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Joan Maragall



Joan Maragall

Glòria Casals (University of Barcelona)

(Barcelona, 1860 – 1911). Modernist poet and writer

From the standpoint of the history of Catalan poetry, Joan Maragall's work constitutes a bridge between the different formulas of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Maragall embodies and emends the traditions of the [Jocs Florals](#) literary competitions, the Catalan cultural renaissance movement, the [Renaixença](#), [Romanticism](#), [Verdaguer](#), the naturalism of Apel·les Mestres and the classicism of [Alcover](#) and [Costa i Llobera](#) while, in the spirit of agitation, he formulated an innovative set of reflections on his own poetry that, without his knowing it, coincided with some of the defining features of symbolism. He also experimented with poetic models that would flow into, on the one hand, the creation of a Maragallian school of uneven quality and echoes (Pijoan, Lleonart, Pujols and even [Sagarra](#)) and, on the other, some of the great obsessions of [Riba](#) (pure poetry, inspiration, the word, rhythm and how to understand criticism), [Espriu](#) (Goethe, the figure of Nausicaa) and, at another level, [Salvat-Papasseit](#) (songs, women and love as sources of pleasure and creation). Maragall would thus become a classic. The first classic poet of the twentieth century.

The Years of Apprenticeship The fourth and last child and only boy in a family of small industrialists, Maragall was born in Barcelona on 10 October 1860. Little is known of his first years at school. The experience must have been somewhere between what [Rusiñol](#) describes in his *L'auca del senyor Esteve* (The Illustrated Story of senyor Esteve) and what don José de [Sagarra](#) recalls in his *Memòries* (Memoirs). The experience of Esteve was "shrunken and practical", while Sagarra learned a "series of useful things". His secondary schooling and family obligations indicate, as Maragall himself admits in the *Notes autobiogràfiques* (Autobiographical Notes) written in 1885, a first turning point in his personal and literary trajectory:

"(...) I finished my secondary schooling and started to feel unhappy. (?) I was abruptly torn away from books and seated at a small desk in the industry that was to be my destiny, occupying, in a certain fashion, the position of being little more than an apprentice. The blow was terrible and it resounded throughout my being, and this vexed thwarting of my aspirations would rise up in protest under the standard of rebellion, my passion for poetry while, at the same time, at the age of sixteen I gave myself body and soul to the adoration, idolisation of a number of attractive women who passed before my eyes, while a kind of mysticism about Nature also ran in my veins. My love for poetry manifested itself in a sort of craze for filling with myriad verses and astonishing fecundity, in any moment I could steal from my working hours, notebooks that I hid among other more prosaic books that were full of figures pertaining to our industry. (Joan Maragall *Notes autobiogràfiques*. In Gabriel Maragall (1988), *Joan Maragall: esbós biogràfic* (Joan Maragall, a Biographical Sketch). Barcelona: Edicions 62)

These early verses basically adhered to two models of nineteenth-century poetry. On the one hand

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was the humorist-satirical line (and it happened that Maragall considered that his first literary success was the poem "Òptica" (Viewpoint), which was published in *Lo Nunci* on 22 September 1878 and in which he nonchalantly and humorously described an amorous relationship that was frustrated because it was not just between two people but at least three). On the other, was the line that was close to storytelling and the canons of the Jocs Florals amatory poetry (the poem "An ella" (For Her), which was also published in *Lo Nunci* on 12 January 1879, is a song in the most delicate terms of the illusions of young love). After a tense discussion with his father in the autumn of 1879, he was finally allowed to leave the family business and to enrol in the Law Faculty. His classes, truancy, intellectual gatherings, reading, music, opera and several friends (the seven fellow students that completed the "circle", Antoni Roura and Josep Soler i Miquel) soon opened out what had previously been his rather stunted intellectual horizons. Antoni Roura (1860 - 1910), who studied in the Faculty, was the ideal friend and confidante. Numerous still-extant letters reveal a relationship that was not so literary as Maragall's friendships with Soler i Miquel and Pijoan but more human, familiar and mundane. More easygoing and infinitely more serene. Also a student in the Law Faculty, Josep Soler i Miquel (1861-1897) wrote as a literary critic for *La Vanguardia*. A connoisseur of symbolist poetry, he had a great influence on Maragall the poet and also on Maragall the critic and theorist. It was he who produced the edition of the volume *Poesias* (Poems - 1891), a wedding gift from Maragall's friends on the day he married Clara Noble. Much of his writing was subsequently collected in 1898, in the volume *Escritos* (Writings).

After 1902, Maragall rediscovered in Josep Pijoan (1879-1963) the *excelsior* he had lost on the death of Soler i Miquel. The letters they exchanged reveal the solidity of the friendship and also that its didactic component was not always unidirectional.

It was during his university years that Maragall really began his term of apprenticeship, during which, sometimes timidly, and sometimes showing off, he would have to resolve many issues, affirm positions and break new ground. The aesthetic options and language with which he would communicate; cultural models and literary sources; the relations between theory and practice, between abstract and concrete or, what amounts to the same thing, between art and life; the meeting points between creation and criticism and the rejection of any type of precepts or prior codification, were some of the big questions with which Maragall grappled as he sought answers. The poems of these years confirm and accentuate the tendencies that were merely hinted at in the juvenilia poems that he had written in secret. Plagiarism, imitation and parody of the most flowery baroque, romantic and post-romantic Spanish poetry run through some poems "dedicated" to his teachers, which he dashed off to stave off his own boredom and that of his classmates, as well as the amorous poems that some of his less poetically gifted friends asked him to write for them. Most of the poems that are conserved among his lecture notes are written in Spanish, with some words in Catalan when a rhyme or a joke required. They offer glimpses of a rebellious individual, with anarchic tendencies, an upholder of nihilism who was prone to laugh at the dead and the mourners, and capable of setting down such ideas in producing a few rhyming lines. The amorous and circumstantial poems written in Catalan are of a different type. Although they are, as Soler i Miquel would say "*con relleno de las* (padded with) commonplaces *del arte* (of art)" (padded with the commonplaces of art), they already indicate an expressive and not at all tragic lyricism and an ingenuous but terribly effective sensuality that, properly developed, polished and appropriately paced, would become decisive stylistic instruments in his later poetry.

From his early student years dates a very forceful declaration of principles with regard to literature and language, in a letter [in Spanish] dated 5 July 1881 to his friend Joaquim Freixas: "*I share your enthusiasm for Spanish literature, even if my leanings make me prefer to study the other one, to*

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which I owe, and for which I profess greater affection because it is in the language in which I bumbled my first words and in which I shall no doubt express my love for the first Charlotte or Gretchen that some kindly angel places in my path; not least, it is the language in which we have mutually expressed our friendship. In this same language I would make myself understood without surprising anyone if this letter were written four centuries ago; or if four centuries ago there had not taken place what we Catalans shall always recall with certain bitterness, and now that I again read your esteemed words, I see that in one passage you have written, "our literature (Spanish)" and I don't know whether to be sad or happy about the parenthesis because, while you are turning us into Spaniards without our deserving it, it also shows the fear that by "our literature" something that is not Spanish might fortunately be understood. " (Joan Maragall (1960). "Carta a Joaquim Freixas (Letter to Joaquim Freixas)", *Obra completa I* (Complete Works I). Barcelona: Selecta)

Maragall would always sustain this position while he would implicitly accept and never combat the prevailing diglossia: one language for feelings and emotions, another for reasoning and making judgements, with a few more or less significant intersections, always in the same direction (he wrote no poetic works in Spanish).

His university years also show the evolution in his reading of German writers, especially Goethe, and their impact in his literary formation. In 1881, now steeped in Goethe, Maragall won his first literary prize, precisely with the poem "Dins sa cambra" (In Her Chamber) a free reworking of the episode when Faust is conducted by Mephistopheles to Gretchen's chamber and is seated on the side of her bed. With this little poem, Maragall opened the collection *Les disperses* (Disperse Writings), a retrospective anthology covering the years 1881-1903 and published in 1904 in la "Bibliotheca Lovett" collection.

The 1880s were also the years of his first approximations to, or written reflections on art in general and poetic creation in particular. These are not elaborate formulations that are sustained in specific theories, and nor are they the expression of a perfected system of thought. Rather, they make one suspect the need for justification of what is just beginning, in the exercises of self-discipline that Heine, Longfellow, Musset, Lamartine and Bécquer, for example, had also imposed on themselves when they discovered their vocation. In Maragall's case, the blend of metaphysics and aesthetics is certainly indiscriminate, and yet it is possible to glimpse progress in some statements of the *Notes autobiogràfiques* of 1885, "La Naturalesa és Déu Pare, l'Art Déu Fill, l'Amor és Déu Esperit Sant, que són un sol Déu: la Bellesa. Això per a mi és tot" (Nature is God the Father, Art God the Son, Love the Holy Spirit, and These Are One God: Beauty. That, for Me, Is All), and the poetic programme of "Oda infinita" (Infinite Ode), which was published in 1888 in *Il·lustració Catalana*, a timid harbinger of what will later become known as a theory of the living word, which, after 1903, Maragall would endorse and develop through Novalis, to whom he would always be true.

The Modernity of a Theory of Poetry The year 1891 represents a true turning point in Maragall's personal and literary adventure: he married Clara Noble and his friends (including Soler i Miquel, [Oller](#), Sardà and [Yxart](#)) gave him the wedding gift of an edition of *Poesías*, a selection of original poems and translations of Goethe that they had gradually been able to extract from him. The gift would mean his recognition as a poet.

After 1892, Maragall would become the undisputed leader of the followers of the new airs of modernity that were circulating in Barcelona and also a guide for his battered society. He had access to different platforms for launching [modernism](#) with reviews (*L'Avenc*, *Luz* and *Catalònia*), the modernist festivities in Sitges, the Teatre Íntim and the choral societies; he also availed himself of the

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conservative newspaper *Diario de Barcelona* (in October 1890 he had begun to work there as the personal secretary of the director, Joan Mañé i Flaquer), the [Jocs Florals](#) and the most significant regular gatherings of intellectuals at the time: those of *L'Avenç* and the Barcelona Ateneu (Athenaeum).

Maragall, with different intentions and results, would experiment with some of the considerable variety of modernist proposals (decadentism, Nietzschean-derived vitalism, pre-Raphaelitism, etc.), while at the same time strengthening his direct and primary, expressive and sincere lyricism with which he sang of the landscape, customs, festivities, myths and heroes of Catalonia and his love for his wife and his friends. *Poesies*, published in 1895, was his first book. At the turn of the century, Maragall contributed decisively to the recovery of Catalan nationalism, not only through genres that were addressed to the collective (songs, hymns and cantos) but also through his poetry, which obliged him to breathe new life into the language and leave aside overly complex forms. The poems of his second book, *Visions i Cants* (Visions and Songs), published in 1900, were the best example of this.

Maragall's fame as a poet, publicist and speaker, honourable citizen and exemplary family man gradually eroded the distinctive slightly romantic aristocratic spirit of rebellion of his early years, turning it into a generous, eclectic, liberal and universalist -and, in short orthodox Christian- outlook. In literary terms, this change meant rejection of the aesthetic possibilities of [modernism](#) and a consolidation of his reflections on his own creative experience (the ill-named "theory" of the living word, which he outlined in 1903 in his *Elogi de la paraula* (In Praise of the Word) and elaborated upon in 1909 in *Elogi de la poesia* (In Praise of Poetry)) through simplifying themes and techniques of metrics and versification, linguistic resources and rhetorical procedures. *Enllà* (*Beyond*), published in 1906, is the best example of this.

The flourish with which the Noucentist movement led by [Eugeni d'Ors](#) erupted into the cultural scene, and its frequently insolent, indiscriminate and preconceived criticism of the modernists and, in particular, its most visible and most influential leader, triggered off a crisis in Maragall, causing him to withdraw and start reflecting upon his own work, a response that was interpreted as silence. After the lukewarm reception of *Enllà*, Maragall the poet said no more. One cannot specify whether it was a small revenge, therapy, a deliberate act, or the artist's sense of responsibility to his work and to his readers, but Maragall then set about the first major rectification of his poetry. With *Tria* (Selection - 1909), an anthology for a children's reader, Maragall demonstrated that he was capable of doing what the Noucentists declared that good poets had to do: submit their work to revision so as to offer it in the most refined form possible and free of mistakes, inconsistency and muddle. Maragall's corrections tend to eliminate formal defects (repetition, colloquialisms, Spanish forms) and polish defects of versification, as long as the change does not involve an attack on his personal sense of rhyme or oblige him to modify his taste for free verse and anisosyllabism. The corrections also toned down excesses of sentimentalism and absurdity as well as dealing with superficiality in patriotic and religious sentiments. His writing would gain internal coherence thanks, in particular, to elimination of pointless elements. With this revision, Ors, then rectified what he had said about Maragall's poetry and especially *Enllà*.

Tragic Week was to be the stimulus that brought Maragall out of his lethargy and returned him, at the end of his life, to the agitator role of his early years. The violence of July 1909, which Maragall describes in the second part of "Oda nova a Barcelona" (New Ode to Barcelona), like that of 1893, which is reflected in "Paternal" (*Poesies*) and that of the colonial war, which is expressed in "Els tres cants de la guerra" (The Three Songs of War in *Visions i Cants*), the violence -let us say- has been of some use: it brought to light errors, leading to hopeful calls for reparation that had to be achieved

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through compromise, not by just a few people but by a whole country, and giving rise to expressions of fidelity to that country. The problem is that Barcelona of 1909 is not the same Barcelona of 1893 or 1898. The choice of paths to take was greater and the positions more radical. In Maragall's new combative phase, Nietzschean vitalism and romantic elegy were left behind, opening the way for intimate, serene, and even slightly tragic reflection, which found its *raison d'être* in the discovery and acceptance of pain and egoism, in the sentiment of guilt and its expiation: in brief, in solitude. In 1911, in *Seqüències* (Sequences), Maragall completed or closed the thematic cycles he had previously opened: the sea, Haidé, his civil poetry and Count Arnau. And he would embark upon another that would be denied continuity, that of the "Cant espiritual".

Joan Maragall died in Barcelona on 20 December 1911.

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A selection of texts

Text

 **PDF: 'The blind cow'**

A poem of Joan Maragall translated by Jordi Torres. In *Catalan International View*, n. 5.
<http://www.international-view.cat/the-blind-cow-22>

 **WEB: Selection of Catalan Poetry**

Nine poems are offered here: "Paternal" (Paternal` in English translation), "La vaca cega" (The Blind Cow), "La Sardana" (I) (The Sardana (I)), "La Sardana" (IV), "Cant espiritual" (Spiritual Song), "Oda a Espanya" (Ode to Spain), "La Fageda d'en Jordà" (The Beech Wood), "Excelsior" and "La ginesta" (Broom Flower).

<http://www.uoc.edu/lletra/especials/folech/maragall.htm>

 **WEB: "La Ciutat del perdó" (The City of Forgiveness)**

Text of the article "La Ciutat del perdó" (10 October, 1909) with a brief commentary.
<http://www.xtec.es/~jrovira6/restau21/maragall.htm>

 **WEB: "Collserola"**

Poem by Maragall on the web page of Elena Vicioso, "Un viatge literari per les comarques de Catalunya" (A Literary Journey through the Regions of Catalonia), nominated by the jury of the Lletra Prize.

<http://www.xtec.es/~evicioso/bcnes/collcer.htm>

 **WEB: "Bosc de Vallvidrera" (Forests of Vallvidrera)**

Another poem by Maragall on the web page of Elena Vicioso.
<http://www.xtec.es/~evicioso/bcnes/vallvidr.htm>

 **WEB: "Part de fora de la ciutat" (Outskirts of the City)**

A third poem by Maragall in "Un viatge literari per les comarques de Catalunya".
<http://www.xtec.es/~evicioso/bcnes/sfamilia.htm>

 **WEB: "L'últim xiscle" (The Last Screech)**

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Another poem by Maragall on the web page that was nominated by the Lletra Prize jury.

<http://www.xtec.es/~evicioso/bcnes/trensarr.htm>

 **WEB: Gedichte von Joan Maragall (Poems by Joan Maragall)**

Four poems in Catalan and in German translation.

<http://www.jbeilharz.de/katalan/frameset.htm>

Bio-bibliography

Biography

 **WEB: The author in the Catalan Encyclopaedia**

<http://www.grec.cat/cgi-bin/heclangl2.pgm?&USUARI=&SESSIO=&NDCHEC=0039959&PGMORI=E>

 **WEB: In Wikipedia**

Biographical note, analysis of Maragall's work and links in the free encyclopaedia.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joan_Maragall

 **WEB: Member of the IEC**

Joan Maragall, a permanent member of the Institut d'Estudis Catalans (Institute of Catalan Studies).

<http://apmembres2.iec.cat/detall.aspx?pkMembrePLE=204>

 **VIDEO: "Joan Maragall: pròxima estació...Maragall" [Joan Maragall: Next Stop...Maragall]**

Documentary on Maragall's life and work in the programme *El meu avi* [My Grandfather] on Televisió de Catalunya.

http://www.edu3.cat/Edu3tv/Fitxa?p_id=644

Bibliography

 **WEB: Works in the Biblioteca de Catalunya**

http://cataleg.bnc.cat/search*eng/?searchtype=a&searcharg=Maragall+Joan&sortdropdown=-&searchscope=13&searchscope2=13&SORT=D

 **WEB: The author in The European Library**

<http://search.theeuropeanlibrary.org/portal/en/search/%28%22creator%22+all+%22maragall+joan%22%29.query>

 **WEB: The author in the Congress Library (US)**

<http://catalog.loc.gov/cgi-bin/Pwebrecon.cgi?DB=local&PAGE=First>

 **WEB: The author in the COPAC Catalogue (UK)**

<http://copac.ac.uk/search?&au=Joan+Maragall>

Comments on the author

Criticism

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 **WEB: On *Enllà* [Over There]**

lletrA page devoted to this work by Joan Maragall.
<https://lletra.uoc.edu/ca/obra/enlla-1906/>

 **WEB: One of the "Dotze mestres" [Twelve masters]**

lletrA page devoted to this work by Maurici Serrahima.
<https://lletra.uoc.edu/ca/obra/dotze-mestres-1972/>

 **WEB: AELC Website**

Biography, publications, information.
http://www.escriptors.cat/autors/maragallj/pagina.php?id_sec=2076

 **WEB: Joan Maragall in the City of Barcelona Literary Corpus**

Biography, links and transcription of articles on this author.
http://www.ducros.cat/corpus/index.php?command=show_news&news_id=1490

 **WEB: In Praise of Literature**

Contains the poetic works of Joan Maragall, and offers the possibility of looking up words and establishing lists of concordance. Compiled by Ursula Bedogni and Francesco Ardolino.
<http://www.elogidelaliteratura.net>

 **WEB: Joan Maragall and Modernism**

On the website "Gaudí i el Modernisme a Catalunya" (Gaudí and Modernism in Catalonia).
<http://www.gaudiallengaudi.com/CL004%20Maragall%20a.htm>

Miscellaneous

 **WEB: The Joan Maragall Foundation**

Created by the Archbishopric of Barcelona in 1989 with the aim of encouraging discussion around Christianity and culture.
<http://www.fundaciojoanmaragall.org/>

 **WEB: The Maragall Archive in Barcelona**

Information about the Joan Maragall Archive at the website "Espais escrits. Xarxa del Patrimoni Literari Català" [Written Spaces. The Catalan Literary Heritage Network].

<http://www.espaisescrits.cat/home.php?op=6&module=escriptors&ides=4&idioma=eng>

Comments

 **WEB: "La poesia de Joan Maragall" (The Poetry of Joan Maragall)**

Article by Arthur Terry in *JOCS* (2001).
<http://www.uoc.edu/jocs/4/articulos/terry/>

Didactic proposals