic expression in *Terra natal* (1978), a collection of poems written from 1973 to 1977, built around the central idea of the mother land as a highly complex notion that challenges politico-sentimental stereotypes. Indeed, from the start of this collection, the reader is faced by a questioning of the self and of the feeling of belonging to a fragile and precious land. This is introduced by means of an initial quotation by J.V. Foix which sets the framework for the explora-

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7 Comadira also got to know Félix de Azúa through Gabriel Ferrater, who found him some translation work in Seix Barral, where the former was working. This contact then extended to Carlos Barral and Jaime Gil de Biedma.

8 Julián Marías used to translate poetry from Catalan into Spanish after living in Barcelona with Mercedes de Azúa for some time. He later moved to Madrid and kept in touch with his Catalan friends for life.

9 This contact was the product of a good review he wrote on Comadira's *Amich de plor*. He worked for *Triunfo*, was very politicised, communist and mainly friendly with the *pijos*, as they were known.

10 Carnero was a close friend of Jaime Gil de Biedma and Pere Gimferrer because he had attended the Col·legi Sant Ramon de Penyafort in Barcelona for a while. In the late eighties Antoni Marí, who knew Comadira's girlfriend, Dolors Oller, invited them both to stay with him in Eivissa where they were introduced to Antonio Colinas.

tion which Comadira is going to undertake in the poems that are to follow:

De quin secà sóc hereu? I en la ment  
 Debat amb mi la sort que em fa clement  
 I em crec l'epíleg d'una història feta.  
 (Comadira 1981, p. 172)

Here, the sense of belonging to a tradition or history and the doubt of whether one has any ability to change anything are key. Indeed, the first wave of counter-culture that started in California reached Barcelona in the early 70s (graffiti, revolutionary slogans, popular music and cinema clubs) and brought to the fore a new wave of cultural and political subversion which encompassed artistic manifestations ranging from the avant-garde revival to the return to the above mentioned Noucentista formalism. The influence of these cultural novelties is present in varying quantities in the work of the poets of the transition addressed here and very subtly evidenced (by comparison to his public declarations) in Comadira's own. Accepting of Foix's challenge, Comadira starts his intellectual quest with some sad observations of his own, including a further, weighty question regarding not only his personal ability and responsibility, but that of the poets of his generation as a whole:

#### PREGUNTA

Derrota és la meva herència,  
 Confusió el meu present,  
 Tristesa tot el pervindre.

Amb tot encara em pregunto:  
 podré complir la lloança?

This poem therefore becomes a summary of the fear and confusion experienced by Comadira and his peers as they saw the end of the dictatorship, the start of the transition towards an unknown democracy and the existential but unavoidable choice of continuing to sing the glories of their nation in such hard times. This theme will become the centre of Comadira's *raison d'être* and will find its true expression in the poem that gives the book its title «Terra natal» as it combines the sense of tiredness and sorrow with ideas of death and rebirth.

Passos somorts, bressol de somnis lassos.  
 Un goig pesat nat d'imatges serenes  
 m'arriba dolç, calent d'antigues penes  
 i em renova la sang flonja dels passos.

Arbres de dol que són recer dels marbres.  
Un immòbil turó en el clam i en l'herba  
dóna a l'aire un tresor de llum i el serva.  
La tarda cau entre els meus ulls i els arbres.

Trist, fatigat, per daurades boirines,  
dic al turó que ara apareix, gement,  
que em sigui pàtria i acolliment

Ara que, amb sal de vastituds marines,  
la carn em dol, amarga, del teu mal,  
morta del tot, per tots Terra Natal.  
(Comadira 1981, p. 177)

In a sense, as Comadira has often explained, with the death of the dictator the fight for the preservation of the utopian Mother Land was over and what followed was necessarily different, less clear and less reassuringly ideal. Nonetheless, and even though in this case the repression is still very close, a feeling of hope was already rising from the destruction, as can be seen in «Mis capitales años desterrados», written by Comadira in homage to Rafael Alberti, which portrays a collective feeling of suffering and shared resilience.

Sempre perduts per perdudes arbredes,  
debanem la madeixa del dolor,  
cent esbarzers ens punxen, sense flor.  
Anem com cecs enmig de boires fredes.

No hem viscut i ni l'oblit ens deixen.  
Són impures les cendres d'aquest foc  
que ens consum. Els camins no van enlloc.  
El vent és un manyoc de veus que es queixen.

Terra Natal, oh dolça Catalunya,  
no-pàtria del cor, exiliats  
vivim dins el teu clos: tu, terra llunya,  
  
conreu eixut que tots els mals escretllen.  
Altes Muntanyes del No-res ens vetllen  
i persistim, absurds i descarnats.  
(Comadira 1981, p. 178)

The sense of wasted youth and patriotic pride is evident even when described through the conscious modification of the best known of Catalan

exile songs, «L'emigrant». In an interesting game with the redefinition of Catalan nationalism and the constraints imposed by the sonnet form, Comadira, still unable to shake off the nostalgic image of the «Dolça Catalunya», transforms the «Pàtria del meu cor» from those who were in exile, into the «no-pàtria del cor» of those who were locked inside the country «Exiliats vivim dins el teu clos», and who felt just as (if not more) dispossessed, giving the impression that the ideal Catalonia is further away from those inside than from those outside.<sup>11</sup> The retention and metamorphosis of the sounds from the original song are examples of the kind of successful mastering of form which Comadira has so often defended. This is mixed, however, with a very 60s and 70s 'L'Estaca'-style ending, «i persistim, absurds i descarnats», even when the sense of the unknown is so foreboding.

One could say that *La llibertat i el terror* represented a personal redefinition of Catalan identity which, as we have seen, was not finalised. To the poet, the end of Francoism brought a feeling of tiredness; a loss of unity in the fight, and a great fear for the unknown. What was in store, like the next book in Comadira's poetic quest was an *Enigma* and, as he writes in one of the first poems of the collection, amongst the rubble is where the seed for new dreams was to grow: «Entre la runa, la llavor dels somnis» (last two lines of the poem «1939», Comadira 1981, p. 134).

In fact, Comadira's hopes were shared by many in the Catalonia of the time and, in 1981, as one of the first actions taken by the newly recovered Catalan Generalitat and going along with the *Pact of Oblivion*, Jordi Pujol started the process of bridging the enormous communication gap that there existed between the intellectuals of Catalonia and those from the rest of Spain. It was thus that, Jordi Serra, the major of the nearby coastal resort of Sitges, was asked to organise a meeting of personalities representing Catalan and Castilian cultures where Comadira would play an key role.<sup>12</sup>

What became known as the *Encuentro de intelectuales*, was celebrated from 20th to 22nd December and gathered a total of 60 people out of the 100 who had been invited. The event was very well publicised, reviewed and closely monitored by the press and the full proceedings published by the Generalitat itself in 1983. The success of the talks was perhaps due to the feeling of enthusiasm and relief generated by the very possibility of its organization and the belief at the end that there would be further fresh opportunities to continue talking in the future.

11 Despite Comadira's criticism of Salvador Espriu, this notion of inner exile is paradoxically similar to that in «Assaig de càntic en el temple».

12 The location was meaningful because Sitges had been a traditional meeting place for the Catalan intelligentsia, *Jocs Florals*, Summer holidays, etc. and was historically relevant as it had been host of an acclaimed gathering of intellectuals from all over Spain in 1930. On that occasion José Luis Aranguren was the person responsible for the coordination of the Castilian participation.

Jordi Pujol's introductory speech set the tone for the discussions. It read:

se habla del Estatuto de Autonomía, de la España de las autonomías. En estos momentos, yo no les oculto que, desde un punto de vista político, estamos preocupados. Hay algunos elementos de la evolución política española de estos últimos tiempos que no nos satisfacen. Pero he de decirles una cosa: [...] lo importante, para nosotros, es aquello de lo que ustedes van a hablar. Desde un punto de vista catalán, lo importante es hoy nuestra identidad como pueblo. Quizás por eso la gente intuye que aquí se va a hablar de estos temas, y no de si el artículo o disposición tal nos da ésta o aquélla competencia. Quiero repetir lo que ustedes ya saben: para nosotros, lo básico, lo esencial de esta España que estamos construyendo, es que sea respetado el fundamento de nuestra identidad como pueblo: un hecho de lengua, de cultura, de conciencia histórica, de voluntad colectiva.

Y finalmente, quería transmitirles mi convicción personal - y creo que la convicción general de Cataluña - de que nosotros tenemos un profundo sentimiento de fe en el actual momento español. No digo momento político: digo el 'momento español'. Tenemos fe en lo que hoy se puede hacer en España para resolver, pienso yo que definitivamente, toda una serie de problemas. Y no solamente el problema autonómico - que atañe a las diversas nacionalidades, los diversos pueblos, las diversas lenguas y culturas - sino, en general, el problema global de España. Pienso que estamos en un momento muy importante, en un momento que puede ser decisivo y en el que tenemos muchas más posibilidades de salir adelante que de fracasar. (Anon. 1983, pp. 14-15)

As can be seen, even leaving aside the excesses of the political discourse, the organisers were as aware of the risks as they were optimistic about the outcomes and, since they inhabited a world of hypotheses, they seemed happy to let the intellectuals express their views. In that respect Narcis Comadira's intervention is highly interesting, particularly when we try to ascertain the perceived elements at play in the delicate and difficult redefinition of Spanish and Catalan identities:

Me sorprendió don Pedro [Llaín Entralgo] cuando dijo que era un 'aspirante a español'. Yo, debo confesarlo, jamás me he sentido español. ¿Qué es sentirse español? Aunque, debo confesarlo también, mi capacidad de sentirme algo es muy reducida, porque, y lo siento, Jordi Carbonell, también me cuesta mucho sentirme catalán. Y me extraña esta doble utopía, la divorcista y la matrimonial, de los señores Carbonell y Sotelo. Ambos, divorcio y matrimonio, son eminentemente utopías familiares, por lo tanto estatales, por lo tanto mortuorias. Yo, en esto de las patrias,

estoy por el amor libre [...] Yo me siento más afín con mi generación (alemana, inglesa, italiana, francesa...) que no con gentes de la misma lengua y de edades distintas. No digamos ya del mismo Estado. Y creo no estar solo en estos sentimientos. [...] Además, quisiera añadir que eso de las culturas, como lo de las patrias, tiende a desaparecer. [...] Todo esto camina ya también a su disolución: hacia un talante común. Y no soy derrotista. Sólo en este talante común, cada cual puede ser cada cual y libre. Eso, ser cada cual y libre por encima de Estados y fronteras y culturas y hasta lenguas, eso ésa es mi utopía. [...] Creo que hay que dejar morir en paz a Madrid y a Barcelona, e irnos todos a ese París, irreal y utópico, intemporal pero auténtico, donde todos podamos sentirnos lo que realmente somos: es decir, unos metecos.<sup>13</sup> (Anon. 1983, p. 157)

We see here a strong undercurrent of European self-identification running along with a *laissez faire* approach to cultural identification, much like that present in the poems of the collections *Un passeig pels bulevards ardents* (1974 and 1976) and *Les ciutats* (1976).<sup>14</sup> A good example of this type of cosmopolitan interest is the poem «Captard a París»:

Rostres deserts al gris de tantes tardes  
 passen absorts per l'aire de París.  
 Un bulevard no és un passadís.  
 A poc a poc s'encenen les mansardes.

El Sena, lent, es perd entre boirina.  
 De Nôtre-Dame se'n van els pelegrins.  
 A les terrasses dels cafès i a dins,  
 estudiants somnien amb la Xina.

Per uns afers que no comprenc prou bé,  
 un algerí m'empaita pel *quartier*.  
 Als cinemes fan films del anys quaranta.

Hi ha corredisses pels carrers. M'espanta  
 caure plegat sota els embats d'un *flic*  
 o d'accident en el *périphérique*.  
 (Comadira 1981, p. 120)

<sup>13</sup> In ancient Greece this was a foreigner who settled in Athens but did not benefit from all citizenship rights. Newcomer. English (Pej) wog, wop.

<sup>14</sup> This collection not only includes all the poems written in the UK, but also a range of others set in Germany, France, Italy, etc. as well some set in Barcelona.



Needless to say, despite the heated and enthusiastic debates that took place during the event, no major discovery was made at the *Encuentro*. Nonetheless, the participants found the experience useful and, especially the younger ones with Comadira at their lead, agreed to continue investigating not only the relationship between the two cultures but also the development of the new, joint, Spanish identity.<sup>15</sup> What frustrated most of the intellectuals, however, was that they had expected the event to display a radical political stance and offer the automatic granting of full freedom to establish contact with writers abroad, and they were thus not very impressed with the caution with which those issues were handled throughout.

Comadira followed up this Spanish identity quest in «Prejuicios», a text which he wrote in 1982 and which became his contribution to the open forum entitled «¿Qué es España?», celebrated in Girona two years later.<sup>16</sup>

Dije ya en una ocasión que nunca me había sentido español y eso es cierto. Absolutamente cierto. Nunca ninguno de los mitos de España me ha conmovido lo más mínimo. Ni la bandera, ni el himno, ni el Ejército, ni la historia. Al contrario, he sentido ante todo una especie de asco profundo. ¿Pero España es eso? Así nos han educado a los españolitos oficiales engendrados en la época de la restricción y los racionamientos, crecidos al calor de estufas de aserrín y enderezados hacia la virtud por un futuro que no era otro que el miedo. Y a esos símbolos se unían otros tan dispares como la Virgen del Pilar, la jota, los Coros y Danzas, el castillo de la Mota o las mismísimas minas de Almadén. ¿Eso era España? Pues sí. España era, y sigue siéndolo, una entelequia formada de mitos absurdos y trasnochados tanto o más que la misma idea de Patria o de Estado. Pero todo el mundo civilizado (?) todavía funciona así. ¿Cómo iba a no hacerlo España, la pobre, siempre tan atrasadita? (Comadira 1998, p. 36)

Here we see both, the heavy weight of the Francoist legacy and the embarrassment of being part of a new Democracy painfully aware of its backwardness when compared to modern societies. What was perhaps most unexpected was that for Comadira there were also so many problems with Catalonia and his sense of inadequacy was so acute, that to him being Spanish or Catalan did no longer make any difference:

<sup>15</sup> This is quite controversial, as most Catalan nationalists would have gone back to the precepts of self-determination laid out by Enric Prat de la Riba in *La nacionalitat catalana* (1906) of historic, geographic and linguistic difference, which Jordi Pujol himself seemed to spouse.

<sup>16</sup> This open forum, celebrated in 1984, was organised by Josep Ramoneda, and counted as participants Rafael Sánchez Ferlosio, Félix de Azúa and Narcís Comadira, amongst others (Comadira 1998, pp. 35-40).

Dije también en otra ocasión que me costaba mucho sentirme catalán. Porque, como es fácil deducir de lo que voy diciendo, Cataluña, a pesar de no tener estado, tampoco se escapa de esa mitología productora de ascos profundos. Lo que ocurre en Cataluña es que tiene menos culpa porque tiene menos fuerza. No tiene poder y por tanto su mitología cultural, sus esencias tipificadas, son poquita cosa, no molestan tanto. (Comadira 1998, p. 37)

Against that background, what seems to have worried him most was the quality of the culture, and more specifically the literature, that was emerging in the period of transition because he felt that standards had disappeared and prizes were proliferating in a totally haphazard way, and that lead him to the conviction that Catalan people were starting to take their culture for granted:

Cataluña está siendo víctima, culturalmente hablando, de un doble fenómeno. Por una parte una inflación cultural galopante promovida desde el interior: una consagración de mediocridades, una promoción de golpes de efecto (siempre pequeñitos), una cortedad de miras que apenas si llega a lo inmediato. Y en el fondo de todo una degradación moral profunda por la que los partidos y los cargos son más importantes que el país. Las inauguraciones más importantes que las obras, los cócteles más importantes que las exposiciones..., etc. [...] Cataluña, ese pueblo trabajador, es un pueblo gandul espiritualmente, quizá mucho más que antes. Y acaso sea éste un indicio de que Cataluña es, cada vez más, España. Con la democracia, España se ha sentido también libre por fin. Su mala conciencia reverdece sus laureles míticos. [...] Ese renacimiento de lo español [...] se afianza teóricamente en la pretendida decadencia de las culturas periféricas, especialmente la catalana, que eso sí, hace veinte años era el orgullo de la resistencia, puerta de Europa, bastión de la lucha. Y ése es el segundo aspecto del fenómeno a que me refería antes. Pero, ¿era realmente aquélla una cultura catalana? ¿Y ésa de ahora, la pobre, tan provincianista, como se dice, es realmente también una cultura catalana? [...] Yo creo que los catalanes como pueblo ya estamos bien así, con nuestro comadreo de rebotica, y no queremos otra cosa: es decir no queremos poner en el empeño lo que sería necesario: trabajo. Y no queremos sacarnos de encima algo que también sería necesario: prejuicios. Porque de prejuicios vivimos todos, a nivel estatal, como parece que hay que decir para no ofender a nadie. De prejuicios vivimos todos en Cataluña. De prejuicios vivimos todos en España. ¡Todos nos encontramos tan a gusto en este prejuicio que es Cataluña y este gran prejuicio que es España! (Comadira 1998, pp. 37-40)

Even though his discourse is much more critical in tone than many would have found tasteful, the underlying message still falls in line with the general trend of defence of the oppressed Catalan culture which had already developed during the years of the dictatorship and which was shared by the majority of the Catalan population after Franco's demise. Along these lines and right at the end of the period which interests us, Comadira would get involved in yet another rapprochement initiative with Rafael Argullol, Félix de Azúa, Narcís Comadira, Dolors Oller and Francesc Parcerisas which successfully materialized in 1985 in the form of the collection *Poè'tica*<sup>17</sup> published by the emblematic Edicions 62.<sup>18</sup> This bilingual series of poetry books started with Comadira's *Enigma* and did not lose its inertia until the early 1990s having published over 20 titles and included a few translations, mainly from European writers (Shelley, Heidegger, Wallace Stevens, Thomas Berthold, Samuel Beckett, Gottfried Benn), works by poets writing in Castilian (Juan Luis Panero, Carlos Barral, Francisco Ferrer Lerín, Eloy Sánchez Rosillo, Vicente Molina Foix) and works by poets writing in Catalan (Juan Bufill and Antoni Tàpies-Barba, Comadira, Francesc Prat, Juan Ferraté, Joan Margarit, Antoni Marí, Carles Torner, Pere Rovira, Pere Gimferrer),<sup>19</sup> thus fulfilling the internationalising and modernising hopes and aspirations of a full generation of poets.

In all, this study has stressed the high importance played by the opportunity to live abroad in the development of Comadira as a writer. It has shown how it widened his horizons and allowed him to see Catalonia from outside, thus capitalising on a short-lived and relatively comfortable exile perspective that would allow him to reassert his individual sense of nationalism once he got back to Barcelona and started to participate in the intellectual and political debates of the time. It has also proven that the role of writers, in our case mostly poets, can be considerably influential in political developments and in the shaping of public opinion. It has documented how Comadira's response to political disenchantment was quite extreme but that in this his struggle to cope with what he regarded as *not radical enough* he managed to convert anxiety into intense and beautiful artistic outcomes, such as the two collections of poetry here analyzed. It has also established that Comadira was highly selective when it came to inspirational sources, often veering towards British and American writers but without ever losing track of his deep-rooted Catalan classical fa-

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17 The collection title was written with both an acute and a grave accents on the «e» to represent the coexistence of the Spanish and the Catalan different ways of spelling the word.

18 Initially Antoni Marí had offered to publish it in Anagrama but when the initiative didn't progress Castellet offered to do it in Edicions 62.

19 Pere Gimferrer worked for *Destino* and got into contact with Comadira in the early 70s because he wanted to write an article on his poetry.

vousrites and that, through those filters, he created a very personal brand of Catalanism which never stopped him from relating to other Spanish writers or to those Catalan writers who chose to use Castilian as their creative language. What is more, despite his provocative public speeches, this study has also shown that, for Comadira, developing a sense of Nation was important but full of disenchantment, to the extent that on some occasions he seemed not to mind if such a Nation was Spain or Catalonia. However, through the analysis of the poems, it is evident that the notion of the mother land as an identity symbol goes beyond language and even politics, and is stronger than any individual. In all, therefore, this study has reached the conclusion that, in Comadira's views and practices, it is only through the writing of what comes straight from the heart (and in his case in the Catalan language and carefully-crafted poetic form), that a Nation can be retrieved from the rubble and brought back to life.

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