

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Los poetas apócrifos de Max Aub by MARIA ROSELL

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REVIEWS

ROSELL, MARIA. *Los poetas apócrifos de Max Aub*. València: Universitat de València, 2012. 143 pp.

At least since the advent of modernism, the relationship between writers and historians of literature has been a complicated one, perhaps not unlike the relationship between the police and the Mafia. It is the critics who, in principle, control the authors' entry into, and place within, the canon. Yet writers tend to display a barely veiled disdain for the bean-counting bureaucrats of the academy, trying their best to mock and undermine the professors' much-too-neat categories and attempts at periodization. Fiction writers have plenty of tools at their disposal to confuse their readers, academic or not. The sprawling operating system that we call the novel comes with centuries' worth of open-source apps designed to throw readers off track, from gender-bending pseudonyms and unreliable narrators to found manuscripts and spurious footnotes. Lyrical poetry, on the other hand, appears to have less room—perhaps a lower tolerance—for this kind of masquerade-ball playfulness. If fiction is about inserting as many filters as possible between the author's self and the final text, readers of lyrical poetry have come to expect direct access to the poet's authentic core. As Maria Rosell points out in this short but at times thought-provoking book, even after modernism and postmodernism we continue anachronistically to impute to the artistic object an "aura casi religiosa" based on "la autenticidad y la originalidad" (132).

Naturally, to the mischievous-minded, the relative rigidity of these generic

expectations is a tempting invitation to mess with their underlying presuppositions. It is the very assumption of authenticity, after all, that allows for the creation of apocrypha in the first place. As Rosell writes, “para probar que alguien es un artista auténtico, necesita mostrar que es capaz de dominar la delicada operación de fabricar la inautenticidad” (132). Max Aub proved a master at this test. As if his literary, cultural, and linguistic profile wasn’t kaleidoscopic enough—born in Paris in 1903 of German-Jewish parents, he moved to Valencia at age 11, worked as one of the Republic’s cultural operators in Paris during the Civil War, and spent most of his adult life as an exiled Spanish writer in Mexico—he further multiplied his authorship through geography and time in *Antología traducida* (1963, 1972) and *Imposible Sinaí*, which he began to write in 1967 in response to the Six-Day War, and which was published posthumously in 1982. Similarly mischievous were his invented biographies *Luis Álvarez Petreña* (1934, 1965, 1971) and *Jusep Torres Campalans* (1958).

True to its subject matter, *Los poetas apócrifos de Max Aub* has a misleading title. For one thing, the book dedicates much more space to other poets’ uses of apocrypha than to Aub’s. Spanning Spanish, French, and Portuguese, we read about Fernando Pessoa, Prosper Mérimée, André Gide, Paul Valéry, Miguel de Unamuno, Valéry Larbaud, Antonio Machado, Federico García Lorca, Felipe Benítez Reyes, Agustín Delgado, Luis Mateo Díez, and José María Merino. For another thing, it uses Aub’s and others’ work as a springboard for a series of more general questions and reflections about authenticity, authorship, and literary history: “¿se puede considerar la existencia de una historia de lo falso en las letras hispánicas contemporáneas, definiendo claramente lo falso como toda práctica cuyo origen o autor difieran del pretendido?” Rosell wonders; “si consideramos que lo falso es lo no verdadero, todo el arte queda implicado en esta percepción que conlleva apreciaciones de tipo moral dirigidas al ámbito creativo” (15). The book’s relative brevity and purposely unfocused, almost sprawling structure mean that Rosell rarely does more than scratch the surface of the texts and authors she deals with; in that sense, the book itself reads like a brief introduction or an anthology.

The first chapters provide a guided tour through sundry examples of apocryphal poets that likely inspired Aub, starting with Machado’s *Complementarios* and Juan de Mairena, and Pessoa’s 72 heteronyms. Rosell identifies the author’s urge for self-multiplication as rooted in a paradoxical combination of emotional fragmentation and taxonomic classification—discipline and anarchy—and closely connected with the notion of the author as actor. In her second chapter, Rosell draws on Pessoa to offer a useful distinction between fictional character, pseudonym, and heteronym. The difference is one of gradation; but only the latter, she states, aims to create “una verdadera alternativa experiencial” (133). The third chapter gives a

loose historical overview of the phenomenon of the faked poetic anthology and the “found manuscript” since the Renaissance.

The brief second part of the book, 18 pages in total, deals directly with Aub’s two apocryphal anthologies. *Antología traducida* has a broad world-literary scope—ranging from ancient Egypt to the twentieth-century present—and its intention is primarily playful. It aimed, Rosell argues, to relativize the authority of the canon, at the same time that the short, displaced lives of the invented poets—many of whom were killed young or committed suicide—can be seen as a reflection of Aub’s own wandering biography and fear of literary-historical marginalization. *Imposible Sináí*, on the other hand, was a politically gutsy experiment: a fake collection of writings by 28 young soldiers from both sides who had died in the Six-Day War. The anthology reads like one of Aub’s novels or tragedies: dignified voices that fundamentally disagree with each other on the most basic level, without a clear common ground in sight.

For Antonio Machado and Fernando Pessoa, the invention of heteronyms was an act of personal and literary liberation: a way to transcend the limitations of their own voices and biographies, or to explore the forking paths of hypothetical lives and histories. In the case of Aub, the efforts to destabilize the foundations of literary history and authorship, authenticity and truth, were rooted in the avant-garde, to be sure; but over the years of his long exile in Mexico they acquired a clear political dimension. The Franco regime—or, for that matter, state authorities everywhere—endorsed and instituted truths and histories that Aub knew to be false. The lies that a snitch had told about him in 1939 remained uncorrected in his French police record for decades and served to deny him entry into the country; cultural histories of Franco’s Spain excluded the bulk of the Republicans’ work; and so forth. In addition to these bureaucratic and institutional abuses, Aub also felt betrayed by history itself—a post-1945 history dominated by a Cold War in which the project of the Second Spanish Republic proved impossible—and interpreted this betrayal as a license to ignore that history in order to imagine the world as it could and should have been: a world in which a non-assassinated García Lorca ended up with a seat in the Royal Academy, or a world in which the assassination of Franco in 1960 heralded the arrival of a Third Republic. As Rosell writes, Aub’s apocrypha embody “la sonrisa irónica del pesimista ante la parodia de un cosmos derrumbado”; “El apócrifo valida lo que la vida niega” (133–34).

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