

Some reflections on *Contra la monarquia* by Matthew Tree

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The British-born author Matthew Tree has lived in Catalonia for years and writes in Catalan professionally. In his charged essay in literary regicide, *Contra la monarquia*, the writer's radical anarchist past (Tree *Memòries*¹), rage against the Francoist repression of Catalan culture (particularly popular culture: Tree, "Mort de dama?") and broad love of things Catalan mesh with a recalcitrant Republicanism to form the basis of a carnivalesque lampooning of the venerable Houses of Bourbon and Windsor.

In essence, this opusculum is more political pamphlet than novel, portraying royalty as a pointless, costly anachronism. On the cover, an inverted chess piece crown opposes a mass of upright chessmen below and the book's *obi* paper wrap-around quotes the inner text: "Creure en un rei suposa la renúncia total a la lògica i al sentit comú; significa la bogeria col·lectiva." In this way, the ideological orientation is clear from the outset. The author openly admits his inspiration - a "ràbia alliberada" against all monarchies (Tree, "De Bretanya...") - and, true to this position, the book is a direct assault on all royalty.

¹ According to *Memòries* from which the following references are taken, Matthew Tree (born 1958) spent much of his life as a young adult fascinated by and involved in radical politics. A girl interested him in Trotskyism at the age of 15 (28), though he eventually drifted into anarchism. He kept up his association with anarchists when he moved to Barcelona in 1984, finally becoming disillusioned with the local anarchist trade union after some drunken behaviour at a funeral finally persuaded him that anarchists were no different from other political organisations (115-117). His present-day *catalanista* and republican sympathies should not surprise.

The narrative starts appropriately with a scatological blast at king Joan Carles's humanity (peculiarly his name is Catalanised throughout, though he is unnamed here), and the overblown Spanish nationalist pageantry of Armed Forces Day, with accompanying twenty-one gun salute, fly past and three-and-a-half hour parade. The introduction is well considered. Tanks, foreign legionaries and flag-waving civil guardsmen summon up for the Catalan reader dark memories of the Civil War and subsequent coup attempts. In this way, the different reference of such manifestations for Catalans on the one hand and Spanish on the other is duly signalled. Such dissident speculation is enhanced in turn by a conflictive lexical melange of medical precision and basic abdominal urgency as a royal turd, which the king's insides are instinctively shoving out, seeks egress whilst our royal dignity tries consciously to hold it in. Clenching his buttocks and discreetly asking for the toilets, the monarch hurriedly disrobes and defecates while his internal organs combine in near-orgasmic pleasure to finish the job.

As such, this king with no clothes possesses a body chemistry which directly contradicts his pompous, formal splendour. Although this might not take the outrageous *Naked Lunch* route of instructing the anus in the art of conversation (Burroughs 1992: 119-121), the image is eloquent enough. Tree even works in an implicit jibe about Joan Carles's faltering linguistic acumen as we read in Catalan the arresting English calque "the turtle's sticking his head out and touching cloth" (10). Musings on royal excrement, birth and genitalia lead into the author's welcome which constitutes an admission that the narrative will be short and written on a happily accepted commission to its declared purpose: showing up the collective royals of the world for a pointless superstition to rival Father Christmas, horoscopes and the Pope (13).

With hilarious and malicious intent the author applies the highest technical and cultural lexis to the lowliest bodily functions in order to dish the dirt on the monarchy (17); and the subversive tension between loftiness of speculation and grossness of register will be a constant

throughout the essay. Indeed, much of the work's satiric impact emanates from this antagonism, as the silk and ermine clad rulers of the past give way to the fashionable, modern Spanish monarchy and its accidentally assembled collection of disparate (and not all willing) subjects. Much of Tree's analysis of the feudal monarchy could come from a history textbook, where Machiavellian insight combines with a post-Marx class consciousness, with frequent detours to the toilets or peeks under the sheets. The nobility are unmasked as gangsters and cut-throats, justifying themselves with the useful mumbo jumbo of religion and royal privilege. *Contra la monarquia* examines the basest parts of human nature to reveal them ironically as the very stuff that kings and queens are made of. Tree's grotesque merging of the inner and outer body is not, however, gratuitous; it breaks down the barriers between royalty's outwardly lofty persona and the bathos of the world beyond. And the downward and inward thrusts at the grotesque body are redolent of the subversion of the notorious lower abdominal speculation of Bakhtin (1984: pp. 316-371)

The book's size and format recall Christopher Hitchens' knocking copy on the Clintons and Mother Teresa: a clipped punchy style deployed to attack sacred cows, its chapters furnished with relevant epigraphs. Tree has one great advantage over Hitchens, however, in terms of expressive vitality. The idiom assumed by anglophone intellectuals can often sit uncomfortably with conversational style. (High and low register in English frequently tend not to mix well whereas, in socio-linguistic terms, there is far greater tolerance in Catalan.) As such, Hitchens' deliberation can sometimes read very cerebrally, even confusingly. For example, his reflection on respect for human life and the existence of God warns: "to make the one position dependent upon the other is to make the respect in some way contingent" (Hitchens 1995: 52-53). The phrasing of the following musing on Mother Teresa is likewise intricate or cultured: "What is a woman of unworldly innocence and charity doing *dans cette galère*" (Hitchens 1995: 83). Tree is never so constrained, and slips with

riotous idiomatic ease between speculation on movements of the bowel and movements of independence.

As a result, Tree's writing is erudite but not irritating. His discourse will recall mad Biblical kings and George III of England to prove that royalty are more a genetic monstrosity than supermen. The historical dimension is continued as a pantheon of Spanish monarchs are depicted in similar terms as a bunch of in-bred, sickly and insane creatures. However, the popular touch is never absent as, in the appropriately titled section "Interludi britànic" (49-57), the author trawls in tabloid form through the British monarchy's numerous scandals, though these revelations are edited down owing to the sheer quantity of material.

All is not, however, simple and straightforward. The gravest charge thrown at the monarchy, in the chapter "Un cop de sort" (95-105), concerns the commonly accepted myth that Juan Carlos saved democracy by publicly declaring against Tejero's infamous 1981 coup of the 23-F. The king gave a televised speech condemning the coup, seen by millions, and used all his contacts and influence with the military to quash the uprising. The collapse of the coup and the Socialist election victory of following year are usually accepted as Spanish politics' coming of age. Somewhat problematically, however, the author does not share this viewpoint.

Borrowing his information from the book *Un rei, cop per cop*, written by Patricia Sverlo (a pseudonym) for the radical Basque press group Kalegorria, Tree alleges that the coup was planned with king's knowledge, along with the implication of main political parties including the Socialists and Communists (181-209). The reactionary Lieutenant Colonel Tejero, however, was to turn what was planned as a de Gaulle-style all party coalition dominated by the military and headed by General Alfonso Armada, into a full blown military coup. Armada, it is purported, was the link between the plotters and the king.

The reliability of such speculation is, however, questionable. The Basque author conveniently neglects to assign any direct authority for her

information. Similarly, it is impossible to accurately identify the sources – as incommensurate as *El País*, *¡Hola!* or *El Triangle* – to which this specious biography is referring. And the reliance on hearsay renders all the allegations more spurious still. All of the above, when considered with writer's anonymity, makes the assertions unreliable in the extreme. Haplessly, this is what Tree dubs “una mostra excel·lent del periodisme d'investigació, que es basa en un enorme ventall de fonts diversos i perfectament fidedignes” (99, my emphasis).

The appeal of Sverlo's book is surely to be found in its surfeit of tantalising innuendo and gossip which the majority Spanish media would never touch: the “convenient” shooting of Juan Carlos' younger brother, sex, the future king's academic stupidity which jars with his political (or, as Sverlo has it, Machiavellian) skill, etc. However, these conspiracy theories hold little water when compared with academically rigorous accounts by writers not renowned for Francoist apologetics. In his excellent biography of Juan Carlos, for example, the distinguished academic Paul Preston has the king repeatedly condemning General Armada as a traitor (Preston 2004: 532-533) with the accompanying revelation that the General's own beliefs about his influence over the king are also debatable.

As such, the chapter on the coup may be considered as doubly weak. In this section the immediacy and punchiness of the rest of the book is compromised by what is little more than the summary of another work. When Tree writes, for example, that “No som ningú, evidentment, per afirmar que la interpretació que Sverlo ha fet [...] sigui correcta” (105) it falls flat in comparison with his peculiar mix of prurience and denial elsewhere. This ending would have worked better had the preceding argument been more convincing. The essence of the volume's style is to make readers laugh so that even when they disagree, they turn the pages. As it stands, this chapter neither amuses nor persuades.

Fortunately the final chapter rounds off the book with real bite, the writer returning to his anarchist, punk roots and ideals of independence

and class struggle without sparing the scorn. Significantly, the deliberation begins with a quotation by Federica Montseny, the Catalan Anarchist and Minister for Health during the Civil War. Even if Tree tries to prove the lie to her opinion that the present day monarchy seems “força innòcua” (109), she is a useful symbol, unifying cultural memories whose twin pillars were the fight against Fascism and defence of Catalan difference.

Some of the subsequent observations on British class snobbery are dated, particularly as regards the class implications of accent in the English context (112-116). The author’s observation that class structure is more “hermèticament tancada” (116) in England than Spain is also debatable. Spain’s class divisions and the perception of them are of a different order than in Britain, complicated by a far more fractured regional identity. Nevertheless Tree’s barbed humour still stings: the parasitic British and Spanish royalty and royals in general are the seal on an ignorant, all-accepting passivity. Within this realm people are:

Inconscients del corc que s’engreixa amb la seva material grisa, del pensament paràsit que s’ha aferrat discretament a les seves cogitacions habituals, de la bèstia aliena que coven a dintre, convençuts com estan que es tracta d’una manifestació més del sentit comú més elemental. (114-115)

The words privilege a self-righteous Nietzschean fury with a notable modern edge. Rather than just raid the overfull cupboard of radical clichés, the writer tempers his evangelism with a good knowledge of the imagery of popular culture (in this case by re-working the powerful metaphor of extraterrestrial parasitism from the science fiction horror movie *Alien*). Once again, such passages confirm how Tree’s expression is more immediate and demotic than Christopher Hitchens’ self-conscious cleverness. Where the latter often tries too hard to impress the reader with his intellect Tree flits quite naturally from highbrow to lowbrow with the unpretentious ease of an admirer of both.

Tree also engages Spain's nationalist question within the context of his anti-monarchical belligerence. The problem for Catalonia, it is asserted, is a monolithic Spanish state whose heritage follows a direct line from the dictator Primo de Rivera, through Franco to Juan Carlos. This expresses itself in an unthinking prejudice born of propaganda from the media "d'obediència centralista" (119). The problem for the Catalans and Basques is precisely the permanence of this mentality which defends Spain as a single homogenous state where "regional" difference defies Castilian "common sense."

The Spanish Royal family are the seal on this "unitat i permanència" as the Constitution puts it (121), and Tree has great fun taking pot shots at some of the antiquated not to say embarrassing paragraphs on the king's role as Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces which grace the *carta magna*. The lines selected could have come straight from Franco's speeches, and the comments are sharp. It is a rare writer who can jump from unravelling the implication gleaned from various articles of the Constitution that the king's rôle as Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces could oblige him to defend Spain's "integritat territorial i l'ordenament constitucional" against peaceful separatists before comparing the monarch and his son and heir to a sort of Batman and Robin, defenders of the Constitution (123). As ever, Tree makes it clear that here the two are more an expensive waste of space than freelancing superheroes. The author may have been inspired again by Patricia Sverlo (Sverlo 2001: 18-19) who quotes or paraphrases many articles of Spain's current Constitution alongside highly negative analysis.

Despite its inconsistencies, *Contra la monarquia* wins the reader's sympathies with its enthusiastic humour. It is not the antics of members of the royal family which Tree deplors but the world of theatrical illusion surrounding them. They come extensively packaged in chocolate box fashions and lying ritual, all to brainwash the British, Spaniards and Catalans into unquestioning apathy. In this respect, certain passages are reminiscent of Orwellian speculation, not inappropriate for an Englishman

in Barcelona. The book appears to have been written for the royal wedding of May 22nd, 2004, as the date is mentioned three times (78-79). Significantly, the author's contempt for the predictable saturation coverage lulling a nation into dull conformity shares the spirit of Orwell's criticisms of a sleepy Imperial England of an earlier age, even if Orwell in, say, *Homage to Catalonia*, is far more circumspect.

Similarly, if *1984* imagined a world where a centralising state controlled everything down to an unfeeling, solely procreative sex life, in Tree's Spain the population is seen collectively to masturbate in celebration of another's wedding day (Orwell 1962: 77). The propaganda machinery of the Spanish state has echoes of *1984* too; but Tree's sarcastically melodramatic finish followed barely by "*The End*" in English (127) is also poignant. Here the royals fade from memory, as illusory as a dream or boring movie rather than the brutality of Big Brother stamping on your face forever. In real life, however, their permanence is inescapable.

Contra la monarquia is no highbrow political satire. It is a fun, disposable read which is underpinned, nonetheless, by a broad knowledge of Catalan history, politics and culture, and also of Spain and Britain. As such, the author's political heritage is worked in cleverly. The young man who read anarchist pamphlets and felt that they could have been written for him (Tree 2004b: 84) does not patronise his readers with leftist clichés, but joyfully leaps from the sophistication of Pi i Margall's political philosophy to the most abject bodily imagery without losing the thread.² In this way, this healthy amalgam of academia and satire deserves comparison with Michael Moore's recent book on George W. Bush's America, *Dude, Where's My Country?* as both were hastily assembled to

² Pi i Margall briefly led Spain's First Republic, a Catalan whose federalist, anti-authoritarian ideals were to influence subsequent Spanish libertarian thought (Brenan: 148-151).

criticise two historic events: the invasion of Iraq and the Spanish royal wedding. Tree's pamphleteering scatology also meshes into a Catalan tradition of some historic standing. Many of the songs quoted, from the group Els Pets to street chants of a much older nature, reveal a fine appreciation of popular radicalism. They smoothly blend with insults, gossip, polemic, and more "serious" history, a combination which, as has been seen time and again, is such a feature of this opusculum,

Britain has had high quality print or broadcast satire since the early 1960s which has shown an ever-increasing viciousness towards its accident-prone royals. In the context of the servile passivity with which the Spanish media and mainstream parties treat their first family *Contra la monarquia* is a welcome breath of foul air. Funny even when not completely persuasive, the pamphlet is a rough-cut gem worthy to go alongside Matthew Tree's more challenging creations.

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