



THE  
ANGLO-CATALAN  
SOCIETY

MARIA-MERCÈ MARÇAL  
HER LIFE IN WORDS

EDITED BY

NOÈLIA DIAZ VICEDO



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NDV

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## WORKS BY MARIA-MERCÈ MARÇAL

Reference to the poet's bibliography throughout this monograph will appear in line with the following key. Translation of the titles into English is supplied below but not in the compilation of essays.

*Cau de llunes* (1977) [Den of Moons]

*Bruixa de dol* (1979) [Witch in Mourning]

*Sal oberta* (1982) [Open Salt]

*Terra de mai* (1982) [The Neverland]

*La germana, l'estrangera* (1985) [The Sister, the Stranger]

*Desglaç* (1989) [Thawing]

*Llengua abolida* (1989) [Abolished Language]

*La passió segons Renée Vivien* (1994) [The Passion According to Renée Vivien]

*Raó del cos* (2000) [The Body's Reason]

*Sota el signe del drac: Proses 1985-1997* (2004) [Under the Sign of the Dragon]

*El senyal de la pèrdua* (2014) [The Sign of Loss]



## **Corpus realities: (De)tracing Maria-Mercè Marçal**

**Meri Torras**

If one of the functions of language and Literature is to provide meaning, to articulate something that was previously stammering and unstructured, to order experience by removing it from chaos, and to offer mirrors in which to recognize its own elaborate experience, we must conclude that when an experience becomes *ineffable*, it is deprived of cultural and symbolic dimensions, thus condemned, not only to invisibility and muteness but, in a certain sense, to non-existence. (Marçal 2004: 201)

Maria-Mercè Marçal announced her arrival on the scene of Catalan Literature with 'Divisa', a word that translates as motto: an explicit declaration of the condition of enunciator that would characterise her life and her words:

A l'atzar agraeixo tres dons: haver nascut dona,  
de classe baixa i nació oprimida.  
I el tèrbol atzur de ser tres voltes rebel.

[To fate I am grateful for three gifts: having been born a woman,  
lower class, from an oppressed nation.  
And the turbid azure of being three times a rebel.]

This is the poem that inaugurates *Cau de llunes*, her first collection published in 1977. Here, the poetic voice is located in a body that incarnates a triply rebellious identity and announces itself in this manner from the very first poetic work. Throughout the years, three important experiences in her life would take her to writing poetry as a means to deepen this intersectional revolt: lesbian sexual practices, unorthodox motherhood and the experience of breast cancer that would propel her into the ‘kingdom of the sick’, as Susan Sontag puts it, where she kept searching for the words that would narrate, in the body of the text, what she was experiencing in her own flesh and blood. This is one of the most dominant themes in the poetics of Marçal, not because her work tackles autobiographical matters; but because it constitutes a *corpus* that considers representation to be a political battlefield; or, as was quoted at the outset, ‘when an experience becomes *ineffable*, it is deprived of cultural and symbolic dimensions, thus condemned, not only to invisibility and muteness, but, in a certain sense, to non-existence’ (Marçal 2004: 201).

It is also with inherited words that we attempt to provide an account of our life. In fact, all struggles take place in the space of discourse and Marçal engages with them not only from a theoretical perspective (she wrote lectures, dissertations and undertook research), but also from her creative literary works — mainly poetic, even though she also produced other genres, such as prose-fiction or essays.

The rebellious attitude that Marçal used to confess with pride and determination emerges from the fact that, as a woman, she is expelled from hegemonic discourse, which prevents her from being recognized and recognizable in existing textualities. It is precisely this that renders her experience — and consequently her existence — ineffable and invisible. Surrounded by mirrors that do not reflect her and cannot provide

recognition, she cannot acknowledge herself. However, Marçal pursues and challenges hegemonic discourse, revealing its arbitrariness and bias. It is via this discourse that women are relegated to being second-class citizens; and Marçal is simply not willing to accept it. Neither for her nor for the community, as Marta Segarra has written:

The idea of community, not as an affirmation of certain characteristics or properties that muster individuals accordingly (to be Catalan, but also, to be a woman, or lesbian) but as an “expropriation” of ourselves, is very close to the paradoxical and foundational gesture in Maria-Mercè Marçal’s poetry. I refer [to community here], not as something that would “fill” the distance between individuals, but to exactly what is situated in this “between” [...] This concept of community, that does not refer to certain “properties” but to what is “un-fitting” (“im-propi”), to a “movement outside of itself”, to the individual outside of herself, brings us to an idea of desire as the tear or fissure in the subject’s limits. That is, to understand desire in its most widest sense. (Segarra 2013: 57-58)

The work of language and of codes is indistinguishable in Marçal’s literature. In fact, the rigorous and accurate use of the Catalan language became one of her main aims, owing to the political persecution of the language during Franco’s dictatorship. Both tasks are carried out simultaneously in order to recover the archaeological fragments that inform feminine language and to build a genealogy of lives, words, women, poets, texts, etc. Hers is the revelation that any woman who intervenes in the public sphere establishes a dialogue with an invisibilised, sometimes even ineffable, tradition of experiences that attempts, not only to have a voice, but also to re-appropriate language.

In this sense, Marçal extends her dialogue beyond the Catalan and Spanish sphere, opening up to other cultural productions such as literature in French, Italian, Russian or English. In her texts, authors like Colette, Renée Vivien, Natalie Barney, Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield, Adrienne Rich, Anna Akhmatova and Marina Tsvetaeva are

intertwined with previous Catalan poets like Maria-Antònia Salvà, Rosa Leveroni, Clementina Arderiu, or contemporary fellow poets such as Felícia Fuster or Anna Dodas.

The autarchy of Franco's regime, along with the ferocious censorship of domestic and foreign texts, had reinforced an introspection in Spanish culture which afforded a false sense of sufficiency wherein short-sighted or blind reading practices paid scant attention to anything beyond the borders of the state. In keeping with Franco's ideological machinery, epitomised by the war-cry of '*España: una, grande y libre*' [Spain: One, Great and Free]. Spain was a country based upon an alleged unity ignoring and persecuting ideological, linguistical and cultural differences within its borders. Allegedly *great* (with an overpowering nostalgia for empire to compensate for present-day poverty and insignificance), it proclaimed itself as *free* when, in reality, all it was free from was the rule of democracy and respect for human rights. Educated as a Catholic during the dictatorship, Marçal, was interested in re-establishing links that would promote critical thinking, linking up with other texts written by women in order to create an alternative genealogy that could construct a meaningful female existence. In this sense, when life is not enough, there is a need to put this experience into words which becomes the imperative.

To this effect, I wish to give the warmest welcome to the present volume, which provides a beautiful and justified tribute to *Marçalian* poetics. Firstly, this monograph focuses on the sense of inseparability that, according to the poet, exists between life and writing. In this respect, the texts collated by Noèlia Díaz Vicedo not only *trace* who the poet was and who she is today but most importantly, anticipate who Maria-Mercè Marçal might in time become. Secondly, the articles in this book provide our author with a new lease of life as they enter into a dialogue with her journey through life. And her output,

seen from this alternative perspective, is offered a different appreciation from that which is current in her own Catalan context, all of which *de-traces* her (the formulation is Marçalian in essence), to an extent which is both healthy and provocative.

It is not the first time, however, that we find ourselves before a differing reception of this poet from that experienced within her national borders. A predecessor was the volume edited in France in 2012 by Fabrice Corrons and Sandrine Ribes, *Lire/Llegir Maria-Mercè Marçal*, though the focus then was mainly on *Bruixa de dol*. Interest in her work from abroad is, of course, all very positive. The proliferation of scholarship, with the growing number of articles, dissertations and theses now devoted to the poet, privileges a comparative perspective which produces a salutary critical environment as researchers from different cultures and generations come together.

The focal points of this collective work — co-ordinated so soundly by Díaz Vicedo — differ from existing volumes as they move to spaces that have rarely been the centre of critical attention. Here, the comparative approach focuses on the *body*, on the disease that devastates it (Jennifer Duprey, Caterina Riba); on life and death drives (Laia Climent, Noèlia Díaz Vicedo), or on the desire that moves or is moved by it: homoeroticism (Natasha Tanna, Sara Torres). In this regard, the texts written by Tanna and Torres address *La passió segons Renée Vivien*. Both acknowledge and locate Marçal within a lesbian genealogy from two different perspectives — both well-founded and coherent — that establish a fruitful dialogue with each other, daring to tackle the challenge of non-hegemonic desires.

As was noted by Rafael Manuel Mérida (2011 and 2013) and myself (2011a), Marçal herself made explicit the estrangement occasioned by the blindness of established

criticism. The result was a cloak of invisibility cast over the topic of lesbian desire with particular reference to her texts:

I find it very peculiar, and I would like to have more clarity in this sense, this strange “protectionism” regarding my person, or my image, that has worked in other cases, in order to force interpretations of poems in an unbelievable way: pure nearsightedness or the will to neutralize a dissonant discourse? I don’t know. The worst thing is how this fact interferes with one’s own fears, self-moderation, self-censorship. (Marçal 2004: 203)

To some extent, it could be said that the authors who analyse Marçal’s work here use precisely those same critical tools advocated by the Catalan poet herself, with her inclusion as part of a genealogy that she tried so hard to recover and unveil; a network, a matrix, a weft that does not capture but holds women writers and creators beyond borders and reunites Marçal with her *foreign sisters*.

I would like to add another element that the authors of this volume generously return to Marçal; and it is also one of the reading practices that the poet herself promoted. I refer, of course, to the theorization that arises from the creative work itself. Indeed, all the literary analyses that Marçal carried out constitute a reading position focused upon the text; though one which avoids any exclusive interpretation which might be closed in on itself. The poet forever strove to postulate theoretical and critical frames that would open out into a conceptual reflection that, in its latency, might well be applied, in turn, to other corpora.

This process of theorizing through a close reading of literary texts is present, in different manners, in all of the articles collected in this volume. The essays contain a strong and coherent theoretical point of view. A clear example is how Caterina Riba reflects upon the concept of translation, with her point of departure in disease in *Raó del*

*cos*; or how Duprey, in her reading of this book of posthumous poetry, posits for comparative analysis the text of another cancer patient, *Love's work* (1995) by Gillian Rose. In similar terms, it is pleasing to note how both these critics follow the Marçalian purpose of seeking to isolate the themes of cancer and disease, removing them from the established domain of standard biomedical discourse.

To conclude, through the lens of the considered and engaged approach of the articles included in this volume, Maria-Mercè Marçal is seen to be a reason for the *corpus* of reason that, throughout the compilation of these comparative and theoretical essays, is rewarded with deserved acknowledgement and recognition from a generation of academics who read her work within those same intercultural and interdiscursive parameters that Marçal herself advocated. These contributions inscribe our author within a framework of feminist genealogies and give life to her words.

## The Life and Death Drives in *Bruixa de dol*<sup>1</sup>

**Laia Climent**

Marçal's writings oscillate between life and poetry indistinctively; and the poet's biography allows us to understand certain aspects of her creation that eliminate the barriers that separate the lyrical 'I' from the real poet. Maria-Mercè Marçal's first contact with poetry was in Castilian when she was in high school. She started writing in Catalan during her university years, an act that could not be uncoupled from its political significance. The use of the Catalan language — her mother tongue — during the 1970s in Barcelona represented the resistance of an entire community and nation against Francoism and thirty-five years of repressive autocracy.

From a literary point of view, the years at university marked a turning point for Marçal. In 1973, she made the acquaintance of two poets, Xavier Bru de Sala and Ramon Pinyol Balasch, with whom she started a publishing house, the now famous *Llibres del Mall*. Inspired by French Symbolism and Greek and Latin Literature, these poets started writing with particular attention to the actuality of their country with its problems and exigencies. For Marçal this was a moment of mobilization where not only she acquired a

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<sup>1</sup> Translated from French by Noèlia Díaz Vicedo.



specific political commitment shared by her two companions but also an awareness of the social and cultural inequality of women. This awareness was a result of her experience within the *El Mall* group where her male colleagues constantly relegated her to a secondary position. Consequently, her first appearance in poetry was characterised by a triple voice (marked by gender, social class and political ideology) as seen in the device of her first book of poems *Cau de llunes* from 1977:

A l'atzar agraeixo tres dons: haver nascut dona,  
de classe baixa i nació oprimida.  
I el tèrbol atzur de ser tres voltes rebel. (1998: 15)

[To fate I am grateful for three gifts: having been born a woman,  
lower class, from an oppressed nation.  
And the turbid azure of being three times a rebel.]

This war-cry became an emblem for feminist groups of the time; and its importance continues to the present day. It reveals the ideological engagement of intellectuals and artists during a period when the relationship between art and politics was intrinsically strong. Maria-Mercè Marçal, for example, became a member of the PSAN (Socialist Party for National Liberation) where she actively fought to reconstruct the Catalan nation alongside a special interest in gender equality. The situation was not easy. With priorities directed towards re-establishing democracy in Catalonia women of the left who fought this battle were alienated in a context where machismo still prevailed. The sensation of orphanhood is explained by a lack of understanding amongst many male colleagues from the party and also from feminist collectives who could not adhere to the priority afforded to Catalonia. As a result, the twin priority defended by the women's

group founded by the poet was independence for the nation and the promotion of feminism.

In this way, Marçal's militancy is informed by the situation of her country, her social class and her gender. Her opposition to Western phallogocentric culture is evinced by the realignment of conventional usage. As a consequence, if thanks to God is given in the Hebrew tradition for the fact of being a man, for being part of the Jewish brethren and for not being a slave (Cònsul 1998: 94), Marçal will reverse such sentiments in her apology for the 'turbid azure' of being a woman, working class and from an oppressed nation.

Thus, in her revolt against tradition Marçal constructs a new female world, transforming the imposed cultural system. But this tension is not fully apparent in the first two books *Cau de llunes* (1977) and *Bruixa de dol* (1979). It is not until 1980 when the poet gets pregnant that she adopts a lesbian voice and lives the experience of motherhood in solitude. She then initiates a profound renewal of the female word. From *Sal oberta* (1982) her writing develops not only towards the expression of maternal love but also to the understanding of her own death as her posthumous book *Raó del cos* (2000) shows. However, these three voices come together to unveil a female world previously unverballed in Catalan.

In this sense, the poetic exploration of these three aspects — lesbian love, motherhood and death — entails an interaction between her own body and the text, the experiences of her flesh, the universality implied in the primitive female womb that all women share and, finally, female *jouissance*. Writing with the fine, white maternal ink that emerges from her breast, the poet finds 'les sœurs-amantes filles-maternelles mères-sœurs' (Cixous 2004: 27 & 24).

In *Bruixa de dol* we find a constant delving into her own subjectivity, her own 'I' displaying in her poems her most unconscious concerns. In fact, *Bruixa de dol* puts Marçal in the eye of the storm without letting her rest. Quite the contrary, she opens a way down towards the deep and dark side of her subjectivity. The gaze of the poet reveals her in a persistent state of undress, with no defence as she faces the world (Cixous 2004: 63 & 53). The poetry of *Bruixa de dol* 'prend force dans l'inconscient, le territoire autre, sans limites, où les réprimés survivent: les femmes ou comme dirait Hoffman, les fées' (Cixous 2004: 24). Or, as Marçal says:

I jo sembro amb pedretes els camins  
que em duen cap a mi, nit meva endins.  
Baixo al meu pou, amb bleix de corriola (1989: 123)

[I sow the roads with stones  
which take me to myself, my night within me  
I go lower in my well.]

Here we are struck by the tension between 'reason' and the 'flow of femininity'. The poet descends into her inner self leaving her footprints along the way where the voice of the unconscious is fully heard. In fact, she remains trapped in a movement of return, of descent into deep darkness, and emergence thereafter back into light: back to the experience of pleasure and unpleasure. It is a return, in Freud's account, to the balance between libidinal instinct (and, by extension, the need for self-preservation) and the impulse towards destruction (1981: 2717). Both are united, combined and in constant struggle, unable to disentangle themselves one from the other.

### **Freedom: the prediscursive order**

The tendency to move away from the reality of the outside world, which is unpleasant, and the wish to construct an imaginary alternative impels the poetic subject towards the small paradise she inhabits with her sexual pleasures, her women friends and her freedom, away from the norms and restrictions of the existing symbolic order. As such, this well-being — representing the life drive — appears sometimes in the guise of figures excluded from society who escape the process of normalisation, as explained by Michel Foucault in his essay *Punir et Surveiller* (1975).

In keeping with this scheme, Maria-Mercè Marçal introduces the figure of ‘the demented’ in her poem ‘A la fira dels Folls/ jo hi aniria [...] amb els llavis oscats/ de molta vida’ (1989: 91) [To the fair of fools would I go [...] with chapped lips/ full of life]. Lack of rationality as a necessary correlative to the libido is also evoked by the symbol of the spider in *Bruixa de dol*. In fact, if the spider is a female symbol *par excellence* thanks to the mortal and defiant Arachne, it is only through her unreasonable nature and challenge to the existing order that the poetic ‘I’ finds pleasure. Thus, Marçal will go down ‘[...] les graus amb vestit d’alegria/ que hauran teixit aranyes sense seny’ (1989: 106) [The steps in a suit of joy/ woven by spiders without sense].

In this way, the demented and the spider are inscribed in the list of referents that are socially rejected but that partake, at the same time, in the pleasure of the poetic ‘I’. Another feature, that of carnival, represents, in turn, the reversal of the established order as Mikhail Bakhtin (1982) has explained in his seminal writings on the subject. But, unlike the condition of the demented, masquerade is socially tolerated given the temporal limitation of its celebration. These images are socially inscribed as joyful, but in Marçal

they include an element of grief or sorrow as they collide inevitably with the actuality of every day: 'Carnestoltes duu llàgrimes/ de colors a la galta' (1989: 96) [Carnival brings tears/ of colours to the cheek].

Within the confrontation between joy and sadness, one of the most important symbols in Marçal's poetry emerges: I refer, of course, to the moon. An image of femininity due to its dark side, hidden, cyclic and unintelligible, she represents the gender that Slavoj Žižek called a 'black hole' (2005: 139) and Freud described as 'taboo in its totality' (1981: 2447). The mutability of the satellite that changes every night is associated with the female due to the multiple variations of women's bodies and their imagined connection to the lunar cycle. This is comparable, in turn, to the fluctuation of the sea in its tide and waves that also return us to notions of female *jouissance*.

The symbiosis of women with natural elements reinforces the prediscursive experiences the body possesses which find themselves in constant competition. In the poem 'Lluna negra', should the moon die 'Cal canviar de pressa el decorat/ perquè pugui florir a temps la berbena' (1989: 117) [The decor must be hurriedly changed/ for the vervain to flower on time]. However, if the moon evokes femininity, this particular image requests a re-elaboration of her own symbolism in order to rid herself of dependence on the sun. Later, in her third book of poems *Sal oberta*, Marçal will dare to establish a dialogue with the moon in order to make an explicit claim for this long desired freedom:

La lluna porta un anell  
de nuviàncies amargues.  
Treu-te, lluna, l'anell fosc,  
llença'l a la marinada! (1989: 223)

[The moon wears a ring  
of bitter courtship.  
Remove, dear moon, your dark ring,  
cast it into the wind!]

The moon reflects the psyche of the lyrical 'I', showing its need for freedom. Similarly she fills herself in turn with doubts, fears and hesitations. It is for this reason that Marçal considers the moon a privileged image as she states with reference to her first book of poems *Cau de llunes*:

La lluna serà en aquest llibre i en els immediatament posteriors imatge privilegiada, recurrent i obsessiva, punt de referència lluminós alhora utòpic i atàvic, amb la subversió en pantalla: del seu significat tradicionalment subordinat: 'Hi havia una vegada, quan la lluna tenia llum pròpia...' podria ser el començament d'un conte que, com tots, no té una localització en el temps, sinó fora del temps. (1989: 8)

[In this book and those which follow immediately on, the moon will be a privileged, recurrent and obsessive image, a point of reference which is luminous, utopian and atavistic with a pronounced subversion of its traditionally subordinate meaning: 'Once upon a time when the moon had a light of its own...' could be the start of a tale which, like the rest, has no location within time, but rather lies outside of time.]

### **Sexual desire**

In *Bruixa de dol*, female sexuality enters into conflict with its male counterpart as heterosexuality is depicted with a certain reticence. From *Sal oberta*, lesbian sexuality is revealed as the central theme and a number of poems criticize intercourse of the typically

phallogocentric kind, based upon an ideological structure that conforms to an understanding of 'the erogenous' with its conventional cultural burden. That is to say, the breasts, the bottom and the vagina with regard to the female body; and, for the male, the penis. By way of contrast, Marçal demands a sexuality without limitations where the multiplicity of the senses become the principal reference:

Avui tancaria el llangardaix en una gàbia.  
I que fos la festa dels dits,  
la dansa de l'heura a cau d'orella,  
la tendresa de la planta dels peus,  
l'or negre de la cella i de l'aixella  
Seguiria els camins que el deliri oblida  
amb pas molt lent  
com el del bou que llaura  
aquest paisatge de lluna gitana. (1989: 113)

[Today I would lock the lizard in a cage.  
And make it a feast day for fingers,  
ivy's dance in the cockle of the ear,  
the tenderness of the soles of feet  
black gold of the brow and axilla  
I would follow paths forgotten by delirium  
most slowly  
like the bull which ploughs  
this landscape of gypsy moon.]

The skin, ears, feet, armpit, eyebrows may be only small spaces of a female body but still they excite, like the full extent of the body, even though this might be self-induced without need of another. In *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un* (1974), Luce Irigaray configures another topo(logy) of *jouissance* and also another representation of gender:

(La/une) femme fait signe vers l'indéfinissable, l'inénomérable, l'informulable, l'*informalisable*. Nom commun indéterminable quant à une identité. (La/une) femme n'obéit pas au principe d'identité à soi, ni à un *x* quelconque. Elle s'identifie à tout *x*, sans s'y identifier de manière particulière. Ce qui suppose un excès à toute identification à/de soi. Mais cet excès (n')est rien: la vacance de la forme, la faille de la forme, le renvoi à un autre bord où elle se re-touche sans/grâce à rien. Les lèvres de la même forme –mais jamais simplement définie- se débordent en se retouchant et se renvoyant l'une (à) l'autre pour un pourtour que rien n'arrête dans *une* configuration.

Ce qui déjà aura eu lieu sans le concours, secours, d'aucun objet, ni sujet. Autre topo-(logie) de la jouissance. Étrangère à l'auto-affectation masculine, qui n'y aura vu que son négatif. La mort de sa logique, et non son altérance dans une copulation encore indéfinie. L'auto-érotisme de l'homme suppose une individualisation du sujet, de l'objet, et de l'instrument approprié(s) à la jouissance. Fût-ce un instant, le temps d'une recharge. (La/une) femme est toujours déjà en état d'anamorphose où toute figure se floue. (1974: 285)

The need of the poetic 'I' to claim a new form of understanding of sexuality that involves, as Irigaray explains, another re-presentation of women, alternates once again with the traditional concept. It would not be until the third collection, *Sal oberta*, that Marçal will defend openly her vision of *jouissance*. In fact, *Bruixa de dol* is placed within a period of transition where both types of sexual relation merge to the point of contradiction as in the comparison of expressions that hint at the penis in two different poems.

In the first composition, the penis is compared to a sweet lizard: 'Dóna'm [...] aquest dolç llangardaix que em duu follia' (1989: 110) [Give me that sweet lizard that brings me madness.] And two poems later the poet abandons the amphibian: 'Avui tancaria el llangardaix en una gàbia./ I que fos la festa dels dits' (1989: 113) [Today I would lock the



lizard in a cage./ To make a feast day for fingers.] The proximity of these two expressions reinforces the confusion established between the pleasure principle and the dispelasure of heterosexual relationships. As a result, in Marçal, sexuality regards the lover as a sweet enemy:

Dolç enemic,  
amb caçapapallones  
em pares trampes  
pels plecs del plaer. (1989: 112)

[Sweet enemy  
with a butterfly net  
you set traps for me  
through folds of pleasure.]

Swords, weapons, enemies, are all elements that make reference to the great castrator of sexual pleasure. Even the axe, erect like the penis, contains a double blade that aggressively severs everything it touches. The male sex is, therefore, the carrier of the death drive coloured with a pleasant coating. Marçal says: 'Avui l'amor té gust de ventolera/ i em fa plaer l'estella: i la destrat' (1989: 129) [Love today tastes of wind/ and axe and splinters bring me pleasure]; and also, 'I t'abraço amb l'angoixa vegetal/ d'un bosc d'amor ofert a la destrat' (1989: 130) [And I kiss you with the vegetable anguish/ from a wood of love offered to the axe]. If, for Freud, the woman provokes the terror of castration, as he explains in his elaboration about the image of the head of Medusa (1981: 2697), for Marçal it is man who has castrated her: who has destroyed her body, her culture, her language, her life, her freedom.

As Mélanie Klein states, the penis is eternally desired by the castrated woman who will never be free from her oedipal yoke, suffering an inevitable penis envy. In this sense, the daughter would want to substitute the mother by taming the penis of the father and having a child with him (Irigaray 2009: 40). The penis, the baby and the clitoris — as a female penis not yet formed according to Freud — contain in Marçal's poetry a common point between the sexual and reproductive drives. In fact, the sexual lines 'Com una serp, cargola't al meu ventre/ i cerca'm, amb verí d'amor, al centre' (1989: 132) [Like a snake, slither round my stomach/ and find my centre with love's poison] are similar to the lines of *Sal oberta*, a collection where the writer sings to maternity: 'Mai cap amant no ha gosat arribar/ al lloc extrem des d'on tu m'acarones' (1989: 269) [No lover has dared to come/ to the extreme place from where you caress me]. Apparently, the lyrical 'I' attempts to differentiate the loving caresses of the lover from those of the baby; but from the point of view of psychoanalysis both lover and baby have the same sexual function.

Finally, sexuality in Marçal compels the poetic 'I' to get into murky waters where the impulse towards destruction will be opposed, at times, to the pleasure principle. Passion, joy, pain and fear divide the sexual lines in *Bruixa de dol* where heterosexuality is still fully present. In this same book, however, love between women, between friends, already begins to entail other feelings.

## **Love**

The relationship between women nurtures a positive vision of life. The force of gender unity evokes the pleasure principle, possibly the only fillip to the natural drives without dividing its opposites. Fairies and witches love each other, constituting the only group with which the poetic 'I' communes:

Avui, sabeu? les fades i les bruixes s'estimen. [...]  
Jo, que aguaito de lluny la roda fetillera,  
esbalaïda veig que vénen cap a mi  
i em criden perquè hi entri. Ullpresa, els dic que sí. (1989: 137)

[Today, do you know? fairies and witches love one another [...]  
I, who watch the cursor's wheel  
amazed, I see them coming towards me  
calling me to enter. Spellbound, I agree.]

Female love increases in turn with the presence of friends, as in the dedication of a poem to Adela Costa who is compared to an angel. This celestial element may be interpreted as a divine messenger who can no longer remain incarcerated, immobile and, according to Luce Irigaray, is a figure who 'vient dire qu'une nouvelle naissance, un nouveau matin, va advenir' (1997: 22).

Apart from the poems dedicated to her friends, this book provides other elements that form the constellation of female *jouissance*. First of all, the use of oral and popular culture provides value to the microhistory that women construct day after day. There are particular elements related to domestic space such as threads, cushions, curtains or embroidery. Other female referents, like 'water', refer to the descending path towards the inner self (Jung 1994: 24); and the rain that in the section 'Avui les fades i les bruixes s'estimen' brings happiness and femininity, also privileging witches, broomsticks, fairies, sky, sea, waves, boats and other associated referents.

Even the sun here provides heat but without burning aggressively. Also the shade, an archetype that, evoking death, finds here a brighter side without tension. In short, this new female universe rejoices in the sisterhood between women. In fact, *Bruixa de dol*

finishes with a composition dedicated to the force of the union of the female gender which allows the poetic 'I' to imagine a new way of achieving a universe where love will reign. This location, a reserve of women, of difficult conception, can be found in the last part of the book 'Sense llops ni destrals' [Without wolves nor axes] of *Bruixa de dol* (1989: 156-66).

Josep-Anton Fernández (2004: 207) has suggested that here the mythical female space of the forest is threatened by two elements that symbolise the phallogentric world: the wolf and axes. The path that begins in the first poem attempts to extend away from the negative energy implicit in the title. In this way, the sexual binary of convention is rejected in favour of Fernández's 'intersubjectivitat feminina' although the strain involved in this exercise of liberation is great and, challenged by the difficulty in continuing, the poet turns on her heels, returning to the previous poems where bitterness and resentment stain the lines. It is no accident, for example, that the poems prior to 'Sense llops ni destrals' are inhabited by a grief that unfolds within the frame of heterosexual love.

Significantly, this lack of understanding, bitterness and fear of suffering induce reflection on relationships dominated by caution. The disproportionate experience that we will find later in *Terra de mai* (1982), where the poetic subject is driven entirely by lesbian desire, cannot be compared to the constraint of *Bruixa de dol*. Therefore, in the poem 'Foravilers' [Outsiders] she demands her lover to eat no longer the bitter almond but to continue with those which are not yet ripe. This amorous unease comes to alter the pleasure principle mentioned previously. In fact, the separation between pleasure and displeasure become almost impossible as, in keeping with much of the verse, the libido becomes inflected by the death drive.

## Pleasure and Beyond

In Maria-Mercè Marçal the experience of pain was refashioned into a matter of poetic reflection about identity. If, according to Freud, the unity of the person is imposed by clear limits, it is through an examination of the inner self that the bounds set lose their shape (Freud 1981: 3018-19). The motto of *Bruixa de dol* refers to that same uncertainty in the sphere of identity:

### DIVISA

Emmarco amb quatre fustes  
un pany de cel i el penjo a la paret.

Jo tinc un nom  
i amb guix l'escric a sota. (1989: 81)

### [MOTTO

I frame heaven's padlock with four pieces of wood  
and hang it on the wall.

I have a name  
and I write it underneath with chalk.]

According to Giesebrecht, 'le nom devient un Double redoutable de l'homme [puisque les] mots, ombre et âme, sont identiques dans la croyance populaire' (cited in Rank 2001: 75). Hence, the strong poetic subject found in the device of *Cau de*

*Ilunes* is here clearly compromised by the limits of a weak space represented by her name written in chalk, a signature that can be all too easily erased. As such, there is a re-appearance of the deteriorated perspective or awareness that in *Bruixa de dol* was engaged in other, more positive paths.

This weakness of identity leads the voice towards the space where the poetic subject is constantly terrorised by her ghosts, especially the confrontation with her other self as she comes face to face with her loss of identity. In this respect, Aliquié Ferdinand has observed that to become aware of the self implies ‘un dédoublement, une certaine séparation d’avec ce dont on a conscience. Avoir conscience de soi, c’est se prendre pour objet, c’est donc ne pas coïncider avec soi, c’est renoncer à ce qu’on était’ (cited in Decourt 2008: 1&2). Moreover — and in a manner more pertinent to our present context — Edgar Morin has speculated that ‘Le double est au cœur de toute représentation archaïque concernant les morts’ (2003: 142). As such, the double becomes in *Bruixa de dol* an alienating element that is communicated negatively by reference to the shadow, the mirror and other related motifs.

### **The shadow**

The small pebbles with which the poetic ‘I’ strews her path to aid return are reminiscent of similar strategies employed in fairy tales: ‘I jo sembro amb pedretes els camins/ que em duen cap a mi, nit meva endins’ (1989: 123) [I sow with pebbles the paths/ which lead me to me, my night within me.] However, as is the case with most characters in these stories, this does not avoid the terror of facing the truth. And the poetic ‘I’ in Marçal is fearful of the presence of her own shadow as well as the other enemies that

surround her: the hawk, the scorpion, the crab, knives, the wind of March that plays at killing, the clown and the mirror that watches her with disdain.

These elements emerge from the depths, from darkness. Given that darkness is the eternal opponent, the personification of all rejections, Marçal unveils the fear of the poetic 'I' when she faces her bare inner self:

Ja no m'enartes, sol,  
vaixell salvat de l'ombra,  
que és l'ombra qui m'ha pres.  
El cranc d'aquest crepuscle  
se m'ha arrapat al cor  
i els meus ulls són el llac  
on es nega la lluna. (1989: 102)

[You charm me no longer,  
vessel saved from shadow  
it is the shadow which has taken me.  
The crab of this sunset has taken my heart  
My eyes are the lake  
Where the moon is denied.]

According to Jung, 'el encuentro consigo mismo significa en primer término el encuentro con la propia sombra. [...] la sombra es un angosto paso, una puerta estrecha cuya penosa estrechez nadie que descienda a la fuente profunda puede evitar' (1994: 27) [the encounter with the self involves in the first instance an encounter with one's own shadow. ... the shadow is a narrow pass, a strait gate whose painful narrowness no one who descends to the deep fountain can avoid]. In fact, he continues:

El encuentro consigo mismo es una de las cosas más desagradables y el hombre lo evita en tanto puede proyectar todo lo negativo sobre su

mundo circundante. [...] La sombra es una parte viviente de la personalidad y quiere entonces vivir de alguna forma. No es posible rechazarla ni esquivarla inofensivamente. Este problema es extraordinariamente grave, pues no solo pone en juego al hombre todo, sino que también le recuerda al mismo tiempo su desamparo y su impotencia. (1994: 26)

[The encounter with the self is one of the most unpleasant things and man avoids it in so far as he is able to project all that is negative on the the world around him... The shadow is a living part of the personality which wants to live in whatever way it can. It is not possible to reject it or avoid it without effect. This problem is extraordinarily grave, for it does not only place everything at risk for man, but also reminds him of his helplessness and impotence].

As a result, representing her great primitive fears, the shadow (like the hawk) glides over the lines of *Bruixa de dol*. It is her *double mystérieux* (Rank 2010: 77). Nevertheless, even if it provokes fear, in our culture the shadow 'a été le moyen par lequel l'homme a vu pour la première fois son corps' (Rank 2010: 78). In this way, it functions as an objectivation of the human soul, marking the possessor's health, good or ill. Otto Rank, while verifying the meaning of that element in several civilisations, concluded that 'celui qui n'a pas d'ombre meurt, celui dont l'ombre est petite ou faible tombe malade, tandis qu'une ombre forte prédit la santé' (2010: 73). Therefore, the vitality of the poetic subject in *Bruixa de dol* gives colour to the most sinister poems. Here, the libido is confused with the death drive. If the shadow seems to attack the poetic 'I', it also provides an incredible vitality, so much so in fact that she confuses it with death. Otto Rank states that 'l'ombre signifie la mort, mais elle signifie aussi la vie et les deux significations reposent sur une croyance primitive à la dualité de l'âme' (2010: 82). Significantly, Jung offers a similar affirmation:



C'est à l'heure mystérieuse du midi de la vie que la parabole s'inverse et que se produit la naissance de la mort. Dans sa deuxième moitié, la vie n'est pas ascension, déploiement, multiplication, débordement; elle est mort, car son but, c'est la fin. Ne-pas-vouloir-l'apogée-de-la-vie et ne-pas-vouloir-sa-fin, c'est la même chose. L'un et l'autre signifient ne-pas-vouloir-vivre. Or, ne-pas-vouloir-vivre est synonyme de ne-pas-vouloir-mourir. Devenir et disparaître forment une même courbe. (1980: 420)

Interestingly, the link between death and life can also be compared in Maria-Mercè Marçal with the motif of the widespread 'ivy' particularly in the third book *Sal oberta* where she combines the vivid characteristics of this plant with its fatal components as it wraps round a tree. In addition, returning to the image of the shadow that incorporates the concept of the double, death can only be understood as one of the two 'I's. That is to say, there is a tension between the first and the second 'I'. Otto Rank speaks of 'suicide' (2001: 84) when one 'I' tries to destroy the other. In the next poem, the shadow eliminates completely the poetic 'I' to the extent that it disappears:

El mag m'espera a frec de l'envelat  
i jo arribo amb la bruixa del casal  
on visc amb mi, i amb l'ombra del meu mal.  
A voltes sense mi, i amb l'ull fadat. (1989: 127)

[The magician waits for me at the centre of the square  
and I arrive with the witch of the house  
where I live with me, and with the shadow of my pain.  
Sometimes without me, and with the fairy eye.]

Hence, the shadow evokes a strong archetypal power that, along with other symbols, enhances the world of phantasmagoria. According to Freud, this duplicate is produced when the part of the *pleasurable* 'I' needs to disassociate itself from the 'I' of

*displeasure* and expel it forming an external *non-I* (1981: 3019). The image is thus intensely alienating and casts the subject into the void. Or, in Marçal's own words:

La tensió entre el jo poètic, la lluna i l'ombra — llast, zona no explorada, incontrolable, fat, lloc de la subjecció i dels fantasmes paralizadors — és l'esquema triangular bàsic que, com el poema xinès 'Petita festa' que traduï Marià Manent, remet sempre, en la lluita o en el festí, a la pròpia solitud. (1989: 8)

[The tension between the poetic 'I', the moon and the shadow — ballast, unexplored zone, uncontrollable, fate, place of subjection and of paralyzing ghosts — is the basic triangular scheme which, like the poem 'Little Feast' translated by Marià Manent, inevitably returns us, in struggle or celebration, to our own solitude.]

### **The mirror**

This image provides a new meaning to the lyrical subject; though, like its counterpart the shadow, the mirror reaffirms the sense of solitude as seen in two key poems.

Aquest mirall em diu que sóc ben sola  
i no hi fa res que el trenqui en mil bocins.  
He enfilat el carrer trist que va a escola  
i em marco, amb guix, entorn, els meus confins. (1989: 123)

[This mirror tells me I am quite alone  
and unperturbed should I break it into a thousand pieces  
I've threaded the sad path which leads to school  
And frame myself, with chalk, all around, my limits.]

Sola, ben sola, em diu aquest mirall.  
I no hi fa res que sent en el meu front

la teva mà, llindar entre el teu món  
i aquest núvol que em fa d'amagatall. (1989: 126)

[Alone, quite alone this mirror tells me.  
It is unperturbed should I feel your hand on my forehead,  
boundary between your world  
and that cloud which serves as my hideaway.]

In his speculation on the mirror phase, Lacan is interested in the awareness of the body which represents the child's entrance into the symbolic order (1989: 87-88). The mirror shows a complete image of the body, a Gestalt, which offers a visual and corporal representation of identity. For the Lacanian child, the mirror becomes tragic since the complete body is apprehended through the specular form; and the image is primarily that of an Other. Furthermore, the image reveals always less than the subject *is* (Lacan 1989: 90). Other more recent theorists such as Fabienne Pomel have reflected upon the dialogue established between the specular image and the 'I'; a dialogue of the truth since, as Jung explains (1994: 26), the mirror unveils with complete accuracy the figure of the person who beholds its revelation of the hidden face: the mask, imposed by all upon themselves.

In *Bruixa de dol*, the mirror elucidates anticipation and announcement of the truth, revealing what the poetic subject resists believing. This is how the world of specular visibility dramatically marks the psychology of Marçal's 'I'. The mirror, shattering into a thousand pieces, evokes superstition — particularly seven years of bad luck or even death (Rank 2001: 95). In fact, the mirror points out the solitude the poet, the sadness that surrounds her. Her attempts to establish a dialogue, even if it is with herself to break

the sense of isolation, reinforce the tragic situation. 'Aquest mirall em diu que sóc ben sola' (1989: 123) [This mirror tells me I am quite alone] is powerfully indicative of this modality; as is the device of the collection where she quibbles with the words 'em marco' [I frame myself] and 'emmarco' [I frame].

This polyphonic structure, which contrasts the lyrical 'I' with other opposed voices, imprisons her in a world of reflections. But these reflections provide another source of meaning related to the search of gender. In this case, the alteration of identity that the mirror produces is not an end but a means. From the feeling of solitude that the poetic 'I' experiences in front of the mirror it will be only a small step to female *jouissance* where the shattering of the mirror will not disassemble the pieces; on the contrary, they will still remain united as in *Terra de mai*. In *Spéculum de l'autre femme*, Luce Irigaray establishes the difference between female and phallogocentric speculation in this area:

La femme et la mère ne se spéculent pas de la même manière. Une double spécularisation en elle(s), entre elle(s), déjà s'interpose. Et plus. Car le sexe de la femme n'est pas un. Et comme en chacune de ces/ses 'parties' explose la jouissance, ainsi peuvent-elles la mirer différemment dans leurs éblouissements. Plus plénière que dans le tout? Ce serait dire que cette pluralité du plaisir est réductible en brisures, fragments, d'un miroir. Qu'elle le soit parfois, ou aussi, dans des jeux de réflexions, d'inversion, de perversion, polymorphes n'est pas impossible, ni même sans satisfactions. Mais c'est là encore jouir de l'hommologue, non d'une sexualité où des multiples hétérogènes fondent, refondent, confondent, les éclats de glaces en faisant feux de/dans leurs écarts. Les rassembler en quelque unité de spéculation, sommation à comparaître de leurs plaisirs, n'a rien à voir –encore- avec ce qui brûle et reluit dans l'embras(s)ement indéfiniment rallumé de ces coupes incendiaires. (1974: 297)

This new experience of pleasure in female existence starts in *Bruixa de dol* but it is fully evident from *Sal oberta* onwards. Thus, *Bruixa de dol* anticipates the different conceptions to be explored later. Though, in this book, the poet does not liberate herself completely from phallogentrism, the mirror enhances the solitude that encourages her to continue with the search for female identity with the purpose of framing her limits and her name. And Marçal attempts to move away from previous poems where the established male order was still present. In the poems quoted above, however, we can find a lyrical 'I' that desires to act as a subject with her own identity, where nature and culture are combined. Anna Montero has referred to this point:

El problema es planteja quan tu vols actuar com a subjecte, com a algú que té identitat, però sense abandonar aquest grup i penses que el que cal és un marc, un àmbit on es pugui ser dona, sense renunciar a ser *natura* ni a fer cultura. (1987: 79-80)

[The problem occurs when you want to act as subject, as someone who has an identity, but without abandoning the group; and you think that what is required is a frame, an ambit where you can be a woman, without renouncing being nature or producing culture.]

Accordingly, there is frustration in the poet's attempts to frame women structurally as she becomes aware of the difficulties to congeal the female gender within a unique imaginary territory. In the poem cited above, 'Aquest mirall em diu que sóc ben sola' (1989: 123), the mirror seems to define her identity in the writing of her name. But as we have seen, the material of her writing can be erased easily. Therefore, just as with Narcissus, the poetic 'I' looks in the mirror and vanishes, finding death in psychological terms, as Thibierge explains:

Elle établit d'emblée les modalités de la relation au semblable dans la forme de l'agressivité jalouse et de la destruction. Cette jalousie liée structurellement par la nature réduplicative de notre moi et à cette puissance de destruction tournée vers l'autre, ne fait que différencier la pulsion de mort: ce ne sont que des prolongements et des complexifications de la pulsion de mort. (2000: 8)

What is more, the situation is exacerbated by the presence of this mirror both in front and behind her: 'Tinc un mirall al davant i a l'esquena./ Galtes avall la pluja em fa la trena' (1989: 122) [I have a mirror in front and behind me./ Down my cheeks the rain makes its plaits]. Thus solitude and sadness swallow the psyche in an 'I' that cannot resist the restrictive power of mirrors. If, for Lacan, reflective identification signifies transformation of the subject (1971: 87), for Marçal in *Bruixa de dol* there is no such empowerment. Her personal transformation is lost amid phallogocentric culture and does not serve her desire. And this solitude negates the individual's needs to approach the female collective. In fact, as we have mentioned, Marçal's woman becomes aware of the isolation of her singularity, as Luce Irigaray has suggested:

De ahí el misterio que ella representa en una cultura que pretende enumerarlo todo, calcularlo todo en unidades, inventariarlo todo por individualidades. *Ella no es ni una ni dos*. No cabe, rigurosamente, determinarla como una persona, pero tampoco como dos. Ella se resiste a toda definición adecuada. Además, no tiene nombre 'propio'. Y su sexo, que no es *un* sexo, es contado como *no* sexo. Negativo, envés, reverso del único sexo visible y morfológicamente designable [...]: el pene. (Irigaray 2009: 19)

[It's from there that the mystery comes that she represents in a culture which tries to number everything, calculating all in units, making an inventory of everything, in personalities. *She is neither one nor two*. She

cannot be rigorously defined as one person, nor as two. She resists all adequate definition. Moreover, she has no name 'of her own'. And her sex, which is not *one* sex, is counted as a non-sex. Negative, underside, reverse of the only visibly and morphologically designated sex: the penis.]

As such, in the face of an unsatisfactory outside world the invisible woman cannot walk towards her inner self. The specular solitude will condition not only the situation of her gender but also the situation of the so-called female writing. In her prologue to *Llengua abolida (1973-1988)*, published in 1989, the poet explains the constant difficulties encountered in constructing room for her words and, importantly, she compares the productive act of poetry with a mirror:

¿Què deu ser la poesia sinó el mirall que em fa retornar un i altre cop a aquest escenari i, ahora, l'intent també reiterat d'arrencar-me'n, amb els mots, i confegir-me un espai propi, una cambra pròpia? Des de *Cau de llunes* a *Desglaç* aquest és el ball d'ombres i màscares que les paraules *re-presenten, juguen* o es juguen. Quasi sense entreactes. I sense treva: clOs i/o Solc. (1989: 7)

[What can poetry be but the mirror which returns me time and again to this scene and, at the same time, the reiterated attempt to drag me from it, with words, to re-create a space of my own, a chamber of my own? This has been the game from *Cau de llunes* to *Desglaç*, the dance with shadows and masquerade which words represent, play or play with themselves. Almost without intervals. And without truce: clOse and/or furrow.]<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Translator's note: the last sentence is a palindromic pun in the original Catalan.

The constant search for expression that could represent her encourages the poet to call out to her double, inviting her to dance with the shadows and the masks that words *re-present*. Entrapped by solitude, the lyrical 'I' will face her inner self that will be identified not only with the image of the mirror but also the related motifs of shadows, friends and clowns. As in the mirror stage, the existential void displayed in *Bruixa de dol* opens the door to the creation of a new structure or, in a more Marçalian formulation, a *de-structure*. On the one hand, the lack of understanding marks the woman who is not yet re-constructed and lives in a gender orphanage; on the other, her own identity expels her from any definition. Like chalk that can be erased, Irigaray affirms that a woman 'est indéfiniment autre qu'elle-même', and continues 'il faudrait l'écouter avec une autre ouïe "comme un autre sens" en se tissant toujours, en s'embrassant aux mots, mais aussi en se démêlant pour ne pas se fixer, se coaguler' (2009: 21).

### **Conclusion: Some Notes on Language**

In the final analysis we can affirm the poet's struggle towards life and death, towards pleasure and displeasure. Two drives and principles that attract and, at the same time, repel each other. It is through the opposition of these forces that Marçal's world is constructed as they circumscribe the process of becoming a subject. The ensuing fall towards her inner self led to the discovery of her unconscious, her primal being, the place where language comes into existence. It is within this space that Marçal attempts to escape limitations:

Ésser capaces de detectar els límits del llenguatge heretat — i aquesta és la nostra eina i la nostra matèria primera — per forçar-los i eixamplar-los, i forçar i eixamplar, així, també el nostre univers, perquè un i altre



—llenguatge i univers — deixin d'ésser paraules només del gènere masculí: vet aquí un objectiu. Perquè reanomenar és una forma de prendre possessió del món. Potser la prèvia a qualsevol altra. (1986: 36)

[To be able to detect the limits of inherited language — our tool and raw material — to forge and extend them, to force and extend our own universe as well, so that one and the other — language and universe — cease to be words solely of the male gender: this is the objective. For renaming is a means to take possession of the world. Perhaps the precursor to all other means.]

The complexities of decolonising female gender are explained as follows:

No és gens reconfortant llegir poemes on Brossa o Neruda — per parlar de dos poetes que m'agraden i que entrarien dins del qualificatiu 'd'esquerrosos' — s'extasien davant la seva companya, que els renta els plats o els sargeix els mitjons. Però això fàcilment detectable, i que fins i tot fa simpàtica la 'bona fe' dels autors, no és pas el més perillós. La trampa penso que es troba a nivells més profunds, i més difícils, per tant, d'explorar i de delimitar. Tots els processos de descolonització són llargs, complexos, contradictoris, difícils. És un repte, però, que no podem eludir si volem deixar d'ésser inexistents. (1986: 37)

[It is no comfort to read poetry where Brossa or Neruda — to speak of two poets I like and would enter into the category of 'lefties' — leap into extasis before their partners who wash their dishes or darn their socks. But what is easily detected, and which even renders attractive the 'good faith' of these writers, is not what is most dangerous. The trap is laid at deeper, more difficult levels to explore and delimit. All processes of decolonization are long, contradictory and difficult. It is a challenge: but one we cannot avoid if we want to cease being inexistent.]

This is, for Marçal, the inner space of pre-consciousness where she finds a possibility of extending limits. A space where the psyche of the mother interacts with that

of the daughter. As Jung has suggested, mothers and daughters are reunited in a location where the time factor is altered as mother and daughter mingle to develop a feeling of immortality (1980: 422). For Marçal, this constitutes the immortality of gender. And it is to reach this space that the poet aims to build a new language as Irigaray affirms:

Ainsi (la/une) femme peut-il/elle à la rigueur être un signifiant — même de dessous la barre — dans le système logique des représentations, ou représentants-représentatifs, du 'sujet'. Ce qui ne veut pas dire qu'en ce signifiant elle puisse de quelque façon se reconnaître. (1974: 286)

It is precisely the search for recognition as a woman that encourages in the poetic 'I' the need to descend towards the unconscious; that is to say, towards a space where time stops: the world of myths and archetypes. The place of fear and vertigo, as Freud (1981: 2504) suggests, where the act of creation surpasses the dark, displeasure, and the death drive. It is for this reason that the encounter with her own body-text produces the maximum pleasure. Like Arachne, free from reason, the poet weaves her text without impediment to construct a new world beyond the rigidity of phallogentric space and the values promoted by patriarchy, property and order (Irigaray 2009: 65). In this way, with the unconscious and archetypes as her point of departure, the poet fights against a cultural heritage that has blocked women. In the prologue of her collection *Llengua abolida (1973-1988)* she refers to the 'I'-moon-shadow of the poems of the book *La germana, l'estrangera* where she affirms:

*La germana, l'estrangera* reflecteix la crisi de l'esquema jo-lluna-ombra, que temptava la construcció d'una *identitat* des del cor mateix del conflicte — des de l'herència i contra l'herència, des d'uns arquetips

mítics i contra l'arquetip: una identitat de *dona*, enllà i ençà del femení que confina amb tornaveu de fat. (1989: 8)

[*La germana, l'estrangera* reflects the crisis of the scheme I-moon-shadow which attempted construction of an *identity* from the very heart of the conflict; from and against inheritance, from and against mythic archetypes: the identity of *woman*, up to and beyond the female which confines and amplifies fatidically.]

Plunging into the unconscious, into the signifier of our cultural elements, into the primitive image of the baby released from the mirror stage, the poet strives to be reborn at the very the centre of the conflict. Her spider weaves a dance of the senses between her body, her forces, her relationships with other women, in an alternative, prediscursive universe. She will determine herself without the sacrifice of any of her pleasures, without defining herself with only one single identity in a polymorphous attempt to free the female subject along the lines suggested by Hélène Cixous in *The Laugh of the Medusa*.

Es imposible *definir* una práctica femenina de la escritura, es una imposibilidad que se mantendrá pues nunca se podrá *teorizar* esta práctica, encerrarla, codificarla, lo que no significa que no exista. Sino que sobrepasará siempre el discurso que rige el sistema falocéntrico; tiene y tendrá lugar en otros lugares que los territorios subordinados a la dominación filosófico-teórica. Sólo se dejará pensar por los sujetos rompedores de automatismos, los corredores de bordes a los que ninguna autoridad somete jamás. (Cixous 2004: 30)

[It is impossible to define a female practice of writing. It is impossible to maintain such a thing since it is impossible to theorise this practice, encase it, codify it — yet this does not mean that its does not exist. It will always surpass the discourse imposed by the phallogcratic system. It takes place and will occur in places other than territories subordinated

to philosophical and theoretical domination. It will only be conceived by subjects who smash automatism, those who run around the edges and whom no authority can ever subject.]

It is here that the poet locates her being, in the passage from pain to pleasure, from death to life, from darkness to the light, from particular to general, from personal to collective and vice versa. The poetry of Marçal becomes a form of exploration of the gap, the space in-between, the investigation of the fissure that will allow the emergence of the *white ink* of womanhood in a place where women can finally find control.

## Persephone's Invisible Threads: On *Raó del cos*

Jennifer Duprey

[Zeus] came to the bed of all-nourishing  
Démeter, and she bore white-armed  
Persephone whom Aïdoneus carried off  
from her mother.

Hesiod, *Theogony*

### Overture

The epigraph opening these pages prefigures its subject matter. According to Greek mythology, the god of the dead and hell abducted Persephone, who then metamorphosed into the goddess of death. This damsel, once called Koré, was snatched from her mother's arms. Since then, white-armed Persephone has been implacable with those who inhabited the world of the living. Only Orpheus and Eurydice enjoyed her clemency, even if only ephemerally. But in the world of the living, no one has escaped from Persephone's furtive presence and frightening gaze ever since. Holding her steadily in her gaze, on a hot summer day in 1998, white-armed Persephone took the life of the Catalan poet Maria-Mercè Marçal. As with Orpheus and Eurydice, it was the sad song of the poet that temporarily postponed the eternal moment of her death.

Maria-Mercè Marçal wrote *Raó del cos* (2014) during the last years of her life, while she was fighting cancer;<sup>3</sup> which, as Susan Sontag explains in *Illness as Metaphor* (1978), is a disease suffered and 'experienced as a ruthless, secret invasion' (2001: 5). And its principal metaphors are spatial: it is always described as 'spreading,' 'proliferating,' or 'diffusing' (2001: 14-15) and evokes the body as the space in which it spreads, proliferates, and diffuses. In *Raó del Cos*, the feminine lyric voice makes this unbidden invasion her lyrical occupation. In this book of poetry, there is a poetics of death that recasts death beyond any commonplaces related to its medical connotations; and deeply and movingly entwines death and dying with a narrative of life. It is a poetics of death that emerges out of a reckoning with life, both its present and its past, and thereby generates an interrelated process of learning how to die, while remembering how one has lived. In this book, there is a shift from the abundance of metaphors and images of love, sensuality, maternity, and erotic voluptuousness found in her previous books of poems to a more austere language and semantics.<sup>4</sup> For Marçal, this austerity lends expression to structures of thought and feeling that are not only inseparable but are what bestow cohesion to the poetics of death and the narrative of life that is the signature of *Raó del cos*. Indeed, illness and the proximity of death is the defining inner occupation of the female lyrical voice of Marçal's posthumous book.

While critics have drawn attention to the resonance between Marçal's poetry and Sontag's reflections on cancer and its metaphors, I would like to emphasize her affinities with a different figure: Gillian Rose, the British social philosopher whose poignant

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<sup>3</sup> I rely on the book's translation into English by Montserrat Abelló and Noèlia Díaz Vicedo (2014). The page references at the end of each quotation refer to this edition.

<sup>4</sup> As Caterina Riba has pointed out: 'Marçal explora la triple figura de la poeta com a amant, mare, malalta terminal de manera que assistim a un intens *tour de force* a través del cos entre el Jo i el fetus, el Jo i l'amant i el Jo i la mort' (2012: 160).

reflections on cancer, death, and love in *Love's Work* (1995) resonate with the imagery forged in Marçal's *Raó del cos*. Not only are there intellectual and thematic affinities between these two writers, but these two women were formidable intellectual figures whose works were largely neglected during their lifetimes; and both lives were similarly "cheated of old age", as they both died before their time.<sup>5</sup> Rose and Marçal's writings constitute self-reflections that represent the experience of illness as inseparable, intrinsic or immanent to life; their books, accordingly, share the conscious act of narrating the experience of illness. In *Love's Work* and *Raó del cos* the reader finds a female narrative voice that oscillates between feelings of power and powerlessness when facing illness and the impending death, a narrative voice that seeks to master the linguistic expression of this agonistic tension.<sup>6</sup> In the case of Rose, this reckoning is worked through by way of a philosophical memoir, while Marçal undertakes it through poetry.<sup>7</sup> For, if illness undermines their control of their own body, the philosopher and the poet will seek to master illness by means of the written word, through their own *poiesis*. However, rather than offering a sustained juxtaposition of these two *oeuvres*, I would focus on a major thread running through Rose's reflections in order to foreground further my reading of Marçal's last book.

The epigraph of Rose's book forcefully encapsulates the core of her philosophical message: "Keep your mind in hell, and despair not." A consummate dialectical thinker — commanding works on Adorno and Hegel constitute the core of her philosophical

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<sup>5</sup> In Geoffrey Hill's poem, 'In Memoriam: Gillian Rose', which is included in *Love's Work*, he writes 'You asked not to be/cheated of old age' (2011: 148). Hill evokes Rose's remark in the last page of *Love's Work*: 'I like to pass unnoticed, which is why I hope that I am not deprived of old age' (2011: 144).

<sup>6</sup> Hill's evocation of poetry's agon encompasses the stakes of both Rose's and Marçal's reckonings with death: 'Poetry's its own agon that *allows us/to recognize devastation* as the rift between power and powerlessness' (2011: 150).

<sup>7</sup> On Rose's desire to master language to articulate her feelings about imminent death, see Avrahami (2001). In the same volume the author also elucidates the perception of suffering and death as part of life.

achievement — Rose takes her cue from this seemingly contradictory formulation in order to call into question some of the commonplaces about cancer, life and death. This epigraph also echoes the meaning of her invocation of love's work along with the mix of absolute power and absolute vulnerability, mercifulness and mercilessness that defines this work of reckoning with life and death (2011: 60). More to the point, that injunction carries with it the idea that death is not the total negation of life, but, rather, that 'life in the meaningful sense [is] inclusive of death' (2011: 79).<sup>8</sup> Both the Catalan poet and the British philosopher bring death and the decay of the body into an epistemological field of vision in which both are recognized anew.<sup>9</sup> The epistemological import of both works precisely consists of such re-cognition and the work of mourning it demands. As such, the significance of these texts consists of their articulation of the idea of mourning as a process that is profoundly linked with the creative act, an aspect that one finds patent in Rose and Marçal's work. In her book, *Mourning Becomes the Law* (1996), Rose describes this process that the word 'Becomes' conveyed as an 'inaugurated mourning', a work of mourning that refuses to revert to an endless process and is best understood as completed, which entails a creative involvement with loss (1996: 12). Similarly, in *Raó del cos* mourning is a process that acknowledges the centrality of a creative involvement with loss and sorrow. For instance, in this book the Catalan poet speaks to her mother, initiates a dialogue with her, and asks her to be part of the process of mourning.

The texture of embodied life and the transformation of the body, in the case of Marçal, is the preferred site of reflection. Regarding the centrality of the body, in an interview by Joana Sabadell, the Catalan poet observed: 'Molt més determinat, en canvi,

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<sup>8</sup> The critique of the idea of death as total negation is effected in *Mourning Becomes the Law* (1996).

<sup>9</sup> For the exploration of this aspect in Rose's work see Mary Evans (2008).



és tenir un cos, una situació, una història de dona, o l'altre element que continua sent molt important, el lingüístic. No puc establir una separació entre aquests elements i jo' (1998: 16) [Much more determining, however, is to have a body, a situation, a woman's history, or another element that is very important, language. I cannot establish a separation between these elements and myself.] This conjunction of body and language will be vividly expressed when the female poetic voice declares that the scar on her breast:

divideix  
en dues parts l'aixella.  
Cremallera  
de carn  
mal tancada  
però  
inamovible.  
Inamovible  
com el decret  
que en llengua  
imperial  
m'exilia  
a la terra  
glaçada. (24-25)

[divides  
my armpit  
in two parts.  
Zipper  
of flesh,  
badly closed  
but  
unmovable.  
Unmovable  
like a decree  
that in an imperial  
language  
exiles me  
to the frozen  
land  
of the sick  
with no limits  
or features.]

Thus, through the poetic word, *Raó del cos* makes intelligible Marçal's exile to the 'frozen land of the sick with no limits or features'. In 'A Body of Poetry', Dominic Keown has offered an acute set of formulations that explain the centrality of the body in Marçal's book:

Corporality is [...] fundamental to the confrontation. The body is reiterated as a site for an ideological *prise-de-position* [...] in a manner which is open and speculative, without the foreclosure of discipline or dogma [...] Her rebellion is far too determined, far too entrenched to accept, feed on the comfort of death or pass gently into oblivion. (2014: 12)

Marçal poetically crafts her representation of death in ways that show no acquiescence. Rather, her poetry enacts a process of "inaugurated mourning" that entails a way of knowing death that simultaneously reveals the limit of knowing it absolutely. She agonistically dwells on the rift between the two without resting either on passivity or mastery.

### **An Elegy for One's Own Death: 'Les paraules i el cos'**

The body — as matter, text, island and, all in all, as topography of power in which social realities are written and inscribed — would become the *leitmotif* of Marçal's poetry. Words and the body — or 'les paraules i el cos', as the Catalan poet writes — create a different symbolic order expressed in the form and content of her verse. As Noèlia Díaz Vicedo has observed, corporeality, social reality and homoerotic experience are transformed as part of her identity and poetic expression both as a woman and poet (2004: 18). Or, as the poet herself has revealed, it is about

the construction of an identity out of the heart of the conflict itself — out of inheritance and against inheritance —, out of mythical archetypes and against the archetype: a woman's identity ... Fire and water, strange amphibious, spider that weaves...a marine forest or an island of mountains. Through love, passion, disaffection, maternity in blossom, and solitude without shoes. (2004: 9)

In her essay 'Qui sóc i per què escric' [Who Am I and Why I Write?] Marçal also articulates her vocation as a writer:

For many years I have written nothing but mostly poetry. And poetry has been my internal skeleton, my way of telling myself, of provisionally ordering with the word the chaos that the unexpected triggers ... as the mirror in which formless and fragmentary experience is recognized, unified and endowed with meaning. Perhaps, also, as a second memory. (1995: 21)

In *Raó del cos*, the word would become an exile from exile as part of that fragmentary and formless experience that emerges and crystallizes out of the pain caused by the certainty of impending death and the decay of the body. Namely, the word would conjure the forms and spaces of death: 'Porta entre mar/ i mar/ la paraula:/ exili de l'exili' [Door between sea/ and sea/ the word:/ exile from exile.] (2014: 52-53)

What is most striking about *Raó del cos* is how in this book the Catalan poet weaves intensely autobiographical and poetical writing — materiality and spirituality, memory and oblivion, death and resurrection — and how this tapestry informs her basic human, ethical, question: how are we to die? A question that becomes particularly poignant when the body is now conceived as 'Sagrada obscenitat (...)/ tocat per la promesa/ de la mort' (62-63) [Sacred obscenity (...)/ touched by the promise/ of death.] The question of "how to die" reaches a more intense pitch when asked at a moment in which the poet had knowledge about her imminent and premature death. She answers this existential question with a poetics of the decaying body, a body that has its reason to live and to die.

Therefore, in a peculiar use of the apostrophe, in which the 'you' the author addresses is the poet's lyrical voice in itself, she commands herself: 'Sigues sacrílega/ i retorna-li/ la qualitat humil/ dels cossos vius' (62-63) [Be sacrilegious/ and give it back/ the humble quality/ of living bodies].<sup>10</sup> The poet's work that fills these pages is thus painful, difficult but beautiful. It is fuelled by a human necessity: to bestow words with the precariousness of the body and the *agon* of death that is part of our fragile human condition.

In what follows, I shall elaborate on the foregoing themes by exploring how in the poem 'Covava l'ou de la mort blanca' (2014: 86-87) [I hatched the egg of white death], the poet speaks to her mother and presents her own vision of death and resurrection. An exploration that establishes a counterpoint between this particular poem and others collected in *Raó del cos*. This composition's brilliance lies in its semantic field, its solemn musicality and speed of reading, which reveals the slowness of death from cancer:

Covava l'ou de la mort blanca  
sota l'aixella, arran de pit  
i cegament alletava  
l'ombra de l'ala de la nit.  
No ploris per mi mare a punta d'alba.  
No ploris per mi mare, plora amb mi.

[I hatched the egg of white death  
under my armpit, close to my breast  
and blindly fed  
the shadow of night's wing.  
Don't cry for me mother at break of dawn  
Don't cry for me mother, cry with me.] (2014: 86-87)

The narrative force of the poem is sustained by the use of the imperfect in the first line. Inside her body, the poet has the germ of death; and, like a mother, she blindly feeds

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<sup>10</sup> As Neus Aguado observes, in *Raó del cos* Bios and Thanatos will face each other again and again until exhaustion (2003: 31).

it. The line conjures the idea of something cyclical in the poet's relationship with death, namely, that death was consuming her while she was keeping death (or cancer) alive: 'Incubated', nursed blindly in her 'breast'. Indeed, the 'ou de la mort blanca' [egg of white death] is located in a very particular place: 'sota l'aixella, arran de pit' [under my armpit, close to my breast]. Her breast is metonymy both of motherhood and the feminine as well as of the wound. What is more, these first three lines do not convey a spiritual or transcendental idea about illness. Quite the contrary, they reveal that the body is nothing more than the flesh we live in.<sup>11</sup>

There is an undeniable solemnity in the tone of this first stanza. The solemnity creates mental — or abstract — images of fragility, of what is spectral and somber. The line 'l'ombra de l'ala de la nit' [the shadow of night's wing] crisply conveys the relationship between the implicit voice and its abstract images. From this line emerge multiple dissimilar images, yet these are images concatenated and semantically associated with and among one another. These are visionary images that provoke a feeling of the actual object: death and its terror. In this sense, the visionary images form a complex metaphorical system that creates a new aesthetic element: "the night is like the wing of terror." What this new aesthetic element establishes is an implicit identity of coincidence based on the dissimilar images, which are yet enjambed in a rather circular structure:

DEATH= night = shadow = wing = hand = fright = night = DEATH.

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<sup>11</sup> As Marçal expressed: 'Crec [...] que el cos hi és en tot, que en definitiva no som res més. Per això, sí hi ets al text.' [I believe (...) that the body is in everything, that definitively we are nothing else. For that reason you really are in the text.] (Sabadell 1998: 15)

The night becomes the fright caused by the shadow lingering like death; or, conversely, death would become the fright caused by a shadow that flies like the night. The core of this structure could be described in the following terms: it is not death as such that terrifies, but the fright that its shadow brings; a shadow whose immense wing is similar to the night that embraces everything with the ubiquitous presence of its darkness. Yet this fright is not induced by Death but by the experience of dying.

The meaning of the syntactic and semantic parallels conveys the imploring tone expressed to her mother: 'No ploris per mi mare a punta d'alba/ No ploris per mi mare, plora amb mi' (2014: 86-87). [Don't cry for me mother at break of dawn/ Don't cry for me mother, cry with me.] The musicality of these lines, in which the poetic voice moves to the present tense, expresses despair and disquiet. Their iambic rhythm creates a direct discourse that emphasizes the crying as both lament and scream:

Esclatava la rosa monstruosa  
botó de glaç  
on lleva el crit.  
Mare, no ploris per mi, mare.  
No ploris per mi mare, plora amb mi.

[The monstrous rose burst out,  
button of ice  
where the cry is born.  
Mother, don't cry for me, mother  
Don't cry for me mother, cry with me.] (86-87)

'Esclatava, la rosa monstruosa' [The monstrous rose burst out], 'glaç' [ice], 'crit' [scream]: the poetic voice amalgamates sensations in a beautiful yet desolate way. The sensoriality of this synesthesia evokes pain: the chest is a 'botó de glaç' [button of ice] frozen, devoid of life. Similarly, the visual-auditory image of the scream created by the synesthetic image makes us part, as readers, of the experience of pain and death: we feel

pain and hear the scream of death. The synaesthesia creates a kind of crescendo that is emphasised by the word 'crit' for death is compared to a scream that lives at the centre of the poet's body: in her 'pit' [breast]. By using the apostrophe, and the alteration of the line's syntax, in the foregoing stanzas the poetic voice interpellates her mother, makes her an interlocutor and invites her to be part of the poet's process of mourning. Marçal configures the internal world of the poem in the presence of this interlocutor. It is the solidarity and communion that the lyrical voice seeks from her mother that bestows meaning to this apostrophe. As part of her inaugurated process of mourning, the Catalan poet asks her mother not only to cry with her, but also that the mother's cry weaves with the poet a mesh that holds the poet's fate:

Que el teu plor treni amb el meu la xarxa  
sota els meus peus vacil·lants  
en el trapezi on em contorsiono  
agafada a la mà de l'esglai  
de l'ombra.

[That your cry mesh with mine a net  
under my staggering feet  
on the trapeze  
where I writhe  
and holds hands with the horror  
of darkness.] (86-87)

This 'xarxa' [net] is simultaneously the net of salvation and the net of death that Persephone weaves with her invisible threads. A net that becomes an unstable trapeze, where the poet holds the hands of horror and nothingness: the 'mà de l'esglai/ de l'ombra' [hold[ing] hands with the horror/ of darkness], a hand that throws her to the terrible fall of death. It is hard not to think about how this stanza evokes Sappho's act on the flying trapeze of death as movingly described in Marguerite Yourcenar's *Fires*:

[Sappho] climbs the rope ladder of her celestial scaffold... With one pull, she brings herself to the last support her will to die will allow: the trapeze bar swinging in mid-air transforms this creature, tired of being only half woman, into a bird; she glides, sea gull of her own abyss... Death has her vault the next trapeze... From here, music is only a smooth swell washing over her memory. (1994: 127-28)

Like the poet that writes this stanza, Yourcenar's Sappho is 'too winged for the ground, too corporal for the sky' (1994: 116) and her 'wax rubbed feet have broken the pact that binds us to the earth' (1994: 116).<sup>12</sup> This movement on the trapeze of death points, in and of itself, to the limit of Marçal's text: the limits of her net. Her poetic language creates a semantic net that is sewn up by the words: body/tissue/flesh/text/oblivion/memory. As expressed in the poem 'Amb fils d'oblit':

Amb fils d'oblit  
l'agulla enfila.  
Desfà l'estrip que veu,  
deixa el que troba.  
Encerta pell  
morta, teixit,  
aire, carn viva:  
cus la memoria  
la sargidora cega. (22-23)

[With threads of oblivion  
the needle is threaded.  
Undoes the tear it sees,  
and leaves the one it finds.  
Reaches dead  
skin, tissue,  
air, raw flesh:  
the blind seamstress  
sews memory.]

The stories one finds in these poems are sutured by Marçal's voice and written word, by her simultaneously profane and sublime recasting of the poet as weaver. The

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<sup>12</sup> Let us not forget that in her poetry, Marçal evokes the literary tradition of this Greek poet.



rhetorical figure of hyperbaton at work in the first lines emphasizes the importance of memory in the act of weaving by the blind seamstress. The poetic voice thus emphasizes what constitutes her memory; namely, poetry and body, which at the same time are 'dead skin, tissue, air, and raw flesh' (23), woven by the blind seamstress's thread of oblivion. The last stanza of 'Covava l'ou de la mort blanca...' [I hatched the egg of white death] conveys the poet's vision of death and resurrection:

Com la veu del castrat  
que s'eleva fins a l'excés de la  
mancança.  
Des de la pèrdua que sagna  
en el cant cristal·lí com una deu. (86-87)  
La deu primera, mare.

[Like the voice of one castrated  
that rises to the excess of what  
is missing.  
From the loss that bleeds  
in the crystal-clear song like a spring.  
The first spring, mother.]

Behind the lines of this stanza lurks the view that dying is a sort of retrospective misplacement of time; that is, the evocation of a time in which the poet may no longer be. For the poetic voice, dying does not mean any form of rebirth, or resurrection. Dying, on the contrary, will be 'to lose shape', 'to undo oneself' (51), 'to be swallowed inside'; or, as the poet says to her mother, it will represent 'desnéixer' (50) [to become unborn]. In the poem titled 'Resurrectio' [Resurrection] (88), the female poetic voice makes us see both her powerlessness and the invasion of her lyrical text by the ill, decaying body:

m'agenollo davant  
el cos  
impur  
obsce

mortal  
primer  
país  
vivent  
taüt  
obert  
d'on vinc  
no hi ha,  
mare, una altra naixença. (89)

[I kneel down before  
the body  
impure  
obscene  
mortal  
primal  
country  
alive  
open coffin  
whence I come,  
there is not,  
mother, another birth.]

These lines are the triumph of the fragmentation of the body and the poetic word. Her body, which in her entire *oeuvre* is body-island, body-earth, a 'primal/ country/ alive' (89), is now 'obscure/ obscene/ mortal': an 'open coffin'. Up until her last book of poetry, Marçal's body will bear the agony of opposites that characterizes her lyric. In *Desglaç* (1984-1988), for instance, the poetic voice had already expressed 'S'estalonen l'infern i el paradís. / I el bressol i la tomba, i les paraules/ i el cos: país natal, exili' (2001: 168). [Hell and heaven are propped up./ And the cradle and the grave,/ and the words and the body: natal country, exile].<sup>13</sup> The body is 'natal country' and 'exile'; or, to be more precise, the body is something which belongs to her subjectivity but that has also exiled her into other discursive geographies

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<sup>13</sup> I am quoting from the collection of poems titled *Contraban de Llum* (2001). I provide Díaz Vicedo's (2004) translation into English.

in which the female lyrical voice finds another dwelling. In this sense, while facing the fragmentation of the body, the written word would confer the poet her own dwelling. Yet what makes 'Resurrectio' stand out in comparison with the images from *Desglaç* is that by means of the corporal images the poem deploys, the reader perceives the extra-textual instance of writing and thus acknowledges his/her own mortality and the physical transformation that comes with death.

### **"Keep your mind in hell and despair not"**

The poems that make up *Raó del cos* create an immanent physiology, a real body: sexed, alive and ill. There is also a ludic sense in the versification and the musical cadences of the poems, which come to relieve the content of the sadness these convey. It expresses the vulnerability and precarious state of the body. This sadness seems to reflect, like a mirror, the collective memory of Marçal and her body. This is a mirror in which the poet would recognize herself as unified, endowed with meaning, and yet fragmented. In this sense, the body of the poem traces the body of the woman who writes and for whom she writes. Marçal's poems at once begin in the body and return to the body. One can thus delineate this relationship: Body-birth-love-desire-maternity-desolation-illness-body-death.

Two passages of Rose's *Love's Work* resonate with the important theme of practising the work of dying in Marçal's *Raó del cos*. One occurs in the context of her critique of how both traditional and non-traditional medicine confront imminent death. At once against the existential obtuseness of surgeons and injunctions of 'the literature of alternative healing' that 'burdens the individual soul', Rose affirms:

to live, to love, is to be failed, to forgive, to have failed, to be forgiven for ever and ever. Keep your mind in hell, and despair not. A crisis of illness, bereavement, separation, natural disaster, could be the opportunity to make contact with deeper levels of the terror of the soul, to loose and to bind, to bind and to loose. A soul which is not bound is as mad as one with cemented boundaries. To grow in love-ability is to accept the boundaries of oneself and others, while remaining vulnerable, woundable, around the bounds. Acknowledgement of conditionality is the only unconditionality of human love. (2011: 105)

As Mary Evans has pointed out in reference to *Love's Work*: "Those artists (of both the written word and the visual arts) who portray disease, physical deformity and suffering are labeled as obsessed with the "abnormal" (2008: 30). Nonetheless, in the foregoing passage of *Love's Work*, Rose evokes ideas of risk, and determinations as enabling conditions, which constitute central *leitmotifs* in her philosophical work: 'I will stay in the fray, in the revel of ideas and risks; learning, failing, wooing, grieving, trusting, working, reposing — in this sin of language and lips' (2011: 144). But what is relevant for the present discussion is her affirmation of life not by fleeing from 'hell' in gestures of denial but by tarrying with it and inhabiting it. The meaning of such inhabiting is clearer in the second invocation of the epigraph, which actually takes place earlier on in the book. Here Rose is reflecting on the 'jovial unhappiness' of her mother: 'denial and unexamined suffering are two of the main reasons for her all-jovial unhappiness — the unhappiness of the one who refuses to dwell on hell, and who lives, therefore, in the most static despair' (2011: 19).

Elsewhere, Rose articulates this apparent contradictory injunction in evocative terms: 'Be — and at the same time know the terms of negation'. This knowledge does not fall into the opposition of mastery/passivity: it acknowledges the negative as it moves beyond eternal loss to eternal confirmation, and adds itself, without count, to the teeming mass of natural declining determinations' (1996: 146). In the face of death, Rose's

triumphal gesture consisted of her affirmation of the dignity of the search for knowledge of death and her avowal of the impossibility of ultimately finding it.

In Marçal's posthumous book, the gestures of the female poetic voice have a devastating effect: they corrupt, disintegrate life, only to contemplate then what is left. And for this it needs a body, a page, where she can write herself. It is about a poetic experience that portrays the remnant of the transformation of the body; an abysmal movement towards the limits of the poet's own thread. In *Raó del cos* the lyric voice fuses with death to regain a sense of dignity in the face of death and precisely inscribe the humanization of the body in the act of writing. In the act of reading her poems we vicariously experience those aspects of love, life, hope, despair, and nothingness that her poetry figures with painful yet stirring beauty. At the end of this journey into these profound aspects of life, the reader finds a revelation gained from the fluctuations of the poet's soul and flesh: its decaying desires, and the work of mourning in the face of imminent death. It is through these poetic images that in *Raó del cos* Marçal practises the work of dying. For it was a human necessity to embrace death, to take it in, before letting it go. The poet is wrapped up in her own net, but her life is fated by Persephone.

Maria-Mercè Marçal lived with the knowledge of her mortality and the certainty of her inescapability from this human condition. She held her look with 'the obscene/ look of a god/ that usurped/ [her] words' (60). Death is thereby admitted and allowed as final. Yet, at the same time, in her writing, in the creative process of mourning her own death the poet remains alive.

## Eros and Thanatos: A Dialectic in the Late Poetry

Noèlia Díaz Vicedo

*Who can tell me that to be born is not  
to die and that to die is not to be born?*

Pindar

The peculiar, ambiguous and apparent miscellaneous point from which Maria-Mercè Marçal's last poems emerge may only be understood through assimilation of their main characteristics: a series of disruptive, fragmented images and a diaphanous plenitude of the poetic subject. The conscious demand of the subject to be saved (memory), the despair of *not knowing* and the paradoxical certainty of rejecting the mother are the reasons for the essentialist, desolate style in which poetry conducts a dialogue with death under the title *Raó del cos* (2000).<sup>14</sup>

The apparent disconnection, not only among the poems themselves but also between the images we find in this collection, remains a unique poetic display within the totality of Marçal's work. If the poems written until 1989 were a clear response to the

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<sup>14</sup> The collection was translated into English by myself and Catalan poet Montserrat Abelló with the title *The Body's Reason* (London: Francis Boutle Publisher, 2014). All quotations will be taken from this edition and accompanied by the page number.

poet's attitude towards the functionality of poetry, which in her own words: 'poesia i vida fan la trena, indestriables' (Marçal 1989: 7) ['poetry and life are entangled'], poetry in this second phase, after the fissure suffered by a literary crisis, congeals into a vivid dialogue with death (Thanatos). Poet and critic Pere Gimferrer refers to this dialogue in the prologue he wrote for the posthumous edition of the book in 2000:

hi ha a *Raó del cos* un tema que s'afegeix als ja coneguts de la gran poeta, però aquest tema és ara ni més ni menys que el de la pròpia malaltia i la pròpia mort; no pas cap mort abstracta i metafísica merament, sino la mort individual i personal. (7)

[In *Raó del cos* we can find a new theme incorporated to the poet's works, this is the display of her own illness and her own death; not merely a metaphysical or abstract death but her individual and personal one.]

*Raó del cos* contains the poetic production of the last two years of the poet's life before her untimely death in 1998. It covers the period wherein she was diagnosed with cancer in 1996, as she says in her journal *El senyal de la pèrdua* (2014), on 1<sup>st</sup> August 1996: 'Avui és el tercer dia que visc amb la mort enganxada, arrapada al costat dret. Fa tres o quatre mesos — potser cinc, ja, amb el terror de les primeres proves que, aparentment, em van tranquilitzar — vaig començar un poema' (22) [Today is the third day that I live with death hooked on, clutching onto my right side. Three or four months ago — maybe five already, with the terror of the first tests that apparently reassured me — I started writing a poem]. Despite the difficulty of the experience, the poems composed during this time emerge simultaneously as a juxtaposition of the most subtle but vital fight: the vulnerability of the body in its movement towards disintegration caused by death and the essentialist immanence of the poetic word. Pere Gimferrer has stated in the

prologue that 'la poeta ha arribat a un punt de nuesa desolada i essencialíssima' (2000: 7). [The poet has reached a point in her poems, the very essence of bare desolation.]

The question arising out of verse which is so sheer in its images that it can even provoke blindness is the extent to which we, as readers, are able to account for this poetry as a form of revelation, the extent to which the poet can achieve eternity: in other words, the extent to which this poetry has finally reached the unity, the desired completeness of the poet's own existence: that is to say, the aim of poetry in its own essence. It is then imperative to elucidate the mechanism, which I read as a dialectic oscillation between Eros and Thanatos, whereby Marçal engages with the act of creation as a form of survival. Given the poet's intrinsic interaction between writing and experience, the physical and intellectual moment that she was experiencing when she was diagnosed with cancer utterly signifies the fundamental basis of such a mechanism.

Inevitably, the poet confronts death with no sign of despair or pain. Although the dialogue with death is intense and primarily transcendent, the poetry does not understand itself as a quest for death. Rather, Marçal offers a definition experienced in her own flesh and blood, the flesh and blood of a woman poet:

Morir: potser només  
perdre forma i contorns  
desfer-se, ser  
xuclada endins  
de l'úter viu,  
matriu de déu  
mare: desnéixer. (2014: 50-51)

[To die: perhaps only to  
lose shape and outline  
to undo oneself, to be  
swallowed inside



the uterus alive,  
god's womb,  
mother: to become unborn.]

This definition entails the concept of death as a retrospective process of being born, as a way to return to the mother. It is from the loss of shape and of outline that the possibility of returning to the womb of the mother becomes plausible. Thus death is not conceived as the end of existence or as the inevitable mission of life. It is not opposed to birth; as the poem shows it is 'to become unborn'. There is an utter end in this poetry; but an end that, far from showing any despair, offers a new possibility of being. The journey detailed in the poem is a very specific one as the poem indicates 'to the uterus alive, god's womb'. The dialectics entailed in these lines intimately connects death with the mother. That is to say that the process of dying for Marçal becomes a way of returning to the origins in order to be born again (*desnéixer*).

On what terms can we take death as an act of return, a return to the mother? It is solely within the space of poetry and the action of writing that this possibility can be pursued, as Marçal has already stated: 'camí de retorn, de reveure, de retrobar, de reidentificar, de reanomenar, de refer-se' (Marçal 1989: 10) [way of return, of revisit, of reencounter, of reidentify, of rename of reconstruction]. This journey or returning to the mother as a process of dying is unleashed when the mechanism and the action of writing is set to work, as Marçal herself has stated 'anar — si cal — cap a la mort, fent-me més i més petita — desnéixer...' (1989: 51) [to go — if necessary — towards death, becoming smaller and smaller — to become unborn...'] .

In this sense, poetic creation emerges from a poignant and controversial dialectic involving the journey back to the mother as origin of existence (Eros) and, as its inevitable

counterpart, the propulsion forward towards death (Thanatos). It is the intention of this chapter to elucidate how this dialectic provides a new form of embodied thought for Marçal and, ultimately, for the female subject. To this effect two theoretical perspectives will inform deliberation: *Il ordine simbolico della madre* (1991) [The Symbolic Order of the Mother] as elaborated by Luisa Muraro and the *Diotima* group of Italian feminist philosophers;<sup>15</sup> and the concept of memory elaborated by María Zambrano in *Notas de un método* (2011) [Notes for a Method].

Maria-Mercè Marçal was diagnosed with cancer on 1 August 1996. Prior to this date she had written six books of poetry all collected in *Llengua abolida (1973-1988)* published in 1989 and her only work of fiction *La passió segons Renée Vivien* (1994) which won a series of prestigious literary prizes. Her poetic activity was interrupted after the publication of *Llengua abolida* to favour production of the novel that took her ten years to write. At the time of her death, poetry was no longer suitable to accomplish its mission, as the poet explained in her last interview:

Arriba un punt, però, que tot allò que has anat creant, d'alguna manera, es va també fossilitzant, que ja no et serveix per anar més enllà. Fins que arriba un moment, podríem dir, d'una certa crisi. Jo havia de cercar altres vies si volia seguir dient coses. I volia. La poesia que fins llavors m'havia anat servint, de cop, no acaba de ser-me útil. (Muñoz 1997: 190)

[You get to a point that everything you have been creating, to some extent, becomes fossilised, that is to say that it is not enough to go beyond. Then, there is a moment, we could say, of a certain crisis. I had to search for other forms of expression if I wanted to continue *saying*

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<sup>15</sup> *Diotima* is a community of women philosophers based in Verona. Their name refers to Diotima of Mantinea, the woman named by Socrates in Plato's *Symposium* and who taught him about Love. Their members are: Adriana Cavarero — who later left the group — Cristiana Fisher, Elvia Franco, Giannina Longobardi, Verónica Mariaux, Luisa Muraro, Anna Maria Piussi, Wanda Tomasi, Anita Sanvitto, Betty Zamarchi, Chiara Zamboni and Gloria Zanardo.

things. And I wanted to. Poetry that hitherto had been useful for me, suddenly, was not any longer.]

Nonetheless, when she died on the 5 July 1998 her friend and critic Lluïsa Julià found two different folders with poems inside. In one of those folders was the handwritten title 'Llibre de Maria' [Book of Maria] and in the other 'Raó del cos'. Although the poet's companion, philosopher Fina Birulés, remembers Marçal's initial intention to embark on two different projects — one dedicated to her mother (Maria) and the other narrating her experience with cancer —, the definitive intention still remains a mystery. *Raó del cos* was chosen as the title for this posthumous volume although, as the editor herself admits, there was no particular bio-bibliographical justification for this decision (Julià 2000: 81).

Unlike the poetic elegance that populates the majority of her works — her masterly ability to use language and the constant recourse to classical structures such as sonnets or sestinas — in *Raó del cos* Marçal presents us with a lyrical starkness where images are elementary but distressing, terrifyingly sharp. Conventional structures are displaced by the use of free verse, a breakage very much in keeping with the naked physicality of her corporo-aesthetic exploration to conjure up 'the brutal purity of panic':

Escriure: trencar el fil del discurs intern, desdoblar-me, posar peus de foto (vici sense esma). Conjurat la puresa brutal del *pànic*. Pànic sobtat, quan ja et sembla que has [tr]obtat una mena de serenitat insospitada. (2014: 29)

[To write: to break the thread of internal discourse, to split into two, to become a caption (inevitable vice). To conjure up the brutal purity of

panic. Sudden panic, when you think you have found a sort of unexpected serenity.]

## Writing and death

Marçal's diaries, published in 2014 under the title *El senyal de la pèrdua*, become a poignant revelation of the last two years of the poet's life after being diagnosed with cancer. It also includes a series of letters written to Jean-Paul Goujon, professor at the University of Seville and biographer of the poet Renée Vivien, with whom she established a constant and intense correspondence. In these pages, Marçal provides a vivid, sometimes heartbreaking, statement of her experience and her concerns regarding life and the act of writing. Literature is entangled in a dialogue with the infirm body: not with dying as a concept but with fear, with the panic and the anguish of death itself which is alternated with moments of peace and tranquility.

And she reveals this feeling several times throughout the journal, particularly during the first days of the diagnosis. She says: 'aquests dies han estat molt estranys —la paraula és banal, però no sé com substituir-la. Van estar precedits pel terror' [these days have been very strange — the word sounds banal but I don't know how to replace it. They were preceded by terror.] Or 'ara la por i la presència de la mort' [now the fear and presence of death], 'després altre cop el terror' [afterwards terror once again] and finally 'pànic de tots els llibres que no llegiré, potser més que no pas dels que no escriuré' (2014: 23-29) [panic for all the books I won't read, perhaps more than for those that I won't write].

Despite the fact that the need to write arises out of the terror of dying, this poetry does not stand in itself as a document about salvation. Neither can the book be

interpreted as the deeds of a heroine immortalized in writing. The poet does not plea for her soul. She does not seek forgiveness. There is no sign of compassion throughout the book. Although the fear of death is imminent in her persona, as the journal reveals, the contingent necessity of being saved remains utterly absent in the poems.

For Marçal writing does not become a fight against death or a search for eternity. The poems in *Raó del cos* become a quest for love. She says in her diaries: ‘Sé que, passi el que passi, he començat a posar per a la mort. No sóc jo qui faré “mon squelette”. No sé, tampoc, com posar, no tinc models a l’abast’ (2014: 22) [I know that, whatever happens, I have started posing for death. It will not be me who will make “mon squelette”. I do not know either how to pose, I do not have any reference]. Even though she could find no point of reference for herself in poetry, no creative space in which to position herself, Marçal followed her basic aesthetic principles and used her own experience to elaborate poetically her dialogue with *la Desconeguda*, as she names death (2014: 38).<sup>16</sup>

In this collection, death is not understood in any conventional, religious sense. The word *Déu* [God], for example, or associated Biblical references, appear only on three occasions in the entire collection and with different connotations. God Almighty is found solely in the poem ‘La dona de Lot’ [Lot’s Wife], not as part of the poem written by Marçal, but in a quotation taken from the poem of the same name by Russian poet Anna Akhmatova. The two other instances where we find the word do not relate to the Almighty but to an undetermined deity whose identity remains unknown. In one of these, Marçal is referring clearly to her mother:

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<sup>16</sup> On the 11th day after the diagnosis Marçal becomes aware of the presence of death and says in her journal: ‘A estones totes i tots em semblen remots — elles es quedaran, i ells; jo sola tinc una cita probable amb la Desconeguda’. [At times everyone, female and male, seem remote to me — they, both women and men — will remain; I alone have an almost probable appointment with the Unknown] (2014: 38).

Però cosides  
l'una contra l'altra,  
clavades  
una i altra  
pel mateix deu (68 & 69)

[But sewn one  
against the other,  
nailed  
one and the other  
by the same god]

The final occasion where the word 'God' can be found is a peculiar and speculative piece where Marçal plays with the homophones *déu* and *deu* and their disparate meanings according to the gender. *Un déu*, for example, signifies 'a God' whilst *una deu* means 'a spring'. From this ambiguity arise the implications of patriarchy and the symbolic order that pervade the work as a female counter-figure, a spring, origin or source of life, is posited as an alternative to the deity as a male concept.

### **Love and Death in Marçal's Previous Work**

It is not the first time that Marçal enquires into death and love in her texts. The last of her poetry collections published while she was alive, *Desglaç* (1989), seeks to elaborate poetically the symbolic consequences of the death of her father Antoni Marçal. The poet, who confessed to adoring her father, reacts to his absence by questioning the presence of his *laws* that govern signification. In this sense, influenced by Sylvia Plath's poem 'Daddy', Marçal dedicates the first part of the book (given this same title) to explore the death of the father as the end of the patriarchal laws and the possibility of rebirth.

The absence of her real father transmutes into the constant presence of the symbolic father through the image of the hawk, as the poem that mirrors the *Lord's Prayer* evinces:

17

Pare esparver que em sotges des del cel  
i em cites en el regne del teu nom,  
em petrifica la teva voluntat  
que es fa en la terra com es fa en el cel.  
La meva sang de cada dia  
s'escola enllà de tu en el dia d'avui  
però no sé desfer-me de les velles culpes  
i m'emmirallo en els més cecs deutors.  
i em deixo caure en la temptació  
de perseguir-te en l'ombra del meu mal.

[Hawk father who watches me from heaven  
and you cite me in the kingdom of your name,  
your will petrifies me  
on earth as it does in heaven.  
My blood of every day  
flows beyond you today  
but I do not know how to remove old guilt  
i am reflected in the blindest trespassers.  
And I let myself fall into the temptation  
of following you in the shadow of my evil.]

In the second part of *Desglaç*, 'Contraban de llum', love is depicted by the presence of the other woman. Love flourishes against death not only as a form of survival but also as a source of possibilities: 'contra la mort/ contra aquest lladre absent/ que pot robar-li el preu del seu rescat,/ així tornava jo al lloc de l'amor' [against death/ against this absent thief/ who can steal the price of his ransom/ this is how I returned to the place of love].

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<sup>17</sup> Marçal could not read English, therefore her route to Plath's poetry was through her friend the poet Montserrat Abelló's translations: *Arbres d'hivern* (Barcelona: Llibres del Mall, 1983), *Tres dones* (Barcelona: Columna, 1993), *Ariel* [with Mireia Mur] (Barcelona: Columna, 1994) and *Sóc Vertical. Obra poètica 1960-1963* (Barcelona: Proa, 2006).

The unfortunate consequence of fate brings to light a new possibility of approaching the other as love emerges from death. Herein, the limitations of death become transformed into an unrestricted love towards the other in a movement which is cyclic. In this sense, the dichotomy absence/presence — which conditions death and love as opposite forces of human existence, condemning them as contraries in their nature — becomes complementary. In *Desglaç*, love and death match each other in a way that the more absence intensifies death, the more the poet's love increases in its attempts to fill this absence.

As has been seen, although the dialectics between love and death in Marçal's poetry is not exclusive to *Raó de cos*, the mechanism that unleashes its interaction and the nature of its function here operates in a different manner. Its distinctive treatment of love and death engages both as impulses of creation. In the following sections I shall explore how this collection opens the door to the dialectics between the poet's own death (Thanatos) and her love of the mother (Eros) as a return to origins. In this way the trope does not function as a representation of mutually destructive forces but rather a necessary act of survival whereby the body, the female body, moves along lines of thought as a process of memory, shedding a new light for new feminist forms of signification.

### **Eros and Thanatos as Primal Forces of Existence**

That death has been traditionally categorised as opposed to love is unexceptional but rather peculiar. On the level of semantics, the opposite of death is life and the opposite of love is unfulfillment. We inevitably owe the consideration of love as the opposite to death, however, to Sigmund Freud and his theory of drives. According to the psychoanalyst, the nature of humanity is based upon the conflictive interaction between



the pulsions of life and death, that is to say, between Eros and Thanatos. These drives are characterised as intuitive forces that compel experience: the instinct of reproduction reacts to the fear of dying and extinction surrounding death.

To some extent these two impulses find their opposition in the very essence of their purpose: the perpetuation and extinction of life. In this respect, human existence is entirely biological and therefore its origins and ends coincide: pleasure. Freud takes this understanding of Eros from Plato's early thought, whose understanding of culture was derived from a free, self-development of Eros. It is later, when Eros is absorbed by Logos, that the drives towards life and death remain repressed and subdued. Thus, reference to Freud's theories is inevitable when reflecting on the interaction of love and death. The Spanish philosopher Maria Zambrano scrutinised these two forces as opposites, suggesting that 'el amor, entendido a la manera freudiana, natural y trágicamente, camina hacia la muerte [...] la muerte es lo único que hay más fuerte, más devorador que esa furiosa "libido" [...] su furia es pasividad' (2012: 137-41) [love, from a Freudian perspective, strides naturally and tragically towards death [...] which is the only thing stronger, more voracious, than that furious "libido" [...] its fury is passive]. This is precisely the point that *Raó del cos* challenges. Love does not walk towards death but death walks towards love. Marçal's movement towards death creates love simultaneously, and this condition is grounded upon action, discarding thereby any sign of passivity.

The concept of love within Western tradition has its roots in religion from the moment that the creation of the universe becomes an act of love by God and/or the gods. This concept, already questioned through the history of philosophy, possesses a central consideration that grounds Mediterranean thought and poetry with ethics through

Hesiod's *Theogony* where Eros plays a central role as one of the three primordial forces along with Gaia and Chasm:<sup>18</sup>

Chasm it was, in truth, who was the very first; she soon  
was followed by broad-breasted Earth, the eternal ground of all  
the deathless ones, who on Olympus's snowy summits dwell,  
and murky Tartaros hidden deep from Earth's wide-open roads,  
and Eros, the most beautiful among the deathless gods—  
limb-loosener he is of all the gods and of all men:  
thought in the breast he overwhelms and prudent planning, then.  
(2006: 26-27)

Eros, in fact, is not considered as a god in the *Theogony* but as the impulse that generates the creation of the world and the reason that will sustain the social and divine structures among men. Therefore, in its original sense Eros does not constitute a sexual drive — as Freud imagined — before the absence of the object of love. Eros is conceived rather as the primitive force of attraction that unleashes creation. It was precisely this power that, in the course of cultural history, caused Eros to become considered as the fierce enemy of reason.<sup>19</sup>

Similarly, Thanatos is not considered a deity in the mind of the Ancients. Son of night (Nyxta) and brother of Hypnos (Sleep), he exercises a benign power, providing sweet death. To this effect, he stands in opposition to the Keres, female death spirits and emissaries of the Moires, the three Fates that bring violent death to their victims. As such, the presence of death in *Raó del cos* is determined by the violent display of corporal pathology and the terror, the panic of disintegration and the limitations of the flesh. Eros,

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<sup>18</sup> See Graves (1960) and Frazer (1911).

<sup>19</sup> A clear and important example of this is *Antigone* by Sophocles, where Eros is accused of driving Antigone to tragedy.

on the other hand is envisioned in the figure of the mother. Given the etymological meaning of Eros and Thanatos, one specific aspect of both is of particular interest: that is to say, maternity, or how to provide life while dying. The correlative vision affirms life through Eros and its sacrifice of the giving of the self to death, the death of Eros in maternity itself. In this way, the lexical field of maternity extends from creativity to the negation of femininity through a negation of the mother. The impulse towards love causes death as Marçal seeks fusion with the other until the other disappears. As such, love melts and blurs otherness and selfness.

### **Thanatos and the Body of the Mother**

One of the two trains of poetic thought developed in the collection is the exploration of the mother-daughter relationship. The poems dedicated to her mother correspond to Part IV of the book and Marçal was particularly interested in unravelling the complexities of being a daughter. Previously, the poet had analysed this interface from a very conflictive perspective. In *Sal oberta*, for example, she challenged the mythical and mystical aspects of pregnancy; and in *La germana, l'estrangera*, she displayed her anxieties as a mother and the difficulties of communicating with her daughter.

The theoretical configuration of the mother becomes a central point of discussion for the group Diotima and especially for philosopher Luisa Muraro whose theories on *differenza sessuale* and particularly on *la madre simbolica* impacted significantly upon Marçal's work. This rearticulation focussed on a re-exploration of the mother-daughter dyad with the specific aim of altering existing symbolic references and extending the space for new significations:

women need maternal power if they want free social existence. The mother is the symbolic figure of gendered mediation that puts women in relation with the world, opening a vital circuit between the self and the other-than-self in their experience. (Cigarini *et al* 1991: 127)

Correspondingly, the poet seeks to rescue love for the mother from the invisibility and neglect that the image of this figure suffers in patriarchy. This search inevitably entails a preliminary phase of rejection. Traditional accounts of the experience are no longer valid. A sense of correspondence now needs to be recognised and this approach can only be encapsulated in negation. Marçal finds no satisfaction with regard to the figure of her mother. And she denies her thoroughly and poignantly in one of the poems:

T'he negat  
mare  
tres cops  
i cent.  
I cap gall no cantava  
defora.  
Són cegues, sordes, mudes  
les nostres traïcions.  
I la derrota.

[I have denied you  
mother  
three times  
and a hundred.  
And no cock was crowing  
outside.  
Our treasons are blind,  
deaf and dumb.  
And defeat.]

As the poem suggests, to deny the mother bestows a pre-condition to return to poetry as a way of recovering the primitive relationship. To reject the existing reality of the mother becomes the fundamental point that prompts Marçal to go back to the path of creative doubt. There is a need to undo the already existing path. This is the principal point that instigates the journey back to origins in order to re-elaborate poetically new forms of signification, that is to say, to generate, to create. This is precisely the function of Eros as maternity as may be understood in its wide lexical variations, particularly in the case of creativity. The point of departure is the denial of the mother as the symbolic image that conventionally provides her with cultural acknowledgement and social significance.

The unreliability of patriarchal considerations stimulates the theoretical exploration of this paradigm. In 1993 Marçal delivered a paper entitled 'Meditacions sobre la fúria' [Meditations on Fury] at the Summer School in Gandia, later to be published under the title 'La dona i l'escriptura' [Women and Writing], where she analysed the symbolic place and space of the woman writer within patriarchy.<sup>20</sup> Herein, Marçal concentrated her thought on the diachronical and therefore mythological dimension between her subjectivity as a writer and her interaction with tradition and language. She explored the sense of uneasiness she was feeling when she had to talk about the relationship between women and writing. She describes such uneasiness as a fury, as a violent feeling that was blocking her capacity to speak. A fury so intense and specific it might be epitomised by the willingness to transgress and disobey in the manner of Lot's wife, a poem which constitutes one of the collection's most evocative essays. Here,

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<sup>20</sup> San Martín, Ángel, ed. *Fi de segle. Incerteses davant un nou mil·lenni*. (Ajuntament de Gandia i Universitat de València, 1994).

timeless and preterite gestures prefigure a perennial and immanent voice that condemns women who have not followed the phallic order:

A l'alba reverbera la història sense història.  
El gest es perpetua  
gegantí i resplendent.  
I en la duresa mineral impresa  
fulgura la pregunta sense veu:  
Quin era el Nom de la dona de Lot,

*la qui donà la vida només per un esguard?*

[At dawn that history without history returns.  
That gesture perpetuates  
gigantic and gleaming.  
And in mineral hardness imprinted  
that unvoiced question shines.  
What was the Name of Lot's wife,

*the one who gave her life for just one look?]*

Thus, death becomes the necessary substratum to situate the figure of the mother within tradition. Feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray had famously declared that patriarchal society was based upon matricide. And, in order to elucidate this position Marçal adduces Marguerite Yourcenar's short story 'La llet de la mort' [The Milk of Death] (1997: 37-54). In this tale, three brothers are building a tower and in order to avoid the tower falling down they decide to underpin the building with a corpse. The chosen victim is a wife of one of the brothers who has had a baby. At the moment she is being immured, she requests her breasts and eyes are left free in order to feed the baby and see if her milk was good. She feeds the baby for two years despite her death. This narrative describes how the mother is kept behind a wall, silent, invisible and absent from her own body; and

the maternal body emerges as a corpse, the result of the phallic action of patriarchy: 'espectadora invisible morta-viva, ossada i fonament de l'edifici fàl·lic, és el bell i mític cadàver que el patriarcat ens ha ofert en el lloc de la Mare' (1993: 139) [Invisible spectator, dead-alive, bone and foundation of the phallic building, this is the beautiful and mythical corpse that patriarchy has offered to us as a Mother]. Such a narrative is utterly crucial if the gendered mediation is to be successful. As such, the recovery of the mother from behind the wall, the recapture of her integrity from the fragmented images throughout cultural history is of vital importance both for the poet and ultimately for the female subject.

However, it is precisely for this reason that Marçal's despair when she seeks the love of the mother — which remains within the game of mother/father binaries — should not be overemphasised. In *Raó de cos*, Marçal does not reject the Father as was the case in *Desglaç*. Rather she refers to the attributes that god has inflected upon women, as she meditates in her diaries:

Al capdavant, la imatge de pare no m'és pas negativa (adorava el papa. Potser per això la visió masculina de la Divinitat m'anul·la així) i podria incloure-la dins d'un sentiment cap a déu, sempre i quan no sentís aquesta pressió — d'on ve? — que n'exclou el femení, en la mesura que identifica Déu Pare amb el Tot. (2014: 50)

[Ultimately, the image of the father is not negative for me (I adored daddy. Maybe this is why the masculine vision of the Divinity negates me so) and I could include it within a sentiment of god, as long as I did not feel the pressure — where does it come from? — that excludes the feminine when God the *Father* is identified with the *Whole*.]

*Raó de cos* envisions the possibilities of eternity, the validity of transcendence and the idea of survival, though its encapsulation within the patriarchal economy that excludes women is explicitly critiqued, especially in the vanity of mankind which thinks himself as unlimited and complete. The only outlet that remains for Marçal is to consider death as a limit; particularly, as a limit to life: 'he començat a pensar en la mort, en la vida a que aquesta mort dóna limit' (26) [I have started to think about death, about the life upon which this death imposes a limit]. These limitations, however, are not based upon the dichotomy of presence and absence but upon an act of embodied return.

In this way, Marçal's transcendence does not occur as a transmigration of the soul, but as a modulation, or an entry, into another existence. As such, death becomes the pre-condition of birth and consequently 'another existence' which acquires an embodied meaning. In these terms, the love towards the mother claims the fusion of the poet with the mother. This disintegration, the fusion with the mother, marks the disappearance of the poet into the womb of the mother as her death (Thanatos). This experience, as it develops in the collection, recollects María Zambrano's memorable statement in *Filosofía y poesía*: 'Y es que la poesía ha sido en todo tiempo vivir según la carne' (1993: 47) [The fact is that at all times poetry has been living according to the flesh].

The dialectics of creation described here denounce not the forces of opposites but the forces of pre-conditioned and pre-existent thought. In this sense, Marçal does not reject the figure of the father in order to search for the love of the mother. Rather, the poet denies the traditional and patriarchal configuration regarding the mother in order to set her back on her journey towards her origins (Thanatos), as an act of creation (Eros). She seeks to construct a new form of being, a new form of memory, which allows for an exploration of the intersections of love of the mother as a form of embodied memory.



### Love for the Mother as Embodied Memory

The image of the mother in *Raó de cos* occupies an extended space. From the particular, real mother to the universal symbolic figure silenced throughout history, Marçal explores the possibilities of poetic space, which transcends time and challenges existing parameters:

Però cosides  
l'una contra l'altra,  
clavades  
una i altra  
pel mateix déu  
en la creu del no-res  
des del fons dels  
segles  
brandem  
la sang  
del  
nostre silenci,  
aigua i vi,  
a la ferida.  
i es poden comptar  
tots els nostres ossos. (68-69)

[But sewn one  
against the other,  
nailed  
one and the other  
by the same god  
into the cross of nothingness  
from the depth of  
centuries  
we shake  
the blood  
of  
our silence,  
water and wine,

on the wound.  
And all our bones  
can be counted.]

The terror caused by imminent death, the futility of the body and the awareness of the limits of the flesh impedes any aspiration to eternity in the conventional sense of the salvation of the soul. But there is undoubtedly a sense of guilt embedded in the poems. This guilt, underpinned by the rejection of the mother, unleashes a diachronic journey throughout the word. It is guilt and its condition that stimulates thought to move towards transformation. The anxiety of reconciliation with the past (both personal and symbolic) is so poignant that the poet is ready for sacrifice and to seek expiation by offering up her own body in the name of the mother. Marçal has meditated upon this act, which clearly echoes the sacrifice of Christ as elicited in the poem above.

Expiation reveals Love in its origins and prime purpose. And, in this text, the possibility is considered of God as a mother, or the mother as metaphor for a possible God: 'La mare metàfora de Déu o Déu metàfora de la mare? Tant és: confiança de l'infant que es deixa agafar i portar i s'adorm en braços potents d'amor. Amor [...]' (2014: 41) [Mother a metaphor for God or God as a metaphor for mother? It's all the same: the security of the child who lets herself be picked up and carried and sleeps in the powerful arms of love. Love...].<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> The idea of God as a maternal womb comes from Teresina de Lisieux (1873-1897): 'M'agrada la imatge divina que Teresina de Lisieux agafa d'Isaïes d'un déu amb entranya maternal' (2014: 41) [I like the image of the divine that Teresina de Lisieux takes from Isaiah of god with a maternal womb]. Luisa Muraro and the Diotima group were working on this figure and, through philosopher Fina Birulés, Marçal became very interested in her life. In fact, she planned to write about her if she recovered from cancer: 'Si me'n surto, escriuré un llibre sobre ella, com per damunt d'un estrany abisme, m'ha colpit: No sé si tinc la fe que caldria — el cert és, però, que l'interès per la "Santeta" em va començar abans, a través de la Luisa Muraro i les "Diòtimes"' (2014: 39) [If I ever get out of this, I'll write a book about her and about how she struck me a

Mother and daughter share the *passion* of a god whose intervention has propitiated a situation of conflict as the first two lines of the poem indicate, 'but sewn one against the other', and has also created 'from the depth of centuries' a void, an abyss between both, where Marçal has lost her love. The mother she has neglected throughout the years does not become a distant entity but a real, close existence whose presence needs to be rescued. The pain caused by the void between both impels the poet to sacrifice her body in the name of Love. This action transcends individuality at the time that her death emerges as the will to overcome pain as she says in the lines 'shake the blood of our silence, water and wine, on the wound'.

The act of sacrifice is not solely a search for transcendence; Marçal undertakes this action because she finds therein the means of access to her love. In *L'ordine simbolico della madre* (1991), Luisa Muraro elaborates a detailed theoretical framework in which she claims back the love of the mother so as to regain access into the Symbolic. But in order to bring this love into play there is a prior matter in need of resolution: the recovery of the figure of the mother as a valid parameter for signification. Muraro points out the need to rearticulate this figure through philosophy, since this discipline provides the appropriate frame whereby the return to origins and its explanation becomes plausible and possible:

Ahora veo que el reino de la generación y el mundo natural de que hablan los filósofos no es la naturaleza, buena o mala, ordenada o caótica, poco importa, sino la posibilidad de otro orden simbólico que no despoje a la madre de sus cualidades. (1994: 11)

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blow, like from above a strange abyss. I don't know if I have the faith necessary — but one thing is certain: my interest in this little saint took hold of me some time earlier, via Luisa Muraro and the "Diòtimes".]

[Now I see that the kingdom and the natural world that philosophers have spoken of is not nature, good or bad, chaotic or ordered, nor too important; what matters is the possibility of another symbolic order that does not relieve the mother of her qualities.]

Accordingly, the mother grounds the origins of both life and language. But during the pre-Oedipal stage, male subjects are privileged with regard to her love by the intervention of the father thus denying her affection to the daughter. The consequences of such a situation have been devastating for the female subject. The female poet is left with no possibility to enter the symbolic order and her situation is akin to that of an orphan. In Marçal's own words: 'Nuesa, rere l'Ídol que suplanta Déu-l'Home-pare-fill elevat a la màxima potència. Negant la mare. — Nuesa simbòlica de la Mare. Em calen ara els braços — potser més tard l'úter — de Déu-mare' (2014: 51) [Bareness, behind the Idol that replaces God-Man-father-son raised to the greatest power. Denying the mother. — Symbolic bareness of the Mother. Now, I need the arms and, maybe later, the womb-of-God-mother].

The infinite and inevitable journey towards death provokes this need to return to the mother. Its terror acts as a basis upon which this desire is unleashed. Not only the terror of the void, of the abyss caused by death and its intrinsic pain of annihilation but also the panic of solitude, the anguish of nothingness, the situation of being an orphan caused by the loss of the mother, by the rejection of her love. Her torment and the suffering of her body act as catalyst for the sacrifice:

Cos meu: què em dius?  
Com un crucificat  
parles per boca de ferida

que no vol pellar  
fins a cloure's en la mudesa:  
inarticulada  
paraula viva. (74-75)

[Body of mine: what are you saying to me?  
like one crucified  
you speak through a wounded mouth  
that will not heal  
until it closes up in dumbness:  
an unpronounced  
living word.]

Although based upon the diaphanous action of sacrifice, the uncertainty of death and its unknown consequences leave Marçal trembling, unsettled, shaken in her yet fragile voyage towards a displaced subjectivity. Her poems in *Raó de cos* oscillate between a movement towards death and the inevitable return to love. It is not only her soul, which reflects on this movement: it is felt in turn by her body. Death discloses the limitations of the flesh and highlights, not the weakness and imperfection of the body, but the power and control it imposes upon life. This is manifest in the manner in which the body challenges death, defeating memory through writing as in the first poem of the collection:

Amb fils d'oblit  
l'agulla enfila.  
Desfà l'estrip que veu,  
deixa el que troba.  
Encerta pell  
morta, teixit,  
aire, carn viva:  
cus la memòria,  
la sargidora cega. (22-23)

[With threads of oblivion  
the needle is threaded.  
Undoes the tear it sees,

and leaves the one it finds.  
Reaches dead  
skin, tissue,  
air, raw flesh:  
the blind seamstress  
sews memory.]

However, the poetic voice does not succumb to the terror of death; rather she accepts her presence. A presence that, regardless of the intensity of the moment the fear of disappearance and the intimacy of the act itself, becomes an entity estranged to some extent from the individual. And the poet responds to the possibility of dying with a certain disconnection. That is to say, the imminent end to her own life becomes objectified. In the first stage of her poetic production the 'I' of the poems was always the poet herself: 'en el meu cas, sempre el *jo* del poema sóc jo, que tampoc no passa sempre, en poesia' (Batista 1986: 3) [in my case, the I of the poem is always me, this does not always happen in poetry]. In *Raó de cos*, however, there is a prominent absence in subjectivity, which confirms the will of the poet to objectify death.

When Marçal glimpses of death, she faces this interruption in life barely, with an inevitable urge to comprehend. The fundamental exercise of comprehending entails entering into the field of reason (logos). According to Luisa Muraro, there is a need to interrelate being and logos at the time that action is unleashed and the journey towards *knowing* the mother starts. She has stated that 'when a woman *knows* the love for the mother, and *knows* how to love the mother, she is outside the symbolic order of patriarchy — which for her was rather, a symbolic disorder' (2000: 82; my italics).

And this is, in fact, the mechanism for understanding what the dialectic between Eros and Thanatos provides Marçal. The return to the original order for the female

subject implies an act of memory as the means of discovery of a new perspective. As Maria Zambrano suggests, 'la búsqueda de algo perdido es sin duda el origen de la memoria' (2011: 124) [the search for something lost is without doubt the origin of memory]; and, like a 'blind seamstress', Marçal starts this process from the opening lines of the book: 'Amb fils d'oblit/ L'agulla enfila [...] Cus la memòria/ La sargidora cega.' [With threads of oblivion/ the blind seamstress, / sews memory'].

The real time of her death (thanatos) moves forward as a form of an embodied thought. The time of this thought progresses hand in hand with the time of her body: 'Sagrada obscenitat/ del cos/ tocat per la promesa/ de la mort' (62-63) [Sacred obscenity/ of the body/ touched by the promise/ of death]. But while Marçal is moving forward, she is unable to see; there is no clarity in her thoughts, she moves within darkness. She is approaching the end of life and the only form of doing so is in darkness. The lack of references to elaborate on the experience of death and the void suffered with the loss of the love for the mother forces the poet to display a sense of blindness with continuous references to lack of vision: 'però els ulls, orfes/ de llum, percacem àvids/ l'engruna verge/ d'una màtria abolida' (58-59) [but their eyes, orphan/ of light, avidly chase/ the virgin crumb/ of an abolished motherland]. The same strategy is repeated in: 'Com dues trenes,/ escala oberta/ de cop segada,/ a banda i banda/ de l'orba mirada' (56-57) [Like two plaits,/ an open ladder/ suddenly reaped/ on both sides/ of the blind/ gaze]. Memory is therefore, an act of vision as Zambrano suggests, and the 'something lost' becomes 'algo que necesita ser mirado nuevamente' (2011: 124) [something which needs to be looked at again.]

Thus, the act of remembering becomes always a form of 'desnèixer', a form of returning to the path of original thought so it might be reborn to a new form of

significance. The infirm body of the poet flows along time and succumbs to it to the extent that it disintegrates. The certainty of the physical dissolution bestows the truth of the poignant but illuminating end: freedom. Marçal's journey throughout time reveals that Eros and Thanatos in *Raó del cos* do not work as instinctive forces which are the opposites of a binary thought; they are rather conceived as actions derived from thought. This thought becomes a constant form of being 'unborn' ['desnéixer'] and will merge with the mother through the symbol of the sea as the origin of life where:

Res no et sera pres: vindrà tan sols  
l'instant d'obrir  
dòcilment la mà  
alliberar  
la memòria de l'aigua  
perquè es retrobi aigua  
d'alta mar.

[Nothing will be taken from you: only  
the moment will come to open  
meekly your hand  
and release  
memory of water  
so it may rejoin water  
in high seas.] (48-49)



## The Poetics of Breast Cancer in *Raó del cos*<sup>22</sup>

### Caterina Riba

Maria-Mercè Marçal was marked as a writer by her commitment to Catalan language and culture, which suffered repression over the nearly four decades of Franco's dictatorial regime in Spain. Brought up in a sexist and oppressive country, she began to write in Catalan during the final years of the dictatorship that would end in 1975 with the death of the dictator. Marçal published her first collection of poems in 1977 and, as a poet, novelist and translator, was able to make her unique and intensely female voice heard, taking her place as one of Catalan literature's most important writers.

Marçal's work is considered to have various innovative and transgressive qualities, especially in terms of her feminism. She creates from her own experience, foregrounding her body as the primordial enclave. The poet re-signifies the female body mainly through the experiences of giving birth, love (both heterosexual and lesbian), and sickness. In her output, the body becomes a space for self-affirmation, where the dividing lines between self and other are overcome: whether the other be foetus, lover or even death.

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This article will place Marçal's work in context and present a selection of the critical work that has been written about her. I will then review some of the main aspects of the debate between biomedical discourse and feminist perspectives and refer to some of the pioneers who sought out new forms of reflection on the social construction of illness, and more specifically breast cancer, which affects one of the most densely signified parts of the body, the very metaphor of femininity.

Finally, I will discuss how Marçal poetically elaborates on the sick body in her last poem collection, *Raó del cos* (2000), where the author, faced with the reality of breast cancer and the proximity of death, explores the meaning of existence. I will also address how death is treated in her poetry, which likens it to an inverse gestation (de-birthing) and to a process of personal disintegration leading to a return to unity with the great Mother Nature.

Marçal, who was 45 when she died of cancer in 1998, left a complete poetic corpus that she herself anthologised and introduced in a volume published in 1989: *Llengua abolida (1973-1988)*. *Raó del cos* was published posthumously, as was *El senyal de la pèrdua* (2014), a volume that collects a diary of the last years of the poet's life along with the letters she wrote to her friend Jean-Paul Goujon, with whom she began correspondence just a few months before she was diagnosed with cancer. Marçal is also the author of a novel, *La passió segons Renée Vivien* (1994), three short stories, and a large collection of prose pieces (prologues, articles, proclamations, round table interventions, etc.) compiled by Mercè Ibarz and released in 2004 under the title, *Sota el signe del drac: Proses 1985-1997*. Marçal also carried out important work as a translator of women writers, including Marguerite Yourcenar and Colette.

Her death spurred recognition of her work, and presently she is unanimously regarded as a central figure in Catalan literature. Several magazines have dedicated issues to Marçal including *Urc* (1991 and 2007), *Lectora* (2004), *Rels* (2006), and *Reduccions* (2008); six Marçal-themed conferences have been held; and five doctoral dissertations have been written on her work.

Fina Llorca was the first to write a thesis on Marçal, which she completed in 2003. She was followed by Laia Climent, whose doctoral study formed the basis for the monograph *Maria-Mercè Marçal: cos i compromís* (2008) and the collection of interviews entitled *Maria-Mercè Marçal, veus entre onades* (2013). Noèlia Díaz Vicedo followed a few years later with her thesis, *Constructing Feminine Poetics in the Works of a Late-20th-Century Catalan Woman Poet: Maria-Mercè Marçal* (2014); and the most recent theses on Marçal, presented in 2012, were Melissa McCarron's and my own, which has formed the basis for two books: *Maria-Mercè Marçal: L'escriptura permeable* (2014) and *Cos endins. Maternitat, desig i malaltia en l'obra de Maria-Mercè Marçal* (2015).<sup>23</sup>

Translations of Marçal's work began to emerge in the 1990s and, as of now, selections of the author's works have been translated into languages as diverse as German, English, Spanish, French, Hungarian, Italian, Japanese and Russian. The year 2011 saw the publication of *Maria-Mercè Marçal (1952-1998): agua de alta mar*, edited by Fina Llorca, which is a readers' guide written in Spanish and published by ArCiBel editores, whose aim is to help introduce the author's work to the Spanish-speaking community. Elsewhere, due to the inclusion of *Bruixa de dol* (1979) in the French *agrégation* (qualifying examination to lecture in Higher Education), Trabucaire, a publishing house

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<sup>23</sup> In this book I discussed, along with maternity and love, the poetic treatment of cancer in Marçal's work, pp. 127-65.

based in Perpignan in the south of France, published a book of articles entitled *Lire/llegir Maria-Mercè Marçal. À propos/sobre Bruixa de dol* (2012), edited by Fabrice Corrons and Sandrine Frayssinhes Ribes.

It is also worth noting that Marçal's poems have been set to music by several Catalan singer-songwriters such as Marina Rossell, Cinta Massip and Toti Soler. Further proof of the high regard in which the poet is held is the film *Ferida arrel: Maria-Mercè Marçal*, which premiered on June 8th 2012 at the Filmoteca de Catalunya and featured contributions from twenty Catalan filmmakers.

My discussion of the treatment given to the subject of cancer in the author's work will focus on the book *Raó del cos*, featuring the poems the author worked on over the final years of her life. The poetry collected in this book was found in a scattered series of files on the author's personal computer by her daughter Heura, Fina Birulés, the poet's life partner for 13 years, and Lluïsa Julià, a friend and literary critic. The poet had been working simultaneously on two separate projects which were to have been entitled *Llibre de Maria* and *Raó del cos*; but Julià, who edited the text, thought the latter title was the best choice to encapsulate the amalgam of rough drafts and more or less definitive versions that are collected in this volume.

The year 2014 saw the appearance of a bilingual translation (Catalan-English) of *Raó del cos* by Montserrat Abelló — who shared her late friend's passion for literature and feminist activism — and Noèlia Díaz Vicedo, a London-based Marçal expert. The text was brought out by a small publishing house, Francis Boutle Publishers, which in the past had already displayed an interest in projects aimed at increasing the visibility and accessibility of minority languages for an English-speaking readership. Abelló herself

died at the age of 96, just months after the presentation of the book. Although a few English translations of the author's poems had previously been published by Sam Abrams, Kathleen McNerney, Lawrence Venuti, and Christopher Whyte among others, this is the first of Marçal's books to have been published in English translation in its entirety.

### **Precedents**

In her final collection, Marçal leaves us with a series of minimalist verses that hold fast to the book's pages just as the author herself did to life. As the poet lost weight and her body languished, her poems became likewise slimmer. They are 'little flashes of evanescence', as Mallarmé, one of Marçal's greatest sources of inspiration, defined his own work.<sup>24</sup> She was able to foresee the likely progression of her disease because she had been close at hand to experience the deaths of three fellow writers (Helena Valentí, Maria-Aurèlia Capmany and Montserrat Roig) from the same illness. Nevertheless, Marçal was the first Catalan writer to use her experiences with breast cancer as the raw material for poetry.

Marçal's reflections on breast cancer touch on a territory that had also been the concern of feminist scholarship since the 1980s, especially in the English-speaking world, where departments of Gender Studies already played a prominent role. In fact, breast cancer was an area of confrontation in which the troubled relationship between the medical establishment and women was particularly apparent. Interest in taking breast cancer as a theme for texts from a feminist perspective was the logical consequence of a

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<sup>24</sup> I discussed the relationship between Marçal and Mallarmé in my article 'El cos a cos amb el llenguatge a l'obra de Maria-Mercè Marçal' (2014).

decade of political activity and theoretical and academic work concerned with denouncing the systematic violence inflicted upon women under the auspices of certain medical protocols and practices. Among the first to deal with this issue were the Boston Women's Health Book Collective in their classic book *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (1973), Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English (1973), Phyllis Chesler (1972) and Ellen Frankfort (1972).

One of the indisputable reference texts within the scholarly reflection on cancer is *Illness as Metaphor* by the New York novelist and essayist Susan Sontag, written in 1978. This is the first essay that turned the experience of cancer into the object of study. Sontag criticises some of the metaphors and culturally constructed meanings of the illness that in her opinion functioned to stigmatise patients and to add additional pain to their already intense physical suffering. Her book compares the cultural constructions surrounding the nineteenth century's symbolic illness par excellence, tuberculosis, with those connected with cancer, the twentieth century's most feared pathology, at least prior to the arrival of AIDS. The two illnesses were connected to certain psychological traits; in the case of cancer to the repression of passion. Sontag, who was undergoing cancer treatment at the time she wrote the essay, makes no reference to her own personal ordeal (although she does address it in her 1988 work, *AIDS and its Metaphors*), but she offers a vociferous criticism of the theories that place the blame for causing illnesses on the individuals suffering from them.

The diaries of Audre Lorde, the self-described black lesbian warrior poet, were another key text.<sup>25</sup> Lorde was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1978 and recorded her experiences in a diary, which was published two years later. *The Cancer Journals* (1980)

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<sup>25</sup> For more information, see my article 'Dealing with Breast Cancer: the Journals of Audre Lorde' (2014).

was immediately seen as a landmark text. The book received considerable acclaim due to its use of a first-person approach to confront a series of experiences that, although they affected a large number of women, were still seen as a taboo subject; indeed, for years Lorde received letters from around the world thanking her for having shared her experiences. Her analysis poses a series of questions that had yet to be tackled at the time concerning cancer: the loss of a breast and the possibility of reconstruction.

Over the following decades, other academics, writers and artists who were suffering from cancer worked to give their own accounts of the illness. Well aware that biomedical discourse failed to provide a sufficient and satisfying explanation of what was happening to them, they opened up new areas of thought and sought out alternative formats that allowed for the inclusion of other narratives. The British photographer Jo Spence was able to translate her experience into her own artistic language after she decided to create a visual record of the evolution of the illness, from 1982 until her death ten years later. Facing society's reluctance to look at breast cancer head on, Spence created a series of self-portraits as she was undergoing treatment and exhibited striking pictures showing her breast before and after a surgical removal. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, another theorist and one of the founders of queer theory, was also a patient affected by breast cancer who searched for new approaches to the issue of the illness and who in 1999 published *A Dialogue on Love*, in which she narrates the psychotherapy sessions she attended to treat her depression, using conversations with her therapist, poems and notes.

Other sufferers, like the feminist psychologist Nancy Datan, worked in more conventional formats but also posed other variables for consideration. In her essay 'Illness and imagery: feminist cognition, socialization, and gender identity' (1989), she

sets out concerns about the sexism and hetero-sexism that underlie the social pressure to reconstruct the breast and also denounces the influence of the cosmetics industry in particular and of neo-capitalism overall on medical practices related to breast cancer. This criticism was also taken up and further developed by the duo of British professors Sue Wilkinson and Celia Kitzinger, especially in 'Towards a feminist approach to breast cancer' (1994).<sup>26</sup>

Marçal, then, may be a pioneer in Catalonia, but she belongs to a tradition of writers, artists and academics who had tried to wrest control of the narration of the illness and to face the experience of cancer, negotiating this crossroads of competing interests and the pressures exacted by biomedical discourse in a sexist society dominated by greed. Marçal chose to fuse some of these earlier theoretical contributions with her own experience and make this amalgam into poetic material.

### **The two passports**

Cancer is an illness that progresses in silence; and the patient is not attributed the status of cancer sufferer until the doctor confirms the diagnosis. The doctor's words have a performative function, transforming the patient into a person touched by death and forcing him or her to change her passport, going into exile in the ghetto of the ill. As Susan Sontag writes in *Illness as Metaphor*:

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<sup>26</sup> Breast cancer is currently no longer a taboo, and prolific new lines of research have been opened to analyse other related issues which too often reveal sexist practices and reinforce gender stereotypes: cancer awareness campaigns, the distribution of resources for research, the lack of attention given to the relationship between cancer and the environment, the new discourses emerging on Internet forums for those affected by the disease, sexuality after a mastectomy and oncofertility.



Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use only the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place. (1978: 3)

Marçal finds herself in this unpleasant situation and she attempts to show that the border between these two lands is spurious: a false duality, in light of the reality that, by virtue of being mortal, we are all subject to the degradation of the body as we move inexorably towards death. The idea of health is, in essence, no more than a fantasy, an absurd presupposition, and the stigmatization of the sick is a way to avoid confronting one's own mortality and the finite nature of life. Despite the social rejection inspired by illness as a reminder of the finite character of existence, Marçal refuses to back down, instead proudly exhibiting herself in all of her vulnerability in the poem 'La cicatriu':

La cicatriu  
em divideix  
en dues parts  
l'aixella.  
Cremallera  
de carn  
mal tancada  
però  
inamovible.  
Inamovible  
com el decret  
que en llengua  
imperial  
m'exilia

a la terra  
glaçada  
dels malalts  
sense terme  
ni rostre.

[The scar  
divides  
my armpit  
into two parts.  
Zipper  
of flesh,  
badly closed  
but  
unmovable.  
Unmovable  
like a decree  
that in an imperial  
language  
exiles me  
to the frozen  
land  
of the sick  
with no limits  
or features.] (24-25)<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> The poems and translations cited are all taken from *The Body's Reason* (2014). Page references correspond to this edition.

The lines of this poem are the stiches that close the wound after the operation, and the poem traces the scar on the white of the skin and the paper. This is a mark, a stigma, much like the dividing border that Sontag refers to, which condemns patients against their will (by imperial decree) 'to the frozen/ land/ of the sick' and that gradually erases their human dimension.

Marçal nevertheless chooses to expose herself without modesty to the uncomfortable gaze of the reader, displaying her weakness, a disease society had for so long hidden from the children and for which there were a wide variety of euphemisms. In short, the poet believed that facing down death directly gave her a certain degree of power and control, as it caused the scales to fall from her eyes, lending her a unique sort of lucidity that allowed her to redefine her expectations and priorities.

### **Speaking through the body**

The wound in the poem 'La cicatriu' is 'badly closed,' an opening through which the body, although sewn shut, tries to express itself despite the difficulties. For Marçal, the body has for centuries been neglected by the Western tradition. It has been stripped of its ability to speak for itself as it has been separated from the spiritual part of the person, thus rendering it silent, mute flesh, totally divorced from the world of thought. The poet, however, views the human being from a more holistic perspective and regards the body as an integral and inseparable part of her being, a belief that had already manifested itself in her earlier poetic treatment of the topics of motherhood and love. The body's agency as an element inextricably tied to her identity is an idea that pervades the collection and one that is especially apparent in the poem below:

Cos meu: què em dius?  
Com un crucificat  
parles per boca de ferida  
que no vol pellar  
fins a cloure's en la mudesa:  
inarticulada  
paraula viva.

[Body of mine: what are you saying to me?  
Like one crucified  
you speak through a wounded mouth  
that will not heal  
until it closes up in dumbness:  
an unpronounced  
living word.] (74-75)

Marçal wants to listen to the stammering speech of her own body, coming through the wound as if it were a mouth. Elsewhere, she refers to the crucified body, for in *Raó del cos* the poetic self is constructed as a Christ figure. There are innumerable references to various passages of the Passion, starting with the analogy of the wound to the chest. Of all her books, this is probably the one with the most numerous and prominent intertextual connections to the Bible. Despite the author's troubled relationship with Catholicism, Marçal always displayed the utmost respect for the figure of Christ. For the poet, pain was not something to be avoided, but rather to be confronted with fortitude, and in this sense Jesus was the ideal role model.

Another reference to the Gospels, and one that at the same time questions the division between body and mind, is the poem entitled 'Resurrectio'. The layout of the lines suggests the poetic self kneeling down before the body, in such a way that there is a reversal of roles: the physical is worshipped by the spiritual, which uses language to prostrate itself before the body. In fact, written language, which linguists divide up into a

system of signifiers and signified, neither of which can function independently of the other, is the hinge uniting body and mind.

m'agenollo davant  
el cos  
impur  
obscè  
mortal  
primer  
país  
vivent  
taüt  
obert  
d'on vinc  
no hi ha,  
mare, una altra naixença.

[I kneel down before  
the body  
impure  
obscene  
mortal  
primal  
country  
alive  
open  
coffin  
whence I come,  
there is not,  
mother, another birth.] (87-88)

Marçal is well aware of the inevitable process of degeneration of the flesh, a revelation that seems 'obscene' to those who live with their backs turned to their own condition as mortals. The poet, marked as incurably sick, feels that she has been placed in an 'open coffin' and that she has had rescinded from her, along with her personal dignity (which is taken for granted as going along with health), the right to the word. The

poet stakes her claim that despite her sickness she is very much alive and is just as human as she had been before her diagnosis.

Marçal endeavored to write about the experience of cancer in order to claim for herself a more active role as a sick person. Biomedical discourse failed to offer her a satisfactory explanation because, for one thing, it enforced the body/mind split and, for another, it excluded the patient from her own narrative. Through verse, Marçal was attempting to uncover, to the extent that she was able, the hidden mysteries of the human condition and to face with full consciousness the decisions she would take over the last days of her life.

### **The white death**

Even though in the poem above Marçal rules out the possibility of resurrection, saying ‘there is not, mother, another birth’, death is nevertheless associated with the colour white, the colour of divine revelation, or perhaps simply that of a blank page upon which all has yet to be written. The final walk through the Stations of the Cross is taken, then, with pain, but also with serenity and calm. White is first of all the colour of the egg, which represents the tumour. This is a symbol of reproduction, the self-generation of more of one’s own cells, which Marçal had used previously both to refer to the gestation of her daughter and in a poem dedicated to the neo-figurative artist Josep Uclés, a friend who suffered from cancer years before her. The following poem is one of the longest in the collection, its lines bathed in the pale light of dawn, a new birth beyond death:

Covava l’ou de la mort blanca  
sota l’aixella, arran de pit  
i cegament alletava  
l’ombra de l’ala de la nit.

No ploris per mi mare a punta d'alba.  
No ploris per mi mare, plora amb mi.  
Esclatava la rosa monstruosa  
botó de glaç

on lleva el crit.

Mare, no ploris per mi, mare.  
No ploris per mi mare, plora amb mi.  
Que el teu plor treni amb el meu la xarxa  
sota els meus peus vacil·lants  
en el trapezi  
on em contorsiono  
agafada a la mà de l'esglai

De l'ombra.

Com la veu del castrat  
que s'eleva fins a l'excés de la  
mancança.

Des de la pèrdua que sagna  
en el cant cristal·lí com una deu.  
La deu primera, mare.

[I hatched the egg of white death  
under my armpit, close to my breast  
And blindly fed  
the shadow of night's wing.  
Don't cry for me mother at break of dawn  
Don't cry for me mother, cry with me.

The monstrous rose burst out,  
button of ice  
where the cry is born.  
Mother, don't cry for me, mother.  
Don't cry for me mother, cry with me.

That your cry mesh with mine a net  
under my staggering feet  
on the trapeze  
where I writhe  
and hold hands with the horror  
of darkness.

Like the voice of one castrated  
that rises to the excess of what  
is missing.  
From the loss that bleeds  
in the crystal-clear song like a spring.  
The first spring, mother.] (85-86)

This poem features a direct appeal to the mother, a crucial figure throughout the collection. Here, we find a mother who cries when she sees the wings of night approaching, resulting in the establishment of a clear parallel between the author's mother and the disconsolate mother of God at the foot of the cross. Throughout the course of the collection the mother merges both with the mother of God (thus reinforcing the idea of the poetic self as Christ figure) and with Mother Nature. In fact, the mother's cries stand in opposition to the tumour, as solid as a 'button of ice,' and represent a force of renewal. 'The first spring', in the last line, could be interpreted as an appositive of 'mother', an allusion to the creative potential of motherhood and to the life cycle of death and regeneration. The fountain and the tears represent the liquid element, in constant motion, which ensures the movement and continuity of the cycle.

For Marçal, death means the return to the maternal uterus that gave her life, a journey inverse to that of existence, a transition rather than an end. The poems suggest that when one ceases to exist, the limits of the self blur, fading away until they are united with those of the mother (whether she be Nature or a feminized God,) as we can read in this poem:

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Morir: potser només  
 perdre forma i contorns  
 desfer-se, ser  
 xuclada endins  
 de l'úter viu,  
 matriu de déu  
 mare: desnéixer.

[To die: perhaps only to  
 lose shape and outline

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<sup>28</sup> See, for example, the chapter on the feminization of religion in my *Maria-Mercè Marçal. L'escriptura permeable* (2014), pp. 146-53.



to undo oneself, to be  
swallowed inside  
the uterus alive,  
god's womb,  
mother: to become unborn.] (50- 51)

To express this concept Marçal coins a new verb, *desnéixer*, a word that does not exist in Catalan, translated here as 'become unborn'. This term does not represent a denial of having been born, but rather refers to a journey in the opposite direction, toward the start of life, which according to the poem we make at the moment of death. The word is a neologism and one that Marçal used only once, but it belongs to a tradition started by the Spanish writer and philosopher Miguel de Unamuno in the late nineteenth century. His obsession with death spurred him to develop a concept he called, in Spanish, *desnacer*, which he explicitly defines as an inverse gestation and uses innumerable times throughout his prolific literary production, including his theoretical work, his first novel *Paz en la guerra* published in 1897, and many of his poems.

Death is thus represented not as an abrupt rupture but as one more step toward shapelessness, toward the embrace of the waters of the high sea, like amniotic fluid and the new phase that is beginning:

Res no et serà pres: vindrà tan sols  
l'instant d'obrir  
dòcilment la mà  
i alliberar  
la memòria de l'aigua  
perquè es retrobi aigua  
d'alta mar.

[Nothing will be taken from you: only  
the moment will come to open  
meekly your hand  
and release

memory of water  
so it may rejoin water  
in high seas.] (48-49)

The author gives herself up to this new stage 'meekly', with a certain feeling of gratitude, as with an open hand she seems to give life back to a sort of transcendent entity, giving thanks for the time that has been granted to her.

### **Conclusion**

Marçal's poetic creation of *Raó del cos* takes up a considerable previous tradition that since the 1970s had put forward the idea that biomedical discourse is not neutral and that it is insufficient to describe the experience of sickness. The medical record expels the patient from his or her own narrative as it establishes an impassable dividing line between the body and the mind, and the patient is rendered voiceless as she comes to be seen as indistinguishable from the pathology with which she is stricken. Various feminist groups had begun to denounce the aggression of discourses against women, which, in the case of breast cancer, reached extreme levels. Breast cancer patients had demanded more active and better informed participation in the decisions that affected them. Laying bare the insidious assumptions that operated below the surface of biomedical discourse and that represented aggressions against patients, they had also sought out new deliberately subjective formats to re-appropriate the narrative of their own bodies.

Marçal transformed her experiences throughout her illness into poetic material. Her unsettled feeling after the initial diagnosis pushed her to order her ideas through poetry, just as she had done before with other questions that had confounded her. The poet listens to her body, which expresses itself through the scar, such that the separation

between the physical and spiritual parts of the person, the division that forms the basis of medical discourse, becomes highly fraught. Marçal is not afraid to show herself in all her vulnerability and to assume all the consequences of her own mortality. *Raó del cos*, with fewer words than other books by Marçal, is able to look with greater lucidity at the human condition. The honesty and astuteness with which the author confronts death are admirable and the beauty of her minimalist verse on the very threshold of existence is captivating.

## **Immanence and Animality in Marçal's Poetic Voice**

**Elisenda Marcer**

Maria-Mercè Marçal has left us with a moving and vast human and literary heritage; a legacy that nowadays enjoys both a solid and persevering critical attention. Although the multiplicity of voices and facets in Marçal have been addressed from various critical perspectives (Pons: 1989; Fernández: 1999; Julià: 2002; Calvo: 2008) the study of the relationship between body and textuality continues to be one of the axes that stimulates most theoretical attention. Indicative of this primacy is the fact that most doctoral theses published to date on the poet from Ivars converge precisely in their interest in the study of corporeality and its representations.

### **Theoretical approaches to Marçal's poetry: the imprint of Derrida**

Laia Climent (2008) elaborated a detailed semiotics of the body in this respect, drawing on ideas that range from theories of the senses from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries to considerations of the influence of the thinking of Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze. In line with this premise, the work of Noèlia Díaz Vicedo offers a rigorous and convincing analysis of the configuration of the female subject. This critic bases her analysis on feminist theories, more specifically the reflections on sexual difference defended by the Italian school, *Il pensiero della differenza sessuale*. Finally, Caterina Riba, in her recent two-volume publication *L'escriptura permeable* (2014) and

*Cos endins* (2015), addresses in depth the condition and problematics of the female body, as maternal and sick, in contrast to feminist theoreticians and women writers of the Anglo-American tradition such as Virginia Woolf, Adrienne Rich or Sylvia Plath.

Riba's second volume also explores the affinities between the concept of the body in Marçal and the phenomenology of perception by Maurice Merleau-Ponty. As a consequence, both the study of the interrelations between the body, language and experience, as well as their contextualisation in relation to the most relevant feminist theories of the second half of the twentieth century have generated a considerable bibliography rich in its methodological variety. Through these analyses of the representation of corporeality a more or less explicit relationship is established with the perspectives of philosophers such as Derrida, Deleuze and Merleau-Ponty.

With regards to Derrida, the work of Climent, Riba and especially Godayol refer to the concept of fissure, introduced in *Marges de la philosophie* (1972) to interpret the dialogue that the poet establishes with the body in her output. In addition to this idea of fissure (which I shall explore in the next section), the Deleuzian notion of the body without organs (1980) has also been applied to the study of Marçal's poetry by the same critic (2008). Both of these approaches have focused primarily on Marçal's construction of the female body. However, they have overlooked the relationship between corporeality, inanimate matter and the natural environment. Drawing on studies of animality and bio-semantics, it is the aim of this article to advance a new perspective to situate the output of the poet in a different interdisciplinary context.

In her most recent book, *Becoming Undone*, Elizabeth Grosz notes that despite the fact that the ideas of freedom, autonomy and agency have been used to understand the

concept of subjectivity during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, they have rarely been adequately defined, explained or analysed. Moreover, for her they have become another kind of 'mantra of liberation' directed to address strictly feminist, ethnic or national question (2011, 59). In this sense, the author defends a more ontological, rather than moral, approximation to these concepts. She states: 'I will not turn to the philosophical tradition in which questions of freedom and autonomy are tied to the functioning of a deprivatory power (oppressive or dominant)' (2011: 50). As such, her meditation gravitates towards imbuing these concepts with a deeper meaning in the recovery of those aspects of phenomenology that have informed existentialism, structuralism and feminism.

It is through this theoretical prism that we can study the points of inflection of the lyrical subject from a more conceptual perspective; that is to say, through identification of those affinities manifested in the philosophical readings that informed Marçal's thinking. In this sense, scholars such as Margalida Pons (1989) and Lluïsa Julià (2002) noted how Marçal's initial remonstrative tone gradually acquired a more reflective and spiritual nature.<sup>29</sup> In this way, the process of identity construction will not only mark this thematic turn but will also produce a means to narrate the subject and invent oneself from the relationship established between body and language.

Julià identified, in turn, the influence of Maurice Blanchot and Simone de Beauvoir on Marçal; particularly the idea that the act of writing has to be understood as a tool to suppress the subject (2001: 41). In this respect, one of the representations most

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<sup>29</sup> In the prologue to the anthology of Marçal *Contraban de llum*, Julià speaks of achieving a higher poetic expression that will make space for biblical and spiritual metaphors. Climent and Riba, respectively, have also analysed this evolution noting the associations with mystic thinking.

foregrounded by critics, Díaz Vicedo (2014) and Riba (2015) in particular, is the renowned image of the snake in 'Qui sóc i per què escric':

D'un sol cop d'ull, em sedueix de veure, en el mirall dels meus versos, dels meus llibres, una serp i les seves mudes de pell: mudes que parlen i alhora resten mudes. La serp potser és com aquella que la meva mare em deia que hi havia dalt d'un sostre mort (...). Temptació i repte, transgressió i mancança: l'escriptura. (Marçal 1995a: 24)

[With just one glance, I am seduced in the mirror of my verses and books by the sight of a snake and its changes of skin: changes which speak yet, at the same time, remain mute. Perhaps the dead snake is like the one my mother used to tell me about on top of a roof (...) Temptation and challenge, transgression and lack: writing.]

Apart from the Biblical reference that reminds us of the contradictory and tempting character of the snake: 'mudes que parlen i alhora resten mudes', the fact that the author refers to writing in these terms is pertinent and also emblematic of the poetry, envisioned as: 'temptació i repte, transgressió i mancança'. Needless to say, the notion of challenge and transgression is reminiscent of the questions of gender and sexuality mentioned before; but it is on the idea of lack that I shall focus in the following section, which is particularly revealing in the light on Derridean meditation on the notions of 'fissure' or 'crevice'.<sup>30</sup>

Various studies have already highlighted the presence of Derrida in Marçal's output. Laia Climent, for example, refers to the Derridean concept of fissure to interpret the pain that produces the crevice between the body and language in *Raó de cos* (2007: 116). Subsequently, Caterina Riba's refers to the philosopher when addressing the

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<sup>30</sup> As Díaz Vicedo notes: 'the "snake" serves as the idea of life, of conception against the existing rules: ex-situ of the traditional core of a family. In this sense, the "snake" as temptation alters the pre-given order, the harmony of actions' (2014: 78).

concept of *différance*, be it in relation to the construction of identity or the understanding of writing as a means of liberation. Pilar Godayol reproduces an interesting interview with Marçal where she not only makes explicit the need to explore the ways in which the philosopher informs the work of the Catalan but also asserts that Marçal's oeuvre in its entirety is a 'drip of Derridean ideas' (2012: 227) which largely articulate the poet's understanding of the nature of woman and language (Marçal 2014: 195).

In this fascinating article, Godayol initiates an intertextual exercise inspired by the poem 'Dolor de ser tan diferent de tu' [Pain of being so different from you], in which the conceptualisation of desire and the relations of alterity are interpreted through the prism of the French thinker. With regards to the question of desire, Godayol also explains the way in which Marçal's association of the process of writing, with a sense of revolt and 'el desig de completesa que té el subjecte en tots els àmbits de l'experiència humana' (2012: 227-28), [the subject's desire for completeness in all aspects of human experience] are Derridean in origin.

Despite this creative connection, fissure, lack and difference have been used principally in relation to theories of gender and the dynamics of the construction of the female subject. As such, if the possibilities offered by Derridean discourse to facilitate the rupture of established codes are notable it is only logical, then, that *différance* or fissure ties in with particular concepts elaborated on the basis of human nature in such well-known texts as *L'animal que doncs je suis* (2006). Without a doubt, such alternative approaches afford a new dimension to the verses of Marçal, particularly with regard to a perceived symbiosis between the body and its environment.



The publication of *La germana, l'estrangera* (1981-1984) signals a step towards the literary maturity of Marçal and reveals a poetic voice that is more and more insightful. However, this progression that culminates with *Raó del cos* (2000) in the presence of vertiginous images laden with spirituality and mysticism, cannot be detached from the synchronic development of the notion of corporeality central to the work in its entirety.<sup>31</sup> In this way, departing from the fact that the poetic voice springs from the named fusion between language and body, I will also explore the way in which the animal body is developed in Marçal by referring to the most appropriate philosophical approaches in each case.

### **Fissure as an opening to animality**

In *Maria-Mercè Marçal, cos i compromís*, Climent noted suggestive parallels between the perception of corporality and the animal. She embarks, for example, on an interesting journey around the relevance of eighteenth-century theories of perception and the senses such as *Über einige Eigenheiten des Gefühlsinnes* (1793) by Johann Jakob Engel. Following Engel, Climent stresses the distinction between the senses in their most refined and basic form: namely, those that 'serveixen per a la recepció de l'art, que permeten desenvolupar més fàcilment la imaginació, aquests són la mirada i l'oïda; i els més bastos, que són sensacions estrictament animals; aquests són el gust i l'olfacte' (2008: 57) [sight and hearing serve for the reception of art, allowing us develop our imagination more easily; and the most basic are the senses of taste and smell which are strictly animal sensations.]

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<sup>31</sup> The poet affirmed this in a conversation about poetry and feminism in 1998: 'More determinant (than class and politics) is to have a body, a situation, a history of a woman, or the other element that continues to be very important, language. I cannot establish a separation between these elements and the subject.' (Cited in Joana Sabadell 1998: 16)

In relation to the sense of touch, the German scholar spoke about the quality of precision in perception; senses experienced using parts of the body that have mobility — for example, the fingers, the lips or the tongue — and those less precise, corresponding to the rest of the cutaneous surface. Over the years, the definition and study of the senses have evolved and other more complex criteria have been taken into account, such as the specificities between active sensations, produced by the sense of touch, or their passive counterparts with involuntary cutaneous sensations (Climent 2008: 58).<sup>32</sup>

In this way, reference to the theory of the senses affords a broader perspective to the lyricism of Marçal, which claims the relevance of the sense of touch to the study of other corporeal sensations classed as involuntary, natural and animalistic. In this ambit, the description of pleasure in the poems 'Saps? M'agrada el teu cap, m'agrada el teu cul' (1989: 199) [Know what? I like your head, I like your bum], of the exultation of the senses in 'Sextina dels sis sentits' (1989: 304) [Sestina of the six senses], for example, harks back precisely to a sensorial experience that takes into account the whole of the cutaneous surface and situates pre-reflective and reflective sensations at the same level.<sup>33</sup> Consequently, the moment at which Marçal puts forward the wholeness of the cutaneous surface as a vehicle of expression of the experience of love, she is presenting an idea of spatial corporeality that is based on a close association between the body and its natural habitat. In order to assess the success of this relationship in fostering the journey towards a symbiosis with nature through desire or illness, Climent insinuates some of the aspects of animality that are akin to concepts of corporality developed by Deleuze and Derrida.

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<sup>32</sup> The distinction is made by by Carl Gustav in *Natur und Idee* (1861).

<sup>33</sup> See especially 'La construcció semiòtica del cos' by Laia Climent in *Maria-Mercè Marçal, cos i compromís* (2008).

Nonetheless, it is important to mention that the analysis of the parallels between the lyrical subject and the animal world proposed by Climent is mostly grounded on Biblical, Hellenistic and medieval traditions. In this context, animals such as 'the eagle', 'the bitch' or 'the fox' which are present in *Cau de Llunes*, for example, are interpreted as tools of subversion of Biblical representations of women (2008: 102). In fact, if we begin from the premise that the construction of female identity in Marçal is informed by several traditions, amongst which we also identify Anglo-Saxon and feminist thinking, it is remarkable that a point of intersection between notions of immanence and animality is produced in each of these.

Informed by feminist debates of the 1970s and 1980s, Marçal understands the hybrid space or, as we will see, the Derridean aporetic space, as a place where the female is in transit: 'a mig camí, sempre en un espai híbrid entre Atenea i Medusa, excavant túnels subterranis entre una i altra, sense ser capaç de triar entre totes dues encara que una o altra pugui predominar' (Marçal 2004: 104) [Half way through, always in a hybrid space between Athena and Medusa, excavating subterranean tunnels between one and the other, being unable to choose between the two although one or the other may at times predominate].

It is important to stress, therefore, that it is precisely in this border space: 'd'averany més fosc./ Camí d'enlloc, de tornada d'enlloc' [of darker augury./ Path to nowhere, a return from nowhere] (1989: 181), where the fissure, division, or even the exile between body and language is produced.<sup>34</sup> Thus, if the Derridean notion of fracture

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<sup>34</sup> This is a fissure between body and language, between signified and signifier. We inhabit a strange space with Marçal that is situated in the middle of everything, that does not belong to pure corporeality nor to pure language [...] in *Raó del cos* a painful fracture becomes evident, this *between space* as developed by Jacques Derrida with his concept of *différence* (Climent 2007: 116).

is adduced, according to which there is a crevice, or multiplicity, that provides a space for creation,<sup>35</sup> the aforesaid fissure will not only acquire relevance for its ability to open up breaches in hegemonic language — as both Caterina Riba (2015) and Noèlia Díaz Vicedo (2014) in their respective studies specify — but will also become the aporetic space that enables a return to origins, both in terms of literary tradition and the pre-linguistic subject.

In this sense, attention to the beginnings referred to by theorists such as Luisa Muraro (1994: 8) acquires a multiple relevance: on the one hand, it will allow the reformulation of traditional and androcentric language; and, on the other, it will cleave gaps that will pave the way to atavism and contact with nature. Marçal's first lyrical production: *Cau de llunes* (1973-1976) and *Bruixa de dol* (1977-1979) show a return to orality in which the 'recitació, la música i el gest entra en joc d'una forma indissociable' (Riba 2015: 83) [recital, music and gesture meld in an inseparable game].<sup>36</sup>

Riba speaks of this return to origins drawing on Muraro's thinking about the disorientation felt by the poet and the willingness to resituate herself in relation to the world: 'Començo des del principi perquè no sé començar des d'on sóc ja que no sóc enlloc' (Muraro 1994: 8) [I start at the beginning because I don't know from where to begin because I don't know where I am]. This recovery of origins — also exemplified in the recodification of feminine stereotypes proceeding from the classical world — is a crucial quest in Marçal's poetry. But, more than any other, the fissure allows the possibility to reconcile — or at least to initiate a dialogue with — the animal that one carries within.

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<sup>35</sup> As expressed in *Márgenes de la filosofía* (1972).

<sup>36</sup> In *Maria-Mercè Marçal, l'escriptura permeable* (2015), Caterina Riba analyses carefully these traces in a series of relevant poems.

In the stimulating reflections of Derrida in *The Animal That Therefore I am* (2002), the author forces the reader to face the condition of human beings and asks us to think about the liminal space in which humanity and animals meet potentially: or, in a more familiar philosophical lexicon, to meet in a state of possibility. Thinking about the nature of existence itself, Derrida affirms:

when I say "*Je suis*", if I am (following) this *suite* then, I move from 'the ends of man', that is the confines of man, to "the crossing of borders between man and animal". Passing across borders or the ends of man I come or surrender to the animal, to the animal in itself, to the animal in me and the animal at unease with itself, to the man about whom Nietzsche said (I no longer remember where) something to the effect that it was an as yet undetermined animal, an animal lacking in itself. (2002: 372)

Significantly, in the above reflection there is a lack of reconciliation with the androcentric conception of language; and this bestows the opportunity to open crevices and break with those aspects that Marçal considered unfit for the new representation of the subject. Although there has been a certain degree of appropriation of the notion of Derridean fissure in feminist theory, in Marçal we can see how this exploration of the liminality between the animal and human body acquires a much wider philosophical latency. In this sense, Godayol has indicated that with Marçal there is a constant drip of Derridean theory: 'per la passió de viure els espais aporètics sense complexos (...) Per a ella el femení ocupa el llinard i representa el poder de la incompletesa' (2012: 227) [for the passion to live the aporetic space unashamedly [...] the female occupies the threshold and represents the power of incompleteness].

Furthermore, the hallmark of the French thinker is manifested in the representation of the movement that is produced in the precise moment of opening

created by the crevice, harking back to the performative condition of the aporetic space noted above. In the section 'Freu' from *Sal Oberta*, the expression of the exaltation produced by sexual pleasure by means of the body and beyond any social and cultural mores will enhance the need of distance from dominant anthropological, biological and cultural commonplaces.

In other words, the numerous figurations of desire in relation to the animal world deployed in the poems VI, VII i VIII of 'Freu', to name but a few examples, illustrate what will eventually be a deep symbiosis between the bodies of the lovers and the animal and vegetable worlds. Hence, here we find traces of the intersection between the human and the non-human — symbolised, on the one hand, by the recurrent images of the fissure or the cut and, on the other, by the synecdochal use of the 'roda de ganivets' (Marçal 1982: 25) [knife wheel], the 'dents esmolades' (Marçal 1982: 20) [honed teeth] and the 'agulló afilet' (Marçal 1982: 22)[sharp sting], which place love and pleasure in an indeterminate and aporetic space that is configured in relation to the dynamics of growth that govern nature:

#### XIV

Ens hem trobat al freu que fon tota vedruna  
on s'estellen les barques i es clivella el camí.  
Adelerats, pel vespre esquixat de matí,  
i per l'alba que du el gep creixent de la lluna.

Pel negre bes que tesa l'arc de la tenebra.  
Per la sorra on s'abrina el foc i la neulia.  
Pel ganivet que enceta la pell de la follia.  
Per la badia oberta, pel congost de la febre. (Marçal 1982: 28)

[We have met at the strait where boundaries melt  
where boats splinter and the path cracks.  
Eager for the evening with the dash of an early start,  
and for dawn that brings the waxing crescent of the moon.

For the black kiss that draws the arch of darkness.  
For the sand where the fire and mist blur.  
For the knife that opens up the skin of madness.  
For the wide bay, for the fever of a narrow pass.]

In the two quatrains that open sonnet XIV of 'Festanyal de l'Aigua', sexuality is represented in absolute communion with the forces of nature; not only drawing inspiration from the movement of water currents and the temporal guidance of the crescent moon, but also situating sexual experience in the interstices of reality — corporeal or temporal — referring again to the inherent dynamism of the Derridean fissure. Therefore, if we are to analyse the Derridean imprint of the cairn, the gorge or the hollow — using Marçal's lexicon — we confirm that in the fissure are to be found the beginnings of change as well as change itself: 'la *différance* no és només el motor que fa diferir les diferències, sinó també, alhora, una diferència que ja ha estat diferida; és fruit d'ella mateixa' (Rosàs 2015: 78) [*différance* is not only an engine that makes differences differ. It is also a difference which has been made to differ, a fruit of itself].

More specifically, here we find a space where there is no beginning or end, but the existence of a continuous movement from which the identity of the subject is being constructed. In her collected essays, Marçal (2004) expresses the need to conceive the articulation of the literary subject as a process that is 'dinàmic produït per la tensió i xoc, entre tendències oposades' (2004: 69) [produced dynamically through tension and shock, between opposite tendencies].

Taking into account the context in which these texts were written between 1985 and 1997 and, with the influence of feminist theory, the author's emphasis on the analysis of the construction of the subject vis-à-vis rejection or acceptance of socially imperative discourses is logical. However, as Godayol notes, the concept of writing as a means of fighting against the disintegration of identity engages with the Derridean notion of the incompleteness of the subject (2012: 227). This incompleteness is also reflected in the proliferation of liminal spaces where Marçal's subject tries to orient herself: 'conjurarem els límits del paisatge' (Julià 2001: 133) [we will conjure up the limits of the landscape] as the lyrical subject in *Terra de mai* (1982) affirms. Therefore, despite the fact that the concept of incompleteness is akin to the will of severing 'el cap de tot esquema' [the head of every scheme],<sup>37</sup> the conceptual sequence that emerges from the dynamics of fissure insinuates a more ambitious interpretation that connects the poetry of Marçal explicitly with the thinking of Gilles Deleuze and, implicitly, with Henri Bergson.

### **Plants, animals and inorganic life**

Elizabeth Grosz, in her fascinating study *Becoming Undone* (2011), considers dynamism as a new concept of life that goes beyond organicist and phenomenological conceptions. That is to say, for Grosz, human beings emerge from that which is non-human and inorganic. In line with the Deleuzian concept of 'inorganic life', she understands individuals as a dynamic and integrative process of absorption of the external environment that goes beyond the limits of life.

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<sup>37</sup> See, for example, 'Decapitació-80', which influenced by poets such as Montserrat Abelló, stating the willingness to begin naked, in front of a canvas where she will write a new identity (Julià 2001: 118).



And for Deleuze, life is that which does not spread from the organic to the inorganic but runs between them, an impersonal force of contraction and dilation that characterizes events, even non-living event, as much as it does life. Each distinguishes life as a kind of contained dynamism, a dynamism within a porous boundary, that feeds from and returns to the chaos which surrounds it something immanent within the chaotic whole: life as a complex fold of the chemical and the physical that reveals something not given within them, something new, an emergence, the ordered force of invention. (Grosz 2011: 27)

This understanding of life, between the organic and the inorganic affords a very interesting dimension to the notion of inhabiting the 'space in-between', about which Marçal has written and spoken profusely. Following these theories, the figuration of subjectivity in her poetry can be inscribed in an ontological framework that complements extant gender and phenomenological interpretations. In what follows, I suggest that in the poetry of Marçal the rupture between the subject and matter can be read as a process of transformation of the subject.

Body and nature melt in verbs as profuse as 'arbrar-se' [to be planted (of a tree)]: 'Cap foc no s'arbra com tu dins la terra' [no fire takes root like you in the earth]; 'Triomfa l'hora entre la sal de l'arbre' [the moment is triumphant between the salt of the tree.] These are lines that open and close the expression of desire in 'Sextina-Mirall' (1989: 296). But these borders are also blurred in the evocation of the landscape and its limits in 'L'ombra de l'altra festa' (Julià 2001: 133) [shadow of the other feast], and in the frequent assimilation of woman within metaphors of seascape and liquidity.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> The use of liquid metaphors and marine similes are known in feminist discourse not only to express maternity but also female biological cycles. Climent, Riba and Díaz Vicedo have dedicated in-depth analyses to the diverse representations of woman that draw on the cycles of sea and the moon as a referent to female body and nature.

This relocation of woman in relation to natural world is intimately related to the reconstruction of her identity and reflects a singular way of understanding the *notion of life*. In other words, the poetry of Marçal — in the same way as that of her much admired Montserrat Abelló — understands that the sense of touch it is not limited to the fingers or hands but entails the whole of the cutaneous area. According to Abelló, the fusion of subject with environment also admits the expansion of the limits of the notion of the subject. The lyrical subject merges with nature, experiencing life through plants, animals and inorganic life; all of which is made manifest in a myriad of forms.

Following Bergson's thinking, Deleuze concluded that life is not uniquely and exclusively lived through the subject but through all forms of life that coexist with humanity.<sup>39</sup> This medium foregoes the opposition with matter mentioned above and seeks instead a singular force that transcends the human and connects the subject's existence with surrounding elements and forces: 'This is what links the concept of life, for him, to becoming animal, to the Body without Organs, and to immanence rather than transcendence, the human or the organism. He is interested in the non-living tentacles that extend themselves into the living' (Grosz 2011: 41).

This new notion of life proposed by the poet, one that presupposes an existence previous to the process of individuation,<sup>40</sup> deploys surrounding elements of the natural environment as referents and mirrors to assimilate, reproduce or differentiate. In this way, lines such as 'la lluna i tu sou u: arbre i mirall' (Marçal 1982: 114) [the moon and

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<sup>39</sup>According to Bergson, life has to be understood beyond matter: 'Life, that excess within matter that seeks to extend matter beyond itself and its present forms, is not the "origin" of the virtual but rather one of its modes of actualization, the potentiality of matter itself, insofar as matter is the material of life as well as nonlife' (Grosz 2011: 28).

<sup>40</sup> The concept of pre-individuation was formulated by Gilbert Simondon and exposed by Grosz in *Becoming Undone* (2011: 36-38).

you are one: tree and mirror], and other recurrent, related images which identify Marçal's lyrical subject with the sinuosity and the movement of the sea; the mirroring with the forests: 'Adéu, amor: ens emmirallen boscos' (Julià 2001: 133) [Farewell, love: we are mirrored in the woods]; and, together with the above, the inscription of the desire to become mother in the message of 'alfabet vegetal', in *La germana, l'estrangera*; together configure a continuous body, undefined, akin to that which Deleuze terms the 'body without organs'. Despite the fact that Grosz emphasises Bergson's influence on Deleuze, and also his incorporation of basic Darwinian concepts, it is the latter that strives to find a new conception of life that is not subject to known forms and contours but to all that is outside:

He is concerned with the "life" of events, and the continuities and connections that run between what is conventionally divided into the living and the non-living. He is less interested in life as lived, experienced, than he is in that part of life which cannot be lived by a subject — thus his abiding fascination with the life of animals and plants, the life of inhuman forces, the life of concepts, the life of sensations which impinge on and entwine, co-actualize, with human life. (Grosz 2011: 35)

Significantly, the connections between the human and the non-human, between consciousness and matter, establish a continuity that inserts the subject in a common place between the animal and the human worlds. The immanence goes beyond individual experience and creates invisible tentacles that move in an involuntary way:

Com si un tauró m'arrenqués una mà  
i tot seguit l'escopís a la platja  
i ella mogué els dits per manaments  
estrany als de la meva voluntat i ja no obeís més el meu cervell

—tal com el cap del gall decapitat  
obre i tanca la boca i el cos corre,  
esparverat, llunyà, sense retorn. (Julià 2001: 139)

[As if a shark had torn off my hand  
and had spat it out, right away, on the beach  
and it moved its fingers by commands  
alien to my will, no longer obeying my brain  
—like to the head of the beheaded cock  
which opens and closes its mouth and the body runs  
frightened, distant, with no return.]

This poem has traditionally been interpreted as an example of the alterity of the maternal body. However, here I read it through the lens of Bergson, Darwin and Deleuze, insofar as their theoretical framework sheds light on the relation of the ‘ethological and the geological, to the machine phylum, and to the biosemiological’ aspects of Marçal’s poetry (Grosz 2011: 27). The poet presents a dynamic subject that is constituted in relation to the outside world, emphasizing its openness and its impossibility to fit within the limits of a traditional definition of life and experience. Marçal locates the subject on a plane of immanence and, in so doing, she heightens the animal and vegetal dimensions inherent in humanity. Hers is a subject in constant movement shaped by the imagery of the vegetable world. In other words, this gradual synthesis of nature and culture is highly reminiscent of the Deleuzian notion of the ‘body without organs’ and the transcendence of the animality inherent in the lyrical subject.

In this way, Derridean fissure and the Deleuzian concept of life foreground Marçal’s weakening of the division between the animal and human. Furthermore, rather than undermining the importance of gender in her work, such a perspective underlines the poet’s vision of a fusion of nature and culture through the integration of the inorganic

into her construction of the subject. In so doing, Marçal broadens the idea of the gendered and sexual subject and locates her understanding of subjectivity in the domain of metaphysics and the nature of being.

## Phantoms, transtemporal desire and the Construction of a Lesbian Genealogy in *La passió segons Renée Vivien*<sup>41</sup>

Sara Torres

Still, one can hear the resonances of lesbian history, even when scholars fail to mention it. Such resonances live in the melancholic discourse of haunt and spectre that illuminates the theory of queer time, much as they underwrite the palpable rage that seeks to extract justice from monumental history.

(Wiegman 2011: 207)

Post-structuralism, particularly the methodology of deconstruction that Jacques Derrida proposes, denies the existence of a univocal and an imbued meaning embedded by the author. In reader–response oriented criticism, the death of the author proposed by Roland Barthes results in the emergence of the subjectivity and dispositions of the reader who, inevitably, creates the text in the process of decoding it (Barthes: 2001). This acknowledgement of partiality in academic reading is fundamental to the development of a queer approach to literature.

The moment at which the scholar puts into place a queer theoretical apparatus, the focus becomes the way in which normative and anti-normative desire produces textuality. In this sense, desire becomes productive and, as a result, it is not only the desire of the writer that produces textuality, but also that of the reader. Thus, for me, to

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<sup>41</sup> Translated from Spanish by Noèlia Díaz Vicedo.

take a queer academic perspective is not only to accept the feminist premise 'the personal is political' (Hanisch: 1969) with all its consequences, but also to claim the complex subjectivity of the critical reader that approaches a piece of writing as her/his object of analysis. The understanding that 'personal problems are political problems' (Hanisch 1969: 114), which is to say that individual and collective bodies and emotions are political matters, leads to the appearance of what Patricia T. Clough identified as an 'affective turn', defined as 'an increased academic focus on bodies and emotions in the humanities and social sciences' (2007: 2). This recourse to affect implies the effort to put aside dualistic thinking by dissolving the binaries between body/mind, reason/passion. Thus, for the purpose of my investigation, I will take the following approach to 'affective history', proposed by queer scholar Heather Love:

Recently, long-standing debates about gay and lesbian history have shifted from discussions of the stability of sexual categories over time to explorations of the relation between queer historians and the subjects they study. The turn from a focus on 'effective history' to a focus on 'affective history' has meant that critics have stopped asking, 'Were there gay people in the past?' but rather have focused on questions such as: 'Why do we care so much if there were gay people in the past?' or even, perhaps, 'What relation with these figures do we hope to cultivate?' (2009: 31)

The only novel written by Maria-Mercè Marçal, *La passió segons Renée Vivien* (henceforth, *La passió*) privileges a relationship between lesbian writers and other lesbian figures of the past, selected as objects of desire for both identification and fictionalization. I do not analyse the nature of homosexual love, which appears constantly throughout the book. Rather, I am interested in the search for transtemporal and passionate referents as drives for the process of writing. In *La passió* we find multiple bodies and voices that are on a constant search.

The search for referents of lesbian love and ways of living occurs in a twofold process: on the one hand, through the author giving voice to the past through the recovery of the figures of the poet Renée Vivien and her group of lovers; on the other, through unfolding her own subjectivity onto the two main narrative voices, which express themselves in the first person singular. One of these two voices is the narrator, who embodies 'el paper d'un estrany corifeu, oficiant enmig d'un cor heterogeni i sovint rebec' (Marçal 1995: 339) [the role of a strange coryphaeus, officiating in the midst of a heterogenous and often unruly chorus]. The second, Sara T., is a scriptwriter who vehemently follows in the footsteps — both physical and literary — of Renée Vivien (1877-1909), the French poet of English origin who challenged the society of her time by living according to Sapphic principles.

Taking into account the concept of stubborn attachments developed by queer theorist Heather Love, which refers to the passionate connection between the queer researcher and her object of research, I shall analyse the web of relationships, energised by affinity in desire, that take place in the novel. In *La passió* the main strands of this relational, textual space are formed by the bonds which connect Marçal — as the author —, and Sara T. as the main character, with Renée Vivien, the poet. Both Marçal (in her intensive research during the decade in which she wrote *La passió*) and the fictional Sara T. had been through a process of investigation, which includes physical contact with manuscripts, graphic documents, and press articles. This type of connection, fuelled by the desire to trace the presence of life in fiction, is also present in Vivien's attachment to the figure of the Greek poet Sappho who she venerated and translated. I argue that this intense search for role models of lesbian figures of the past can be understood as 'stubborn attachments to lost objects' (Love 2009: 7). Reading stubborn attachment as



fetish, in this essay I will explore how the lesbian subject needs these fetishes to create a coherent fantasy in order to explain her being-in-the-world as a desiring subject. In addition, Teresa de Lauretis' concept of fantasy developed in her book *The Practice of Love* (1994) will provide the social and subjective scenario where sexuality takes shape, where the sexual drives are codified and represented.

Before exploring in detail the interaction between the lesbian subject and her fetish, it is necessary to clarify the limits of the term lesbian and how I intend to use it throughout my analysis. Firstly, it is of course imperative to consider the term woman, which is addressed to those individuals who have been acknowledged or classified by patriarchal institutions as women and consequently educated and constructed culturally as such. This does not imply that the process of construction of the subjects — institutionally categorised as women will be perfect, total or constant; on the contrary, there is space for ambiguity and error during the process. The term lesbian can be understood as a term developed to categorise a child that the system has questioned as a woman (often punished as an imperfect woman) and whose libido has been directed towards the teleological unity of heterosexual reproduction. Yet, despite the efforts of the system, the lesbian is the subject that, as we can see in *La passió* continues in stubborn attachment to an improper object, one that breaks, using Monique Wittig's words, 'the heterosexual contract' (1992).<sup>42</sup>

Following the notion of post-identity — the post-structuralist understanding of identity as intersectional and unstable which derived from the identity crisis in feminist and queer theory — it is possible to articulate an argument against this construct,

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<sup>42</sup> In *The Straight Mind* (1992), Monique Wittig presents the social contract as heterosexual, assigning to both woman and man specific obligations. In her work Wittig also differentiates between woman and lesbian, the latter being one who, both in language and labour, breaks the heterosexual contract.

through the experience and fictionalisation of a genealogy of lesbian history. Yet, even if it is true that the process of determination always carries in itself a process of selection and exclusion, it would neither be accurate to read *La passió* through the lenses of a postmodern queer perspective, nor wise to ignore the subversive power that the lesbian fantasy of the text supports. Indeed, the terms lesbian and genealogy, often displaced by the horizons of queer philosophy, are still relevant to analyse the text we are discussing here.

The book places on display the most privileged lesbian figures of modernity such as Natalie Barney, Renée Vivien, Romaine Brooks — writers and artists who lived to excess and in freedom, creating mutual associations based upon affinity and desire. In other words, the exercise of deconstruction of the heterosexual discursive tradition that Maria-Mercè Marçal undertakes in her text is enhanced by her will to provide visibility and reconstruction to the lives of these chosen women who, despite their privileged socio-economic position, offer alternative models for a lesbian existence.

In *La passió* the revision of the past breaks with linearity since Marçal's writing is committed to the opposite: to the aim of representing plurality and polyphony. Thus, the melancholic gesture of looking back in search of references distances itself from the so-called heterosexual teleology that, as Lee Edelman has stated, points its energy towards a univocal productive and reproductive future (Edelman 2004: 11). Playful manifestations of lesbian existence can appear in this novel in a more theatrical form through exaggeration, the aesthetic game or irony, but can also be found throughout in references to affective dispositions and emotions. The feminine characters of *La passió* live their desire not only as an approach to the fantasy of the other, but also as a form of re-appropriating their own lives as agents:

No matter how a woman lives out her lesbianism — in the closet, in the state legislature, and the bedroom — she has rebelled against becoming the slave master's concubine, viz. the male-dependent female, the female heterosexual. This rebellion is dangerous business in patriarchy [...] the lesbian has decolonized her body. (Clarke 1981: 128)

A decolonised body has at her disposal the horizon of Utopia, that is to say, the possibilities of imagining culture and language in different terms. It is here that the specificity of the lesbian sexuality produces textuality. Even if it is not the main aim of this essay, it is of utmost importance here to mention that a comparative study of lesbian textualities based upon the structure of fantasy-scenarios tends to reveal common oppression born of the roots of heterosexual thought. The analysis of such discursive similarities requires an observation of the process of formation as a response to specific structures, where the subject's desire is deployed and constructed as heterosexual.

Recent work by queer scholars has drawn attention to the study of heterogeneous queer temporalities. In their refusal of linear historicism and future-oriented ways of being in the world, these academic approaches are opening up alternative and valuable ways of dealing with concepts as complex as adulthood and failure. Research into a queer use of time and space has produced results that range from Lee Edelman's (2004) call to resist reproductive futurity and Judith Halberstam's (2005) dismantling of the capitalist logic of success. This turn towards time in queer scholarship offers rich new paths for literary criticism: it challenges not only the way in which we read literary texts, but also the way in which we approach discourses or narratives of living as texts.

In a similar vein, in her book on queer history and temporalities, Elisabeth Freeman proposes an approach to queer bodies which focuses on their capacity for labour, understood as 'both the social relation of production/ reproduction and the

expenditure of bodily energy' (2010: 18). Renée Vivien — liberated both from the time of reproduction and for the time of production (she inherited the fortune of her wealthy father) — conceived life as an artistic practice, inhabiting art and love as territories for freedom. Hence, Marçal chose as a leitmotif of *La passió* an intense, ambiguous and utterly melancholic figure that cannot be read within the frame of conventional narratives of failure and success, youth and adulthood.

### **A Fetishist Genealogy of Lovers**

I trace the persistence in lesbian vision of a  
fantasy of the female body loved and lost,  
expropriated or vilified, and found again only  
with another woman.

(De Lauretis 1996: 286)

Maria-Mercè Marçal carried out the creative-archaeological project of bringing into life the fragments of lesbian desire throughout history. Always interested in the texts written by women who challenged their times, she translated the works of Yourcenar, Colette, Leonor Fini, Anna Akhmatova y Marina Tsvetaeva. Her work of reconstructing the life of Renée Vivien through fiction is also a form of translation. She translates Vivien's lines by making them accessible to the contemporary reader; then, the lesbian reader recognises her own appetites and desires in the mirror of the text. Pilar Godayol, in her analysis of feminine referents in Marçal's writing, mentions some of the symbolic mothers and also highlights the Catalan poet's efforts to provide visibility to Catalan women's writings:

«Mares simbòliques». Marçal, no es cansà mai de buscar mares i germanes simbòliques al llarg de la seva carrera literària: Clementina

Arderiu, Maria Aurèlia Capmany, Anna Dodas, Rosa Leveroni, Montserrat Roig, Maria-Antònia Salvà, Helena Valentí i Isabel de Villena, foren algunes de les catalanes escollides; Anna Akhmàtova, Ingeborg Bachmann, Djuna Barnes, Simone de Beauvoir, Colette, Leonor Fini, Luce Irigaray, Luisa Muraro, Adrienne Rich, Marina Tsvetàieva, Renée Vivien, Virginia Woolf i Marguerite Yourcenar. (2008: 192)

[“Symbolic mothers”. Marçal never gave up in searching for symbolic mothers and sisters throughout her literary career: Clementina Arderiu, Maria Aurèlia Capmany, Anna Dodas, Rosa Leveroni, Montserrat Roig, Maria-Antònia Salvà, Helena Valentí and Isabel de Villena, were some of the chosen Catalan writers; Anna Akhmatova, Ingeborg Bachmann, Djuna Barnes, Simone de Beauvoir, Colette, Leonor Fini, Luce Irigaray, Luisa Muraro, Adrienne Rich, Marina Tsvetaeva, Renée Vivien, Virginia Woolf and Marguerite Yourcenar.]

Godayol here draws attention to the political intention embedded in the multiplication of voices that belong to ‘the symbolic order of the mother’, whereas in my analysis I take as a starting point the symbolic order of the lover, considering the figure of the lesbian lover, the Amazon, as taking us beyond the figure of the mother. Lesbian poet and thinker Monique Wittig in her book *Les Guérrillères* (2007) also places the central focus of her research on the figure of the lover, narrating the story of a group of Amazons who live in a society of sisterhood and Utopia. In order to exist as such, they had to renounce their signification through the symbology of the mother. With their complete negation of a heterosexual economy, *Les Guérrillères* becomes a space for fictional and subversive entities, even abject ones.

On this same level we find the figure of the witch that Marçal reconfigures in her second book of poetry *Bruixa de dol* (1979). In contrast with the mother-daughter relationship, the lovers’ liaison — in body and desire — favours a non-hierarchical interconnection. As we can see in *La passió*, Vivien is a figure that is portrayed as capable of denying the mother: ‘maleeixo la meva mare’ (1994: 53) [I curse my mother]. She

portrays herself as exempt from the heterosexual family genealogy and connected with a mythical lesbian tradition. Such a tradition is centred on the figure of Sappho and located on the island of Lesbos. The image of the island, seen as isolated — safe from external influence — and a monitorable territory, is a recurrent trope in the portrait of utopian socio-cultural orders.

Vivien gives her life to the poetic materialization of an extraordinary anti-normative passion; and Marçal portrays her as a subject connected to the world through her desire towards others: towards those whose desire needs to lie outside heterosexuality. The lesbian passion experienced by Vivien can be considered to be transnational, since it goes as far as Constantinople where, as documented by Marçal in the novel, Vivien meets a Turkish princess. It is also trans-temporal, as we can see in the lines Vivien wrote to the reader of the future which Marçal translates and weaves into the novel: ‘Cap d’entre vosaltres no es recordarà de mi, jo que us hauria tan greument estimat’ (Marçal 1994: 329) [None of you will remember me, despite my passionate love towards you].

*La passió* is a novel constructed in poetic language, benefitting from Marçal’s powerful poetic skills. This mode of writing favours openness and latency, offering a fertile space wherein to create and explore subjectivity. In her 2014 study, Noèlia Díaz Vicedo renews classic questions about textuality and corporeality through a demanding and illuminating reading based on the most salient feminist theorists such Luce Irigaray, Adriana Cavarero and Judith Butler. The critic relates Marçal’s creativity to the Aristotelian concept of *poiesis* that refers to the process of “making, creating” later reformulated by Judith Butler. In other words, to think about the process of *poiesis* reconnects writing with its practice: the continuous movement of making compels the

action of birth as the uniqueness of the individual that presents itself in a form that did not exist previously. As she states:

I read this as a process of *poiesis*, where embodied experience is taken as a central theme for poetic composition. Taking these precepts into account, I shall now argue that Marçal's poetry, via her poetic historiography, becomes a process of *poiesis*, whereby she attempts to "make herself". (Díaz Vicedo 2004: 54)

Confirmation of this statement entails acknowledgement of poetic creation as a performative act with the capacity to modify reality when intervening in the subject's perception of their environment.

From a psychoanalytical point of view, Jacques Lacan describes human experience as inscribed in a chain of signifiers which developed from what he labelled as 'the symbolic law of the Father', where 'the human order is characterized by the fact that the symbolic function intervenes at every moment and at every stage of its existence' (1988: 29). From a Marxist structuralist perspective, Althusser presents a subject questioned by the discourses of power, whose identity is an effect of the ideology of the system that sustains it. If we accept the fact that the system of ideas and representation is what generates narratives of the self, it becomes plausible to affirm that Marçal's subversive *poiesis* explores and expands new modes of what is 'thinkable' and 'possible', here through the recasting of the words of her poetic predecessor.

Fugiu d'aquesta satiresa de pupil·les altives, de mirada que l'esclat del sol ha empal·ludit: la seva cabellera salvatge és semblant a les crineres i el seu pas és el pas nocturn dels lleons. Ella vol l'hora intensa on la claror naufraga. És l'hora que espera per endur-se la presa de sines inviolades,

els ulls i els fronts més purs, que ella impregna per sempre amb els seus foscos desigs. (Marçal 1994: 347)

[You flee from this satyr of haughty pupils, of eyes that the splendorous sun has paled: her wild hair resembles horses' manes, her steps become the nighttime steps of lions. She wants the intense hour where clarity is wrecked. It is the hour she awaits to seize the prey of inviolate breasts, the purest eyes and foreheads, which she impregnates forever with her darkest desires.]

This process entails not only the synchronic rewriting of the biological body constructed socio-symbolically as a woman but also, diachronically, from the acknowledgment and negation of this inheritance. Thus, in Marçal's transformative *poiesis* the lesbian subject remains pure and inviolable, entirely committed to the action of making visible and providing a narrative fictionalisation of a past which has the potential to provide room for her own actions, rhythms and myths. This lesbian past emerges from the tensions and fractures in the annals of heterosexual History.<sup>43</sup>

Marçal was not only a writer, but also a political and intellectual activist who participated directly in the debates of her time: the call for community, feminism and political struggle are features constantly present in her work. Moreover, Marçal fruitfully manages the intersection of three main foci that will place her at the margins of discourse: as a writer in Catalan, as a woman and as a lesbian. In this light, the subversion of the symbolic heterosexual norm in her writings is perfectly conscious and voluntary. Diaz Vicedo highlights that in her second collection of poems, *Bruixa de dol*, the iconography of the witch and fairy are independent and marginal figures that empower each other through their filial love: 'The figures of the witch and the fairy involve the vindication of

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<sup>43</sup> Jagose, when referring to the category lesbian, highlights 'this tendency to construct "lesbian" as functioning utopically, that is, as designating an identity exterior to symbolic ordering and regulation' (1993: 265).



a female bonding, as part of the experiences that have been kept in the shadows of symbolic signification' (Díaz Vicedo 2014: 77). In this study, the critic points out that Marçal's recurrent image of the shadow becomes the space in which latent creativity for the marginal, oppressed subjectivities can function.

The symbolic consequences of pleasure and eroticism between women 'reinforce the existence of a specific energy, namely desire, which inspires, through writing, the transgression of the female self through excess, also displacing previous formulations of the female subject as a carrier of lack and loss' (Díaz Vicedo 2014: 140). With this statement, Díaz Vicedo harks back implicitly to the psychoanalytic tradition of Freud and Lacan, as well as to subsequent critical reformulation by theorists such as Elizabeth Grosz, Julia Kristeva or Teresa de Lauretis. While Kristeva (1984) proposes 'the revolution in poetic language' as a means of proliferating images in order to transgress the system that orders the hegemonic rational masculine, Freud relates feminine sexuality with negativity in terms of lack. Following his logic, the Lacanian subject is always constituted by his/her desire based upon lack, meaning that the difference between the gendered subjects lies in the fact that while the masculine subject is able to fill this lack with the presence of the phallus, the woman is trapped within the dialectics of heterosexuality. The heterosexual logic of relation condemns her to be the phallus and forces her to be offered to the other as significant of his desire, to possess it through the son, and to pursue power through representing her in masculine terms.

De Lauretis (1994) negates the exclusivity of the three paths discussed above, instead proposing the existence of female fetishism. I shall use this feminist alternative to classical psychoanalysis as a framework to explore Marçal's *La passió*, particularly her treatment of lesbian desire. After a subversive reading of Freud, De Lauretis argues that

it is possible for the institutionally constructed woman to find a substitute to her lack or constitutive loss. Since the institutionalisation of Freudian psychoanalysis, woman could not display a fetishistic desire; however, De Lauretis states that the presence of fetishism appears as a result of a process of castration which, beyond the echoes that associate the masculine sexual organ with the phallus, is related to the loss of the female body in the woman herself. It is, thus, this latter loss that is interconnected with the incapacity of woman to portray herself as owner of her own body, due to the fact that it has been hitherto conceptualised and constructed under the economy of masculine desire. For De Lauretis, the fetish for a woman becomes the feminine body itself, with all the symbolic inheritance this implies, as well as its potential for transgression.

If we return to *La passió*, we can see that the moment at which the fetish is incarnated in the material and discursive body of the other-lover as a response to the lack of a positive representation of her own body, Marçal finds an alternative form to the heteronormal conception of identity and desire traditionally constructed in terms of opposites. In the following words translated and recast from her predecessor, the narrator in *La passió* refers to her own experience of love through an intertextual and open conversation with Renée Vivien's poetry:

Sóc només el teu fidel mirall. M'abismo en tu per millor estimar-te. Somio la teva bellesa i m'hi confonc. ¿Què podries estimar que jo no estimi...? Què pots pensar que jo no pensi també? Cada un dels teus turments és també el meu traspals. Oh tristesa, oh rancor dels somnis aviat arrabassats. Oh tedi de l'acònit i de la belladona... Raïms de suc amarg d'una nit de desencís... El nostre dolor iguala l'esclat de la joia. La nostra joia d'ulls folls iguala el dolor. Heus ací el palau del dolor. (Marçal 1994: 342)

[I am only your faithful mirror. I become absorbed in you to love you better. I dream about your beauty and I melt into you... What could you love that I would not? What can you think that I would not think as well?

Each one of your torments is also my anxiety. Oh, sadness, oh bitterness of soon stolen dreams... Oh, tedium of aconite and belladonna.... grapes of bitter juice in a night of disillusionment... Our pain equates the burst of happiness. Our happiness of insane eyes equals the pain. Here is the palace of pain.]

The mirror occupies the vacant place of representation that can only be completed with the body-fetish of the other as socio-symbolic materiality. This socio-symbolic materiality is formed by a palimpsest of other writings that intertwine to generate the scenario for lesbian fantasy. Here, lesbian fantasy is 'the palace of pain', the pure and sublime absence, the void of the historical narrative, but at the same time it is the principle of poetic incarnation that precipitates the urge of desire, and hence, the emergence of the search.

The fetish I propose here is related to the exploration and conquest of the potential that a body 'not yet possessed' offers, whose appropriation is undertaken through writing. In practical terms, the logical consequence of my proposal is that, beyond the search for the ghost of the lesbian body — the transformative body that unifies symbolic inheritance, material presence and a utopian horizon — Marçal ultimately conceives the text itself as a fetish. In this way, her own writings, as well as the ones written by other like-minded women, appear to be objects for the temporal satisfaction of desire. This connects with the importance of *poiesis* as a continuum of the union between body and text. Marçal in her note at the end of *La passió* confesses that she has been pursuing Renée Vivien for over ten years, that she has worked with her manuscripts and like some of the characters of the novel, she has copied a great number of letters and unpublished documents (Marçal 1994: 351). Moreover, Marçal not only establishes this fetishistic relationship with Vivien's writings but also chooses characters that are connected to

others precisely through reading. It is relevant at this point to mention that the masculine figures that Marçal activates in the text do not show specific physical desire for Vivien and they are hardly in contact with her except through her texts: with the representation of herself in the writings, with her fantasy.

Similarly, we find in the protagonist of the book, Sara T., a character obsessed with the figure of Vivien who undertakes a process of research about the poet in the same way as Marçal. Sara T. travels around the different cities where Renée Vivien lived; she even goes on a mystical pilgrimage to Mitilene, cradle of Sappho and symbolic centre for lesbian fantasy where Renée Vivien herself built a house. Challenging the dimension of time, Sara T. follows the figure of the poet like an obsessed lover. She questions her, she searches for her, she ignites the process of rewriting herself from the texts that Renée Vivien left as her existence:

A hores d'ara sé que Renée i jo ens havíem de trobar així: per damunt d'aquest abisme que el temps i l'oblit han intentat d'establir entre nosaltres. L'equilibri només es fa possible a través d'aquesta mena de superació —momentània— de la mort que és un poema, un llibre, una pel·lícula... i que cadascuna ha intentat des de la seva banda. Potser un simulacre només una mica més convincent, en darrer terme. (Marçal 1994: 339)

[Now, I know that Renée and I had to meet in this way: beyond that abyss that time and oblivion have tried to establish between us. The balance is only possible through this form of — momentary — overcoming of death, that is a poem, a book, a film... and that each one of us has tried independently. Ultimately, perhaps only a slightly more convincing simulacrum.]

This form of appropriating the text is the way in which Sara T. finds the optimum economy for her libido, in the balance between time and oblivion. The text appears as a

fetish and, in its presence the desiring subject, finds an ephemeral overcoming of death. But the lack is constitutive and, according to Lacan, the lost object that allows the existence of desire does not have any equivalents (Grosz 2002: 102). Therefore, the text-fetish does not have the capacity to fulfil this desire completely; its effect can be only temporal, perhaps an only slightly more convincing simulacrum.

Although lesbian desire in the novel always follows a phantom object, the romantic fictionalisation of the other-lover displaces this figure to become the narrative, the principal fetish on a second level of reading. Evidence of this is given in the following scene from the book. In a long conversation about the nature of desire and love among women, the poetic voice concludes: 'Servilment, de genolls, serveixo l'imperiós poema, més estimat que la dona estimada' (Marçal 1994: 348). [In a servile manner, kneeling, I serve the imperious poem, more loved than the beloved]. As writing is a practice of infinite becoming, the poem appears to be the liminal space where the freedom of lesbian love reaches its maximum splendour.

### **Phantom Interlocutors: the Lesbian Poet as a Trans-Temporal Object of Desire**

La Renée que jo m'havia forjat a imatge i semblança meva no podia desaparèixer sense deixar rastre... I vaig començar a perseguir-la, com una veritable enamorada. (Entre parèntesi et confessaré que aquest amor per una morta m'ha servit de contrapès per a l'altre amor, més perillós per a mi, potencialment molt més obsessiu.). Tenia la certesa absoluta, per endavant, de ser corresposta. (Marçal 1994: 337)

[The Renée that I had created in my image and likeness could not disappear without trace... And I began to follow her like a real woman in love. (In brackets I shall confess that this love for a dead woman has been useful to counterbalance the other love, more dangerous for me,

potentially much more obsessive.) I had, in advance, the absolute certainty of my love being returned.]

The specific absence that configures lesbian desire is, as Judith Butler suggests in *Melancholy Gender — Refused Identification* (1995), culturally unreal and, as such, attributable to the homosexual taboo which operates as an organizing principle of the heterosexual system (1995: 165). For Butler, melancholic identification in the form of gender performance is the incorporative movement through which the little girl preserves her object of love (the mother), given the fact that the homosexual taboo prohibits her erotic access to women. In other words, she renounces her homosexuality but not completely the object of love, since it is incorporated into her own subjectivity. The act of renouncing homosexuality thus paradoxically strengthens homosexuality; but it strengthens homosexuality precisely as the power of renunciation. Nevertheless, the lesbian does not renounce the forbidden object of her desire; rather, she disavows the principle of prohibition that enhances homosexuality as a taboo. Although she can go through phases of negation, the lesbian subject hopes to have access to the object she desires — the feminine body, the body of the other-lover — which heterosexuality has denied to her. Such is the basis of lesbian fantasy, the scenario of desire that moves the characters in *La passió*.

In the quotation that opens this section of my chapter, Sara T. reflects on the nature of her desire towards the figure of Renée Vivien whom she follows ‘as a real woman in love’ from her poems, her correspondence and also by studying the stories that other people who knew her had told. The character created by Marçal consistently finds in them the existence of an ideal object familiar to her own desire and whose accessibility

cannot be negated despite a relationship that exceeds the boundaries of time and space. Sara T. writes a letter to an interlocutor whose voice does not appear in the novel. In this letter, she discloses a secret: 'et confessaré que aquest amor per una morta m'ha servit de contrapès per a l'altre amor, més perillós per a mi, potencialment molt més obsessiu.)' (Marçal 1995: 266) [I shall confess that this love for a dead woman has been useful to balance the other love, more dangerous for me, potentially much more obsessive]. This reveals that directing her desire towards a phantom object (the poet Vivien) is less risky to her emotional equilibrium than 'the other love'. From the rest of her interventions, this other love refers to the romantic link towards another woman. In this, the possibility of lesbian love becoming material through performance in a relationship turns into a fear of failing and, as a consequence, Sara T. articulates her desire in the safer space of literature as a strategy of self-preservation.

Renée Vivien is a pseudonym. Her personality is the poetic construction of the person born as Pauline Mary Tarn, willingly transformed into the perfect container of dreams for the lesbian lover. During her life and literary career, she was exclusively committed to the fantasy of lesbian love. She described herself as an eternal lover, well-prepared and receptive to the sensibilities of the Sapphic tradition to which she dedicated all her poetry. Sara T., who lives the painful echoes of an earthy love, finds in Vivien the object of her worship that underpins the pillars of her fantasy:

Potser també Renée Vivien s'ha convertit per a mi en metàfora de l'inaccessible, un d'aquells amors impossibles, insatisfactoris (?) a què sembla que tingui tirada. Em sembla que no t'he parlat mai fins ara del procés a través del qual vaig ser seduïda per ella. Potser ara puc fer-ho perquè he arribat al final, i des d'aquí, en mirar enrere, apareix un solc més o menys precís... Si intento fer memòria sé que en un primer moment em va atrapar per la identificació. (Marçal 1994: 335)

[Perhaps Renée Vivien too has become a metaphor of the inaccessible for me, one of those impossible and unsatisfactory loves, which always seem to draw me to them. I believe that I have not told you yet about the way in which she seduced me. Perhaps I can do it now because I have come to the end and looking back from here I can see that there is quite a precise furrow...If I make an effort to remember, I know that from the very first moment I was trapped by a process of identification.]

Here, we can see that Sara T. assigns the power of agency to Vivien, whose writing seems to have the capacity to be performative, to affect reality once the desiring reader makes contact with the text. In the above quotation, Vivien is described as the seducer. The reader occupies a passive position, which turns active when we consider Sara T.'s desire to be seduced by the text. She insists she has been marked over and over again by love stories that never become real; or, in other words, that never become significant. In this context, Renée Vivien becomes a metaphor of the inaccessible, a symbolic object that represents the ideal interlocutor of lesbian desire.

Renée Vivien, during her intense life (1877-1909), was already a figure of complex performative capabilities. Given the fact that the Sapphic symbolic universe she inhabited was not the hegemonic world of her time, her action had a phantom, transtemporal effect. That is to say, not only with her aesthetics but also with her every day practices and poetry, Vivien re-invents an insufficient past — the fragmented poetic universe of Sappho — in order to nourish herself on it and on which to project the possibilities of the future. Vivien writes to be desired by the other, the lesbian reader: 'La seducció havia començat per aquella mena de miratge-miracle de mirall' (Marçal 1994: 336) [The seduction had begun with that type of miracle-mirage of the mirror]. The reader, in this case, Sara T.,



accepts this calling and acknowledges her as the same, as a part of a forbidden beautiful and heroic genealogy. The phantom and transtemporal figure of the poet becomes the open object that she can complete and fill with meaning, modelling it to her own image and likeness.

Nevertheless, this spell again fails and in the last phase of her investigation Sara T. acknowledges that the poetic world constructed by Vivien is a like a tomb or dead-end that can distract the reader from the possibility of writing her own existence: 'De cop, tot allò em semblava una mena de gran monument funerari que s'havia erigit per a si mateix algú que no es creia amb el dret a viure' (Marçal 1994: 337) [Suddenly, everything appeared to me to be a type of great funereal monument erected for themselves by someone who believed they did not have the right to live]. Even if the fantasy is the filter whereby we approach reality, and Vivien created her own with sublime delicacy, Sara T. ultimately encounters the impossibility of synchronising Vivien's fantasy with the materiality of her own existence to her complete satisfaction. Finally, the reader needs independence from the world of the writer, there is a need to become the agent and not a mere receptor.

In her project of re-writing the symbology that surrounds the idea of woman, Marçal provides the reader with a Vivien who aspires to transform the culturally confined woman-human 'I' into a 'total self' that transcends the boundaries of the body itself by conceiving corporality as liminal: a continuum which is constantly in contact with — and affected by — fantasy. This boundless corporality finds its means of expression in the poetic construction of new myths, servers of the Sapphic cause. With a heroic sacrifice against the system, Vivien renounces everything that is not related to her poetic or political project. Marçal presents the heroic figure of Vivien with a multiplicity of voices,

like an angel of uncertain corporality, who enters into existence when the other (the reader) consumes her.

In the book, one of the women who works in Vivien's house describes her as: 'feia una cara i un ulls, no sé si gosó dir-ho... com si no fos ben bé d'aquest món' [she had a face and eyes, I don't know if I dare say it...as if she were not completely of this world]; and also: 'Jo sempre ho dic, que la senyoreta era un àngel' [ 'I always say that girl was an angel.'] (Marçal 1994: 324 & 306). In *La passió* we find a form of phantom interaction, which is not only associated with the presence of the poet but also related to the way in which the female characters interact: forming an intense and intimate link that transcends the material dimension:

Caminant a pas lleuger per aquells escenaris, amb aquella olor indefinible del vell Saint Germain i el cel tan net damunt del seu cap, Mary sentia la respiració de Violette vora seu —ara sí— i, de puntetes, per no fer soroll, els seus passos compassats amb els d'ella. Va ser només un instant. La sensació es va volatilitzar a l'instant següent, com aquells plomalls blancs de lletsó que de petites bufaven i es desfeien en l'aire, i en deien «àngels». (Marçal 1994: 143)

[Walking in light steps through those scenes, with that indefinable odour of the old Saint Germain and the diaphanous sky over her head, Mary sensed Violette's breath close to her — yes indeed — and, on tiptoe, so as not to make any noise, her steps aligned with her own. It was only a moment. The feeling evaporated in just an instant, like those white dandelion plumages that they would blow away when they were little and which fell apart in the air and they would call "angels".]

## Conclusion

*La passió segons Renée Vivien* narrates the silenced steps of a genealogy of sisters and lovers, intimately synchronised in the lacunae of history. With her novel, Marçal reacted to the violent invisibilization of lesbian lives: she responded to the lack of lesbian myths active in society by paying tribute to key figures of the past. Furthermore, her poetic and polyphonic use of prose succeeds in mapping a complex web of connections between the past and the present of lesbian desire and affiliation.

With recourse to the work of Lacan, as well as feminist readings by Elizabeth Grosz, I have used the term desire throughout this article accepting that desire is an effect of language fuelled by the libido, which is its source of energy. Thus, desire is produced in the speaking subject: the subject constructed in the symbolic realm, who is both user of language as well as interpellated by it. Such an affirmation requires the acceptance that the nature of desire is partly socio-symbolic; and that it is precisely this characteristic which opens the possibility of communication.

In this novel Marçal undertakes the ambitious project of registering the specificities of lesbian fantasy and longing. But language — which is constructed according to the heterosexual norm — is a defective instrument to capture lesbian desire: 'I els mateixos escrits, màscares sobre màscares. I, així i tot, per les clivelles, des de dins, com una gran teranyina vella, la nafra, transpuant i envaint-ho tot amb el seu color de ponent i de vi' (Marçal 1995: 78-79) [Your writings themselves, masks upon masks upon masks. But despite all this, through the cracks, from within, like a great red cobweb, the wound, seeping out and invading everything with its colour of dusk and wine]. If we recall the Lacanian concept of the real, this quotation tells of the existence of something that goes beyond the symbolic, which appears as excess, surpassing the symbolic order.

In *La passió segons Renée Vivien*, Marçal is mindful of the need to multiply the perspectives of discourse, to provide voice to different characters of different sexes and ages who are not overly familiar with lesbian desire and Vivien's myth. This strategy can be understood as a means of calling attention to the partiality used by Marçal as a researcher and poet when approaching her object of study for the novel: the life and work of Vivien. Thus, any attempt at Universality or Truth is displaced by the revolutionary fluidity of poetic language, which delightfully intoxicates the most important passages of the book. Marçal proposes a politically aware scenario for lesbian fantasy at the same time as she portrays a multiplicity of voices and angles in order to avoid the fixation of that fantasy. In this gesture, we can read a will to preserve the transformative nature of desire, refraining from it becoming ideology through repetition.

The regulations imposed by the symbolic realm cannot be absent, not even in the textualities produced by oppressed groups. This regulation covers every aspect of the world and our capacity to refer to it through language. Marçal acknowledges the force of resistance that disarticulates this from within: every discourse of power carries within itself the elements that constitute its own deconstruction. The title itself of the book can be understood as a reference to the Passion of Christ, as narrated in the New Testament of the Bible, which portrays Jesus as a martyr to save his people, who will suffer persecution for their Christian faith.

In the New Testament we find the idea of Christ as a saviour who appears in the world to preach about the new order of the Kingdom of Heaven. In the altruism of his sacrifice he delivered himself up to his persecutors, the ignorant apologists of convention and the status quo. As a result, it is difficult not to find a certain irony implied in the choice

of title for the novel. In the face of ignorance and oppression, Vivien also she gave her life to and for Sapphic culture, as a willing martyr for lesbian subjects.

## Sapphic Literary Genealogy in *La passió segons Renée Vivien*<sup>44</sup>

**Natasha Tanna**

Many critics of lesbian literary history have focused on the invisibilisation or silencing of the lesbian subject. Terry Castle outlines this trend in provocative terms:

The lesbian is never with us, it seems, but always somewhere else: in the shadows, in the margins, hidden from history, out of sight, out of mind, a wanderer in the dusk, a lost soul, a tragic mistake, a pale denizen of the night. (1993: 2)

In this article I will argue that in contrast to the critical lamentation of lesbian texts as ‘mutilades, censurades, reescribes’ (Torras 2007: 141) which tends to lead to a fixation with recuperating an idealised past that supposedly came before this ‘mutilation’, in *La passió segons Renée Vivien* (1994 — henceforth, *La passió*) Maria-Mercè Marçal celebrates fragmentation, which she depicts as productively oriented towards the present and future. Marçal explores how Sara T., who is considered an alter-ego for the author herself and also the main diegetic representative of the reader, responds to the figure and work of eponymous poet, Renée Vivien. Vivien is the pseudonym of the English-born writer Pauline Mary Tarn who moved to Paris upon inheriting her father’s fortune and adopted French as the language of expression in her works. Sara T. is working in the 1980s researching Vivien’s life in order to write the script for a film about the poet who, in turn, looks back to the Ancient Greek lyric poet Sappho. I will investigate how, in her depiction

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of a fragmented Sapphic literary genealogy through these figures, Marçal reveals her vision of lesbian writing.

Vivien saw herself as an incarnation of Sappho who, in the Western world, is the origin of lesbian literature and identity, with Lesbos being the place of her birth. The continued use of the words 'Sapphic' and 'lesbian', even after the passing of millennia, suggests a contemporary desire to ground identity in history by tracking its genealogy back to the first recorded instance of its existence; this typically involves the notion of an unspoilt origin which is probed by Michel Foucault via Nietzsche:

The lofty origin is no more than "a metaphysical extension which arises from the belief that things are most precious and essential at the moment of birth." We tend to think that this is the moment of their greatest perfection, when they emerged dazzling from the hands of a creator or in the shadowless light of a first morning. (1977: 79)

Karla Jay suggests that Vivien considered herself to be 'a Sappho to generations of young women yet unborn, in a kind of *unbroken* line of female succession' (1988: 37, my emphasis). The insistence on the 'unbroken' signals a vision of female literary inheritance with stable classical foundations. Jay's statement echoes the Oxford English Dictionary definition of genealogy as 'a line of descent traced continuously from an ancestor'; a conceptualisation of genealogy that tends to revere the ancestor. Just as Sara T. visits Paris and Mytilene to retrace the steps of her predecessor, Vivien and her lover, Natalie Barney, wanted to set up a poetry school on Lesbos in the early twentieth-century to recreate the group of women that some claim Sappho founded there. As Margaret Reynolds notes: 'For Barney, Vivien and other women, the search for authenticity took them back to Sappho's words and to Sappho's home. "Let us go to Mytilene," wrote Renée Vivien, and "re-sing to an intoxicated earth/ The hymn of Lesbos"' (2000: 293).

I will contend that through her focus in *La passió* on the fragmentary and discontinuous Marçal, in contrast, emphasises the impossibility of a continuous or unbroken line of succession. Foucault asserts, for example, that genealogy ‘relentlessly disrupt[s] its pretended continuity’ (1984: 88). Following him, I will consider Marçal’s Sapphic meditation as expressive of this same tension between continuity and rupture: fragmentation; as the very essence — a counter-essence, one could say — of genealogy: ‘The search for descent is not the erecting of foundations: on the contrary, it disturbs what was previously considered immobile; it fragments what was thought unified; it shows the heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with itself’ (1984: 82).

A key element in my exploration of Sapphic genealogy is the particularly fragmentary state of what remains of Sappho’s work which, combined with the uncertainty about the biographical details of her life, makes the origin of lesbian identity, literary and otherwise, partial and haunted by lacunae and the unknown. This Sapphic fragmentation can be linked with the concept of *l’esbós* in *La passió*. Marçal draws on the pun in the Catalan word for sketch, *l’esbós*, a play on the name of the island, Lesbos, where Sappho was born (Julià 2000: 369), to associate the originary topographical site of lesbian literature with the notion of the sketch — a finished but self-consciously incomplete work. The novel is interspersed with fragments from Vivien’s verses and some lines by Sappho.

Readers also encounter multiple perspectives on Vivien’s life through documents such as letters and diaries by a proliferation of historical and fictional characters who knew Vivien or were interested in her life or work. We are given the impression that the documents that make up the novel are texts that Sara T. comes across during research that she is carrying out following a rupture with her girlfriend. Sara T.’s truncated name, her amorous break-up — the broken heart — and the broken, or fragmented texts she



comes across, suggest the inevitability of break-ups, breakages and a broken genealogy.

Through her fragmentary text Marçal highlights the importance of readers of today and tomorrow, whose imaginations are critical to the kaleidoscopic — from the Greek *kalos* ‘beautiful’ + *eidos* ‘form’ — process of twisting and rearranging the fragments of their predecessors in the formation of a Sapphic genealogy that anticipates the future. Their relationship to their predecessors is reminiscent of Elizabeth Meese’s conception of ‘lesbian : writing’ described in her book *(Sem)erotics. Theorizing lesbian : writing*. Meese connects ‘lesbian : writing’ to ‘queering’ in the sense of ‘twisting’ (the etymology of the word ‘queer’ can be traced back to the Latin ‘torquere’, ‘to twist’):

Torque: the twisting and turning in the driving tension of my passion for you. Lesbian: vision is a torque differential machine, relating me to you. Because I am always approaching you/we who have no definition, the absence of definition consigns us to more writing, no endings, more talking, mountains without tops, threatening the de/nominative project of “the known”. (1992: 94)

If lesbian is taken to be an adjective and writing a noun, the colon in ‘lesbian : writing’ symbolises the gaps in the text in which the reader may imagine the inevitably absent erotic desire between women that cannot be fully represented by words, but triggers the writing of more and more texts. The colon also prompts us to read lesbian as a noun, and writing as a gerund, signalling the reader’s craving for a lesbian author behind the text.

I will begin by looking at how the reader-writer’s desire to identify with the past may reveal a visceral longing for continuity with her predecessors in order to understand and consolidate her own existence in the present in an attempt to overcome an apparently invisible or silenced lesbian history. I will explore how in the desire to ‘touch across time’ that Carolyn Dinshaw suggests is crucial to an ‘affective connection’ with

queer history (2001: 203), readers and writers in the Marçalian genealogy make *partial* connections with their literary predecessors, despite their yearning for *complete* identification. I will then explore how the tension between continuity/wholeness and discontinuity/fragmentation is inherent in Sapphic writing by considering critical responses to the extant fragments of Sappho's poetry that have frequently attempted to make both the poet and her work cohere. I will go on to investigate how Marçal grappled with a sense of fragmentation in representation and examine how, in *La passió*, fragmentation or brokenness is a source of great potential in her perception of 'lesbian : writing'.

### **Desiring Identifications with the Past**

Some days I have little interest  
in the abstract "Lesbian."  
I want mine with skin.  
(Meese 1992: 130)

At a forum on her book *Getting Medieval*, Dinshaw relayed a comment by one of her students who noted that many people experience their first 'queer' encounter textually rather than sexually:

As is true for many queers [...] my queer sexuality was first articulated not through a relationship with another body but rather through texts [...] I consumed such texts urgently (...) I was looking for a way to be queer, for a way to fashion my own identity (...) Queer history is my queer present. (Dinshaw 2001: 202-03)

In *La passió*, we observe Sara T.'s urgent consumption of written accounts of Vivien's life as well as her work — '¿On cercar-te, si no en els mots, els teus, els dels altres, els meus mateixos, llançats, com una canilla mal ensinistrada, a la caça i captura d'un fantasma?' (2008: 91) [Where to look for you, if not in words, your own and those of

others, my own words, thrown about like a pack of untrained dogs, in the hunt and capture of a ghost]. Texts are one way that readers and writers can connect with their 'spectral' predecessors in order to shape and understand their own existence in the present. In *The Apparitional Lesbian*, Castle considers the ghosting of lesbians in history. She views her essays as 'a kind of invocation: an attempt to call up, precisely by confronting the different kinds of denial and disembodiment with which she is usually associated, the much-ghosted yet nonetheless vital lesbian subject' (1993: 8).

However, the language used by the reader-writer figure, Sara T., highlights the ambivalence in her reaction to the ghost of the writer from the past. The simile in which Sara T. likens her words and those of others to an untrained pack of dogs — 'com una canilla mal ensinistrada' — reveals the lack of control she has over them. She thus hints at the possibility of writers also being h(a)unted against their will, or possessed by something or someone beyond their conscious control. Sara T.'s ghost-hunting thus tempers a pure emphasis on the active subject-agent in the quest for a literary past that is also implied by Kim's reference to fashion[ing] his own identity. It is in this vein that Friedrich Nietzsche critiques the over-emphasis on the volitional first-person subject in considerations of identity:

a thought comes when "it" wishes, and not when "I" wish, so it is a falsification of the facts of the case to say that the subject "I" is the condition of the predicate "think." *It* thinks; but that this "it" is precisely the famous old "ego" is, to put it mildly, only a supposition. (1989: 24)

Some critics see Vivien as having been compelled to write by spirits that haunted her, such as Violet Shilitto, her childhood friend who died in her twenties. Vivien did not go to visit her when she was on her death-bed as she was reportedly too absorbed in her relationship with Natalie Barney. Her guilt at abandoning her childhood friend in her last

hour seems to have haunted her throughout her life, arguably leading her to scatter violets, as tokens of Shilitto, throughout her poetry. In the foreword to Teresa Campi's *Sul ritmo saffico: La vita e le opere di Renée Vivien*, which introduced Vivien to Italian readers, Jean-Paul Goujon, the biographer of Vivien, described her as 'una autrice, la cui opera è un caleidoscopio dei suoi fantasmi personali' (1983: 12). Again, the reference to ghosts 'conjures up' the image of a sort of presence through absence that may be unwanted. However, it is also these 'ghosts' that inspire Vivien's 'kaleidoscopic' work, an adjective which gives the impression of shifting, mesmerising rearrangements of beautiful fragments, including those of Sappho. Vivien may trigger the creation of the 'beautiful forms' through her act of writing — akin to a *twisting*, a *queering* of the kaleidoscope — but the precise composition of the fragments is beyond her full control.

In 'Sappho Enchants the Sirens', Vivien describes the sensation of feeling entangled in the seductive past. She refers to a sense of captivation beyond deliberative desire; the 'silvery nets' of the past are appealing and the writer may seek them, but they can also entrap her: 'The Past, more alive than the Present, and more resonant, will catch you in its silvery nets. You will be held captive by dreams and by long-vanquished harmonies.' (Reynolds 2000: 300) The 'living' past hints at an 'affective connection — a touch across time' and 'the intentional collapse of conventional historical time' that are vital to Dinshaw's vision of queer history and community. Dinshaw sees the affective connection as 'an enabling concept with which readers could work in order to respond to their own situations — their places in space and time — and their needs and desires for a past' (2001: 203).

Similarly, Elizabeth Freeman argues that 'social change itself enables, and perhaps even requires, that incommensurate temporalities — often most available to us via their

corresponding aesthetic forms — rub up against one another, compete, overlap, cross-reference’ (2011: 31). The rubbing of words against one another marks the works of Marçal, Vivien and Sappho in *La passió*. Cristina Peri Rossi accentuates that Sappho seems ever-present for many contemporary poets: ‘Safo es esa poeta que cuando no sabemos que es Safo creemos que es una poeta contemporánea. Y cuando sabemos que es Safo sentimos que somos contemporáneas de ella’ (2007: 15) [Sappho is that poet who, when we don’t know that it is Sappho, we believe to be a contemporary poet. And when we know it is Sappho we feel like we are her contemporaries]. Sappho is “touched” by readers across time and Marçal, via Sara T., reaches out to “touch” Vivien who in turn “touches” and is “touched” by Sappho.

Castle signals a more affective than deliberative connection in her reference to Judith Roof’s thoughts, in *A Lure of Knowledge*, on trusting one’s instincts in making “lesbian” identifications with a text:

Even if I don’t know precisely what lesbian is, I look for the lesbian in the text [...] I begin with this perspective probably because reading, even academic reading, is stimulated, at least for me, by a libidinous urge connected both to a sexual practice and to the shape of my own desire. (1991: 120)

A ‘libidinous urge’ is evident in Sara T.’s desire for Vivien. There is a tension in *La passió* between familiar family tropes and a *desire* to get beyond them. Sara T. seeks to identify with the past to overcome what Marçal has referred to as a feeling of ‘orfenesa en què movem les dones que escrivim’ (1985: 9) [orphanhood in which we women writers move]. Here, orphanhood refers to a perceived lack of female literary foremothers, to the apparent absence of a matrilineal genealogy. However, in the novel Marçal appears to probe the insistence of the mother-daughter relationship that endures

spectrally, hauntingly, but is insufficient; rather than an inherited tradition, Sara T. seeks to overcome the isolation of literary orphanhood through searching for a figure in the past with whom she feels affinity. She is initially drawn to Vivien as she identifies with the feelings the poet seems to express in her works: ‘sé que en un primer moment em va atrapar per la identificació’ (2008: 380) [I know that, at first, she captured me because I could identify with her]. The *feeling* of affinity and the *touching* across time are important, as they suggest the interplay of sentiment and contact, of that which is psychologically or emotionally touching and of physical touch.

Sara T.’s engagement with Vivien’s texts is followed by a desire for an embodied encounter; she strives to bring Vivien back to life in the present: ‘¿Com donar-te cos, encarnar-te, arrelar-te, fer que la meva sang recorri la teva ombra i, sense substituir-la, la converteixi en vida, en saba, en moviment?’ (2008: 91) [How can I give you flesh, embody you, root you, make my blood run through your shadow and, without substituting it, transform it into life, into sap, into movement? ] Once the initial elation of discovering Vivien’s work has subsided, Sara T. wants more than words; she longs for a person in flesh and blood, recalling Meese’s conception of ‘lesbian : writing’, which points to a physical absence: ‘for me, reading and writing are not enough [...] after the page has been signed, with just me and these words [...] I recall how the ecstasy of the letter — once the continual acts of re-memorization and reinfusion wane — eventually fades’ (1992: 20-21).

Sara T. confirms that her obsessive ‘hunt’ for Vivien resembles a lover’s chase of a fading relationship: ‘La Renée que jo m’havia forjat a imatge i semblança meva no podia desaparèixer sense deixar rastre... i vaig començar a perseguir-la, com una veritable enamorada’ (2008: 382) [The Renée that I had forged in my image couldn’t disappear

without a trace... and I started to pursue her, like a woman madly in love]. The literary predecessor as lover, with the emphasis on affinity and passion rather than familiar tropes, overcomes views of sisterly or maternal relationships that may sometimes be utopian but that also tend to de-eroticise relationships between women. Sara T. notes the disorientation she feels as she carries out her research into Vivien, also comparing her sense of a lost connection to a literary predecessor with the realisation of waning love:

Cada cop em sento més perduda. ¿És encara, en realitat, un interès meu, en present, vull dir? ¿O simplement persisteixo en una via morta, per una absurda fidelitat a un interès pretèrit que no va saber treure cap a res? Allò que, de vegades, passa amb els amors: que ja no saps si van enlloc, però t'aferres al saber cert: d'on vénen, l'origen. (2008: 52)

[I feel more and more lost each time. Is it, in reality, still an interest of mine, a present interest, I mean? Or am I simply continuing down a dead-end street due to my absurd fidelity to a past interest that didn't come to anything? Just like what sometimes happens with love affairs: you no longer know if they're going anywhere, but you cling onto the only thing that's certain: where they came from, their origin.]

The quotation suggests that when one cannot find points of reference in the present, or if the present is overwhelming, it can be tempting to cling to something in the past that seems certain; this is the structure of melancholy and, indeed, one of the great post-Renaixença Catalan motifs and stereotypes, *enyorança*.

We learn that Sara T.'s obsession with Vivien is, in fact, born of the difficulties that she is encountering in accepting a recent break-up: '(Entre parèntesis et confessaré que aquest amor per una morta m'ha servit de contrapès per a l'altre amor, més perillós per a mi, potencialment molt més obsessiu)' (2008: 382) [(As an aside, I'll confess to you that my love for a dead woman has been a counterweight to my other love, more dangerous for me, potentially much more obsessive)]. It is telling that the other love is bracketed and set apart; Sara T. tries to displace it from her life. Unable to process the loss that her

break-up signifies, she projects her desperation on to the figure of Vivien. She seeks consolation in the past in which she looks for a *familiar* figure in order to suture her “heartbreak” in the present. Meese explores this turn to the textual body to deal with the absence of a physical body: “The pleasure in/of writing as engagement stands in for other pleasures — a kiss or an embrace; perhaps just a touch [...] So when her lover is no longer or not ever there, the writer returns to writing’ (1992: 19). For Sara T., a persistent longing for *familiarity* paradoxically leads to a sense of defamiliarisation, causing her to feel even more lost. Her fractured bond with the past cannot be “unbroken”, nor can her recent relationship. Her feelings recall the disposition of Vivien who struggled to deal with her break-up from Barney and longed to return to an idyllic Sapphic past on Mytilene. According to Goujon, for Vivien literature was ‘il luogo ideale della realizzazione, luogo dove si congiugono l’amore impossibile e l’impossibile ritorno al passato’ (1983: 12); she endeavoured to cope with a broken genealogy and a broken heart through her poetry which looked back to that of Sappho.

While envisioning her film about Vivien, her *projection* of Vivien’s life into the future through a ‘motion picture’ — a ‘moving image’ that involves motion and emotion, an image that both moves on the screen and moves the viewer psychologically — Sara. T. strives to feel closer to an ‘embodied’ Vivien. She retraces the poet’s steps in an attempt to discover more about her. She describes the thoughts that run through her mind as she approaches Vivien’s tomb, a physical site for the memorialisation of loss:

de quina manera *redreçar-te* a tu, més enllà d’aquest estrany joc d’encaixos, de peces movedisses [...] Peces canviants i indòcils, que ballen i s’encarcaren, fugen i s’apropen, desapareixen i es recreen, en contínua metamorfosi. Peces mòbils fetes amb fragments de peces fixes, trossos de papers esquinçats i restaurats [...] cases que han estat enderrocades, carrers que han canviat de nom. I els teus mateixos escrits, màscares sobre màscares sobre màscares. (2008: 91, my



emphasis)

[how can I straighten you out, beyond this strange mosaic, this game of moving pieces [...] changing and untamed pieces that dance and stiffen, flee and come closer, disappear and reform, in continuous metamorphosis. Moving pieces made with fragments of fixed pieces, papers torn and restored [...] houses that have been demolished, streets with new names. And your own texts, masks upon masks upon masks.

The use of the verb 'redreçar' in this passage is significant. It can be read as *another* address to someone (re-adreçar), an apostrophe in the sense of an address to an absent or imaginary person or to a personified abstraction; thus signalling an absence and marking a loss. 'Redreçar' can also be interpreted as the verb 'to straighten'; Sara T. strives to make Vivien's life conform to her projection of it; she wants to tame the 'wild' fragments that hint at how Vivien lived and interacted with those around her. Frustrated with the palimpsestic nature of the clues she comes across, Sara T. desires and attempts to make Vivien's life cohere into a comprehensible narrative.

As the passage shows, the 'metamorphosing' fragments of the past resist Sara T.'s ordering, normalizing impulse; 'Vivien 's'ha convertit [...] en metàfora de l'inaccessible' (2008: 380) [Vivien has changed [...] into a metaphor of the inaccessible]. The apparent inaccessibility of the past and the impossible coherence of a welter of fragments that cannot be moulded to Sara T.'s desiring vision of Vivien causes her to feel disorientated. Nonetheless, she continues to claw desperately at the *familiar* vision of Vivien that she has created in her mind as a result of reading Vivien's poetry, despite the persistent defamiliarisation in the form and content of the documents she encounters during her research. Sara T. initially 'sees' Vivien's texts as a mirror of her life in order to consolidate her sense of self in the present ; but she eventually comes to realise that this first "seeing" is an illusion, a fantasy, a specularisation of the spectral that involves her projecting her

desires: 'la seducció havia començat per aquella mena de miratge-miracle del mirall' (2008: 381) [the seduction had begun with that manner of mirage-miracle of the mirror]. She thus comes to learn the fallacy of seeking a mirror-image of herself in a seemingly single figure in the past for self-validation in the present.

Sara T.'s relationship to her literary predecessor is unavoidably *queered*, in the sense that it involves twisting, turning and rearranging fragments rather than simply looking back to the past for a ready-made, full reflection, on which to base her self-perception in the present. The 'peces mòbils fetes amb fragments de peces fixes' (2008: 91) that frustrate her at Vivien's grave are unavoidable. She realises that, as Dinshaw asserts, the 'touch across time' involves 'partial connections' (200: 206) and a connection with and through parts; the past cannot provide all the answers for Sara T.'s present. Meese draws on Derrida to make a useful distinction between identity and resemblance: 'in the resemblance of one thing to another, there is always an absence [...] There is resemblance but not identity [...] So that at the heart of the very description which is supposed to give us lesbian presence, lesbian identity, this absence lingers' (1992: 13).

The lesbian reader-writer's desire for a tangible past, then, can manifest itself as a 'libidinous' longing for a literary predecessor with whom she can totally identify. As we have seen, the reader-writer may attempt to consolidate a fractured genealogy, seeking continuity with a coherent, idealised past in order to feel more secure in an uncertain present. The tension between craving wholeness and continuity and the realisation of the impossibility of this desire is also evident in critical responses to the seductive figure of Sappho and her work, particularly in approaches to the translation of her fragments.

### **Sapphic Fragmentation, Sapphic Translation**

DEFINICIONES: PALIMPSESTO.  
- Escrito debajo de una mujer.'  
(Peri Rossi 2005: 31)

The figure of Sappho and her work that is extant resists association with conventional notions of perfection in an original “wholeness”. In the twelfth century, the Byzantine grammarian John Tzetzes of Constantinople declared in frustration, ‘time has frittered away Sappho and her works, her lyre and songs’ (1110-80 CE, cited in Poochigian 2009: xlv). We can read fragments of her poetry, salvaged from damaged papyri but it is estimated that ninety percent of what Sappho wrote has been lost or remains undiscovered (Duffy 2009: vii). Thus, for a present day reader, as for most of her readers throughout history, Sappho and her fragmented texts are in a process of becoming.

The process of becoming is mediated by others through citation; many of her words have reached us through quotations in the works of scholars (Carson 1995: xi; Reynolds 2000: 18). The depiction of genealogy that forms the opening of Foucault’s aforementioned essay could readily double as a description of Sappho’s oeuvre. He states that genealogy is palimpsestic; it ‘operates on a field of entangled and confused parchments, on documents that have been scratched over and recopied many times’ (1977: 76).

Many express pleasure in the fragmented nature of the discoveries of Sappho’s words as it permits a collaboration with her: ‘it is in Sappho’s broken fragments that the modern woman poet could reinvent Sappho’s verse and thus inscribe feminine desire as part of an empowering literary history of her own’ (Greene 1996b: 4). However, Sappho as inspiration cannot be contained in an exclusively women-centred or lesbian sphere. Although Jay draws our attention to Sappho as a figure who has represented ‘all the lost women of genius in literary history, especially all the lesbian artists whose work has been

destroyed, sanitized, or heterosexualized in an attempt to evade what Elaine Marks identifies as “lesbian intertextuality” (1988: 64), it is important to remember that her fragments lend themselves to both queer and heteronormative manipulation. In Vivien’s novel *A Woman Appeared to Me*, Vally (a nickname for Barney) refers to the tale of Sappho committing suicide after being shunned by her male lover, Phaon: ‘Haven’t they invented the legend of an idiotic infatuation for the swell Phaon, a legend whose stupidity is equalled only by its lack of historic truth?’ (1982: 68)

The majority of readers of Sappho approach her extant work in translation, thus the transmission of her words through time and space depends heavily on the approaches of her translators. Some strive to impose order, structure, and intelligibility on her fragments, seeking to straighten and complete the figure of Sappho, as Sara T. initially seeks to do with Vivien. Aaron Poochigian who translated a 2009 edition of Sappho’s poetry into English writes: ‘I confess that, though Sappho’s remains are usually fragments that are themselves fragmentary, I have done my best to create a sense of completeness and, on occasion, translated supplements proposed by scholars’ (2009: xlv).

Stanley Lombardo who translated a 2002 English edition recognises the value of Page duBois’s proposed shift in *Sappho is Burning* (1995) from a focus on reconstitution of a lost whole to recognising ‘our momentary and receding relationship to the shattered fragments of the past’. He announces, nonetheless, that he has ‘engaged in some kind of reconstitution, as a translator *must*’ (Lombardo 2002: xxvi, my emphasis), going on to state that he ‘felt *compelled* to order and arrange [the pieces] into a collection with some kind of esthetic coherence’ (xxvi, my emphasis). The sense of obligation in the phrase ‘compelled to’ smacks of compulsory heterosexuality, as formulated by Adrienne Rich (1980). Lombardo’s words echo those of Sara T. when she acknowledges the temptation

to simplify Vivien's life for her film script. She describes 'la sensació d'intentar encerclar, delimitar i definir allò que és complexitat i moviment i que constantment tens la sensació que se t'escapa de les mans' (2008: 379) [the sensation of trying to encircle, delimit and define what is complexity and movement and constantly seems to slip from your grasp].

Translation as a corrective, completing act imposes the translator's would-be univocal reading, stultifying the consideration of other perspectives. It also betrays the translator's little faith in the imagination of the reader. In 'The Task of the Translator', Walter Benjamin emphasises the importance of the 'mode' of communication in texts, above 'meaning' and 'sense':

Fragments of a vessel which are to be glued together must match one another in the smallest details, although they need not be like one another. In the same way a translation, instead of resembling the meaning of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original's mode of signification, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel. For this very reason translation must in large measure refrain from wanting to communicate something, from rendering the sense. (1999: 79)

As Pamela Gordon suggests in her introduction to Lombardo's translation: 'Instead of trying to weave the fragments too closely together, why not take each one as it comes, remembering that a poem can resonate with other poems without becoming an entry in a single narrative?' (2002: xvii).

It is precisely mode and resonance that Anne Carson considers critical in her translations of Sappho. She retains the plurality of potential meaning by maintaining a sense of fragmentation through the use of brackets and blank spaces to indicate missing text:

Even though you are approaching Sappho in translation, that is no

reason you should miss the drama of trying to read a papyrus torn in half or riddled with holes or smaller than a postage stamp — brackets imply a free space of imaginal adventure. (1995: x)

As well as simulating missing text to maintain the fragmentation of the extant parts of Sappho's poetry, Carson includes Ancient Greek transcriptions of the discovered text alongside the English translations to remind us of the otherness of Sappho's writing, and our distance from it. For Benjamin, a reverence for otherness is vital to translation, which he believes should consist of a form of othering of the target language. He cites Rudolf Pannwitz:

Our translators have a far greater reverence for the usage of their own language than for the spirit of the foreign works (...) [the translator] preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue. (1999: 81)

Reynolds also celebrates Sappho's 'distance' from us, asserting that 'Sappho and her work should be thought of as something strange, foreign and remote; something that is ultimately unrecoverable, in spite of all the many layers of invention by later writers' (2000: 16).

Attempts to retrieve Sappho's 'authentic' words and to uncover her text from layers of invention or alteration through transcription and translation often overlook the fact that as Sappho's poetry was originally sung, there is not an 'original' written *text* at all, but an 'original' *voice*. Carson reminds readers of her translation of Sappho's fragments that 'whether or not [Sappho] herself was literate is unknown' (1995: ix). Even prior to the act of translation, Sappho's voice has undergone a transformation. Reynolds warns: 'Sappho has no authentic voice in any language, even her own' (2000: 16).

It is significant that as Sappho has become more well-known, she has been

increasingly associated with an Attic culture that was not hers; she sang in Aeolic dialect. Vivien recognised the transformation in Sappho's appropriation by other literatures and used the Aeolic spelling of her name: 'She felt that the very name by which Sappho is commonly known was a bourgeois denigration of her ideal, and preferred Sappho's own Aeolic spelling, *Psappha*' (Jay 1988: 70). The standardisation of the peninsular, peripheral Aeolic by central Attic culture has symbolic resonance with the situation of Catalan in Spain. Reynolds goes so far as to put forward the argument that Sappho's Aeolic dialect contributed to her work being undervalued and largely lost (2000: 18).

Approaches to translation that respect otherness accord with Gayatri Spivak's argument in her essay 'The Politics of Translation', in which she draws on Benjamin's aforementioned piece to highlight the importance of recognising untranslatability. She posits the recognition of untranslatability against an imperialist assumption that everything 'other' can be accessed and known, an attitude which she describes as 'confidence in accessibility in the house of power, where history is waiting to be restored' (1993: 195). The assumption is particularly relevant in the case of Sappho given the colonial context in which a large part of the modern discoveries — or rediscoveries — of her fragments took place.

In 1895, two students from The Queen's College, Oxford, backed by the Egypt Exploration Fund, heard news of farmers turning up pieces of papyrus as they ploughed new fields. The students realised that the land had been a rubbish heap of a town from the period of Hellenistic Egypt. They sent the scraps of papyrus that they found back to Oxford, where many crates of fragments remain to this day (Reynolds 2000: 19). Spivak's comments on imperialistic visions of history as awaiting restoration recall Foucault's assertion that 'genealogy does not pretend to go back in time to restore an unbroken

continuity that operates beyond the dispersion of forgotten things' (1977: 81). By not striving to complete the fragmented text in a reparative act, we acknowledge that we do not have mastery over knowledge or history; 'forgotten things' are an inescapable part of our past.

However, simply forgetting is not the most productive way forward either. Linda Bishai summarises Nietzsche's critique of history in this way:

the essence of truly living occurs *in the space between remembering and forgetting*. In other words, we must remember in order to know who we are, and forget in order to become what we may be. The disadvantages of historical narratives, for Nietzsche, are that they focus on the past to an extent which limits the possibilities of the present and the future. (2004: 133; my emphasis)

Similarly, a place between knowledge and memory and unknowing and forgetting is vital for Meese's conception of the project of writing the lesbian:

I want this word to be a place where my story is not known to myself, to anyone; where the story of the other remains also a mystery, always being solved or written - made and unmade every day like Penelope's handwork. *A place between the ecstasy of desire and passion, and of arrest, silence, not knowing*. A space where both occur. (1992: 18; my emphasis)

As such, Sapphic incompleteness has proved vulnerable, reflecting a tension between respect for the otherness of the unknown and an imperialist desire to access the past and make it cohere. We will now move on to consider how fragmented texts, as well as representing the limits of representation, invite readers to engage imaginatively with the fragments.



## **‘L’esbós d’un esbós’: the limits of representation?**

‘Omitir *siempre* una palabra, recurrir a metáforas ineptas y a perífrasis evidentes, es quizá el modo más enfático de indicarla.’

(Borges 2008: 115)

Sara T. struggles to come to terms with the forgotten things in Vivien’s life. When she finishes her film script, she writes a letter to a friend noting its incompleteness:

és com si [...] no fos sinó una còpia dolentíssima, una rèplica llunyana, d’aquell que jo pretenia fer. Un esbós, tal vegada: hi ha a grans trets allò que volia dir, però essencialment incomplet. Això, que potser només és la constatació de l’inevitable, en aquest cas és més greu. Perquè un guió ja és sempre, en si, un esbós. Així doncs el meu text no arriba sino a ser l’esbós d’un esbós. (2008: 378)

[it’s as if [...] it were merely an wretched copy, a distant replica of the one I was trying to do. A sketch, perhaps : in which what I wanted to say is broadly there, but essentially incomplete. What is perhaps no more that a statement of the inevitable, which is worse in this case. Since a screenplay is always, in itself, a sketch. In this way my text becomes nothing more that a sketch of a sketch.]

Reference to her finished text as an ‘unsatisfactory copy’, a ‘distant replica’, and a ‘sketch of a sketch’, reveals that Sara T. feels that she is unable to conjure with words the life of Vivien that she hoped to portray. However, it is evident that she eventually comes to accept the sense of incompleteness without attempting to complete it, displacing a desire for a totalising representation.

Her acceptance results partly from a realisation that the sense of incompleteness is what characterised the life and works of Vivien, as well as her own. Of Vivien, she states that ‘Allò que em sembla crucial és la seva lúcida i gens resignada consciència d’esbós, és a dir, d’incomplació, i, ahora, la intuïtiva certesa que qualsevol intent de plenitud real seria fal·laç’ (2008: 378) [What seems crucial to me is her lucid and not in the slightest

bit resigned awareness of the sketch, that is, of something incomplete, and, at the same time, her intuitive certainty that any attempt at real plenitude would be fallacious].

However, she goes beyond considering incompleteness to be solely a particular feature of Vivien's life and work and concludes that her 'sketch of a sketch' is also a manifestation of the inherent incompleteness of all representation, that inevitably simplifies and carries over, impossibly, as in metaphor, or re-presents the reality that it depicts. In her consideration of 'lesbian : writing', Meese also acknowledges the failure inherent in representation: 'As with lovers, in the relationship of language and act or event, there is always failure. Nothing is what/as it seems (seems). Could it be, I worry, that what I say is not what I mean at all?' (1992: 94).

Marçal, who was first and foremost a poet, appears to have come to grapple increasingly with the limits of representation in reflecting her world. Her first books of poetry — *Cau de llunes* (1977), *Bruixa de dol* (1979), and *Sal oberta* (1982) — align, as Noèlia Díaz Vicedo argues, with the notion of poetry as the ordering of chaos, chaos from which a subject emerges. Marçal herself compares the poem to the symbol of the mirror: 'Crec que és una recerca de la identitat, però d'una identitat completa. Ens hi reconeixem sencers, en el mirall. Aquest construeix i reflecteix la imatge d'una certa aparença de coherència' (cited in Díaz Vicedo 2014: 42) [I think that it is a search for identity, but for a complete identity. In the mirror, we see ourselves whole. The mirror constructs and reflects the image of a certain appearance of coherence]. The desire for order is apparent in the majority of Marçal's poetry through her adherence to traditional forms such as sonnets, sestinas, and Sapphic stanzas. In 'Terra de mai' she describes a climactic utopian fusion of female bodies which leads to a sense of feeling rooted and at one with the natural world, as in 'Sestina-mirall':

Cap foc no s'arbra com tu dins la terra,  
dins de l'espai atònit del meu sexe  
on es dreça el deler contra la runa [...]  
Arrapada a l'arrel d'aquest gran arbre,  
cap foc no s'arbra com jo dins la terra. (1995: 9)

[No fire plants itself like you do in the earth,  
in the speechless space of my sex  
where longing stands against the rubble (...)  
Clinging to the root of this large tree,  
no fire plants itself like I do in the earth.]

However, in her poetry she eventually abandons classical forms, reflecting her growing awareness that complete identity is merely an apparent, illusory and alluring unity of a fragmented subject. She states that poetry is 'el mirall on es reconeix, unificada i dotada de sentit, per un instant la vivència fragmentaria i sense forma' (cited in Riera: 2010, 257) [the mirror where one sees, for an instant, fragmented and formless experience unified and endowed with meaning]. In *La germana, l'estrangera*, Marçal experiences giving birth as a fracturing of the bond with the foetus, which accords with her rupturing of familiar family tropes that she renders strange:

jo contemplava aquell bocí de mi  
esdevingut, ja per sempre, estranger. (1995: 49)

[I contemplated that piece of me  
now become, forever more, foreign.]

The fracturing of self and other in Marçal's later poetry may be considered in the light of Monique Wittig's call for the splitting of the self as a radical act of resistance to patriarchal language. Wittig enacts what she considers to be a specifically lesbian violence through language, shattering the female subject-as-object of patriarchal

language that is behind the standard first person pronoun, 'je'. Her trademark split pronoun in *The Lesbian Body* (1975) — j/e — symbolises her rejection of the dominant social order.

Wittig's emphasis on violence within language and in desire between lesbians challenges the stereotypical visions of maternity and sorority in which relations between women are frequently presented as soft and nurturing. For Wittig, the splitting of the subject is part and parcel of the act of lesbian love: 'I see your bones covered with flesh the iliacs the kneecaps the shoulders. I remove the muscles... I take each one between my fingers the long muscles the round muscles the short muscles' (1975: 31). Meese draws on Wittig as she describes '(sem)erotics' as creating new ways of verbal and erotic expression: 'the sexual torsion of semantic order, of words on the page. Tension/torsion/torque [...] We move against and with one another, bone on bone, skin to skin, endlessly without words g(r)asping out passion, constructing its ebb and flow' (1992: 98).

Marçal confronts the literal collapse of patriarchal influence after the death of her father in 1984, about which she writes in *Desglaç*. It leads to a period of melancholy, but also to a questioning of the pressures for heteronormative conformity inherent in patriarchal law. It prompts her to imagine the possibilities of rebirth through her love for another woman. Marçal notes her ambivalence at the time of her father's passing, as both an ending and a beginning.

This separation offers potential for new ways of being: 'la desintegració aparent és també la possibilitat de fluir. Enllà queda la rigidesa, l'encarament, els moviments d'autòmata, la repetició compulsiva i mecànica dels gestos. Camí fluid, de nou sense esquemes ni pautes' (Díaz Vicedo 2014: 88) [the apparent disintegration is also the

possibility to flow. Rigidity, stiffening up, robotic movements, the compulsive and mechanical repetition of gestures, are all left behind. A fluid path, once more without outlines or guidelines]. Thus, it does not appear incidental that Marçal started researching and writing her sole novel, the anomaly in her oeuvre, in the year of her father's death. It seems to be the outcome of her grappling with and pushing at the limits of poetry that aimed to depict an ordered reality. In the novel, she probes the unifying, cohering effect of writing, exposing instead its potential to fragment. Marçal describes *La passió* as having 'alguna cosa de trencaclosques a mig fer. I alguna cosa, encara, de *collage*' (2008: 396), [something of a half-finished puzzle. And even something of a collage], echoing Sara T.'s earlier comments on the sense of incompleteness of her work.

In the posthumously published *Raó del cos* (2000), Marçal's confrontation with the limitations of the poetic form see her turn to free verse and experimental forms. The idea of 'l'esbós d'un esbós' ties in with the limits of representation that Marçal addresses in a very short poem in the volume in which she reflects on the limits of language which cause the poet to feel in a sort of double exile:

Porta entre mar  
i mar  
la paraula:  
exili de l'exili. (2014: 52-53)<sup>45</sup>

Door between sea  
and sea  
the word:  
exile from exile.

Words may lead to an awareness of one's distance or 'exile' from the unified subjectivity that they purport to represent; of one's distance from one's imagined reality.

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<sup>45</sup> I would like to thank Montserrat Lunati for drawing my attention to the echo in this poem in a comment on a version of this paper given at the Anglo-Catalan Society Conference in Cork, September 2014.

‘L’esbós d’un esbós’ and ‘exili de l’exili’ chime with Goujon’s interpretation of Vivien seeking ‘refuge’ in the illusion of words and a ‘love of love’ when love itself proves destructive to her: ‘parole finirono col diventare *la sua grande illusione*, così come *l’amore dell’amore* prese il posto dell’amore’ (Goujon 1983: 13). Similarly, Meese considers ‘writ[ing] (of) the lesbian’ to involve ‘speaking metaphorically about metaphor, or representationally of representation’ (Meese 1992: 8).

Sara T. acknowledges that the sketch is a symbol of incompleteness that can cause suffering or a desire for completeness, but is simultaneously seductive, as suggested in a line by Vivien who writes of ‘L’encís tan dolorós dels esbossos m’atreu’ (2008: 378) [the painful charm of sketches]. The spaces in the sketch, the absences it contains, the shadows, make it exemplary of Meese’s ‘lesbian : writing’ which triggers further writing:

Hers is a profitable absence, produces “more” writing, the undecidability of which permits, indeed requires, us to produce other writings, other likenesses, diversity, change. [...] In/completion motivates our compulsion, our obsession, and, better still, our passion for the return, the repetition as reappearance of the lesbian-in-writing, who, in coming *again*, comes a second and a third time as though recalling that illusory, shadowy first time, and, of course, the first (mythically originary) Lesbian — the narrative of her appearance before. (Meese 1992: 17-18)

Marçal is also attracted by the potential of self-consciously fragmented representation. In the ‘Author’s Note’, she states that she wanted to give ‘una perspectiva múltiple, complexa, fins i tot a voltes contradictòria [de Vivien] i del seu entorn’ [a multiple, complex, even sometimes contradictory perspective on Vivien and her milieu]; the disjointed nature of her novel expressly calls for a multitude of interpretations of Vivien’s life. She refers to *La passió* as a bare starting point, ‘un punt de partença, un escairit esquema inicial’, thus emphasising the role of the reader in building on the sketch she provides. She explains how she intended the apparently chaotic style of the novel to

impact the readers:

He cercat també que les lectores i els lectors s'endinsin en la història no pas d'una manera lineal, sinó que aquesta es vagi construint en la seva ment a partir de dades fragmentàries [...] tal com ens sol arribar la informació sobre els éssers i els esdeveniments del present o del passat. (2008: 396)

[I have also endeavoured to make readers delve into the story, not in a linear way, but in such a way that the story pieces itself together in their minds from fragmentary bits of information [...] just as we usually receive information about beings and happenings of the present or past.]

For Marçal, incoherence or contradiction in the text make it a more realistic encounter with the present and the past. In *La passió*, Vivien mourns her works having left the sphere of texts that reach us in an incomplete state as they leave 'espai per al no-dit, per a l'irreal, per al somni, per al vertigen' (2008: 89) [space for the unsaid, for the unreal, for dreams, for vertigo]. For Meese, via Barthes, the unsaid is highly erotic: 'absences, or suggestions of the unseen, are even more erotic than presence or what is revealed [...] For Barthes, the space between, the suggestion of what is there but not yet there, the visibly invisible, makes erotic claims' (1992: 99). Fragmented works call for the deployment of imagination and Vivien and Marçal want their work to belong in this category of texts that invite the readers' collaboration. They do not accord, then, with Maria Àngels Cabré's call for Catalan lesbianism to be represented conventionally: 'el que volem és tenir bons llibres entre les mans amb els quals les lectores lesbianes puguin créixer, madurar, estimar, enamorar-se, desenamorar-se i tantes altres coses sense haver de llegir entre línies' (2011: 37) [what we want are good books with which lesbian readers can grow, mature, love, fall in love, fall out of love, and many other things without having to read between the lines].

Cabré's unwillingness to read between the lines implies a desire for more linear

narratives suited to the passive, conventional reader accustomed to conduct manuals. Marçal, on the other hand, suggests that the essence of what a text purports to represent, may lie elusively between the lines, between the fragments. At the start of the novel, the narrator confesses her unexpected failure, the ‘ingènuaament inesperada sensació de fracàs’, in capturing what is ‘essential’ to Vivien:

com el fotògraf neòfit que hagués intentat de trobar tots els angles i punts d'enfocament d'un paisatge, i al final se sorprengué de tenir a les mans només unes dotzenes de cartrons que deixen a fora allò de més essencial que a ell li sembla saber què és. (2008: 15)

[like the neophyte photographer who had tried to find all the angles and focal points of a landscape and, finally, surprised himself by finding only a few dozen exposures in his hands which left out the most essential elements which he thinks he knows how to recognise.]

Readers, then, are invited in Marçal's novel to consider what is implicit, rather than explicit in the text — to ‘endinsar-s'hi’. Much as Sara T.'s relationship to Vivien is queered when she attempts to ‘straighten’ Vivien, the reader's relationship with implicit meaning in the text (from the Latin, ‘implicitus’, ‘entwined’) involves a delving into the text rather than a superficial encounter with an explicit text (from the Latin ‘explicitus’, past participle of ‘explicare’, ‘to unfold’), a ‘straightened’ text.

In line with Freeman's conception of aesthetic forms that rub together, Marçal incorporates Vivien's words, translated into Catalan, in a somewhat chaotic form of *collage* in the closing section of the novel, the ‘Monòdia final’. A ‘monody’ is a composition for one voice and Marçal indicates in her note at the book's end that all the words used are Vivien's. However, she lends her voice to Vivien's words which appear here jumbled and rearranged, emphasising rather than resolving the internal contradictions in the poet's verses which are exposed through the juxtaposition of textual fragments and lines



that seem to state contrary views. For example, the varying attitudes to oblivion : ‘Sovint no temo res sinó l’oblit’ (2008: 386) followed by ‘Etic cansada, res no vull sinó l’oblit’ (2008: 394). Melissa McCarron sums up this approach as Marçal signalling that ‘new strategies of reading, or “listening to” the voices embedded in such genealogies are required [...] in the linguistic space of *l’esbós*, a space of contradictions in need of affirmation rather than resolution’ (2013: 12). Marçal’s incorporation (from the Latin ‘incorporare’, ‘to form into a body’) of Vivien’s words in her text results in the creation of a multiple, fragmented body of text and a complex, contradictory, rather than a coherent subject.

Rather than displaying a longing for a lost whole, Marçal seems to see both Lesbos and *l’esbós* as sites of potential as they call for creative engagement, for repeated comings-into-being. It seems to be with an eye to future transformations that Marçal brings together chaotic fragments in her novel. For Marçal, fragmented texts are part of a Foucauldian genealogy that counters ‘a history whose perspective on all that precedes it implies the end of time, a completed development’ (1977: 86-87) and instead acknowledges the potentiality of the future and of readers’ imaginations. In the Marçalian depiction of the search for Sapphic literary genealogy, rather than completely identifying with one figure in the past, readers and writers experience multiple *identifications* that are necessarily partial and transient.<sup>46</sup> Their perpetual interpretation of textual fragments holds new meanings relevant to changing times and identities. By allowing *l’esbós* to remain *un esbós*, by revealing and drawing attention to the interstices between fragments, and by leaving space for multiple interpretations,

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<sup>46</sup> Susan McCabe argues for recognition ‘that sexualities are socially constructed and can take multiple forms’; she calls for ‘a critical trend of locating “identifications” (rather than identity), modes of being and having, in historical contexts’ (Freccero 2011: 19).

Natasha Tanna

Marçal permits Sapphic texts and authors a certain form of immortality as they are shaped by those that read them.

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