1 Introduction

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1.1 Why Write *This* and *in This Manner*?

Few authors embody the energies, hopes, struggles, and disappointments of the Iberian twentieth century as fully as J.V. Foix (1893-1987).[1] This book scrutinizes his lifelong creative endeavor, styled by him as 'poetry research'. Identifying as a 'poetry researcher', he consciously stepped away from the label of 'poet' and adopted terms that likely provoked intrigue and perplexity. His pursuit was more than a poetic quest; it was a thorough interrogation of a distinct mode of knowing, acting, and being. At its heart was the investigation, and poetry was both its means and object. The works born of this journey stand among the most singular and profound contributions to modern European experimental culture.

Over the course of seven decades, Foix persistently outlined and explored a new creative form of relationship with the world, in defiance of the dominant aesthetic and political currents of his time. The intensity

1 Pronounced [foʃ]. He never used his full name, Josep Vicenç [ʒu'zɛb bisɛns], to sign any published text.

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of his literary output and vision stands in contrast to his apparently uneventful life, which was dramatically impacted by an unfavorable and unfeeling context. He never moved from his hometown Sarrià, about five kilometers inland from Barcelona, to which it was incorporated in 1927. His family ran a renowned local pastry shop, and he received a proper, bourgeois education. While still a kid, he climbed the nearby hills of Collserola with some friends when they heard that the famous romantic poet Jacint Verdaguer (1845-1902) had just passed away in one of the villas scattered in the forest. Allowed to pursue his interests in reading and writing from an early age, he was nevertheless expected to study Law at the university, as were many other young boys of his background, but he never completed his studies and instead spent more time voraciously reading at the library. Alongside modern intellectuals and dilettantes, he was a recurring presence in the Ateneu Barcelonès, a scientific and literary association in the city center. For several decades he could be seen daily on the train line that connected Sarrià and the capital city, where he would often leave behind his belongings, including personal papers and manuscripts.

Before the Spanish Civil War, he contributed to literary magazines and directed the cultural section of a large newspaper, but after the demise of the Republic and the destruction of the Catalan political and cultural systems, he was often the man behind the cash register at the Foix pastry shop. In 1946, he bought a small house in the fishermen town of Port de la Selva, in northeast Catalonia, and spent most summers there, sailing along cliffs and coves. He married once, to Victòria Gili, but she moved away in 1948 – divorce was illegal – and he stayed in their apartment in Setantí street for the rest of his life, where he would often be visited by friends, young poets and artists.

These are Foix's poetic spaces: the perimeter of a small town, the bustling city, the literary cenacle, the train car, and the rugged coast of a fishermen village. His works obsessively deal with the unexpected that looms in each of these spaces. An almost infinite number of blurry characters and dreamlike figures appear, stalk the first-person speaker, and cause a sudden, fantastic transformation of the characters, the objects, and the space. In both verse and prose, nothing and no one escape these processes of mutation, repeatedly frustrating a speaker who had wished for a clearer picture of himself and the world around him.

For a long time, his audience was a limited one. At least until 1960, appraisal came mostly from other poets, but none of his works had become widely known.[2] His puzzling poetic universe disturbed many readers, because it challenged the conventional images of the

2 In 1961, Foix received the Golden Letter, a prestigious, independent award given to the best Catalan book of the previous year. That book was *Onze Nadals i un Cap d'Any* (*Eleven Christmas Poems and One Year End* [L'Amic de les Arts, 1960]), where Foix combined his intricate poetic world with the rhythms and images from popular songs. His

realist narrator and the lyrical poet. The influence of literary cubism (Apollinaire, Reverdy) and the interest in the uncanny within everyday life, for instance in his two first prose collections, *Gertrudis* and *KRTU* (L'Amic de les Arts, 1927 and 1932), made people think of Parisian surrealism. And his classicizing sonnets and imitation of medieval syntax and style (either Occitan, Tuscan, or Catalan) in *Sol, i de dol* (Alone, and Mourning [L'Amic de les Arts, 1947]) left a lingering impression of impenetrability.[3]

In 1969, he gave a talk at the University of Barcelona in homage to the poet Carles Riba (1893-1959), author of *Estances* (*Stanzas*, 1919 and 1930) and translator of Homer, Plautus, Hölderlin, Poe, and Rilke, among many others. He was unanimously praised for the purity and depth of his lyrical verses. In his speech, Foix recalled an anecdote from around 1918. Riba curiously perused some of his unpublished prose texts and said, apparently dry and caring at once:

> "Why do you write this and in this manner?"
>
> "Do you find it dark?", I asked.
>
> "Neither dark nor clear, but rather toxic and distant, deprived of illation. As if you made me look at a landscape upside down, with the head between my legs". (OC 4, 291)

Foix was left speechless – Riba's erudition often had that effect, but his own verbose personality was difficult to appall. He thematized these questions in his own work and commented on them on several occasions. In the book *Catalans from 1918* (Edicions 62, 1965), among diaristic entries that captured the intellectual atmosphere of the early twentieth century, he mentioned his exchange with Riba. In this version, he only recalled seeing the revered poet frown while reading his prose poems:

> It seemed to me, and Riba said nothing about it, that I only strayed; the continuous transformations to which I subject the images were merely false simulacra and not the simulacrum in its integral purity that I attempt to transcribe. In Riba, I have seen the permanent. (*C18*, 118)

popularity skyrocketed thereafter, and many new readers appreciated both his witty, playful verses and his enigmatic, nocturnal landscapes.

3 Edicions L'Amic de les Arts was the press and publishing house that edited several of Foix's self-financed publications: *Gertrudis* (1927), *KRTU* (1932), *Alone, and Mourning* (1947), *The Unreal Omegas* (1949), *Where Did I Leave my Keys…* (1953), and *Eleven Christmas Poems and One Year End* (1960). In homage to this habit, *Desa aquests llibres al calaix de baix* (*Store these Books in the Bottom Drawer*, 1972), by the publishing house Nauta, and *Cròniques de l'ultrason* (*Chronicles of the Ultrasound*, 1985), by Quaderns Crema, included L'Amic de les Arts alongside their own names.

Alongside Foix's immense respect for Riba's depurated expression, there is an obvious and earnest concern about the nature and purpose of his own work. Stimulated by the inquiries of his peers, he dedicated numerous texts to his ideal conception of poetry, most of which were informed by his own practice.

In a short essay called "Some Reflections on One's Own Literature",[4] Foix confessed an act of betrayal. In his youth, he had committed to a very peculiar intellectual ideal, revealed in terms of absolute transparency: "I would be inexorable in realizing my personality, which I aspired to project, dematerialized, like a brief shadow that slipt over the sea" (*K*, 40; Venuti, 145). There are various forms of disappearance in the arts, from pseudonymity (Cendrars, Pessoa) to creative mutism (Rimbaud, Duchamp). The poet called his pen name "J.V. Foix" a "false pseudonym" (*K*, 40), and even though he wrote many of his press articles under actual pseudonyms, he never abandoned creative writing. His drive was a vitalist one. In the *Gay Science*, Nietzsche demanded from the artists the discovery and the exercise of a style fashioned by themselves, autonomous from any exterior doctrine (Nietzsche 2001, § 290, 163-4). The philosopher also considered blurriness, confusion, and disarray to be the main features of his time and argued that general collapse and destruction were required if humankind was to ever return to transparency:

> [W]e have no way of preventing people from *clouding* us, from darkening us […]. But we will do what we have always done: we take down into our depths whatever one casts into us – for we are deep; we do not forget – *and become bright again…* (§ 378, 243)

The desertion of his former commitment is described by Foix as a failure:

> For me, then, my literary production is a defeated protest, a phenomenon of spiritual dissociation similar to what men of science designate as the consequence of the death of an organism, with its bifurcation, total dispersion, even destruction. Total? (*K*, 40; Venuti, 145)

And just some lines above, Riba's questions resonated again: "There were moments when I repeated myself: Why write *this*? Why write *in this manner*?" (39). He felt unable to turn his personality into a natural phenomenon. He failed at rejoicing with a "silent flutter of wings" (40). Throughout his entire life, poetry would channel his

4 Originally printed in the last issue of the magazine *L'Amic de les Arts*, in March 1929 (Foix 1929a), reprinted in the newspaper *La Publicitat* (17-06-1932), and finally used at the end of 1932 as the prologue in his second book of prose texts, *KRTU*.

painful experience of defeat. Through his work, he showcased the bubbling unrest of his personality, overwhelmed by deep inner confusion and besieged by the impossibility of becoming one with an increasingly chaotic world.

In these proemial words to *KRTU*, he outlined the volume's three kinds of poems (*K*, 40-1): attempts – he called them *"applications"* – with "indisputable documentary value"; poems where images are loosely arbitered "with the aim of disorienting their situation within the reality where they move or metamorphose"; and first and foremost those poems that "best represent the *retreat* (*refoulement*) from that initial ambition":

> In their realization, the classic phenomenon of intellectual liberation through the work of art is produced inversely: each new poem is a new element of intoxication which demands other poems with imperious exigency. It is a closed world whose irreal exoticism held me and whose prisoner I have long remained. (*K*, 41; Venuti, 146)

What kind of research is undertaken by this intoxicated and defeated individual? He is, according to these preliminary words, entrapped in an investigation that has no clear endpoint, for each poem is indelibly bound to the previous and the following ones: his strategies of transformation and accumulation keep him far from any "intellectual liberation" and do not grant him the chance of disappearing in his work.

1.2 Three Suspension Points

Foix's personality, embodied by his first-person speaker and by his spaces, objects, and characters, multiplied in each poem, branching from text to text, from verse to verse. The poet and literary critic Gabriel Ferrater (1922-1972), one of Foix's most acute interpreters, drew attention to this imaginative procedure and called it the "uncountable multiplication of personality" (Ferrater 1979, 60). According to him, Foix's ever-transforming images corresponded to his ever-changing personality, which the poet failed to restrict to an organic, comprehensible, narrative. His scope was thus decidedly collective:

> When Foix says "I", and he has repeated this to me a hundred times in conversation. He says: "When I say 'I', I always mean 'we', because I believe my experience to be shared by all humankind". (Ferrater 1987, 56)

From the standpoint of poetic objects, the uncountable multiplication of personality corresponded with the objective emergence of the world's paradoxes. He relied on an expanded understanding of

knowledge, focusing as much on the statements of poetry as on their modes of appearance and relation (Vogl 2015). Both the 'I' and the objects of the world are subject to dispersion through these multiplying processes of transformation. Foix's poetic practice, in spite of Ferrater's own perspective, appears close to Rimbaud's famous "I is another": "The first study of the man who wants to be a poet is the knowledge of himself, complete. He looks for his soul, inspects it, tests it, learns it" (Rimbaud 1951, 254). The French-Spanish poet Claude Esteban summarized Foix's endeavor as follows:

> It is, of course, a rejection of all the apparatus of Symbolist poetry in order to return, as Rimbaud would say, to that famous task: to seek out the rugged reality and embrace it once again. (Esteban 1987, 47)

In poetry as in life, he was unable to assemble a total image of himself, but this did not deter his renewed commitment to his own practice in terms of research. Ferrater would call this combinatorial aggregate of juxtaposed singularities "a tallying of the impersonal threads with which a person is sewn" (Ferrater [1969] 2018, 16).

Foix rarely commented on the meaning of his verses or the real-life anecdotes and images that inspired them. He often added all sorts of paratexts to his works, but these tended to complicate the matter even more, due to their own lyrical and allusive nature. Deprived of exhaustive first-hand accounts on the poet's inspiration, the interpretive keys of his works are to be found almost exclusively within the poetic space, where failure and disorientation are thematized and where the inquiry on the role of the poet unfolds.

The first poem of *On he deixat les claus…* (Where Did I Leave my Keys… [L'Amic de les Arts, 1953]) bears a long title written in capitalized letters:

> I ARRIVED IN THAT TOWN, EVERYONE GREETED ME AND I RECOGNIZED NO ONE. WHEN I WAS GOING TO READ MY VERSES, THE DEVIL, HIDDEN BEHIND A TREE, CALLED OUT TO ME SARCASTICALLY AND FILLED MY HANDS WITH NEWSPAPER CLIPPINGS (*OHD*, 159; Rosenthal, 55)

Dated from September 1942, it reflects the general state of devastation in the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War, and the loss of shared, civic, cultural touchstones (Carbonell 1991, 140-2). As the poet and critic Pere Gimferrer (b. 1945) argued, such a state of prostration "subjects the validity of art to interrogation" (Gimferrer 1984, 194):

What's the name of this town
With flowers on the steeple
And a river with dark trees?
Where did I leave my keys?
(*OHD*, "I arrived in that town…", 159, vv. 1-4; Rosenthal, 55)

The speaker does not recognize the town and remains a stranger to its residents. He does not remember his name (v. 9), where he came from (vv. 10-11), and his job (160, v. 26), but he clearly recalls being a poet:

Just look at the crowd in the square!
They must be waiting for me;
I, who read them verses;
They're laughing and they leave. (vv. 17-20)

The verse "Where did I leave my keys?" does not aim to thematically encompass what is a rather miscellaneous collection of poems. Foix selected it as the title of the book instead of "When I sleep, then I see clearly", which would become one of his most well-known verses. He argued that neither of them defined nor explained anything at all about the book (*OHD*, 157). To the critic Antoni Comas, Foix's choice shifts the focus from semiotics to poetics, for it reveals "an approach to the poetic technique, to the strictly creational phenomenon" (Comas 1968, 249).

The general lack of recognition and the questions posed by the speaker of the poem are recurring themes in Foix's work, oftentimes related to all sorts of phenomena of darkening and mutation. The defined historical circumstances that inspired this poem, however, highlight that Foix's poetry research is no simple manipulation of sound, image, and idea in pursuit of metaphysical understanding. The poet makes choices regarding the matter of his work, but the plural materials of his craft constantly evade his control, revealing that in the poetic endeavor, he is as much an agent as a patient. The verse – and title – *Where Did I Leave my Keys…* invokes the fragility and uncertainty that inspired Foix's practice for decades.

The speaker whimpers, fumbling for the keys – a mundane yet evocative gesture that summons an image of the poet, mere steps from his threshold after his habitual train journey to the city center, his hands patting down his pockets. Even though the town is apparently strange and unavoidably *unheimlich*, it is his own town, and the keys, "keys to his identity, keys to his poetry, anchor points" (Boehne 1980, 74), must not be far away, or entirely lost, but rather tucked and hidden in some inner pocket of the coat, or maybe left inside the house, and, hence, near at hand: "On a daybook scrap | My portrait strolls" (*OHD*, "I arrived at that town…", 160, vv. 29-30).

In a much later prose poem, written between 1970 and 1972, Foix seemed to engage in a long-distance dialogue with himself, as he attempted to give an allusive answer to the conundrum presented by the verse "Where did I leave my keys?". The poem is titled "Near at Hand", its name taken from its final three words. Foix used it to title the entire collection, subtly adding three familiar suspension points: *Tocant a mà…* (Near at Hand… [Edicions 62, 1972]). As the epigraph reads, this piece was written in tribute to the aforementioned Carles Riba.

The speaker is now just another inhabitant of the town, and the questions revolve around a specific limit of the collective knowledge, which materializes in the shape of an "ultrasecular Wall": "We all knew where the Wall was, but we had no clue what was behind it" (*TAM*, 457). Similar walls had made an appearance in earlier works:

> All of us, maidens and bachelors, gather every evening at the foot of the wall. We spend long hours there, listening to the sounds and songs coming from the other side. (*EDP*, 283)

And in the proemial words of *L'estrella d'en Perris* (The Star of Mr. Perris [Fontanella, 1963]), Foix had acknowledged that some of his prose poems came "from beyond the Wall and the Ultradream" (*EDP*, 250). The "ultrasecular Wall" might also remind the readers about one of Foix's first texts, "The village", published in *Gertrudis*: "No one has gone beyond the square, and no one knows what lies beyond the walls that close off the streets" (*G*, 19; Venuti, 27). This was a familiar atmosphere: during Foix's youth, as the poet himself declared, Sarrià's daily life had a remarkable liturgical aspect, and civil and social customs were formally organized by the cyclical rituals of the Church (Foix, Comadira 1985, 48). In "Near at Hand", Foix synthesized this theme with a mythical narration regarding the relationship between the town and that which lies beyond its reach:

> We saw arithmetical calculations, weeping suns and laughing moons, prophetic sentences in ill-arranged, transcendental verses, and commemorative hearts and phalluses. (*TAM*, 457)

Afflicted by some sort of "contagious fever, a peculiar disease of the soul" (457), the inhabitants muster the strength to tear the Wall down. The resulting *Entzauberung* of their world allowed Foix to highlight the permanent presence of the incomprehensible and the unexplainable, as well as the obstinate recombination of the forms of the sacred in the modern world:

> The cloud of dust obscured the day and terrified the villagers. At the dawn of the new, mild, bright, fragrant day, we all, young and old, of both genders, awaited: neither river, however, nor forest, pond, or beach. Neither right at the other side of the secular foundations of the wall nor well beyond them: there was no mysteriously elongated hole, no well with sinister blacknesses, no passage to astounding cliffs, no abyss with magnetic depths. There was just a clear *whole* without shape or color, a *white whole*. Its neutral whiteness was difficult to describe, and it attracted you, but not as if you were to collide against it, helpless, or as if you were to penetrate it like the cleaver of a butcher would cut through a country lard bread. (457-8)

Demoralized by the impossible vision of absolute clarity and the unbearable uncertainty it causes, revealing that the *white whole* is as inaccessible as the Wall, the villagers rush to build new walls from the ruins. The transgression is immediately counteracted by actions of restitution. The town's relationship with that limit, present in its absence, is now more nuanced:

> [The villagers] piled up materials from the ruins, but as soon as someone stepped on the ground where the Wall had enclosed the village from that side, they imagined chimeras and fled towards the square with the church, the bakery, the tavern, and the apothecary, or they headed to the hill trail. (458)

In this context of general disarray and confusion, the speaker adopts the first person plural and concludes the mythical narration with a call for a transhistorical and collective form of relationship with the mystery:

> This event, recorded in the archives, has given, in my people's land, a different meaning to the act of standing *facing the wall*, distinct from the disciplinary action in schools. Among us, vindicated testimonies, it signifies *facing*, even when close to home, an infinite filled with wonders and latent miracles. *Near at hand*. (458).

A single image of the poetic endeavor is revealed by the first poem in *Where Did I Leave my Keys…* and the first prose text in *Near at Hand…*: the research is likened to an uncertain adventure. It is characterized by a strong will of orientation and a relentless hope against all odds. A commitment engrained in doubt and mediated by an all-encompassing experience of failure guides these poetic essays. Zooming out from his puzzling images and examining their interplay with his general ideas on poetry and the standpoint of the poet, this book aims to analyze the correspondence between Foix's

aesthetic strategies and his poetic pursuit of knowledge. The investigation will rely on an expansive concept of 'realism',[5] which fuses reality and imagination, past and future, life and poetry in a practical and obstinate unitarian vision. In sum, the book seeks to provide a detailed account on the scope and objective of Foix's avant-gardist 'poetry research'.[6]

5 See Baßler et al. (2018), for a panoramic introduction to the complex relationship between modernism and realism.

6 The philosopher Joseph Vogl, drawing from a diverse tradition of philosophical aesthetics – from Bachelard and Deleuze to Blumenberg – defines the poetology of knowledge as follows: "An open concept of knowledge, plural and loosely determined, that seeks the specific correspondence between modes of presentation and objects of knowledge in order to describe the historical singularity of the orders of knowledge" (Vogl 2015).