

Speaking Brossa.

On the αἴσθησις of the Poet Joan Brossa

Pedro G. Romero

Barely concealed amid the broom bushes – a pitiful jungle of holm oak and olive trees – a country bumpkin in the middle of the countryside, Brossa makes a poor stab at humming Wagner’s *Siegfried* at the invitation of Antoni Tàpies. ‘Talking of Joan Brossa – who has always been a great friend of mine and even though he comes from a very different social background to my own – he is a man who does not have much culture, or rather, is not very erudite, but he has been able to capture so many fundamental things...’ That was how I saw him in images shown in the *Brossa, poeta transitable* documentary directed by Manuel Arranz and Soledad Gomis for Televisión Española (2016). Tàpies was talking about his friend and the gulf between them in terms of social class. In astonishment, he emphasised the value of Brossa’s poetry and his knowledge of things, the encyclopaedic value of his wisdom, his ability to understand the radical language of the Avant-garde movements: Brossa, who was destitute and lacked the wherewithal to escape the suffocating atmosphere of the Franco years, the dismissal of written Catalan, the disparagement of the ultimate gesture of poetry. And I can repeat this now, with proof provided by the audio-visual recording, since Tàpies himself said the same to me in 2006 as we were walking amid the scaffolding in ‘Community’, one of the spaces in the display of *The Empty City* project that Archivo F.X. was presenting at Tàpies’ foundation. You will have to forgive my memory and my notes and the fact that I speak Spanish, but his words went something along the lines of: ‘This world of ladders and labourers would have been very much to Brossa’s taste. You know? I am still amazed at his intelligence. He wasn’t even a labourer, less than a worker on a salary. And he emerged from down there’, he pointed down at the floor from up on high on scaffolding on the second floor at the Fundació Antoni Tàpies, ‘and spoke to us to our face, with his brazenly informal way of addressing us as equals, and his obsession with eggs and tortilla. A poet of the people, yes, of the most common folk. The most radical of all the poets produced by the Catalan language.’

So, yes: we will be reviewing the entire oeuvre of the great Catalan poet Joan Brossa. A body of work that is in large measure visual, in large measure performative, but nonetheless the work of a poet. Acknowledging Brossa as a poet may seem to be stating the obvious, but I believe it is necessary to underline this, above all for his ‘way of making’, his *poiesis*, and his ‘way of seeing’, his *αἴσθησις*. We need to understand that the association between aesthetics and poetics, between an aesthesis and a *poiesis*, is not just a modern take on the classical *ut pictura poiesis*, but that it is a better definition of Brossa’s work than describing it as visual, conceptual or visive poetry. A *way of making* and a *way of seeing* identified as one and the same thing: the same meaning, the same vibration of the air, be it captured by the eye or the ear. A pre-modern identification of ‘poetry’ with ‘painting’ and vice versa is forcefully presented in Brossa’s pieces, so much so that his work is a paradigmatic lesson in that ‘making’ with which art operates in the early twenty-first century.

There is a need to understand this ‘making’, its original voice, its provenance, not just because of the language but because of the position from which it is spoken. We’re not talking about sociology, naturally. Poetry is a particular mode of making, of saying. The voice of the poet does not depend solely on the vocal apparatus, as the political and economic conditions are also vocal cords. We need to try to recover the function of the ‘Brossa poem’, to attempt to restore the power to utterances often drowned out by the fatherland, the market and academia, ‘to decolonise Brossa’, as Maria Salgado put it. His intent is an enigma, but there is something of that to it: to stir up, revolutionise the reading of Brossa to ensure it does not end up as a dead language, a museum piece or a national monument. Brossa – the poet himself says this repeatedly, giving thanks to Odin – escaped death in the war, his only injury being damage to an eye caused by a shard, like Wotan. ‘*Like Wotan, wisdom cost me an eye.*’ Just this, to continue nurturing one-eyed poetry, a way of making that survived the war.

THE WAR

It passes through a bourgeois dressed as a priest.
 It passes through a fireman dressed as a bricklayer.
 I touch a very human earth.
 It passes through a locksmith dressed as a barber.
 I eat a piece of bread
 and take a sip of water.¹

From his early writings during the Spanish Civil War, Brossa talks of fighting on the frontline, near the Battle of the Ebro, with his copy of Federico García Lorca's *Romancero gitano* (the Republican edition of 1937) in his pocket, of the Republican defeat, the shard that damaged his eye and the dead time of his military re-education, during which he appears dressed up as a Chinese man, entertaining his fellow soldiers at the barracks in Salamanca. Brossa came out of the war with the traits of what would become his poetics clearly defined. He insisted, for example, on championing Lorca, Alberti and Miguel Hernández, the popularist and – why not admit it? – populist poets of the war. And not just because the books provided him with something to sit on or to protect his arse during combat. The popularist populism – the repetition is intentional – of these poets, their simple language and sonorous rhyming was not incompatible with the Surrealist image, the sonnet and the sestina, the linguistic experiment, the visual graphic line, the learned word, biographical prose, in short, with the broad spectrum of literature that Brossa himself was going to frequent. But reading them at the height of the war, during breaks at the front, in the R&R sessions organised by the 30th Division's Cultural Commissariat; reading them aloud there, among other militiamen, in Spanish, interspersed with stanzas and couplets in Catalan, well, that left an indelible mark. Brossa states this repeatedly to the learned and to TV journalists: 'Yes, I wish I were a poet like Lorca.' When Brossa talks of poetry, he is talking about *poiesis*, but also about the rhymes that the masses understand as poems, with their trifling musicality and half rhymes. Like someone who can improvise, a *trouveur* and *troubadour*. The sleights of hand that Brossa has got us so used to are nothing more than this: astonishing rhymes. The secularisation of the sacred word, of the language of the state, of the instructions of commerce is this translation of meaning into different words that the people dared to undertake. Modern poetry began there, with the Romance languages in Provence, with the language of Oc, with Catalan, with rhyme, the founding language. And this same thread of the secular voice remains in Brossa, constitutes him. This beginning to speak in rhyme. It is in his most popular and lowbrow poems, yes, but it is also in his bilingualism between words and things.

¹. Original version on p. 210 of this book. Version in English: *Joan Brossa or the poetic revolt*. Fundació Joan Miró, Barcelona, from 23 February to 27 May 2001. Edited by Manuel Guerrero.

Barcelona: Generalitat de Catalunya, Departament de Cultura ; Fundació Joan Brossa, Fundació Joan Miró, 2001, p. 103.

On the Camino de Sacromonte, because of something their respective wives had said, Eduardo García Fernández, an irrigation warden, and another individual called Ramos started arguing. The latter, using a large knife, stabbed Eduardo. He has a serious stomach wound.²

Brossa was a poet in Catalan at a time when Spanish was the politically imposed and hence the dominant language. When I speak of bilingualism in Brossa, I do not mean that he expresses himself in two languages but that he expanded the meaning of language, of words, and not just spoken or written words but also those that are performed and are visual. We will see later how this was also enunciated by Nicanor Parra. From the outset, for example, writings in Spanish appear in Brossa's work as quotations, ready-mades and *détournements*, taken from the press, from official speeches, from the bureaucratic communiqués issued by the Franco regime. It was a strategy and a constant in all his work, which opened a yawning breach in the normalisation of Catalan poetry since modernism. It opens a new space, his *Coup de dés*, in which poetry combines actions, images and objects. This secular founding exercise is essential if we are to understand Brossa, to challenge those who regard the poet's voice as sacred: ah, great poetry, the great bards! Brossa wielded his Catalan as a political weapon and at the same time had to prevent it from being consecrated and institutionalised, from becoming a 'police voice'. Of course, Spanish is the voice of the enemy: the voice of sermons and preaching, stock market reports and decrees published in Spain's Official State Gazette. The secularisation of language implies restoring that early character of the popular romance that is no longer the state language.

Let us consider for a moment Giorgio Agamben's view of this bilingualism between words and things. This Italian philosopher situates the essential bilingualism of every human word in the struggle between official Latin and the new vulgar languages, in the debate between the language of knowledge and the language of love, between the dead and the living. Brossa's poetic pulse involves repeating this combat, this battle, in every poem. Agamben reminds us of the metrical form of *discordo* which, in Provençal and *Dolce Stil Novo* lyrical poetry, comprised 'this Babelian discord in which several languages seep into each other, thereby demonstrating each language's inner disagreement

² Joan Brossa: extract from 'Tres poemes purs', *Vivàrium*. Barcelona: Edicions 62, 1972, pp. 40–41 (Cara i

creu, 17). Complete version of the poem on p. 340 of this book. Translation by John London, 2018.

with itself, the bilingualism implicit in every human word'.³ So, there is Brossa, amid words and things – now also in the sense given by Foucault in his work of the same title – between the defended Catalan language and the official Spanish of the Franco regime, between the Catalan language spoken and heard on the street and the one he wrote in each poem, in that private conflict between the poet and his language, with that need to invent a language that is each poem. There he is and from thence emerges every gesture, every action, every theatre, every image, every typeface, every odd and end functioning colossally as a poem.

PALMA DE MALLORCA

Best situation, view to the bay and to
the wood. Rooms with all comfort,
private bath, telephone in every room.
Bar Service and Restaurant.

Beste Lage. Aussicht auf Hafen
und Wald. Zimmer mit allem Komfort
einschliesslich Bad und Telephon.
Eigene Bar und Restaurant.⁴

Manuel Vázquez Montalbán said that he was a Catalan poet who wrote in Spanish in the same way that Kafka, a Jew and a Czech, wrote in German. But Brossa's outsider status took a different direction. There was no possibility of him abandoning vernacular Catalan, and he had neither the opportunities in his life nor the education that would allow him to use French, like Samuel Beckett, for example. The poet becomes aware of the foreignness of language when he confronts the singular act of naming, even if only adverbially, the events and things of this world. The poet's way of speaking always has this disposition. He knows that this 'wood' or this 'river' has been named thousands of times, but the poem is always the first to use this form of words. This is not solemn by any means. It is not a question of inaugurating dams and reservoirs, as national laureates do whenever they rehearse their elegies. I have already talked about this prime rhyming, about the consonant repetition, of the refrain that links the 'thing' in the word of the poem. Nicanor Parra (again) spoke of that moment of realisation, of the poet and his dichotomy, by drawing attention to

³. Giorgio Agamben: *El final del poema*. Buenos Aires: Adriana Hidalgo Editores, 2016.

cabell: triada de llibres (1957-1963). Esplugues de Llobregat: Ariel, 1977, p. 403 (Cinc d'oros, 7).

⁴. 'Palma de Mallorca'; *Poemes de seny i*

this basic outsider status of someone who, having had the choice of either Quechua or English, continued to write in the Spanish of the colonisers. And this foreignness derived from images, objects and things. So, it is about existing in a conflict between language and the world in such a way that each word is original and vulgar, national and prostitute, language and thing. This naturalness and culture, nature and civilisation are to be found in Brossa's way of making. The academic categories that define him as an experimental poet, a language innovator and a pioneer are meaningless. Brossa was mindful that he was writing after Dada, after concrete poetry, Fluxus and Lettrism. In his works, he was aware of the new stage available to poetry in the world, of the new conditions afforded by technique and poetry's infinite reproducibility, of what it meant to rhyme in the twentieth century. We cannot continue to repeat the slogans that sell the poet as a publicist for the new; he was never that, however much many of his poems – letters, images, things – may have appeared, sociologically, as novel in Catalonia, a province of Europe. What Brossa does is be a poet, and that, radically, means observing the new shift of the poem beyond semiotics. It is not just the polysemy of the sign, the new means of communication, the structuralist deployment of language. It is about knowing that poetry is not confined solely to uttered phonemes, written signs, because language has infiltrated the world and everything speaks; everything can speak. When he places an A in bread like a sandwich filling, this is not an act of daring or any Avant-garde *boutade*. Rather, it emphasises the ample condition of poetry in the world. Like the goliard expelled from his religious order who devotes words of praise to God to singing about food and wine. The Brossa who constantly writes and rewrites the world is, with every poetic object, with every action, with every expansion of the field of poetry, signalling not transgression (though that too), not the enlargement of boundaries, but something more fundamental: the way to read his written texts, how to listen to his word, the linkage of phonemes in his voice.

The word expresses
 concepts and emits sounds
 and is also used to communicate ideas
 and perpetuate truths and lies.

Maybe it points to all this in some way?⁵

⁵. El mot expressa / conceptes i emet sons / i també serveix per a comunicar idees / i perpetuar veritats i mentides. // Que potser ho indica d'alguna

manera? Joan Brossa: 'Untitled', *Ot*. Barcelona: Alta Fulla, 1984, p. 105 (Els entra-i-surts del poeta, 2). Translation by John London, 2018.

So, yes, only with this understanding of the word, object and thing in Brossa, this understanding of his way of making, his *poiesis*, will we be able to speak and put something forward in this exhibition, the accompanying publication, initiatives, academic lectures and the publicising of the project. And, thus, clearly delimit and even embark on a total review of his work based on three main qualities: orality, performance and anti-poetry. From his early books to his final plastic explorations, as well as theatre, cinema, music, action art and gestures of which he was a pioneer. Our determination to dismantle academic categories (suites, habitable poems, hypnagogic images, object poems and action poems), to shatter the classification tables, the taxonomies of Brossa's works, is not a mania or act of rebellion swinging in the other direction, nor a necessary dialectical renewal. Brossa showed almost the same astonishment at magic as he did at politics; the same contempt for bourgeois theatre as for cabaret; the same passion for Wagner's cantabiles as for the great contemporary music after the Jewish Schönberg. Blurring these taxonomic boundaries, destroying the Brossa thesaurus, is just an attempt to restore the power of his poetic voice.

Brossa's distinctive stance in relation to the Surrealism of the Dau al Set group made him more disposed towards Miró than Dalí. Dau al Set held Brossa back rather than helped him to develop his own particular word, and his materialist turn was akin to the shift towards Art Informel of Tàpies and other fellow travellers. It is possible to see a parallel between the artisanal turn, the return to plain language, to common expressions, and Tàpies' matter painting, since adding sand to a painting is almost the same operation as directly taking the manner of speech of people on the street. His critique of the commodity from his communist standpoint prevented him from being assimilated into the Pop spectacle, despite the advertising games, the *détournement* of brands, and the awareness of the fact that conceptual turns of poetic speech did not differ that much from the new inventions of financial capitalism. The poetic concept of language kept him simultaneously close to and distant from conceptualism and institutional critique, much like Marcel Broodthaers, with his works akin to those of Pere Portabella and the Grup de Treball, and the self-awareness of the place of his work in the ways of making art in the second half of the twentieth century. Lastly, the recapitulation of his visual work in the 1980s imploded following the triple exhibition held at the Mosel und Tschechow (1988), La Máquina Española (1988) and Joan Prats (1989) galleries. It also put an end to the fetishising of the commodity, precisely by mimesis, by exhibiting there, in that window display

or kingdom of goods for sale, the triumph of the spectacular marketplace, exposing the symptom, as Marcel Mariën and the Surrealists did, by bringing together discordant objects – such as the famous encounter of the umbrella and the sewing machine, the work of Lautréamont – and presenting them as a poem due to the rhyming of their meanings. This is exactly the same operation that capitalism does with ‘things’, it bends material, the accumulation in images, the density of the spectacle in a Campbell’s soup can or a Dior perfume. And Brossa is merely the shopkeeper, the assistant in an old hardware store, anachronistically amazed at the monsters, the new goods.

PIT

Advertising, by making so much use of
superlatives, has weakened
language.

The majority of words
we read in adverts
are discredited.

Language
and life don’t go together any more.

A pit.⁶

Brossa’s long relationship with the Brazilian João Cabral de Melo and the influence the latter exerted on him are other themes considered in this review of the Catalan poet’s work. It is not just an invitation to read the classics of Marxism, the social and political turn of his poetry, the reclaiming of common parlance, as the poet Pere Gimferrer has suggested. Cabral de Melo’s Marxism is not one of his strong points, though it is repeatedly upheld in relation to Brossa. The turn to the material condition of language is connected with other areas he focused on, materialist of course, but of a more sensual nature, a celebration of life and its gifts. It is interesting to think that for Cabral, Spanish – the Spanish of poets such as Jorge Guillén and Gerardo Diego – was a sober, austere language; even in Lorca and Alberti he found this dryness that contrasted with the excesses of Portuguese modernism, with the extreme musicality attained by the language in

⁶. ‘Pou’ / La publicitat, de tant fer servir /
els superlatius, ha afeblit / el llenguatge. // La majoria de mots / que
llegim als anuncis / estan desprestigiats. // El llenguatge / i la vida ja no es

corresponen. // Un pou. *Rua de llibres*
(1964-1970). Sant Joan Despí: Ariel,
1980, p. 77 (Cinc d’oros, 8).
Translation by John London, 2018.

Brazil. Cabral de Melo was from Pernambuco and he reclaimed for the language the direct, dry style of the *sertão* that is not in keeping with the stereotypes of Brazilian tropicalism and which, for the Brazilian poet, is best reflected in Iberian regions, in Catalonia, in Andalusia, in a different way but with a turn to the flesh and blood of language, to its brushing against the things of the world. This is the materialism that Cabral instilled in Brossa, not a Marxist analysis of reality. We are talking about an extensive system of connections: for example, with the Spanish of the Republicans in exile, the wandering Spain described by José Bergamín; with the tradition of César Vallejo and its extension in Peruvian Surrealism; with the lines set by Vicente Huidobro in Chilean poetry; with the conceptual tradition in Mexican poetry, influenced by Max Aub; with Brazilian concrete poetry and international concrete poetry in general. This is the materialist atlas that Cabral de Melo opened before him. Brossa's social and political turn was his own, something he upheld amid the context of the Franco regime's quashing of ideas and crushing of a culture, Catalan culture, on which Brossa took a clear stand.

12 MARCH 1951, AT 11 O'CLOCK IN THE MORNING

*The attempted coup d'état was successful to start with...*⁷

(Extract from a newspaper.)

The demonstrators turn over
and burn a tramcar.
They hand out leaflets
and proclamations throughout Barcelona.
Here comes
a group of demonstrators and they just keep shouting.
The shops close. Yes,
down with the fascists!
The police are pelted with stones
Petrol-soaked rags are thrown through the windows of
the local government.
Another demonstration takes shape.
Men march down the road.
The explosions have stopped.
On the right, the impact of a bomb.⁷

⁷. '12 de març de 1951, a les 11 del matí' /
'La intentona logró un éxito inicial...' /
De la premsa. / La manifestació bolca /
i crema un tramvia. / Reparteixen

impresos / i proclames per Barcelona. /
Baixa / una manifestació que clama
sense parar. / Els comerços tanquen.
Sí, / a baix els feixistes! / La policia és

When we consider the trope of Cabral de Melo and Marxism, we need to consider another of the Brazilian poet's warnings, one that gives the lie to the commonplaces about his relationship with and influence over Brossa: the limits of politics and a conception of life – Cabral de Melo was one of that long dynasty of Latin American writers who are members of the diplomatic corps – that always separates the sensory enjoyment of life from its political instrumentalisation. 'Politics acts on the way things are delivered, not on their gestation': this is the simile Cabral de Melo uses to describe the relationship between poetry and politics. Poetry is politics, not in its gestation but in its printing, distribution and circulation. Making poetry originates elsewhere, outside the *polis*, though words end up building our cities too. This would explain Brossa's relationship with political parties, his distance from the active militancy that Carles Santos and Pere Portabella talk about, an effective Brechtian distancing that separated him from the powers-that-be even though he was at times aware that the authorities were using him. In Brossa's final years, his dependence on Barcelona's socialist City Council gave rise to a complex relationship but this had very little impact on the poet's elegiac parodies, in which his heroes are still Macià and Companys, for example.

In keeping with this logic, let us consider poets that we wish to compare to Brossa. The comparative method makes it possible to decontextualise his work, which is just as important as contextualising it. The Brossa that we present is often interchangeable with Nicanor Parra, Marcel Mariën, Ian Hamilton Finlay and their work in a kind of trompe-l'oeil effect, since there are evident similarities between their toolboxes, likewise between the political situation of these poets and their geographical contexts. Interestingly, Marcel Mariën and Ian Hamilton Finlay also wrote in circumstances in which there were disputes and certain languages were excluding others for political reasons: Ian Hamilton Finlay in the context of Scottish nationalism, which the poet supported so strongly that he turned Little Sparta, the place near Edinburgh where he lived and constructed his work (a garden with constructions, sculptures and poems set in the surroundings), into a redoubt, a kind of independent republic; and Marcel Mariën, a Walloon in the context of Belgium, who in many

apedregada. / Llancen per les finestres del Govern Civil draps impregnats de benzina. / Es forma una altra manifestació. / Marxen homes pel carrer. / Han cessat les explosions. // A la dreta l'im-

pacte d'una bomba.' *Antologia de poemes de revolta (1943-1978)*. Barcelona: Edicions 62, 1979, p. 37 (Els llibres de l'Escorpi. Poesia, 53). Translation by John London, 2018.

of his poems addressed this geographical and linguistic dislocation that Flanders signifies, as well as the dual language community of the Belgians. In his correspondence with Guy Debord, he alludes on a number of occasions to this and to the tension that any image reaches when he has at least two different words with which to name it. The reference is to certain children's books in which illustrations appear, such as a picture of a cow, with its corresponding terms in French (*vache*) and Flemish (*koe*), though he could also be referring to Magritte's *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*.

FOREST

Word referring to it.

FOREST

Ef o ar es tee⁸

I have arrived at much of this evidence by transposing Nicanor Parra's concept of anti-poetry to Brossa's work. The Chilean poet placed the birth of his anti-poetry in a reflection on language: 'Why write in Spanish and not in English or Quechua?' This is an *idée-force*, if you will allow me to use this leitmotiv, a constant that is already starting to sound repetitive. This question gives rise to the need to exploit the idiomatic normality of language by using humour, colloquial language, sonorous sounds, visual discoveries, performative execution, etc. It is about always emphasising a certain foreignness in the language that is our particular mother tongue. It is not a matter of writing in another language but of exploiting the semiotic conventions of the system of signs used in the language itself. When Parra and Brossa met – due to a project set up by René de Costa – they were surprised at how many commonalities there were in their ways of making poetry. Parra had to rethink the status of his poetic objects, as he suddenly discovered that Brossa had succeeded in formulating a set of grammar rules for this way of making. In Parra's work, the object is always an interchangeable sign. The Coca-Cola bottle will change every time the joke or poem is repeated: it will be a new bottle, recently bought at the supermarket, and not the one that featured in the poem in 1964, to mention a date at random. Brossa's objects and his enormous output from the 1980s onwards must also be understood in this light too. The semiotic operation takes precedence

⁸. Bosc / Mot que l'al·ludeix. / *Askatasuna*. Barcelona: Alta Fulla, 1983, p. 42 (Els entra-i-surts del

poeta, 1). Bosc / Be o essa ce / Ibid., p. 43. Translation by John London, 2018.

over the fetishising of the material. To my mind, Brossa's objection is legitimate. He accepts the risks that lie between the poet's naming and the trader's commodification. The operation of language between the object and the thing would become a simple game of artifice were it not for the resistance of the word to the material, and for this reason it sometimes needs to be demonstrated. The obviousness of the fetish contains an implicit criticism of fetishisation. The thing becomes word and becomes commodity; there are risks to making this operation visible, and what Brossa does is expose it, show it frankly, pornographically. The word and the commodity laid bare, as if they were the same, showing the contradiction, the disagreement of language that every poetic operation demands. Thus, we come back to this evident disagreement that every language has with itself, as Giorgio Agamben puts it.

CANVAS SANDALS

Canvas sandals cost 15 pesetas.

Shoes, 175.

A car drives by, with its radio on.

An ounce of ham costs 3 pesetas.

A packet of cigarettes, 4.60.⁹

Consequently, following the visual recapitulation of Brossa's poetic work from the 1980s, we have opted to place his work amid the array of these ways making poetry. The selected poets are simple examples of a more extensive way of making found around the world. Firstly, within Europe, we have the work of Marcel Mariën, from Belgium, as well as Lettrism, Fluxus and the concrete poetry scene in Vienna, to mention but a few examples. Secondly, the English-speaking world is represented by Ian Hamilton Finlay, from Scotland, and the long line that extends from Joseph Cornell to the language poets. Lastly, within Latin America, we have the poetry of Nicanor Parra and, as mentioned earlier, the vast terrain of Brazilian concrete poetry, the Argentinean León Ferrari and the Mexican Ulises Carrión. The choice of Mariën, Hamilton Finlay and Parra is, of course, connected with the poetic phenomenon of mimesis. Though these three poets never

⁹. 'Unes espadenyes' / Unes espadenyes valen 15 pessetes. / Unes sabates, 175. / Travessa un cotxe, amb ràdio. // Una unça de pernil val 3 pessetes. / Un paquet de cigarretes, 4'60. *Poesia rasa*:

triada de llibres (1943-1959). Introduction by Manuel Sacristán. *Esplugues de Llobregat*: Ariel, 1970, p. 184 (Cinc d'oros, 1). Translation by John London, 2018.

met, there are numerous thematic and formal similarities between their work and Brossa's. This is what Erich Auerbach described as the global capacity of poetry to give the same answer to the signs of a particular time.

Face
mirror
to face.¹⁰

Accordingly, we need more than a reading of Brossa as anti-poetry. As stated at the beginning, orality and performativity are at the heart of the implosion of the poetic text that led Brossa towards the visual realm, towards the differentiation between what is written and what is said, to become a poet who also sought the popular and ordinary register of the Catalan language, who reclaimed the language of workers and crafts and the political use of language, thereby rekindling the necessary theatricalisation of every manner of speech, of every register of utterance. Hence Brossa's interest and professional ambition in relation to the theatre, in deconstructing the great Catalan bourgeois theatre, in experimenting with performing spaces, in the cinematographic aspect of actions and words, performance, the action and happenings, be they in the high-brow cultural tradition that comes from Dada and Surrealism or in the popular culture of magic, the circus and variety shows.

One of the evident tasks to be done when rereading Brossa is, therefore, to link orality and performativity with the stagnation brought about by the conventions of the bookish reading, of pros arch theatre, of the various 'boxes' with which museums work. For Brossa, language is characterised by its use. There is no body of theory or grammar that can place limits on language. It is in the use of language that the poem can be effective. Consequently, when the rereading of Brossa is conducted within an institutional environment, seemingly minor problems arise that challenge us and make it possible for us to rethink the expressive status of the poet's work. Firstly, because the orality of a poet in Catalan is confronted with the translation into other languages – English, French and Spanish – an exercise in which the power of the spoken language is made visible, not only by translating its meaning but also by interpreting the qualities of the diction,

¹⁰ Cara / mirall / a cara. 'Untitled',
Els entra-i-surts del poeta. Barcelona:
Alta Fulla, 1986, p. 17.

Translation by John London, 2018.

bearing in mind the language's particular and dialectal approach. And secondly, due to the performativity of the poetry and its dissection as a theatre action. Of course, the limits between action and representation are difficult to establish, but the reading we propose requires us to at least disrupt the static reception of texts and documents. As we consider the printed poem, the written or audio-visual document, or the object, we have to broach awkward questions and issues, changes to conventions in order to reclaim the use of language in an effective manner so that this way of making, the *poiesis* of Brossa's poetry, is produced once again.

You've turned the page.¹¹

Much of what I say here is the result of working with a team created specifically for this publication, a kind of critical committee that secularises – so to speak – the standard reception of Brossa's poetry. 'Secularise' should here be understood in a broad sense. It is not that there is a Brossa religion or credo, but it is true that there are many pious readings, exegetes that link the poet with his language in the nationalist manner – for example, I write in Spanish but do not believe that my language implies that I belong to any nation or culture, and there was a need to demonstrate that this could also be the case for Joan Brossa, if only as a working hypothesis – that have held the poet hostage. The members of this committee are Isabel de Naverán, who has worked on the possibility of bringing performances, dances and other forms of action theatre up to date, and on how to ensure that the anachronisms of any re-enactment do not descend into unnecessary historicism and are not rendered banal by being taken out of context; María Salgado, who has taken as her starting point the notion of a form of poetry that does not distinguish idiomatic properties, that cannot be understood unless it is 'performatted' and which regards these processes to liberate writing as a kind of decolonisation of language; and, lastly, Roger Bernat, who has looked at the contextualisation of the processes of creating, editing and presenting Brossa's works in the public space while studying the production mechanisms, exploring his social and economic relationships, and demonstrating the political potential of these appearances of his poetry in publications, books, theatres, radio broadcasts, films, television shows, exhibitions, museums and the Joan Brossa Foundation itself. In every working process, the tasks entrusted are a methodology, a determination of

¹¹ Has girat el full. Ibid., p. 154.
Translation by John London, 2018.

how far one wishes to operate, how far and on what basis one wishes to read and reread a poet.

The entries in the glossary in this publication bear witness to their contributions and they delimit and reframe the ambitious aspirations in the reading and rereading of Brossa's poetry. If I draw attention here to the contributions made by this diverse group of readers, it is not just because of the results but because I want to make special mention of the exercise in diversification and gestural enlargement that both Teresa Grandas and I wanted to present in this project. Incorporating the performative necessarily entailed incorporating other voices. Reading can be a solitary exercise, but rereading requires the collective, the sum of diverse times and spaces. Brossa's interest in the theatre, in the conventions of the bourgeois theatre with its more-or-less cardboard actors and dialogues and sets, also involved increasing the number of voices in his work. The logic of Fregoli, Brossa's early interest in this master of the quick-change act, is associated with the need to make room for many voices, many ways of saying his poetry. In addition, this wide range of registers, from the sonnet to the action poem, from the minuscule hieroglyph to the grandiloquent monument, is connected with polyphony, with the need to give a choral, expanded, polyhedral order to the expression.

Steak and chips 20
Anisette 4
Two coffees 7
Dessert two ice creams 6
Wine 12
Service 17.85.
Wallet.¹²

For example, Roger Bernat identifies, almost at sememe level, money (let us remember that Brossa spent much of his life without a penny to his name and was supported by his friends and the occasional job) and Brossa's poetic word, which has given us considerable insights into the circulation and expansion of his poetry, of his poetic voice, over time. Likewise, María Salgado points to decals and stickers as examples in which Brossa seizes reality by introducing a phrase found

12. Filet amb patates 20 / Un anís 4 / Dos cafès 7 / Postres dos gelats 6 / Vi 12 / Servei 17,85 // La cartera. 'Untitled', *Poemes de seny i cabell. Triada de llibres* (1957-1963). Esplugues de Llobregat: Ariel, 1977, p. 400 (Cinc d'oros, 7). Translation by John London, 2018.

in the press, by incorporating images or the poetic object itself. When we consider this relationship with the decal rather than, for example, with the ready-made, we can better place the level of transparency and exposure of his poetic work. It has also proved important to understand that when we speak of a performative order, it is in the theatrical gesture framed in the traditional idea of the theatre, in the Italian style, in which there is a momentary break in the action and things, and the words first appear and then disappear. All of this has been important in considering the exhibition display and even for thinking about the similarity of the overall device of *Brossa Poetry* with the 'theatre'.

ENTR'ACTE

Homage to Pompeu Fabra

The words run to change
 their costumes. The curtains fall, and the flies
 come down once more over the wings.
 The subjects, verbs and adverbs,
 now differently dressed, return
 onstage. This leaves a group
 of adjectives who peer through
 the gap in the curtain.

The next poem will now begin.¹³

When Brossa's work was presented in 2007 in *A Theatre without a Theatre*, an exhibition also produced by the MACBA, an attempt was made to combine a certain documentary philology with the actuality of his performative poetry. Brossa was viewed as more than a pioneer of action art from the time of his poetry soirées in the 1940s, as it was also a question of rereading his poetry on the basis of these qualities that are theatrical rather than dramatic, which are not at all the same thing: the theatre understood as a device, as a fundamental instrument for reading Brossa, whether that be having to turn a book around to find the new direction of a verse or due to the introduction of a visual element, or because the poem suggests that we perform an everyday action, a political gesture, a gag.

¹³. Original version on p. 148 of this book. English version: 'Entr'acte' in Joan Brossa, *Poems from the Catalan*. Introduction and translation by

Arthur Terry; preface by Roland Penrose, vol. I. London: Guinness Button Publishing Limited; Barcelona: La Polígrafa, 1973, p. 24.

INTONATION

I notice so many changes
in what I hear and see,
that if I remember personal
tragedies I light up a cigarette
and get out of the poem.¹⁴

It is interesting to note how there survives in Brossa's objects and visual works a connection with the word, with what is spoken, a relationship that in some instances comes from a duplication of Roussellian and Duchampian roots, to consider its main actualisation, and in other cases from a dialectal relationship with a profound political charge with Brechtian effects, in the jargon of the theatre, or Benjaminian effects in his practice with images. Strengthening the co-existence of duplication and dialectics in his poetry and in the visual, performative and objectual practices that constitute it is what makes its complexity and, to a certain extent, the ongoing actuality of Brossa's poetry possible. And it is the theatre, the theatrical mechanism, that enables the double and the dialectic to be articulated at the same time. It is widely known that much of the Avant-garde theatre after the Second World War took this direction, expressing the Artaud and Brecht duo in many modalities, combinations and senses. In Brossa, however, the attention paid to duplication is perhaps more primordial, rooted in the early gestures of pataphysics, in the humour of the absurd – especially of the humourists of 27, pioneers in nonsense playwriting – and in the effect Raymond Roussel had on the Surrealists, on Duchamp and Cocteau. The expression of this essence of the double – the linguistic reality of what occurs on stage distances it from fiction, from the conventions of any representation – with the dialectics, be it of Brechtian origin but also linked to the collapse of the bourgeois theatre in Ibsen and Chekov, as a way of formulating ideas, plots and even political action, is enormously original in Brossa. We should not think just of his stagings. For Brossa, writing itself was a theatre work that places on the stage a series of lines, dots and commas, black masses, which, when put in typographical order, make up a sentence but also a scene: on the blank page, he rehearses a tremendous theatrical convention. The theatrical mode is contained in the basic process of the writing and reading of the poem: the calligraphic

14. 'Entonació' / Són tants els canvis que noto / quant al que sento i al que veig, / que si em recordo de tragèdies / personals encenc una cigarreta / i surto

del poema. *Poemes de seny i cabell: triada de llibres (1957-1963)*, op. cit., p. 775. Translation by John London, 2018.

script (the roman and capital letters as Brossa himself drew them), the typographic printing and the published copies.

INDEX

3 February 1937

ORDER by which carnival festivities
are forbidden. (Official State Bulletin, no. 108)¹⁵

Clearly, the path from Mallarmé to Marx – the double and dialectics, which in essence is what we are talking about – as João Cabral de Melo pointed out, is one of the main courses followed by poetry and art in the twentieth century. Mallarmé and Marx, as Susan Buck-Morss indicates, embody two routes to correct the Wagnerian project of the total work of art, another of the major features of the century. Brossa's endless fascination with Wagner's work – always expressed in a humorous tone and partly based on love, partly on hate – is essential to establishing his way of making, his *poiesis*. It is the essence of Brossa's writing project and also, it must be said, one of the sources of misunderstandings regarding his work. It should be noted that the genealogical origin of Brossa's poetry lies within the work of Mallarmé and particularly *Un coup de dés*. This is not just a historical root, as Agamben rightly points out. The poets of the thirteenth century who formulated the metre of the sestina and the modern Mallarmé share the same concerns, which involve accepting that the divide that exists between language and reality is insuperable and making language operate autonomously, alert to its own rules and configurations and not just to the reflection, echo or relationship with the real world. Brossa's fondness for the calligram and sestina, for example, seemingly opposing forms, can thus be seen to be totally natural.

¹⁵. Originally written in Spanish. 'Índex', *Rua de llibres (1964-1970)*, op. cit., p. 135. Translation by John London, 2018.

CONCEPTUAL SESTINA

You have to write six stanzas of six ten-syllable lines each, ending in an envoi of a triplet. The rhyme words of the first stanza (which should be disyllabic with the stress on the first syllable and preferably nouns) are repeated in each stanza, but in a different position and following a preconceived order; with regard to the preceding stanza, each stanza alternates the last three rhyme words, placed in reverse order, with the first three, which follow the usual order; in other words: each stanza, in the first line, repeats the rhyme word of the sixth line from the last stanza, in the second line, the one from the first line; in the third line, the one from the fifth line; in the fourth line, the one from the second line; in the fifth line, the one from the fourth line; and in the sixth line, the one from the third line. In the envoi the six rhyme words are repeated, two in each line, one within the line and the other at the end.

In addition to the discovery of words which rhyme (not endings but identical words), there obviously exists a certain analogy between this medieval genre and twelve-tone music, written according to the serial principle discovered by Arnold Schoenberg.¹⁶

We should bear in mind that Mallarmé simultaneously admired and rejected Wagner's work and his concept of the total work of art. Mallarmé knew that this method, the presentation of a work of art that aspires to depict the world in its entirety, the orders of all things, once formulated – Wagner's tetralogy, for example – takes reality as it is and turns it into a paradigm of the ways of making of a particular time. Mallarmé was both admiring of and appalled by the capacity of the work of art to encompass totalising portrayals of the world, and in response to this high-flown ambition – quasi-fascism if we were to talk in political terms (and in this I am not, or almost not, referring to the myth that connects Wagner with the ideology of National Socialism) – he offers the possibility of another world, not on a scale of one to one but through fragments, remains, flotsam, shards, broken bits, fossils that reveal their hollows, empty spaces, their omissions, the mere potential of what could have been. In other words, he presents us the world in its totality but not by any means its total representation.

¹⁶. Original version on p. 316 of this book. Translation by John London, 2018.

LUCKY FOR SOME*

Richard Wagner was born in the year 1813.
On 13 March *Tannhäuser* was premiered in Paris.
He premiered the *Tetralogy* on 13 August.
His marriage with Cosima lasted thirteen years.
On 13 January he finished *Parsifal*,
and the Barcelona premiere was on 31 December 1913.

He died on 13 February 1883, thirteen years
after the declaration of war with France.
And if you add up the figures of the year of his birth
you end up with thirteen.¹⁷

From this we can grasp Brossa's fervour for Wagner. Of course, Brossa's work is in keeping with the logic of Mallarmé's fragment, going against the flow, with an almost folkloric sense of the Wagnerian, linked historically to the Catalan societies that identified with Wagner's work with unwonted populist force. Wagnerian societies began to appear in 1862, the year that the Grand March from *Tannhäuser* was first performed, imposing their tastes at a time when leading musical institutions such as the Gran Teatre del Liceu opera house, mainly dominated by the aristocracy and the upper bourgeoisie, still favoured works in the Italian style and bel canto. Later on, elements among the bourgeoisie took over the Wagnerian movement and used it to culturally colour their own nationalist ideology. It may seem incidental, but there is the operatic and post-Wagnerian version of *Terra baixa/Tiefland*, the iconic rural play by Àngel Guimerà, which was set to music by Eugen d'Albert, who was born in Scotland but ended up taking German nationality as he admired the country's culture and regarded it as superior to British culture. Over time, the opera became one of the favourite works among the Nazi elites in Vienna during the period that Austria was annexed to Germany. After the Second World

* Translator's note: The original title echoes the phrase using 'tretze' (the number thirteen in Catalan), meaning 'sticking to one's guns'.

¹⁷ 'En els seus tretze són tretze' / Richard Wagner va néixer l'any 1813. / Un tretze de març va estrenar *Tannhäuser* a París. / Va estrenar la *Tetralogia* un tretze d'agost. / El matrimoni amb Còsima va durar tretze anys. / Un tretze de gener va acabar

Parsifal, / i l'estrena a Barcelona va ser el trenta-u de desembre de 1913. / Va morir el tretze de febrer de 1883, tretze anys / després de la declaració de guerra amb França. / I si sumem les xifres de l'any del seu naixement / ens donen tretze com a resultat. Joan Brossa: *El dia a dia (1988-1992)*. Barcelona: Edicions 62, 2007. Translation by John London, 2018.

War, the opera fell out of favour due to denazification programmes in Germany and Austria. Well before this, it had been performed for the first time at the Liceu in 1910, when Wagnerian euphoria was at its height. We regard this incident almost as an allegory. It clearly and concisely exposes the internal contradictions within this populist, even libertarian, passion for Wagner in Catalonia at the start of the twentieth century. But it was during this trend, this early popular outburst of enthusiasm, that Brossa became staunchly Wagnerian. This was the Wagner of the musical societies, the popular choirs, the tune performed by a sardana band, the very one that we evoked at the start of this essay, onomatopoeically performed by Brossa himself (the poet was born on Carrer Wagner in Barcelona). It is important to understand this displacement of the Wagnerian in Brossa in order to grasp his opposite operation, the Mallarméan expression that Brossa embodies. He operates with the same fragmentation, the same generation of potential but from below, from a gesture at ground level. We should understand that Brossa achieves this using the artisan, popular, working-class voice that is Wagnerian, which, being broken, rendered precarious and defeated, cannot take on the Wagnerian total work of art, but he can employ it to do what Mallarmé did, and that is reduce that total work to its mere potential.

COSMOGONY

They gently stretched out their thigh
and put it between my legs,
and put their left leg
on top, on the outer side
of my right thigh.¹⁸

But, potential for what? Bryan Magee¹⁹ observes that the frenzied passion for Wagner very often conceals undersexed individuals, poets with a complex when it comes to resolving problems to do with communication and the emotions, who find the German composer's intoxicating musical passages a stimulant, an outlet at the 'height' of their sentimentality. It is not my aim to continue with psychologisms that cheapen what I wish to say. In Brossa, the central argument of the poetry is poetry itself. Unlike the Provençal poets, unlike Dante

18. 'Cosmogonia' / Estirava lleugerament
la cuixa / i me la posava entre les
cames / i la seva cama esquerra la /
posava al damunt, per fora / de la
meva cuixa dreta. *Poemes civils*.

Barcelona: RM, 1961, p. 95.

Translation by John London, 2018.

19. Bryan Magee: *Aspects of Wagner*.
Oxford: Oxford University Press,
1988.

and his Beatrice or Petrarch and his Laura, he has no need of a beloved, of an almost metaphysical figure who plays a leading role in his adventures and loving episodes of language. His love of Catalonia, for example, his political defence and calls on behalf of its dignity, language and political independence are, in fact, on behalf of language, of poetry itself. This is not to diminish his political effectiveness: just as Beatrice shaped our idea of love, so the Catalonia evoked by Brossa lives to the full the construction of its being, its cultural recognition, its political emancipation. This is not a fiction or the construction of a mirage; it is not that. It is a making of language, the making of poetry that understands that the word and the world do not coincide and which develops its potential within that lack of a correspondence between the two. The poet knows there is an impossibility, a gap between language and the world and, conscious of that fact, issues all kinds of procedures, colloquial forms, unconventional forms – to an extent forgotten by the academy and high literature – in order to bridge that gulf. But it is interesting how Brossa employs many of the approaches of the Avant-garde (the ready-made, photographic copy and *détournement*) to expand the relationships between language and reality. I believe that Brossa has extended the capacities of language through his bastard use of these approaches and sources of colloquial, vulgar language, popular jokes, the exaggerated gesticulation of the villager, the conventions, tics and afterthoughts of the working classes.

A WORKER WALKS BY

A worker walks by with his lunch box.

A pauper sits on the ground.

Two businessmen sip coffee
and think about trade.

State is a great word.²⁰

Brossa, rubbish, junk.* Restoring the ordinary worker's voice, the language people speak. Yes, people speak while wearing a hat or without

²⁰. Original version on p. 242 of this book. English version: Glòria Bordons, 'Joan Brossa and the Avant-garde tradition' *Catalan Writing*, 10. Translation by Arthur Terry (May 1993), p. 37.

* Translator's note: 'Brossa' in Catalan means 'rubbish', 'junk' and other similar terms.

one, they exaggerate an A, say a lightbulb, a railway ticket, a playing card, handcuffs, confetti. Ah! People speak Brossa.

The people don't realize the power they possess:
a general strike lasting a week
would be enough to sink the economy,
paralyze the State, and show that
the laws it imposes are unnecessary.²¹

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

For various reasons, I finished this essay on 29 October 2017 in Norway, near Skjolden, where Wittgenstein lived in a cabin. This isolation encouraged me to choose the poems by Brossa included in this essay. Almost all of them come from the Polish poet Marcin Kurek's intelligent reading of Brossa's oeuvre, the only book of his work I happened to have at the time.²² And in evidence of the fact that everything I have said could also be written by adding together poems by Brossa himself, here is another:

No, no.
This poem wants to go beyond
the limits of language.²³

²¹. La gent no s'adona del poder que té: / amb una vaga general d'una setmana / n'hi hauria prou per a ensorrar l'economia, / paralitzar l'Estat i demostrar que / les lleis que imposen no són necessàries. 'Untitled', *Askatasuna*, op. cit., p. 233. English version: *Translation: the journal of literary translation*, 16 (Spring 1986). Translation by Gregory Rabassa, p. 28.

²². Marcin Kurek: *Poesía rasa. La experiencia de lo cotidiano en la lírica de Joan Brossa*. Madrid: Visor, 2017.

²³. No, no. / Aquest poema vol traspasar / els límits del llenguatge. Joan Brossa: *Poemes de seny i cabell: triada de llibres (1957-1963)*, op. cit., p. 290. Translation by John London, 2018.