

AVANT-GARDE MOVEMENTS: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

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The avant-garde movements which, staggered and opposing each other, grew up between 1909 – the date that marked the appearance of Marinetti’s first manifesto – and 1940 – when the Nazi invasion scattered the groups who were working in Paris – split contemporary literature into two large aspirationally antagonist blocs: the ones who understood it as “a cultural experience”, and more specifically as an autonomous linguistic construct, and those who saw it as an “irrational experience”, an adventure, and therefore an act of breaking and subversion but also one of not simply intellectual but also artistic research.

The avant-gardes are the most genuine expression of the new industrial society of the twentieth century and of the crisis of rationalism, and, more exactly, of the nineteenth-century philosophy of progress. It is due to this that since their very first manifestations, some of the most significant ingredients of modern civilisation – the exaltation of the machine, speed, sporting competition, risk, and so on – have been incorporated into literary creation. Now, though, they advocated an irrationalist vitalism that opened up new areas of research: the haphazard, the absurd, dreams and madness. This is why they formed a new theory of art (a sort of anti-art) which, in the name of modernity, defended the destruction of the past and the search for new forms which, to focus strictly on the field of literature, assumed two great traditions: the visual and the symbolist.

Catalonia and the avant-garde movements

Catalan culture – with nuances, inevitable contextualisations and, especially, taking into account its idiosyncrasy – took part in the

artistic and aesthetic convulsion that emerged between the two world wars in the twentieth century. The distinction in the world of culture made by Jean Paulhan between *rhetorics* and *terrorists* encountered a significant contradiction in the idiosyncrasy of the adoption of the avant-garde movements in Catalonia. Catalonia was undergoing a process of industrialisation and national redefinition, and the idea of creation became identified with the idea of modernity. Europe, and more specifically France¹ and Italy, was the benchmark for modernity.

In all, the Catalan writer had to work with a language and a tradition that had been taken apart by a series of historic circumstances. A language and a tradition that had to be discovered, systematised and established, besides being constantly justified to locals and outsiders alike. In this way, right from the start, the avant-garde artist was forced to collaborate in the politico-cultural plans proposed by the controlling bourgeoisie, which often led them into, if not contradictions, at least into a certain paradoxical situation. By identity they had to collaborate in the reconstruction of the culture of the country, while by fidelity to the rules and essence of the avant-garde, they had to fight against the institutional culture with decision and by definition. However, what sense could there be in the intended destruction of a language and a culture that, like Catalan, had not been able to establish itself definitively? Only a culture that had been solid and established for centuries, protected by power, could be the object of ridicule. Because of this, the avant-garde artist had to make a pact in many of their decisions. In these circumstances, their activity is put forward in terms of eclecticism and moderation.

“My poetry aspires to a fairly adjectival lyricism in which participate the poetic tradition of the country, the racial temperament of the Mediterranean man and, above all, a responsibility that reaches us Catalan poets: that of being formative and sustaining elements of a literature that has not known a Golden Age as Spanish has. We Catalan poets should even sacrifice aspects that could afford us a greater personal originality with a view to forging a common language that is of use to future generations.” (J.V. Foix, “El Noticiero Universal”, 28-IV-1959.)

Often, then, they had to renounce modernity as they could not allow themselves the luxury of carving up or playing at destroying a

language that still did not possess the necessary resources to sustain itself. Over time, the establishment of the Mancomunitat de Catalunya permitted the systematisation of the language and a modicum of institutional establishment which, without doubt, afforded more freedom to the avant-gardists. In all, various national and international events (the opposition of Nationalist and Republican and trades union groups to the Primo de Rivera regime, the triumph of the Soviet revolution and the financial crisis of '29, etc.) redefined the relationship between those in the arts and the establishment. Parallel to this, the sense of their criticism became sharper. If at first the avant-garde had been founded as a basically artistic experience, it would later become a redoubt of moral break-up.

This particular situation allows us to note that the appearance and development of Catalan avant-gardism was basically an individual adventure of a small group of creators (Salvat-Papasseit, Folguera, J.V. Foix, Junoy, initially, and subsequently Foix, Trabal, Sindreu, Dalí, Montanyà and Gasch) who did not form homogeneous groups or create a state of opinion. As has been stated by Joaquim Molas, they did not comprise a safe and aggressive avant-garde generation, but rather a sporadic and transitional one. Some were friends and published in their own journals (“Un enemic del Poble”, “Arc-Voltaic”, “Proa” were by Salvat-Papasseit) but their activity was rather individual, indecisive, disordered and transient.

Specialists in the subject have identified four stages in Catalan avant-gardism where different models and trends reigned.

1.- The futurist model 1916-1924: when the first groups of affinities were formed, which disintegrated in 1924 with the death of Salvat i Folguera and the desertion of Junoy, who gave up experimenting to begin a classicist period.

2.- The surrealist model 1924-1934: this was a complex moment for the avant-garde as the first batch had been extinguished and the great success of the culturalist writers of Noucentisme had come about. At the end of the 1920s and start of the 1930s, the nuclei that set the avant-gardist trend were those of the “Grup de Sabadell” and the “L’amic de les arts”, with Foix and Dalí as the leading figures. This would be the great period of the Catalan avant-garde.

3.- The difficult permanence after the civil war and the post-war of the 1950s.

4.- The visual poetry of Brossa in the 1970s.

Salvat-Papasseit (1894-1924): an individual and authentic adventure

Salvat-Papasseit worked with life and literature with the same possibility of realisation.

...

For him, the poem, just as the painting for the cubist painter, does not have to describe reality but should give a poetic equivalent of his experiences of reality. So, the poem becomes a juxtaposition of impressions, of sensations or of sentences which, in theory at least, is infinite and which, in practice, ends arbitrarily and stridently. (An ending that is frequently underlined with capitals or bold letters.) This apart, to increase the capacity of suggestion of the poem, Salvat did away with punctuation marks and also broke the verse into two or more successive or simultaneous tiers and separated some parts from others with unequal blank spaces. A break with which he indicated syntactic pauses and with which, especially, he highlighted the metaphorical superpositions or parallelisms of the action. (...) In general, Salvat used the so-called “words at liberty” – discovered by Mallarmé and programmed by Marinetti – which is the use of different types or bodies of letter, replacement of words with arithmetical symbols, use of words which appear to float capriciously. (Molas, 1978).

His work evolved from modernist and regenerationist origins – his most incisive phase in which he published ideological articles in Spanish where he mixed anarchist and Christian ideas signed under the pseudonym of “El Gorkiano” – to the use of forms from “pure poetry”, given the unworkability of “-isms”. In between was the avant-garde practice phase, basically futurist. In 1917, just after discovering the avant-garde through Torres Garcia i Barradas, he wrote “Columna vertebral: Sageta de foc”. Its programme brought together modernist and futurist topics with a mix of ideas inspired by Nietzsche and anarchism, and following the heritage of Fichte of the poet leading the masses and Carlyle’s poet as a prophet². For him, the strong man had to be both the backbone of society and a flaming arrow aimed at infinity. In 1918 he published the avant-garde journal *Arc Voltaic*, in 1919 he published *Poemes en ondes hertzianes* and in 1921 *L’irradiador del port i les gavines*.

Commentary of “Columna vertebral: sageta de foc”

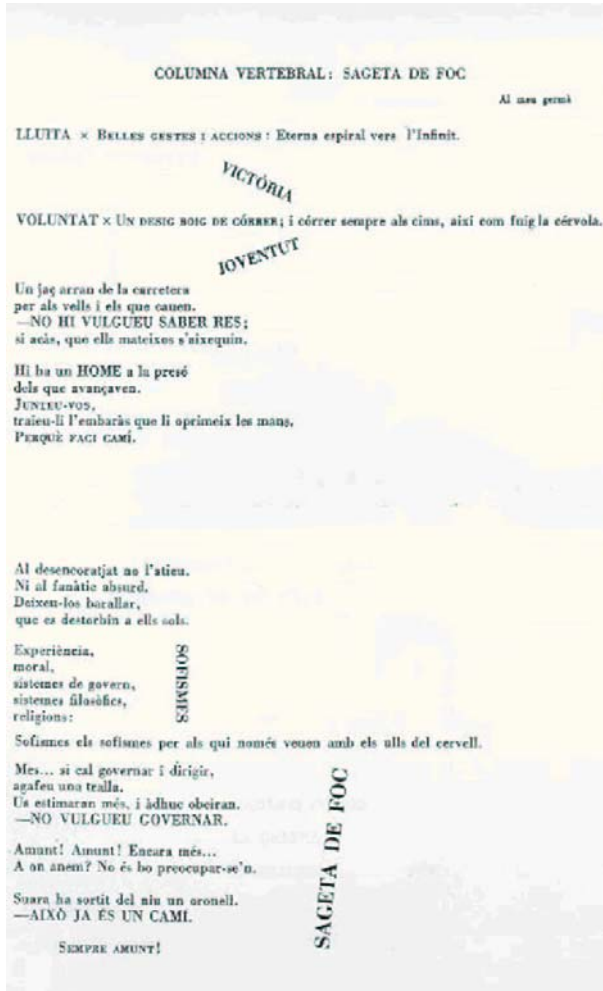


Figure 1. “Columna vertebral: sageta de foc” by Salvat-Papasseit (1917).

The formal layout of the poem and the break-up of the discourse that it vehiculates fits in perfectly with the futurist premises of words at liberty. The breaking of the content aims to emphasise itself through the breaking and formal stridency. It is almost a poem-manifesto.

The fight for “beautiful gestures and actions” must be an “eternal spiral towards the Infinity”, in other words, we do not have to expect

an immediate success. This apart, the will shown by a “mad desire to run always on the peaks, as the flight of the hind” is the impulse that shows a way of being young, of carrying on, saving difficulties with youth and will. All of this discourse is graphically reinforced by the form of the arrow that he sketches, an arrow going forward, constituted by the words “victory” and “youth”, in capital letters.

There is an attack on despondency, on old people with old hearts. We only have to help those who contribute to social advancement, those who help open up a path. By contrast, we have to abandon the elderly, those who show no courage, the fanatics and the absurd: they are a nuisance to society.

Salvat also rails against what he calls “sophisms”, i.e. “experience”, “morals”, “systems of government”, “philosophical systems” and “religions”. Almost alluding to Pascal and his maxim that says “the heart has reasons that reason cannot understand”, the poet claims the existence of other eyes, not only the “eyes of the brain”.

To govern and run, a “lash”, a whip, is needed. The masses only respond to violent blows and, above this, “they will love you more, and so obey”. Tyrannies are always such, which is why he cries: “DON’T WISH TO GOVERN”. What is needed is to advance, to take off (“Up” Up” Even more...”), we do not need to know to where we are advancing, what is important is to advance, to move. A romantic image – a bird emerging from the nest – and the use of an archaism – “Just now” – are the sign of the path to take: “Ever upwards!”, as the “Flaming arrow” that takes an ascending rhythm and is drawn with the previous words “victory and youth”.

“Marxa nupical”

The confrontation between the world of the past – symbolised here by the reference to the circus – and that of the present/future – the cinema – coexist in this poem of *L’irradiador del port i les gavines* (1921). The allusion to the circus is not new, already being evident in “Record d’una fuga de Bach” in the previous book of poems *Poemes en ondes hertzianes* (1919) that was headed by the quote by Pierre Albert-Birot “*L’art commence où finit l’imitation*”.

And we also find an indisputable reference – with direct correspondences – of this poem in “L’Oda connubial”, published by Millàs Raurell in August 1919.

Llun de l'IRR
l'estrella del Circ

Escupiu a la closca
pelada
dels cretins

CLOWN
Això és sà
cònics

La terra no

m no la va co-
un pompier!

Més m'estimo l'



s taules
xistir:

i En **CHARLOT** que s'han tornat bessons per
tal d'entrar en sèrio a la glòria del cel

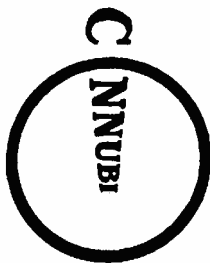
alabars

(car ells són ignorants de que venim d'ahir
d'abans d'ahir de l'altre abans d'ahir
i més d'abans encara)

L'Esfera del rellotge a les DOTZE fecunda les ho-
res que vindran que són:

una	dues	tres	quatre
cinc	sis	set	vuit
nou	deu	onze	

i després el

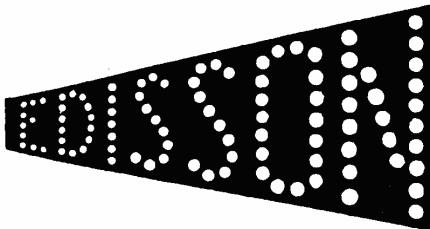


—i així seré immortal perquè d'aquí ha nascut el meu
JO dins el **TOT**

Figure 2. Excerpt from *L'irradiador del port i les gavines* (1921) by Salvat-Papasseit.

We have before us a poetic text where the discourse is submitted to a constant process of metaphorisation through:
The use of symbols (the gramophone that carries the name of its discoverer as though it were an advertisement)

Més m'estimo l'



The elimination of punctuation marks

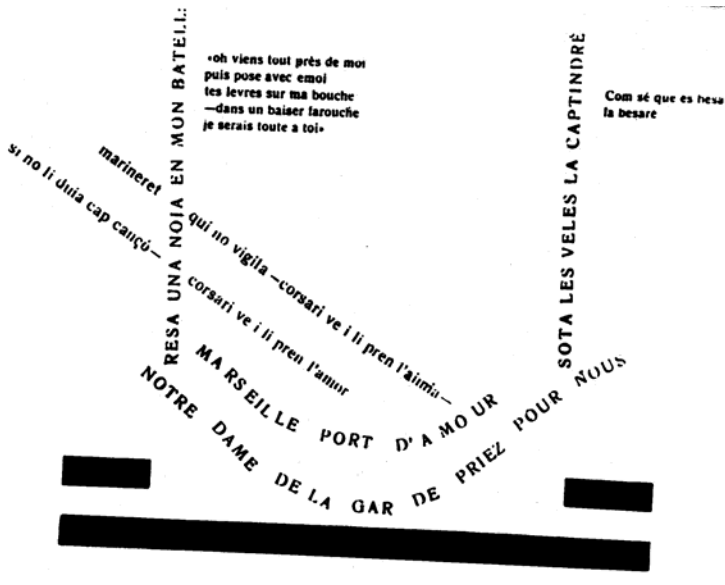
L'Esfera del rellotge a les DOTZE fecunda les ho-
res que vindran que són:

una	dues	tres	quatre
cinc	sis	set	vuit
nou	deu	onze	

The play with the blank space as silence

(car ells són ignorants de que venim d'ahir
d'abans d'ahir de l'altre abans d'ahir
i més d'abans encara)

Intensifying the capacity of suggestion through the words at liberty
("irradiador", "clowns", "pallasso", "mallot", "vida", "jo", "tot"),

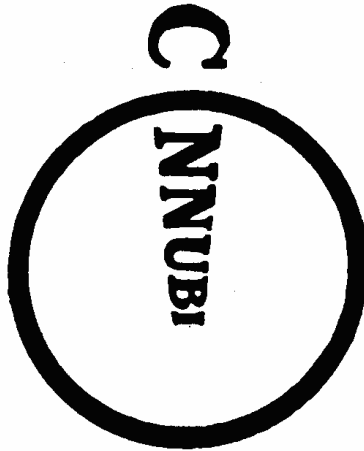


The disintegrations of words in different bodies of letters to mark movement (in the case of Charlot [Chaplin], he wanted to mark the gesticulating behaviour of the character)

CHARLOT

**Escupiu a la closca
pelada
dels cretins**

Topographical layouts of the calligram itself (“Connubi”).



In this “avant-garde” narrative poem (*Poemes d’avantguarda* is the subtitle of the book of which it is part), the use of the circus allows the poet to become a pallasso-clown, who is the actor of the poetic and vital representation, located on the hexagonal track that brings life to and makes the world of the circus possible. Consequently, we go over the verses in the topographical fractures, the typographical variations and the speech marks (symbols such as hyphens, brackets, colons, etc. that afford entry to the various “voices” of the poem) and we learn that his partner is Margot, a red-haired trapeze artist (“she resembles a candle that burns. She only burns for me”) who acts for all who watch her – like delectable centaurs – but who in fact does so only for him because he is the one who creates and corresponds her desire, represented metaphorically by the image of the fire and the redness of the flame.

To a certain extent it is a collage where circus musicians live alongside Wagnerian music, clowns, tamers and trapeze artists with Edison, Chaplin and the fools, advertising is also in evidence. Inside the circus and in the middle of the trapeze artist’s performance, the announcement that the poet-clown reads speaks of the fools and of what they deserve: that we should spit in their face. A subversive and revolutionary message aimed at the bourgeois class that is very typical of Salvat’s anarchist and populist leanings.

And added to the language of advertising is the *boutade* or popular saying, that says that circus music is equal to or even greater than that of Wagner – allowing himself now to rail against the music venerated by the modernists and by Barcelona.

Alongside the advertising, Salvat includes cinema here, opposing it to the antics of the tamer. He says: “I prefer Edison (sic)”, and he does so by turning the letters into a projector, a typographical game made on a lexical unit – EDISON – that is compared with CHARLOT. An Edison and a Chaplin twinned because through the cinema they want to access “seriously (sic) to the glory of heaven”, although they are unaware that this is a fleeting fame, as he prepared us for earlier when he stated that the game of Chinese shadows on a large scale that we can identify as the cinema in its most primitive state is “not to exist”: “Moving and projecting oneself does not exist: LIFE to Dynamism”. In front of the camera, movement and projection are dynamism, but they are also shadow, they are not, they do not exist. At the same time, the disjunctive brings together the supposedly antagonistic terms in a peculiar alliance where the exponent movement, action and dynamism of the world of the

machine, in this case the cinema, also form part of the world of the circus.

From this moment onwards, and when he introduces the ancestral element (“we come from yesterday, from the day before yesterday, from the other day before yesterday and the other one still”), he squarely places himself in one of his basic themes of reflection: posterity, the future, the lasting. This is only possible through the union of people (coitus) and time.

For this reason, he offers us in a game that is both typographic and topographic the hours on the clock and the passage of real time (one two three...) to give way to the only time of maximum creation, the twelve hours represented graphically as marriage, i.e. copulation. Twelve o’clock, the magic hour of midnight, is the exact time of a new age that will really allow us now to be immortal because the union of “my ID in the WHOLE” occurs in this union. The poet is clear that there are two paths to take in life: either move, project, i.e. not to exist, or fertilisation, life.

As regards the polymetric construct on which the poem is organised, it should be said that the iconic symbols are metrically integrated. As Josep Gavaldà stated: “the three iconic symbols show, at once, the scrupulous structuring of the text: they are integrated in the syntagmatic development of the *written* text, fulfilling a special focusing function, and are metrically ruled. All three include in their text linguistic units submitted to the prescribed metric recurrence of the poem³.”

“Cal·ligrama 2”

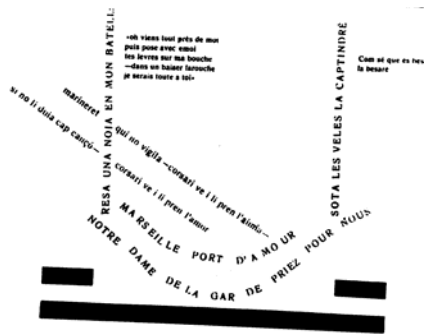


Figure 10. “Cal·ligrama 2” (1923) by Salvat-Passeit.

In *Poema de la rosa als llavis* (1923) we find possibly the most famous calligram of the Catalan avant-garde. In the form of a votive offering, an offering to Christ, the Virgin or the saints in fulfilment of a vote, in memory of a benefit received, this poem by Salvat, read from left to right, shows a ship with two main masts and two sails sailing on the sea. The fragments of text constituting the sails clearly refer to the amorous subject of the poem, and to the book to which it belongs, while at the same time being two fragments of a dialogue between two voices, a male and a female, who are the lovers. The girl, in French – not in vain is the hull of the ship based in Marseilles, port of love – seeking protection from Our Lady of Safeguard to pray for “us” (the lovers), says to him: “Come next to me, place your lips with feeling on my mouth: in a fierce kiss I will be entirely yours”. On the sail on the right, the sailor appears to reply to himself, in Catalan, by saying: “as I know she kisses, I will kiss her”. The masts continue to mark out the left side, the female, and the right, the male. So we have: “a girl prays in the lee”, because it is the girl who has fallen in love and wants to possess and keep her sailor-lover, who perhaps has a love in every port, and “under the sails I will keep her”, which shows the desire to retain her, to “keep her”, under the sails, by the sailor-lover. Note that the conception of the poem as a votive offering and that the appearance of religious symbols or mentions is continuous: “pray”, “Notre Dame de la Garde”, “Priez pour nous”.

Also, combined with the female (left-hand mast and sail) and male (right-hand mast and sail) voices and the lovers of the ship’s hull (“Notre Dame de la Garde priez pour nous”), the bowsprit that emerges from the ship’s prow is an entry of the voice of the people, of popular sayings, also in relation to one and the other, respectively. Consequently, the lower bowsprit, i.e. the one on the left, refers to the girl: “if he brought her no song – the corsair comes and steals her love”. This is a clear allusion to the fact that if the girl does not receive love songs, the love story, the male lover’s feedback, it means that there could be others who woo her. In this case and in the maritime context in which we find ourselves, it alludes to the corsair (danger from the sea) that may have stolen her love. Whereas the upper bowsprit recreates the popular folk song that reinforces the idea that love has to be watched over, it has to be cared for and nurtured as otherwise it is in everyone’s reach, also because not taking into account that the girl is from Marseilles (“port of love”), it could be another sailor, a corsair.

Once again the topographical layout is a perfect structure of a play of voices, of combination of knowledge, of incorporation of the desire and amorous reflection of the interior of the poem and from its physical shape, insofar as the ship is an amorous adventure with the sea as a reference, but also in its condition as a votive offering, an object that is hung to the ceiling or wall of the chapel of the saint or religious personality in question and which takes on a physical form that has a relation with what has been asked and given.

As we will see later in a selection of cubo-futurist poems chosen according to various premises of ergodicity that we can find in them, the avant-garde period is a propitious space for creative imagination that, following the basic guidelines of Avant-gardism, aspires to disorient, to force us to rethink, to generate a non-trivial effort in the process of understanding its artistic manifestations.

NOTES

1. Relations between Paris and Barcelona were intensified with the outbreak of the world war, as BCN (similar to Zurich) acted as a haven for pacifists and exiles.
2. “He is the Light of the World, the world’s Priest: -guiding it, like a sacred Pillar of Fire, in its dark pilgrimage though the waste of Time”, Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes*, Lec. V.
3. Gavalrà (1987, 34).

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