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The invisible (a-)frontier

Paths of thought

The question about the frontier would be answered by the paths that cross it.

The frontier is the manifestation of a conflict. This, as Georg Simmel points out in his work *Le Conflit*¹, must be seen as the element that gets the social domain moving. Frontiers, like conflicts, are intrinsic to human reality. They cannot be denied but they can be crossed.

In the 19th century, a time in which territorial borders were most clearly manifested, Catalonia as a transfrontier space was a privileged zone of exchanges. Networks between people, conceptual transfers and forms of reception paradoxically constitute this period that shaped the writing of thought without proprietorship. It was a tradition that took on a nomadic form, woven of a thousand encounters and highly fecund. It was thought that did not set frontiers but crossed them.

The conceptual mesh to which it gave rise still remains quite unknown. To this unawareness, disorientation mingled with the ongoing dismissal of 19th century philosophical thought has had a great influence, along with the absence of a theoretical model for studying it. The words pronounced by Pere Coromines in the Ateneu Barcelonès (Athenaeum of Barcelona)², even though they were published in 1930, are quite revealing in this regard.

■ ¹ SIMMEL, Georg, *Le Conflit*. Circé, Belval, 2003 [published in English as *Conflict / The Web of Group Affiliations*, The Free Press, New York, 1955-translator].

² Pere Coromines, then president of the Ateneu Barcelonès, pronounced these words at the presentation of a cycle of philosophical lectures given in this institution over the period 1928-1929.

The barrenness of our philosophy in the 19th century is principally due to the fact that each generation was going back to the start. Instead of delving into our philosophical tradition, we went on as a foreign school, without realising that if this tradition had reached its present universal expression, it was by dint of extracting all the possibilities of its own national thinking³.

In speaking about the barrenness of 19th century Catalan thought, Coromines does not take into consideration the accentuated process of acclimation that, fruit of the crisis of thought in the 19th century⁴, occurred in all the countries of Europe and of which Germany and France are paradigmatic examples⁵. Neither does he bear in mind the development of different social movements, of clear philosophical background, that were appearing at the time, giving rise to a significant written production, the study of which is indispensable for knowledge of this period of the history of thought.

Neither should one forget, however, that all this is despite the heuristic interest that goes with the study of cultural transfers from the standpoint of historical research and despite abundant material, as Werner and Espagne have very aptly pointed out:

[...] les bibliothèques et les dépôts d'archives français disposent d'une masse imposante de documents à peine répertoriés et souvent d'importance majeure sur la culture allemande. Il peut s'agir de lettres, de notes de cours, de fragments de journaux, de brouillons d'œuvres, voire documents administratifs.

This is a result of “*l'absence de modèle théorique pour les appréhender, ces pièces sont toujours restées inexploitées*”⁶. Werner and Espagne have themselves worked on major research projects on the *transferts* between France and Germany, a methodology that, applied to the Catalan context, would show the way out of the constriction, not only by inquiring more deeply into the above-mentioned networks but also by laying to rest many prejudices and doubts that still hover over the existence of 19th century Catalan thought.

TRANSFERTS

Knowledge of *transferts* (transfers) between different traditions makes it possible to grasp thinking as something that is rather more dynamic. In order to carry out this work, the more recent studies, along with fields belonging to the classical historical domain, for example conjunctural research and the study of institutions, inquire into the genesis of discourse⁷. Genetic study of this reference would open up the way for an innovative manner of perusing this period of thought seen, perhaps, by the classic studies

■ ³ COROMINES, Pere. *Conferències filosòfiques* (Philosophical lectures), Edició de l'Ateneu Barcelonès, Barcelona 1930.

⁴ See, in particular, Leo Freuler, *La crise de la philosophie au XIX^e siècle*, Vrin, Paris, in which mention is made of those texts of the time that harbour the sense of the end of philosophy.

⁵ See the numerous works by Michel Espagne and Michael Werner, published in both France and Germany.

⁶ WERNER, Michael and Michel ESPAGNE, *Les transferts entre la France et l'Allemagne*, PUF, Paris 1999, p. 987.

⁷ See CONTAT, Michel and FERRER, Daniel (eds.). *Pourquoi la critique génétique? Méthodes, théories*, CNRS, Paris, 1998; and also ESPAGNE, Michel. *De l'archive au texte. Recherches d'histoire génétique*, PUF, Paris 1998.

as a uniquely static body. In this domain, we must not overlook the highly significant studies being carried out by 19th century specialists on the cultural *transfers* between France and Germany over the last centuries, and that hark back to the works of Madame de Staël and Heinrich Heine⁸. Different angles of approximation to the study of the

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transfers are sketched out, then, going beyond the strictly philosophical terrain and that of the history of ideas in order to approach cultural history⁹.

A cultural *transfert* corresponds, in brief, to an attempt at reinterpretation. In this case, it is a twofold process of hermeneutics and acculturation, which is to say a process of cultural change and adaptation

of a new culture. This hermeneutics is situated on two levels. On the one hand, the aim is to show its veracity on the basis of foreign works known by hearsay before experiencing them oneself. Joan Maragall wrote a first article on Nietzsche on the basis of another article without having seen the original texts, although, as Josep Calsamiglia points out, even if his sources were particularly inaccurate, the result turned out to be quite faithful to Nietzschean thinking¹⁰.

On the other hand, thanks to these works from abroad, one can consider the truth of a national tradition that is constituted by successive efforts to interpret the other tradition that is the object of the transfer. For example, Martí d'Eixalà and Llorens i Barba, members of the Catalan common-sense school, knew about the Scottish School¹¹, through the translations into French by Royer-Collard.

One must point out that the hermeneutics perspective fits quite well with the notion of progress, which transforms it into an indefinite task in the endless process of theoretical curiosity that is never fully or successfully satisfied¹². The work *Literaturas malsanas* (Unhealthy Literatures) by Pompeu Gener¹³ was a vehicle for disseminating

■ ⁸ DE STAËL, Madame. *De l'Allemagne*, Garnier-Flammariion, Paris 1994; and HEINE, Henrich. *De l'Allemagne*. Presses d'aujourd'hui, Paris 1979.

⁹ A theoretical introduction to this theme may be found in Yvette Conry, *L'introduction du darwinisme en France au XIX^{me} siècle*, Vrin, Paris 1974.

¹⁰ CALSAMIGLIA, Josep. *Assaigs i conferències* (Essays and Lectures), Ariel, Barcelona 1986, p. 140.

¹¹ See ANGLÈS, Misericòrdia. *El pensament de F. Xavier Llorens i Barba i la filosofia escocesa* (The Thought of F. Xavier Llorens i Barba and Scottish Philosophy), IES, Barcelona 1998.

¹² See BLUMENBERG, Hans, *Der Prozess der theoretischen Neugierde*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1973.

¹³ Pompeu Gener resided in Paris, where he published *Le Mort et le Diable* with a prologue by Émile Littré and came into contact with the modern ideological tendencies (thanks to Ernest Renan). He was, moreover, a translator of Nietzsche and a regular contributor to the periodical publications *L'Avenç*, *La Revista Contemporània*, *L'Esquella de la Torratxa* and *Juventut*.

—even while negatively assessing them— the new European schools. Yet neither should one overlook his statement, “We are fervent naturalists by temperament and conviction¹⁴”. Gener in his work *Amigos y maestros* (Friends and Masters)¹⁵ sided with Guyau, Taine and Renan, who proclaimed the supremacy of life.

Cultural paradigms as stable facts constitute a sort of general space of cultural *transferts*, but do not permit us to be aware of the multiplicity of specific exchanges. *Transferts*, in contrast, are broadly determined by linked junctures. The appropriation of a foreign culture constitutes an objective that is not only outward-looking, in which sense it needs an affirmation of cultural identity, but also inward-looking: the possession of elements that come from a foreign culture may secure some kind of power. In times of crisis, exchanges of humanist culture expand¹⁶. The reception of Kant in the French and Catalan contexts is an example of the sway of the political and ideological situation over the very context of cultural transfer. This juncture determines the interpretation that is made of it. Kant’s philosophy is, as one can see, even if only schematically, the agglutinating element that has ensured it would become, in a project of studying European philosophy, the backbone of many national traditions¹⁷.

PATHS OF THE "TRANSFERTS"

To this point, students of the problems of cultural *transferts*¹⁸ had employed schemata pertaining to the field of history of influences —such-and-such a culture has been submitted to the influence of another culture through intermediaries and translators— and in the belief that the receiving culture is normally in a more or less clear position of inferiority. In keeping with this scheme, one speaks of dominant and dominated cultures.

This way of studying different problems suffers from the defect that it does not make explicit the circumstances that make these *transferts* possible and overlooks, on the one hand, everything that we might be able to group under the heading of a receptive juncture and, on the other, the endurance of cultural traditions that hinder such *transferts*.

The reception of a work of philosophy differs in its function depending on whether it has been transmitted in one place or in another. We know that *transferts* do not have the sole aim of expanding learning and knowledge but also, and quite the contrary, they come to perform a precise function within the system of reception. Thus, a first idea would be the necessary description of the phenomena of reception, not so much in themselves as in relationship with the recipient culture.

This perspective entails a tacit definition of culture that is situated somewhere between reduction to being the distinctive sign of a social class and its extension to everything that is not nature. M. Werner and M. Espagne¹⁹, who have studied the matter, take up a provisional position and adopt the definition offered by Edgar Morin.

■ ¹⁴ See GENER, Pompeu. *Literaturas malsanas*.

Joan Llordachs, Barcelona 1900, p. 75.

¹⁵ GENER, Pompeu, *Amigos y maestros*, Maucci, Barcelona 1914.

¹⁶ DIGEON, Claude. *La crise allemande de la pensée française*, PUF (2nd edition), Paris 1992.

¹⁷ See, *inter alia*, QUILLIEN, Jean (ed.). *La réception de la philosophie allemande en France au XIX^e et XX^e siècles*, Presses Universitaires de Lille, Lille 1994.

¹⁸ See WERNER, Michael and ESPAGNE, Michel. *Les transferts...*

Culture would be a metabolic circuit that, bringing together infrastructure and superstructure to the point of touching, ensures exchanges between individuals and favours communication of existential experiences and established knowledge²⁰.

From this standpoint, one must draw attention to the notion of memory, in which are stored the models of cultural communication that can most easily be delimited, both from the practical point of view (certain archives, libraries, and so on)... and from that of the national perspective. It should be borne in mind that, with all of this, as Bruckhardt has pointed out, culture has to be understood as a complex phenomenon followed by global relations that cannot be fractionated.

There exists within every national unit a plurality of subsets that reproduce religious, social and political differences.

Beneath the base of religious or political groups one can also conceive of transnational cultural units (for example, Judaism, Catholicism).

Nonetheless, national frontiers represented in the 19th century a deeper cultural separation than other forms of fracture, especially when it came to the more abstract forms of culture.

The dominant 19th century

cultures, for example French and German, were little given to opening up towards the outside world, precisely because they were hegemonic. Culture, to the extent that it is defined as a structured whole that obeys its own rules, has no need of an “other”: culture finds itself in itself, in a state of intellectual autarchy, and it tends to reproduce its own system indefinitely. However, at the same time, culture is a process that is subject to internal and external historic dynamics. Not only is it permanently absorbing outside elements but it is also constantly fixing its own frontiers *vis-à-vis* the other, that which is different. These are phenomena of identity and protection that, both in the individual sphere and in collective social practice, are at the basis of this need to establish a limit. Werner and Espagne suggest, in keeping with this line of argument, that:

[...] on conçoit que les problèmes de transfert interculturel, c'est-à-dire de transgression des délimitations instaurées, sont d'un caractère fondamental pour le fonctionnement des systèmes culturels. Une culture nationale se définit également par ses limites, et ce qui est échangé au-delà des frontières du système entre en conflit avec la hiérarchie des valeurs établies, ou même est conditionné par les antagonismes

■ ¹⁹ See WERNER, Michael, and ESPAGNE, Michel,

“La construction d’une référence culturelle allemande en France. Genèse et histoire (1750-1914)”, *Annales ESC*, July-August, 1987, 4, pp. 969-992

²⁰ MORIN, Edgar. *Sociologie*, Fayard, Paris, p. 341.

*propres du système. Il en résulte que les échanges ne peuvent être interprétés sans référence constante à ces antagonismes et à la fonction qu'ils y exercent*²¹.

The question becomes more complicated with regard to the pluricultural character of each culture. It is evident that we must be concerned, first of all, with the problem of national cultures, a factor that involves complex interactions between political systems and cultural systems. Yet, since this also and concomitantly concerns philosophy, we need to bear in mind the international humanist culture, that of the intellectual elites, the tradition of which precedes the awakening of national ideas and that, at the beginning of the 19th century, found itself in antagonistic symbiosis with the respective national cultures. This is why, at this time, some of the thrusts of cultural *transferts* sought out this humanist tradition which, from the very start, had always existed above national frontiers and which continued to survive at least until the middle of the 19th century. In contrast, insofar as they are ideological constructions, national cultures are socially based on the same intellectual elites who ensure, especially through the educational system, the cultural socialisation of individuals.

Study of *transferts* between national cultural spaces also raises the hierarchical problem of different cultural values and traditions in the bosom of a social space and that of the external delimitation of these selfsame cultures. A temporal dimension is added: during the period under consideration, humanist culture which is founded in particular, it must be said, on the Latin language, was undergoing a process of disintegration and it was at this very time that national cultures were sustained by the bourgeoisie's access to power. Perhaps the most evident institutional vehicle of *transfert* in Catalonia is that of French language teaching and, again, when our university was reformed, the French university was taken as the model.

Needless to say, however, the main problem arising from studying a *transfert* is that of the authenticity of a received influence. The importation of a philosophy is manifested, at times, from a sort of clandestinity, as a result of the fact that no reference is made to it in the works of people whom it supposedly interests. We might ask how they went about the reception of Kant or Hegel in France, or how Proudhon was received in Catalonia by Pi i Maragall, et cetera. Yet from the methodological viewpoint it is more fitting to shift from the question of the object to the one of how this reception came about. This type of functioning is also of the discursive order and the social order, and it is in these senses that it needs to be interpreted.

The first manifestations of a transfer are never the works, which are frequently diffuse and belatedly translated, but the individuals who exchange information or the representations that are progressively constituted into a network. The notion of network merits special attention when it comes to understanding the construction of a cultural reference. A network is a system of collective elaboration of an ideology and, more specifically, of an intercultural reference. It designates a set of people among whom there functions a circuit of epistolary or oral exchanges justified, for example, by the desire to bring out a publication. Unlike the notion

■ ²¹ WERNER, Michael, and ESPAGNE, Michel. *Les transferts ...*, p. 971.

of a circle, that of the network implies no closing or no pre-eminence of a centre. The interest of the notion of network lies in the fact that it demonstrates that any series of ideological productions we might describe has a collective genesis.

Thus, in the case that concerns us here, the goal is to bring together data on people who, because of their linguistic skills, their intellectual interests or their geographic situation, have acted as possible intermediaries. Accordingly, in the more general case, one must track both sociological

and personal itineraries of intermediaries who, in the Catalan case, were political exiles in the majority of cases. One must know the motives, duration and setting of the journey. One example of these Catalans is Jaume Brossa, who, in 1897, went into exile in Paris, where he came into contact with the vitalist philosophies. His lectures at the Ateneu Barcelonès were controversial. After 1898 he published articles in *Catalònia*

and *La Revista Blanca* and, as of 1906, in *El Poble Català*. He returned to Barcelona in 1914, whereupon he published *La crisi del règim i el nou dever republicà* (The Crisis of the Regime and the New Republican Duty). He was co-director of the newspaper *El Diluvió*. In 1918 he published *Ecos de la tragedia* (Echoes of the Tragedy). Another rather significant and paradigmatic example was that of Ferrer i Guardiola, who lived in Paris for fifteen years before setting up the *Escola Moderna* (Modern School) in Barcelona.

In the 19th century, these networks materialised almost wholly thanks to correspondence.

They are prior to any particular cultural product although they tend to go beyond epistolary or oral exchanges in being given the form of texts. Thus one can speak of a review or magazine as the natural culmination of a network. There are several examples in Catalonia and study of them should lead to better knowledge of the period. Take Ernest Vendrell, for example, author of the article “La influència moral de les minories intel·ligents” (The Moral Influence of Intelligent Minorities)²², of the book *L'acció moral moderna* (Modern Moral Action)²³ and of the collection of articles *Escrits* (Writings)²⁴, besides his pieces for the review *Catalònia*. Carles Rahola points out that Vendrell held the French philosopher Jean-Marie Guyau in high esteem although he omitted his name from his texts “[...] I know of an ill-starred friend who greatly loved Guyau: I refer to Ernest Vendrell²⁵”, he writes. The place that best demonstrates the repercussion that Guyau’s work had in the case of

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■ ²² VENDRELL, ERNEST. “La influència moral de les minories intel·ligents”, *Pel & Ploma*, Barcelona 1901.

²³ VENDRELL, ERNEST. “L'acció moral moderna”, *L'Avenç*, Barcelona 1906.

²⁴ VENDRELL, ERNEST. “Escrits”, *L'Avenç*, Barcelona 1911.

²⁵ See RAHOLA, CARLES. *Guyau, el filòsof de la solidaritat humana* (Guyau, Philosopher of Human Solidarity), Palé and Co., Palafrugell 1909, p. 7.

Maragall is his correspondence with Rahola. "Guyau will be very good for you²⁶", Maragall writes to him. Indeed, Rahola wrote a small book on the French thinker.

In this same context, we also have the study of translators. The absence of a Catalan translation of Guyau is especially significant when the same writers who were praising him, as was the case of Maragall, were busying themselves with translations of Nietzsche.

Where there is a frontier, there are also quite a number of paths crossing it

Together, it was they who contributed towards the transmitting of a certain image of French culture in general and philosophy in particular. Needless to say, in this regard, any type of exchange, no matter

what kind, can offer us an explanation of some unknown circumstance.

This sociology of intermediaries should be rounded off with a better understanding of cultural *transferts*, with a sociology of the system within which rudimentary kinds of information are exchanged while simultaneously producing the beginnings of the social and political exegesis of this information. Institutions, understood as forms of organisation of a human group, whether they are integrated or not into the cogs of state machinery, are also characterised by both laws and customs and, for the study of *transferts*, it is irrelevant whether the vehicles through which the transfer is carried out establish their own model of organisation or whether they are to be found within some existing local organism.

IN SHORT...

The more frontiers there are, the more exchanges occur. Where there is a frontier, there are also quite a number of paths crossing it. This (a-)frontier cultural space permits the setting up of the exchanges, the networks, the writing and the publications that constitute the shaping element of a particular moment of our cultural history during which, paradoxically, with the progressive disappearance of the political frontier, these paths, instead of expanding, have dwindled. A twofold function is accomplished with their study: first, these documents, in their capacity as the cultural memory of a country, are reintegrated into collective knowledge; second, they make up the deep strata of the French reference in Catalan discourse. Genetic study of this reference opens up the way for consideration of its overall importance with a view to subsequent studies ||

■ ²⁶ Letter from Joan Maragall to Carles Rahola, 17 November, 1906.