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The Choral Intensification of a Chronotope

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Abstract

According to an ancient constant, literature can be regarded as a struggle against oblivion, as an attempt to preserve individual and collective memory. On the grounds of the Pragmatics of Literature, we can consider that the processes of (re)construction of the literary memory of rootlessness, exile, persecution and imprisonment reveal two basic types of creative models: the objective description of reality and a plausible fictionality. This paper focuses on the first of these two creative models through the exploration and critical analysis of the book *Allez! Allez!*, which contains a set of texts by several authors compiled by Professor Maria Campillo, which are focused on the narration of a high point of the Republican diaspora: the very moment of crossing the border between Spain and France, on the way to exile, after the Republicans were defeated in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939).¹

Keywords: Spanish Civil War; France; exile; Republican diaspora; literature and historical memory

1. Introduction

Maurice Blanchot narrates a horrifying event which expresses the unspeakable nature of some extreme experiences, such as those suffered by the victims of Nazism. Blanchot refers to bits of paper found near the gas chambers in Nazi concentration camps; bits of paper that some prisoners had buried in the hope that their messages might be discovered in the future and all humankind might know what had really happened in the concentration camps. Many of those messages read: “You will never know” or “You will never find out.”²

It is paradoxical, but language was used to express an experience while emphasising the boundaries of that experience. Perhaps there is no other metaphor or no other paradox as symbolic as the self-reflective property inherent in language. This invites us to understand that language pinpoints its own limits.

¹ Maria Campillo: *Allez! Allez! Escrits del pas de la frontera, 1939*. Diversos autores. Maria Campillo (ed.) Barcelona: L’Avenç, 2010.

² Maurice Blanchot, and F. Laurell : ‘Notre compagne clandestine’. In: Maurice Blanchot, and F. Laurell (eds.): *Textes pour Emmanuel Lévinas*. J.-M. Place, Paris: 1980, p.79-86.

Other messages read: “Don’t forget.” And this confronts us with one of the main functions of literature: to protect us from amnesia, because literature crystallizes humankind’s cultural and moral survival instincts.

It is this that I want to emphasize in this article, where I analyse one of the main attributes of the book *Allez! Allez! (Writings from the border pass, 1939)*, which is to preserve memory, or more accurately, (re)construct memory, since memory, despite what might be thought at first, is never static, never completed.

The capacity of *Allez! Allez!* to articulate experiences that end up becoming metaphors for exile turn this book into a work of reference in the struggle against oblivion.

On the grounds of the Pragmatics of Literature, we can consider that the processes of (re)construction of the literary memory of rootlessness, exile, persecution and imprisonment reveal two basic types of creative models: the *objective description of reality* and *plausible fictionality*, two different composition processes matching a single aim: highlighting veracity. The first paradigm focuses on a subjective voice subjugated to positive events while the second one is built on the laws of narrative artifice. Both models seek to reformulate the substance of memory: fiction and objective will as ways of arriving at the truth. Despite being different systems, they both share the idea of Imre Kertész, who says that “La verdadera crisis es el olvido absoluto.”³

2. *Allez! Allez!*: Positivist attributes of literature

The book *Allez! Allez! Writings from the border pass, 1939*, was published in November 2010. This work is a collection of texts by 41 Catalan authors from a variety of professional and cultural backgrounds, who have retold the border crossing following the Republican defeat in the Spanish Civil War.

All the texts that appear in this collection were selected by Professor Maria Campillo, a specialist in the contribution of literature to the construction of historical memory, and an expert on 1930s culture, the Spanish Civil War, and the post-Spanish Civil War period. Before embarking on the direct analysis of the book *Allez! Allez!*, and approaching the documentary and objective components of literature that many of these texts contain, I believe it would be useful to recall in a few lines the facts essential to an understanding of the historical context which the material compiled in this work refers to: the Spanish Civil War began on the 18th of July 1936 and ended on the 1st of April 1939, coming to an end just

³ “The only terrible thing would be complete oblivion.” Imre Kertész, *Un instante de silencio en el paredón. El holocausto como cultura*. Barcelona, Herder: 1989, p.65.

before the outbreak of the Second World War. The city of Barcelona, one of the last Republican strongholds, fell in January 1939. It was at this time that there was a great exodus of Republican refugees on the road to exile into France. It is calculated that between January and February 1939, around 460,000 people crossed the French border at the frontier towns of La Jonquera, Portbou and Puigcerdà in the province of Girona. The situation of exiled Republicans in France was extremely hard at first. The Daladier government in France authorised “refugee camps”, which were actually concentration camps patrolled by colonial troops, in which thousands and thousands of exiled Republicans took refuge in extremely precarious conditions. These exiles were, in addition, exposed to the danger of German troops entering France.

The accounts of crossing the Girona border passes into France selected and gathered in *Allez! Allez!*, have been written by a highly heterogeneous group of writers. Seven of the forty-one authors are women. Some of the authors are acclaimed writers; others (like the POUM militant and dressmaker, Otilia Castellví) are purely accidental writers. There are classic texts. Some authors were already old when they went into exile and others were still very young. This diversity means the book is not written in one style or have a univocal generational fit. Instead it honours a group of highly diverse voices, for their origins, ages, backgrounds, their involvement in the Civil War, and for their hope in the future.

To this diversity we must also add yet another multifaceted factor, which is the tapestry of expressive genres encapsulated in these pages: the epistolary novel, the diary, fiction, autobiography, the chronicle, memoirs, the lecture, the interview, the novel – all are represented. This heterogeneity is further strengthened by the different dates and moments in which the texts were written, ranging from the immediacy of the diary to the reflection matured by the passing of time so typical of the autobiography.

Allez! Allez! achieves two things crucial for any work created on the basis of a collection of texts: knowing how to pin down a book that pre-existed but had not come into being yet, and making the collection of texts it is created around become a compact whole based on one theme only.

How can these texts, grouped together in the same work, recreate such an atmosphere?

The answer is eloquent: a wide variety of testimonies, offering a frieze of minute variations on the experience of crossing the French border in the last days of the Republic, burst forth from the pages of this book. *Allez! Allez!* represents the intensification of a very precise moment and chronotope, the compilation of multiple ways of narrating the *same experience*, with slight variations and versions that form a reliable spiral of the last days of the

Republican defeat and the entry into a new historical era. Gathering these texts together in the same volume makes the condensed, centripetal force of this experience explode.

But apart from the merit of heterogeneity, two other features of the book are worthy of mention:

- 1) The reflection on the processes of literary composition
- 2) The value of objectivity that the texts contain.

To begin with the first of the above, the texts in *Allez! Allez!*, as already mentioned, relate an experience which, due to its extreme and dramatic conditions, has forced different authors to think about their literary composition processes. The authors, whether explicitly or implicitly, have reflected on the very act of recounting facts. For example, Artur Bladé i Desumvila has kept in mind the importance of writing about facts that “bé que portin dates precises, foren escrites al cap d’un cert temps amb l’ajut de notes que vàrem prendre en el moment, o poc després dels fets”.⁴ But the extreme nature of this distance in time does not alter the essential truth of such a harrowing experience, as this same author recognises: “I quan aquests [fets] són vius i realment viscuts, qualsevol cosa que sembli fantasia no pot passar de ser una coincidència...”⁵

As regards the obvious objectivity of these stories, the basic principle embodied in the narrative as a system of reference of an objective truth is revealed, for example, in the surprise shown by Edmon Vallès. After narrating his adventures on entering France and a series of happy coincidences which occur while he is waiting for French relatives who have arranged to collect him at a certain spot, he shows how the harshness of the reality he must endure far exceeds the artifice of any literary plot based on the imagination. It is so overwhelming that Vallès writes: “Una casualitat que cap novel·lista seriós no gosaria utilitzar.”⁶

This same aspect of literature, which accepts the pragmatic condition of stating the unspeakable, is reaffirmed by Jaume Pla who comments: “He vist fotografies, he vist algun document cinematogràfic d’aquella retirada. Però cap imatge de les que he vist no s’assembla

⁴ “however much they may contribute accurate data, were written after some time with the help of notes, or just after the event”. Campillo, *Allez*, p. 197.

⁵ “And when these [facts] are vividly and truly experienced, anything that resembles fantasy cannot just be a coincidence”. Campillo, *Allez*, p. 142.

⁶ “It was a coincidence that no serious novelist would dare to use”. Campillo, *Allez*, p. 202.

ni remotament a la realitat. Tampoc no n'he llegit mai cap bona descripció, potser perquè l'espectacle era indescriptible.”⁷

At other times, the veracity of deliberately objective literature merges with a composition that is closer to filmmaking. This is the case, for example, in an extract from Maurici Serrahima's account, in which the literary artifice swings towards that of the documentary film and the entire narrative composition seems to be inspired by cinematography:

Per la finestra vaig mirar cap al mar. I tota la meva atenció va quedar centrada per un espectacle inesperat i impressionant. Per la carretera de la costa, de la qual només veia el petit trajecte a tocar dels reixats del jardí de l'hotel, passava ininterrompudament, de la dreta cap a l'esquerra —és a dir, cap al nord, cap a la frontera—, la lenta corrua dels fugitius... Homes vells, dones, criatures. Empenyien o arrossegaven carretons de mà, o petits carrets carregats de paquets i d'estris inversemblants. N'hi havia algun que era estirat per un ase, però la major part ho eren pels mateixos fugitius. De tant en tant, passava una dona que empenyia un cotxet de criatura, de vegades amb la criatura a dintre, de vegades ple només de paquets sense forma, de flassades, d'estris de cuina, d'objectes inesperats, rastres d'una intimitat destruïda...⁸

The book's constant theme is disclosed in these texts: the objectivity of literature denies rhetorical artifice. Veracity prevails over any aesthetic or stylistic caprice. This phenomenon will have yet another consequence: the book *Allez! Allez!* serves as a necessary counterpoint to the huge outpouring of literary fiction about the Spanish Civil War (a vast number of novels exist on this subject).

3. *Allez! Allez!* - The embodiment of objectivity through literature

By way of illustration, I would like to highlight eight examples of objective references which, imbued as they are with emotion and drama, enable more abstract concepts of that exodus to be objectified.

- 1) A terrifying fragment from Artur Bladé i Desumvila's text, a fragment that gives an idea of the dramatic situation that so many people found themselves in:

⁷ “I have seen photographs. I have seen some documentary films of that exodus. But not one of those images remotely resembles the reality. Nor have I ever read a good description; maybe because the sight was indescribable”. Campillo, *Allez*, p. 245.

⁸ I looked out to sea through the window. And my attention was drawn to an astonishing, unexpected sight. Along the coast road, of which I could only see the short stretch next to the railings of the hotel garden, walking in a slow, continuous line, from left to right —in other words, northwards towards the border—, were the refugees... Men, women, children, and the elderly. They were pushing or pulling hand-drawn carts piled high with packages and the most unlikely utensils. Some carts were pulled by donkeys, but most by the refugees themselves. From time to time, a woman pushing a pram would pass by, sometimes with a baby inside, sometimes only full of shapeless bundles, blankets, kitchen utensils, unexpected objects; the remains of a shattered intimacy... . Campillo, *Allez*, p. 203.

el cas d'una nena petita, de tres o quatre anys, amb els cabells rinxolats com una nina, a qui no es va poder operar. Res semblava que anés malament, excepte una taqueta negra que se li havia escampat sobre la panxa, damunt el melic. Ella no va voler menjar ni beure res i va morir com un ocelllet.⁹

- 2) One story by the writer Teresa Pàmies describes in detail the “health” inspection which Republican refugees were subjected to by the French authorities as soon as they set foot on French territory:

Feia fred. (...) havíem de caminar molt juntes les unes amb els altres, els infants ben agafats per la mà. Uns senyors de bata blanca damunt els abrics, abans d'embotir-nos als vehicles de bestiar, ens preguntaven si dúiem polls, si teníem sarna, si escopíem sang, si patíem de malalties venèries, si carregàvem or, si teníem moneda francesa; a les noies ens preguntaven si érem verges. La Nuri, que sabia francès, traduïa plorant.¹⁰

- 3) The story told by journalist Josep M. Poblet evokes an image that is quickly converted in the reader's eye into the symbol of a painful departure and the hallmark that sealed a stage of history. He relates the last, sad drive that the President of the Generalitat, Lluís Companys, took across the deserted Sant Jaume Square. Before going into exile in France, Companys asked his chauffeur to drive him across the square so he could bid farewell to the parliament building of the Generalitat of Catalonia, thus marking with this ritual the end of a personal and collective trajectory.¹¹

- 4) Two tales that –like so many others in this book– reveal anonymous epic stories. The first is by Teresa Pàmies, who tells the story of a woman carrying one child on her back and holding the other by the hand. Once she has crossed safely into France, she turns around and crosses the border again to help a group of elderly people who were calling to her for help.¹²

The second is the shocking account by the actress Montserrat Julió, who explains how they moved at night along a French road, chilled to the bone and soaked by the

⁹ One inoperable case was that of a little girl, three or four years old, fair, huge eyes, with curly hair like a doll. Nothing seemed to be wrong with her except a small black mark on her stomach, over her liver. She didn't want to eat or drink and she died like a tiny bird. Campillo, *Allez*, p. 139.

¹⁰ It was cold. (...) we had to walk very close to each other holding the children tightly by the hand. Before cramming us onto cattle trucks, some men wearing white coats over their overcoats asked us if we had head lice or scabies, if we spat blood, if we had any venereal disease, if we were carrying gold, if we had French currency; we girls were asked if we were virgins. Nuri, who spoke French, translated for us, in tears. Campillo, *Allez*, p. 107.

¹¹ Campillo, *Allez*, p. 155.

¹² Campillo, *Allez*, p. 104-105.

torrential rain. This experience has been engraved on her (and the reader's) memory in blood and stone:

[...] de sobte, un xiscle punyent va tallar l'aire, el va esmicolar com si fos un vidre i cada petita fracció va clavar-se en el cor de la gent [...]. L'udol, sortit de l'arrel de la veu humana, del olor més remot, naixia del pit d'una dona desesperada, impotent, que corria amb un fardell penjant-li de les mans i que llançava paraules semblants a una incriminació:
—*¡Mi hijo! ¡Mi hijo está muerto! ¡Se ha muerto de frío! ¡Mirad ¡Está muerto! ¡Está muerto!*¹³

- 5) The literary conquest of a *symbolic space* has been accomplished by several common references provided by most of the authors.

Throughout the different stories that make up the book, there are elements or objects that have the faculty of synthesizing the moment they are referring to. The most common are: the sighting (by the refugees) of the snow-covered peak of the Canigó mountain; the white bread that the first refugees bought in the French bakeries as soon as they had crossed the border, bread that contrasted with the black bread they had been eating during the war; references to cold, hunger and filth; the barbed wire fence surrounding the French concentration camps, built to detain the massive crowd of refugees; passports, permits, safe conduct passes; objects (suitcases, quilts, blankets, kitchen utensils, photos, jewels, binoculars, Spanish currency) that the Republican refugees took with them in an attempt, on the one hand, not to lose their most treasured possessions and, on the other, to keep objects that would become vital keepsakes for them.

- 6) The capacity that these texts have to express feelings and emotions. Using such vivid accounts, so full of passion, increases credibility. So, Pere Calders, confesses on “crossing the line” that he wouldn't mind if he died:

Em veig obligat a fugir de tot el que estimo i tinc tanta ràbia i tanta pena que ploro amb els ulls ben secs i no em doldria gens morir-me.¹⁴

¹³ [...] suddenly, a piercing scream cut through the air, shattering it as if it were glass, and every tiny fragment stuck in people's hearts [...]. The cry, coming from the very depth of the human voice, from the most profound pain, was uttered in desperation by a woman who, powerless, ran this way and that with a bundle in her arms, shouting seemingly incriminating words:

—*My son! My son has died! He's frozen to death! Look! He's dead! He's dead!!* Campillo, *Allez*, p. 302.

¹⁴ “I've been forced to flee from everything I hold dear and I'm filled with so much rage and sorrow that I cry without shedding tears, and it would cause me no pain to die”. Campillo, *Allez*, p. 18.

7) The power of these tales when they express the smallest detail that reveals social and historical procedures and power mechanisms of great importance. For example, Antoni Rovira i Virgili, shows how when the refugees crossed the border, their hierarchies continued to be upheld;¹⁵ it was not the same to have the right permits as not to have them; being an ordinary refugee did not always mean the same as being a member of the Government. France's role in this exodus has been approached in the same way, by providing examples of experiences that help to decode great historical mechanisms - a role valued positively by Tísner,¹⁶ Pi i Sunyer¹⁷ and also by Edmon Vallès, who has given credit to France for not restricting entry only to the high echelons of the Republican hierarchy, but accepting everyone¹⁸. Nonetheless, France is criticised by Joan Sales —for being one of the first world powers to recognise the Burgos Junta, the fascist government— and by Josep M. Poblet, for having spread the word that Republicans were carrying great loads of gold and silver.¹⁹

We also know of the havoc wreaked by the internal division of Republicanism, manifested even in these last tragic moments: Negrín, President of the Spanish Republic, did not announce the arrival of Companys, the Catalan president, at the border; or as Manuel Cruells testifies: a group of Republicans, immersed in the umpteenth internal struggle, imprisoned fellow Republicans at Sant Joan de les Abadesses, a small village very near the border, while they were being chased by the Francoist army.²⁰

We come across a few traces of almost involuntary, bleak humour. For example, the archaeologist Prat i Puig discovered the remains of an Iberian settlement in Agde concentration camp, where he was an inmate.²¹ There is the case of Miquel Guinart who, thanks to the intervention of his civil servant friend, was registered as a tourist in the Registry Office of the French town of Palaldà, and so was able to avoid the obligations and restrictions typically associated with those who had refugee status. We can also glean how important it was for Catalan refugees to set foot in Rosselló, still a Catalan environment at the time. (At this point, we should remember that this area of Southern France was once part of Catalonia, and was annexed to France in

¹⁵ Campillo, *Allez*, p. 26.

¹⁶ Campillo, *Allez*, p. 125.

¹⁷ Campillo, *Allez*, p. 264.

¹⁸ Campillo, *Allez*, p. 198.

¹⁹ Campillo, *Allez*, p. 165.

²⁰ Campillo, *Allez*, p. 137.

²¹ Campillo, *Allez*, p. 185-186.

1659 in the Treaty of the Pyrenees, signed by Philip IV of Castile and Louis XIV of France).

There is also a tale of cynical delusion. The painter and engraver, Jaume Pla, explains how Spanish-speaking refugees mistook the cries *Allez! Allez!*, uttered by the Senegalese guards waiting for them on the other side of the border, for cheers of welcome and hospitality. The reason is simple. *Allez! Allez!* sounded to them like *olé! olé!*, an expression used by the Spanish to applaud the bullfighter's skilful movements of the cape to provoke the bull.²²

- 8) The concept of the border has a dual nature. On the one hand, it is symbolic, and on the other, it is physical. The border is, therefore, an imaginary line, but tenacious in its unquestionably material aspect. In this sense, the border can be compared to a scar on the earth, and perhaps even a scar on the refugees' memory.

The border, and the act of crossing the border, are referred to with the following variety of words and expressions: "frontier", "to cross the line", "life-saving line",²³ "imaginary line", "border line", "conventional line that creates such a terrible difference",²⁴ "local path",²⁵ "non-existent line, only invented by Man" or simply "cross a field and you're in France".²⁶

The positivist elements of the accounts in this book, such as the ones mentioned above, uncover a historical frieze, and extreme living conditions associated with survival. The reader of *Allez! Allez!* will be subjected to a narrative of extreme experiences. Its power lies both in the accumulation of tangible facts, the smallest details that express the texture and logic of a historical context like this one, and in its capacity to evoke empathy in the reader by focussing on details which, as already mentioned, are easily transformed into emotions. Jorge Luis Borges wrote: "Quizás la historia universal es la diversa entonación de algunas metáforas."²⁷ This well-expressed idea ties in very well with what the Russian Formalist Victor Shklovskyi termed *ostranienie*, a word that refers to the *making strange* effect that

²² Campillo, *Allez*, p. 247.

²³ Campillo, *Allez*, p. 139.

²⁴ Campillo, *Allez*, p. 211.

²⁵ Campillo, *Allez*, p. 160.

²⁶ Campillo, *Allez*, p. 63.

²⁷ "Perhaps universal history is the history of the diverse intonation of a few metaphors". Jorge Luis Borges: *La esfera de Pascal*. In: *Otras inquisiciones, Obras Completas*, Vol. II, ed. Carlos V. Frías. Vol. II. Barcelona: Emecé Editores, 1989, p. 16

literature is capable of. What has always been familiar to us seems to be told or explained for the very first time using an unusual literary tone or pitch.

Literature, to an extent perhaps not achieved by any other artistic discipline, possesses the capacity to make the transaction that turns the individual experience into a universal experience.

To claim the right to historical memory may entail having recourse to repetition; because, by definition, memory is always historical. In the same way, amnesia, the banality of evil that Hannah Arendt spoke of, and induced oblivion, are also historical. Walter Benjamin's reflections are well-known: "There has never been a document of culture, which is not simultaneously one of barbarism".²⁸ In this respect, *Allez! Allez!* represents a document of culture written on a background of barbarism. This book represents a dam that holds back the spread of barbarism, a claim for the right to the most essential memory, always linked to morality and humanity; a memory which can be transformed into moral consciousness. Metaphors, symbols, emblems of the most objective narrative capacity of literature burst forth from this book. This is a book that can be conceived as a symbol of the power of literature.

²⁸ Walter Benjamin: *On the Concept of History*. USA: Classic Books America, 2009, p. 8.