

THE FIRST AVANT-GARDES IN CATALONIA ANALYSED FROM AN ERGODIC PERSPECTIVE

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At this point, we should retrieve some of the key aspects that Aarseth indicates in his programmatic text with regard to ergodic literature in order to be able to analyse one of the most revolutionary literary manifestations in Catalan literature. We are talking, specifically, of avant-garde literature, of avant-gardes. And we use this plural consciously, as we cannot refer to it unitarily. All over Europe and also in Catalonia, the avant-gardes should be seen in all their complexity and diversity. In the case of literature in the Catalan language, however, the phenomenon is even more complex and must be explained from the endemic peculiarities that envelop Catalan culture and literature, conditioned by eternal historical and political issues that we will not go into here.¹ A scholar of the period, J. Ramon Resina, spoke of the complexity of this case:

If the project of constructing a theory of the avant-garde is already problematic, the difficulties of putting forward a theory of the Catalan avant-garde or of the avant-garde of the Catalan Nations, i.e. a national avant-garde, are incomparably more arduous.²

We therefore have to remember that the name of *avant-gardes*, more than an aesthetic label to identify a uniform group, serves to denote a certain combative attitude with regard to manifestations of culture and power.³ In Catalonia, the avant-gardes have their origins in what Molas ironically called an underground movement at the start of the century, which destabilised the comfortable stances of a cultural establishment anchored in the past.⁴

This consideration having been made, it would make no sense in an article such as this, in which we set out to adopt the perspective put forward to us by Aarseth to tackle texts, for us to attempt to explain the literary avant-gardes in all their dimension and complexity. Precisely what interests us of the concept of ergodism is the fact that it transcends aesthetic movements, that it identifies an ahistorical concept in literature and that it makes sense insofar as it helps us to decode some literary texts with a new look. It is for this reason that we propose a highly synthetic, but also representative, look at some of the most renowned cubo-futurists in the Catalan literary panorama in the first two decades of the twentieth century. The reason behind our choice is in response to the fact that the adoption and adaptation specifically of cubo-futurism in the Catalan avant-gardes did not simply result in some of the most interesting calligrams (and therefore one of the ergodic manifestations according to Aarseth)⁵ that have ever been collected in our literary tradition, but also creations that are on the border between visual poetry and the calligram, or which concentrate all of their expressiveness on an image that combines letters with geometric shapes and the space that the printed page gives us.

Having said that, we should bear in mind that Aarseth also poses the question, that to us appears decisive, which is the importance of the *perspective*. We could, therefore, say that this perspective is the watchtower from where we try to read, from where we look at literature in a broad or restricted sense – according to the interests and the stance of each of us – from where we try to understand, in short, the literary phenomena that relate us to the world. In any case, the way in which Aarseth poses this question seems to us to be very relevant when analysing our way of looking as readers accustomed to specific processes, specific routines. To this effect, it is interesting to see how this critic relates the concept of cybertext and ergodic literature with that of marginality. A marginality in which some literary manifestations are placed for the simple fact of being conceived not on the basis of more accepted hypotheses of what literature should be and what is considered to be literature, but from some undefined place at the periphery of this more generalist, or perhaps less risky, conception of literature in capital letters. Aarseth refers to this concept of marginality and applies it to more recent literary manifestations: from hypertexts to adventure games (including MUDs).

In the case that concerns us here, that of the avant-gardes, we should remember, however, that we place ourselves as readers in a watchtower that permits an exercise of decoding steeped in a historical perspective that confers on avant-garde literary manifestations the status of canonical literature, understood in the terms put forward by Aarseth, i.e. as being little or not at all marginal. To this effect, and as Joaquim Molas said, these cultural movements “constitute one of the most thrilling adventures of the twentieth century”⁶, and as such was understood and received at the time from two very different points of view: “those who, as rhetorics, understood it as a reworking of the traditional forms. And those who, like them, saw it as an act of subversion.”⁷ This statement, referring in the Catalan case to the avant-gardes, end up confirming in other words the vision put forward and projected by Aarseth on cybertexts. Aarseth repeatedly *complains* of the objections found when presenting the label of ergodic literature and the explanation given by him is related to the narrowness of views that is gleaned to some extent from the words of Molas. In short, the criticisms of this new label, which is attempting to open up a path in the field of literary studies, correspond to the application of a reductionist vision of what literature is or what it should be and to the analysis of any new expression or form from an exclusively formal or formalist point of view. When we speak of ergodic literature, we are not speaking simply of experimentation for the sake of experimentation. When we speak of literature of the avant-gardes, we are speaking, among many other things, of subversion of forms, of effort of reading, of textual labyrinth, of path as a search for sense and of expressive ambiguity. In other words, we summarise a whole series of operations necessary to understand texts that were revolutionary in their day and which we can still re-read today from the perspective of ergodism.

These concepts that we have just noted are those to which Aarseth gives rise from his theoretical proposal, and, in this approximation that we are putting forward, they represent the guiding strand of an ergodic *re-reading* of some more expressive, more dense and more relevant cubo-futurist texts that the literature of the avant-gardes gave in its time. The calligrams, visual poems and words at liberty are some of the reading routes that we present and that we relate with a non-trivial effort by the reader when *enjoying* in the more literary or more aesthetic, if you like, sense of the term. The first avant-garde, the one that drank from the Parisian and Italian cubism and futurism, is the avant-garde that interests us, as it

combines a desire for formal experimentation and, therefore, of research with individual and even divergent poetics. The cases that we illustrate based on the commentaries on poems are those of J. V. Foix, Joan-Salvat Papasseit, Joaquim Folguera and Josep M. Junoy. They are poets who do not share a single aesthetic ideal and who understand the avant-gardes in a vast sense, where there is a place for everything from futurism to the surrealism of the 1930s, going through mere formal experimentation without a prior profound reflection in terms of contents or literary attitude. Similarly, it is in this apparent paradox of the Catalan poets with regard to other European avant-gardes wherein, in our opinion, lies one of the most interesting values of this literature. This conscious assumption of tradition and the subsequent subversion to which they submit it constitutes a clear indicator of eclecticism, which affords us an added wealth to the poems that we have selected. We always move between the pitfall and the path, between the attempt and the idea, between the experiment and the reaffirmation. Catalan cubo-futurist poetry is still, therefore, a modern and breaking poetry that reinvents its own code based on the mirroring in the latest outside artistic and literary trends, but which maintains an idiosyncrasy that can be decoded by ergodic examination.

Poema de Catalunya *and the non-trivial effort*

Any approximation to a poetic text, as we have said, requires an effort that goes beyond triviality, but in the case of that cubo-futurist poetry close to visual poetry there is even greater need to immerse oneself in every last corner of the work to grasp its full meaning. The non-trivial difficulty of which Aarseth speaks in his article is specified differently in each literary text with ergodic characteristics. The case of *Poema de Catalunya* by J. V. Foix clearly exemplifies this need for research so pertinent to the works that have been defined with the qualification of ergodic, as in order to understand the meaning and layout, the content and the form, we have to redo the internal bonds that exist between different poems by the same author as well as the in-depth knowledge of the cultural references that is usually required when reading any work, especially those that are part of an internationally scarcely recognised history and culture.

POEMA DE CATALUNYA

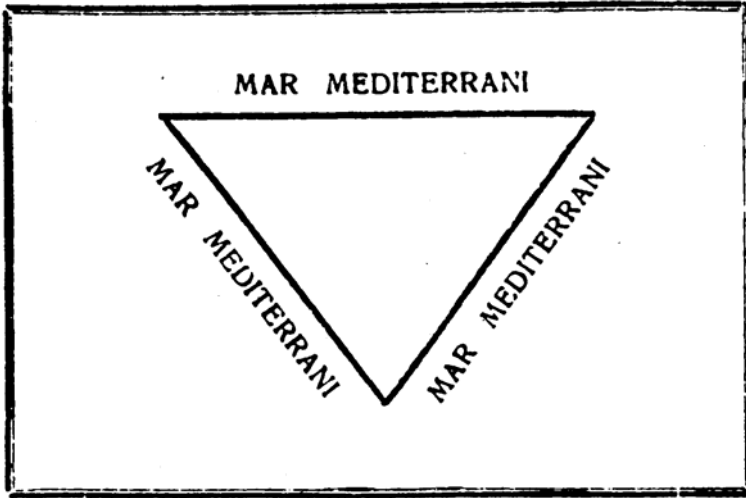


Figure 1. *Poema de Catalunya* (1920) by J. V. Foix.

Written in 1920, *Poema de Catalunya*, beyond its cubo-futurist peculiarities, is outstanding as the visual representation of the interior idea that Josep Vicenç Foix had of Catalonia: a Catalonia idealised through the perfect geometry of its shape. The Catalan region, lying in the northeast of the Iberian peninsula and bounded by the Mediterranean sea and the Pyrenees is really a scalene triangle, with all its sides and angles different, but Foix represents it as being isolated from the mainland and in the shape of a unilateral triangle, with all of its sides and angles perfectly regular: an ideal Catalonia.

Beyond this analysis, the result of an initial formal observation, we should, when studying this work, include other texts that will help us to understand it and which will be necessary for both Catalan and non-Catalan readers. The non-trivial effort in understanding the poem leads the attentive reader to the practice of intertextual reading and the comparison of *Poema de Catalunya* with Sonnet 36 from the

book by J. V. Foix entitled *Sol i de dol*, published in 1947 but sent to press in 1936:

[36]

No pas l'atzar ni tampoc la impostura
Han fet del meu país la dolça terra
On visc i on pens morir. Ni el fust ni el ferre
No fan captiu a qui es don' l'aventura.
Clos segellat, oh perfecta estructura
De la mar a Ponent, i a l'alta serra
-Forests dels Pirineus-, on ma gent erra!:
A Ella els cors en la justa futura.
Sòl de beutats: la Mar és el teu signe
I els teus magnes cabdills la feren dea;
Pagà tribut i un temps fores insigne.
Oh vigorosa estirp! Esclava indigna
Que cobeges viltats: Sagna, i signa
El teu rescate, i el retorn a la Idea!

If we compare the two poems, one clearly visual and the other textual, we see the inseparable connection of common ideas: the “sealed enclosure” of the second quartet leads to the visualisation of a closed, isolated land separated from Spain and France, which have historically applied “the wood and the iron”, as it says in the third verse, to keep the Catalan nation subjugated. This dreamed-of independence supposes a “perfect structure” which, as has been said, is visually materialised with the geometric perfection of the equilateral triangle. If we take into account Foix’s respect for classical culture and for its influence on Catalonia, the Mediterranean sea, “your symbol”, is the reality that helps to place the country in the state of the desired perfection, as it ideally surrounds it thanks to its legacy, which is regarded as being much more beneficial than the legacy left by the neighbouring nations.

It seems necessary, then, that poems such as these should be read with a clear willingness to make a non-banal effort of search that leads the reader to much more satisfactory results of understanding.

Plànol by Joan Salvat-Papasseit and interpretation as a path

The poem *Plànol* by Joan Salvat-Papasseit was published in 1919 in his first book of poems, entitled *Poemes en ondes hertzianes*, and is

one of the first applications of futurist theories in the sphere of Catalan literature. The words at liberty of this work do not ultimately make up a calligram but they do, as stated by the prestigious historian and critic of Catalan literature Joaquim Molas, “describe the city of Rome, or more exactly the politico-social structure of a symbolic city”.⁸

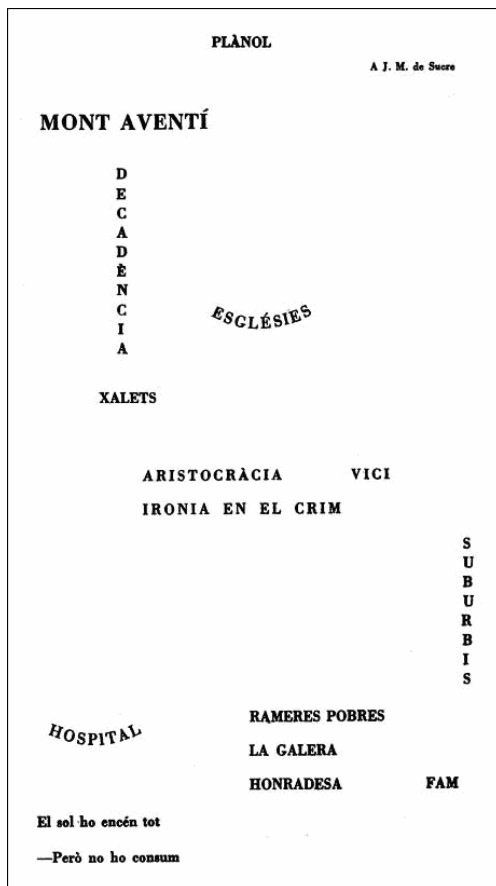


Figure 2. *Plànol* (1919) by Joan Salvat-Papasseit.

From the point of view of the reader who is minimally educated in the literature of the avant-gardes, the perception of this structure based on the achievement and apparently illogical ordering of words at liberty must be completed by a methodology of analysis that

allows us to construct a logical discourse on the chaotic appearance of the unconnected sentences, the juxtaposed impressions or the *tabole parolibere* that surprisingly destroy this same discourse. In short, the reader attempts to reconstruct, consciously or unconsciously, a linear – and grammatical – meaning of the literary text.

In the article “Ergodic literature”,⁹ Espen Aarseth speaks of the etymological sense of the word “hodos” – path – and the need to “journey” through the literary work as a requirement for its complete understanding. It is for this reason that the idea of path takes on importance in the reading, perception and analysis of works that, like the cubo-futurists, offer particular difficulties. In the social, cultural, political and literary context in which it was published, *Plànol* set out to describe artistically a new reality different from the existing one, and the only resource that the reader has to discover this reality different from the existing one is to go into the work by opening up a path, familiarising themselves with the lexicon, with the syntactic relations, with the visual layouts that are *abnormal* in a linear discourse, in short, journeying through the text.

If we put into practice this procedure of reading – applied in ergodic literature – with the poem *Plànol* we realise that the attentive journey through each of the words at liberty reveals that they are laid out in such a way as to allow us to get the general idea of the entire reality described and also the specific idea, with nuances and details, of each of the parts into which the work can be divided. In fact, reading the symbolic space “drawn” on the map is impossible if we do not trace a reading itinerary and follow a path throughout the text: if we start from the top left we come up against *MONT AVENTÍ*, the Roman hill that dominates the city and which symbolises the mystical ascent of the chosen ones, an experience linked to the classical world that descends decadent to the villas of the city, symbols of the new depositaries of wealth of the twentieth century. The aristocracy, who not having this social condition are separate from vice, live in this part of the city. And the *IRONY IN CRIME* symbolises the absolute depravity of society, while constituting the border between the two parts into which the poem is divided horizontally. If in the journey through the upper part, the description is found of privileged social groups: *CHURCH*, *ARISTOCRACY*, etc., in the lower part of the interpretative walk we wander streets of misery, *SHANTIES* inhabited by *POOR WHORES* and *HOSPITALS* that are the *GALLEYS* of the working world that is *HUNGRY*, on the

basis of which, despite everything, *HONOUR* is found. There is an evident contrast of the antithesis in the physical layout of the terms: *HOSPITAL-CHURCH, VILLAS-HUNGRY*.

The interpretative path makes us go through, whether we start at the top or bottom of the poem (or should we say map?), an unequal social reality that Salvat-Papasseit wanted to highlight in order to change it. Finally, however, the itinerary always comes up against the echo of the short note in lower case letters (the only ones in the poem) that we find at the foot of the map:

*The sun illuminates all
- But it does not consume it*

In these last two verses, which besides being the only ones written in lower case are also the only ones that obey a traditional syntactic and grammatical structure, the poet's dissatisfaction at seeing the impossibility of social regeneration is revealed. It is not casual, then, that the only nexus, adverse in this case, in the poem appears in this part. The "but" cannot be replaced by any word at liberty and acquires, by contrast, a semantic meaning and force that reveal the moralism, the impossibility of preventing the sun from coming up for everyone without the reality being consumed and there being the possibility of regenerating it more fairly.

*En avió by Joaquim Folguera,
or the calligram as an ergodic text*

As we have pointed out, the calligram has been identified by Espen Aarseth as the simplest form of non-linear¹⁰ literature considered to be ergodic. Although the lack of linearity and the importance of the layout of the text are also characteristics of visual literature – as we have been able to see in previous examples – calligrams incorporate the composition of recognisable and interpretable forms – through the layout of the words – that have a direct relation with the meaning of the text itself. The proximity of this poetic type with play is indubitable as, initially, all reading is aimed at revealing this relationship between form and content.

In our case, however, what interests us is not so much revealing the rules of this bond between subject and form as highlighting the

importance of the choice when tackling a non-linear text such as a calligram.

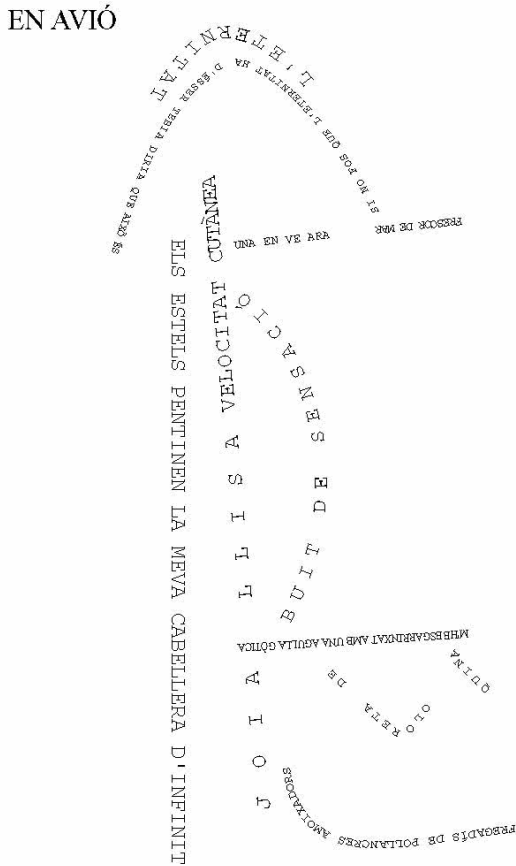


Figure 3. *En avió* (1921) by Joaquim Folguera.

If we read the poem *En avió*, published in 1921 by Joaquim Folguera in the book *Traduccions i fragments*, we will realise the sensation of disorientation that we suffer right from the start in deciding from what point we should start our reading and our analysis. We observe, from the start, that each of the textual units of the poem has a certain coherence and that they do not make sense unless we place them in

relation to the whole of the form and content of the poem. Also, the layout of each of the (we could call them) “verses” means that there are multiple intertwinings, which hinders finding out what the logical continuity of each one of them is. It is for this reason that, although the form of most calligrams does not have the appearance of a labyrinth, in many of them the choice that must be made to complete the reading does make us think – as is the case of this poem by Joaquim Folguera – of the same characteristics of the multi-course labyrinth.¹¹ This constant choice is what will lead us along one of the many possible paths to the desired interpretative outcome of the labyrinth.

In the case of Folguera’s calligram, the shape of the plane and the layout of the fragments of text in different directions means that we can start reading from many points. We propose the following: the plane takes off and sets out to reach *ETERNITY*. On this course, the *SPEED (CUTANEOUS)* that thrusts it is *JOY (FLAT)*, so establishing an analogy between the two apparently unconnected concepts. In descending order, we can read that *THE STARS COMB MY INFINITE MANE*, offering an almost romantic image of fusion between nature, body and spirit. On the belly of the plane a hyperbaton twists the logical order of the words that express the *SENSATION OF EMPTINESS* caused apparently by the height and the speed. The accumulation of images without a logical order is evident and is completed with the reversed verses of the top right, where we can read, according to the choice we make: *SEA FRESHNESS ONE COMES NOW* or *ONE COMES NOW (of) SENSATION OF EMPTINESS*.

Finally, however, we can say that the layout of the verses, although not obeying any grammatical discursive relation, has a meaning in the whole of the design of the plane: the bottom part, the closest to the earthly state and the furthest away from infinity, the part that brushes the *CARESSING POPLARS* with the tail, is the one that senses the *AROMA OF SUPPER*, which scrapes *A GOTHIC SPIRE* of a belfry due to the proximity to the earth.

It is observed, then, that despite the difficulty in establishing a syntactically logical order in this poetic discourse, the accumulation of the partial meanings achieved after each choice helps us to place the shape of the plane in relation to the meaning of the words that comprise the calligram: the plane becomes the outcome of the interpretative labyrinth, the image of the synthesis between modernity and tradition in containing and integrating the novelty of

the machine admired by the futurists, the possibility of satisfying the ancestral desire to fly pursued by the humanity and the search for eternity desired by a young and ill Joaquim Folguera who was nearing the end of his life (1893-1919).

L'Art poètica by Josep M. Junoy and semantic ambiguity

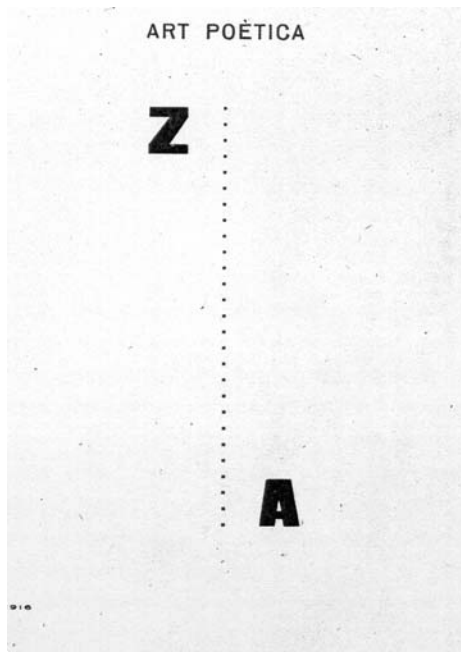


Figure 4. *L'Art poètica* (1920) by Josep M. Junoy.

In speaking of ergodic literature, Aarseth reveals the difficulty in establishing the border between the “semantic ambiguity” and the “variable expression” presented by some literary forms. In the case of visual poetry and cubo-futurist calligrams, it appears that the difficulty is not so great. Unlike cybertexts, where there are always readings to do and the possibilities of unchosen reading are not shown so evidently, in the case of calligrams and visual poems we have in our reach the whole of the text, even though the reading

paths and the routes to take through the interpretative labyrinth proposed to us may be variable.

In the example that we have chosen, the poem *Art poètica* by Josep Maria Junoy, published in the 1920 collection *Poemes i cal·ligrames*, it is evident that we can come to different interpretative conclusions, but in every case we notice that we have before us an interpretative ambiguity inherent in the exercise of reading freedom and not a variable expression: the content of the poem is all that we see, it is what it is irrespective of the procedure taken in reading it.

As put forward by Jaume Vallcorba,¹² “*Art poètica*” can be considered as a sort of manifesto in which the poet sets out their *modus operandi*, shows us the *innermost part* of their composing process based on a visual poem that synthesises the concepts of end and beginning, present and past, up and down, break-up and tradition. The expressive ambiguity to which we refer is highly palpable in this poem, due to the fact that between the *z* and the *a* we contain the essence of the verses, the letters that generate the words and, therefore, the subject of the verses. This poem exudes a sensation of totality, but a totality contained in a generating end and beginning, umbilically joined by twenty-seven points representing the letters in the Catalan alphabet. Verses that are yet to be explored, generated and which may generate all the worlds possible through the combination that the poet constructs. Through an image, the poet manages to convey the vastness of the words, and the sensation of totality that is gleaned from this poetic art is still vertiginous. Consequently, through this textual expressive ambiguity, which precedes the cybertexts of which Aarseth speaks, we can even see the wealth that the critic calls variable expression.

Les formigues by Joan Salvat-Papasseit and the sensation of rejection

There is no doubt that the initial sensation created in us on reading cubo-futurist poetry is in many cases that of rejection. In the first place because we continue to conceive of writing – thanks to the weight of tradition – as a mechanism of linear and logical exposition that contrasts with the words at liberty and with the formal and discursive breaking of the so-called historic avant-gardes. In some cases, this dislocation between the traditional conception of literature

and the avant-gardist approach is generated by a possible global lack of understanding of the text (as may have happened, for example, in the reading of Joaquim Folguera's *Art poètica*), but in others the rejection created does not come from the simple logical and sequential lack of understanding of the words comprising the text but from the sensation of frivolity caused by the poetic form used.

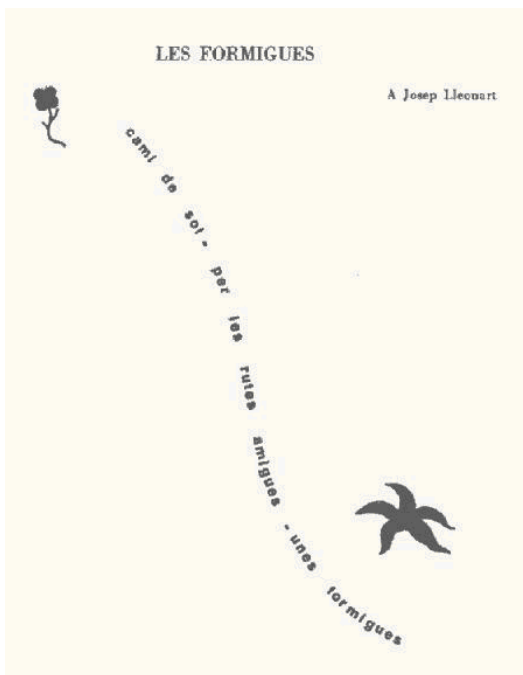


Figure 5. *Les formigues* (1921) by Joan Salvat-Papasseit.

This calligram by Salvat-Papasseit, included in the book *L'irradiador del port i les gavines (Poemes d'Avantguarda)*, published in 1921, is an example of this type of work that may cause rejection from the apparent trivialisation of the form. Besides the drawings accompanying the text, we can read: *sun path – for friendly routes – ants*. In this case, the apparent poetic simplification may provoke a momentary sensation of rejection that will possibly disappear when we realise that the sentence sketching the descending path of the ants adopts the metric form of the haiku.

Once again, then, we come up against one of the principal characteristics of Catalan avant-gardist literature of the 1920s: the link and the bond between tradition and modernity, the need to assume and achieve a formal and thematic break with regard to the literary tradition imposed by Noucentist classicism but with the limits, also imposed, of a literary language in a constant state of threat and recovery.

NOTES

1. Note, otherwise, the words of one of the leading scholars of this period: “The avant-garde, however, did not take on the breadth or the consistency in Catalonia that it took on, for example, in France or Italy. Unlike the French or Italian writer, the Catalan writer had to work with a language and a tradition taken apart by a series of historic circumstances” (Molas (ed.) 1983, 17).
2. Resina (1997, 7).
3. In this vein, one of the Catalan avant-garde poets par excellence, J. V. Foix reinforces this idea when he affirms the following statement by Salvat-Papasseit, another of the significant poets of this time: “Even though it is possible that someone has already remarked on it, we should consider the word *avant-garde* and its derivatives as expressions that mean nothing in literature. Perhaps we should admit the existence of various literary avant-gardes: Maragall, for example, was an avant-garde writer; by contrast, this is not the case of the false avant-gardist Salvat-Papasseit.” J. V. Foix, “Algunes consideracions sobre la literatura d’avantguarda”, *Revista de poesia*, vol. I, 2 (1925), 65-70 collected by Joaquim Molas (ed.)(1983, 194). As can be seen from his words, Foix is rather critical of the poetic adaptation that Salvat makes of the avant-gardes. Contemporary Catalan critics, however, have studied Salvat’s work in depth and placed it in the position that it merits in the history of literature and specifically in relation to the personal adaptation he makes of the avant-gardes.
4. Molas (1979). Both terms, *underground* and *establishment*, are used by Molas in this introductory article to the Catalan avant-garde.

5. Aarseth, (2004, 129).
6. Molas (ed.)(1983, 15).
7. Ibid., 15. We could qualify this second group as *cultural terrorists*.
8. Joan Salvat-Papasseit, *Poesies completes*, in the care of Joaquim Molas (1981, XIV).
9. Aarseth (2004, 118).
10. Ibid., 129.
11. Aarseth devotes a leading section in his article to speaking of the multiple literary labyrinths. Ibid., 125.
12. Junoy (1984, XCV).

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