3 From Images of Darkness to Perennial Twilight: *Gertrudis*

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3.1 Introduction: Foix's Hyperconcrete Metaphors

This chapter will outline the metaphorical uses of darkness to refer to the hardships experienced by the poet in pursuit of stable knowledge of himself and of the world around him. According to Jordi Marrugat (2020, 503), the most immediate coordinates of Foix's rhetoric and poetry are those of post-symbolism. An influential example of this tradition is *La paraula en el vent* (The Word in the Wind, 1914) by Josep Carner (1884-1970). Foix's first compositions "are built as processes of knowledge of the experience in time, by means of love and poetry understood as an inner fight" (Marrugat 2020, 503). The main features of these works include apparent simplicity, metaphoric and symbolic density, intertextual richness, and an abundance of antitheses and paradoxes (503). Foix explored repeatedly the expressive possibilities of lyricism and the genuine correlation of experience in creation, and he acknowledged their stagnation upfront.

In order to explain why he would believe that darkness could be a necessary element in processes of understanding, and what is more,

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higher understanding, obscurity will be singled out as the condition of possibility for a specific mode of vision and writing that Foix assumed as his own in the "*position of poetry researcher*" (*LIO*, 115). This standpoint serves as the means for an obstinate effort to find orientation in the world through a systematic practice of sowing dark likenesses, that is, through the approach to the fantastic fabric of sensual and intellectual perception – and the poetic appropriation of *phantasmata*. As Giorgio Agamben argued:

> [A]lmost all modern poetry, from Mallarmé onward, consists of fragments, as it alludes to something (the absolute poem) that can never be fully evoked, but only made present through its negation. (Agamben 1977, 40-1)

Pere Gimferrer, in his study on Foix (1984, 131-41), included a concise and erudite analysis of the nature of his metaphors. Against the extended prejudice that such a poetic proposal was solipsistic and private, or deliberately absurd, close to the automatisms of Dada and of some surrealists, Gimferrer pointed out that his metaphors were never "pure, non-logical images". The critic observed that obscure poets, such as Góngora or Mallarmé, kept their metaphors in tension between their enigmatic form and a concrete point of reference. They are "reducible" to factual reality, and that allows for their meaningful description, even though their purpose and scope may elude any given thorough explanation (134). Their extreme condensation, or, in Rosenberg's terms, complexity, may lead to the loss of essential bits of information that the hermeneut would need to put together in order to properly identify their referents. To Gimferrer, this is the main reason why a legend of total darkness enshrouded the poet (135).

Ferrater outlined a similar perspective on Foix's metaphors and compared them to Saint-John Perse's phantasmagorical effects, caused by "excessive precision" (Ferrater 1987, 58). In relation to this idea, which opposes formal affectation in favor of synthetic density of meaning, Foix would add: "To save bricks or words is the noblest and most austere venture of the builder and the versifier" (Foix [1971] 1995, 25; [OC 4, 443-9]). His images are meaningful, as Gimferrer argued, and they are, as declared by the poet himself and proven by Ferrater, concrete, precise, and real too. This is crucial to grasp the experimental nature of his poetic endeavor. Metaphors are obscure precisely because they are concrete, and because their genesis and purpose are rooted in the factual world, neither in gratuitous automatisms nor in pure mental abstractions. In his reading of a coetaneous poet, Rainer Maria Rilke, Vega referred to the "dislocation of sense" in his works, characterized by the mobility and originality of the images that express the "genuine ambiguity within the

human soul" (Vega 2021, 23). This angle will prove helpful in understanding the ubiquity of certain tropes and images in Foix's works.

Foix thematized the difficulty of comprehending words and experiences in his works. His difficult images and their dislocated sense articulate darkness at two interrelated levels: dark images are found in both poetry and in life, and the pathway that connects the latter with the former, that is, poetic creation, does not explain them within the framework of a teleology of clarity. As it will be shown, even though the clarification of the meaning of real – and fantastic – likenesses is the very object of the poet's practice, dark likenesses proliferate without remedy. Clarifying, just like understanding and distinguishing, are kept beyond the realms of possibility in the poetic space. Its objects seem inevitably pushed to mutation, to an indeterminate process of transfiguration and production of new likenesses, which are never fixated in form or relations.

Foix's poetic choices, framed by repetition and variation, approach existential and metaphorical confusion equally. His relational and objective poetics finds in the excessive plurality of the real, which is inaccessible to discursive logic, its poetic gravitational center. In a few words, the following sections will showcase that understanding loftily does not mean clarifying dark likenesses, but assuming their objectual quality of being impenetrable to discourse. The purpose of the quest for comprehension is not the certification of veracity of poetic propositions and worldly realities, but an emphasis on the ethical and practical dimensions of creative endeavor (Rosenberg 1981, 43). Foix took the risk of searching for a practice that allowed for a sufficient form of reasoning, in spite of the inevitable disorientation: "among fools and sages, to reason" (*SIDD*, "To Learn How to Narrate…", 72, v. 14).

3.2 A Tormented Lover and the Autonomy of Art: "Daybook 1918 (Fragments)"

3.2.1 Enclosed Poetic Spaces

In the first section of *Gertrudis*, known as "Daybook 1918 (Fragments)", darkness is a constantly invasive presence. It consists of twelve very short poems in prose with no individual title.[1] These prose poems follow one another as diary entries of a spiteful lover, tormented and frustrated because his beloved Gertrudis abandoned him. Her

1 Ten of the poems had already been published by Foix, but not as a collection nor in their definitive order. They can be found in an issue of *La Revista* (January-December 1926), and in issues 7 and 8 of *L'Amic de les Arts*, from October and November 1926.

inconsiderate laughter hurts him, and he begs for solitude after being defeated in the jousts of love:

> Raise high the walls of my street. Let them tower so high that at nightfall neither the murmur of the fountains nor the agonizing shriek of the trains might enter. See to it that my street measures the very width of my step. Form no openings in the walls, and lower every flag and pennant from the tops of the turrets. (*G*, "Raise High…", 11; Venuti, 5)

The first motif of darkness is not the night, which could be starlit or even radiant, but rather the personal enclosed space that the lover longs for, to give in to self-pity and to procure himself just a single joy:

> Grant me no more than the joy that remains at daybreak after my beloved's shadow has passed at midnight, the testimony of a red flower withering in the dimness, or a crushed shoe floating on the surface of a puddle. (*G*, 11)

In the first poem, he had already declared his thirst for vengeance and his will to erect a space of his own that allowed him to resist the narrowness he perceives in treason: "The ceiling will not be, as now, so very low" (*G*, "I Wounded…", 11; Venuti, 3). His bitter isolation makes him wish to be deprived of hearing – not only seeing – "neither the murmur of the fountains nor the agonizing shriek of the trains" (*G*, "Raise High…", 11; Venuti, 5).

Darkness and occultation affect equally natural dews and trains, two recurring images throughout Foix's works. In the last verse of a sonnet from *Alone, and Mourning*, Foix wrote: "The new inflames me and I'm in love with the old" (*SIDD*, "I Like, at Random…", 74, v. 14; Rosenthal, 7). Analogically, the natural and the artificial are as intertwined in Foix's poetics as the old and the new. When invoked together, fountains and trains double down on total deprivation: the speaker deadens both subtle and deafening sounds, and in sum rejects anything that could bring about change, birth, and renewal. The disappearance of the dew that springs from the rock, and the vanishment of the passing train, synthesize an image of immobility and of the interruption of time. From inside the walls with no windows, this voluntary captive is only comforted by the beloved's death, evoked by the sordid images of the decaying flower and the abandoned shoe.

This intensification of violent imagery culminates in the act of assassination in the third poem: "As for Gertrudis, she lies dead at the foot of the abyss where I hurled her headlong" (*G*, "She Assured Me…", 11; Venuti, 7). Writing is condensed into words that exude hopelessness, where the subject alone is at stake. Despite this grim image, Gertrudis reappears in the following poems and in other

sections of the book. Thus, Foix dispels the chronological illusion that might accompany a collection of texts gathered under the title "Daybook 1918 (Fragments)", while at once reinforcing their intimate and confessional tone. The scraps of the personal diary are disorganized and incomplete. Just like the hyperconcretion of the metaphors prevented or difficulted a surefooted identification of each image's real referent, the fragmentary condition of these prose poems serves a similar goal: it dispels the illusion of chronicity as a positive, unilineal phenomenon (Kermode 1967, 56). As the reader is prevented from reading any complete version of the ill-fortuned love affair, Foix de-emphasized the narrative relevance of the prose texts and conversely enhanced their oneiric nature[2], which destabilizes the meaning of facts and multiplies their possibilities of poetic objectivation. This is immediately perceived as a task of prospection or immersion in the instability of processes of comprehension of the world and of oneself.

Early approaches to Foix's prose poems, such as those by Tomàs Garcés (1901-1993) and Guillem Díaz-Plaja (1909-1984), in 1932, noted the poet's rhyme and rhythm strategies in order to avoid easy and formalist solutions. Díaz-Plaja even suspected that when Foix revised his own texts, his absolute priority was the destruction of any rhythm that was too mellifluous (Díaz-Plaja 1932, 5).[3] Antonio Rodriguez took a similar approach when addressing the *poeticité* of Max Jacob's prose texts in *Le cornet à dés* (1917), compared with those by Baudelaire and Mallarmé, which Jacob felt were too constrained by narrative coherence:

> This criticism does not mean that prose poems cannot contain narrations, but that it is necessary to divert them from their narrative purpose […], through an "atmosphere of dream" that manages to provoke a "doubt", without relying on the frameworks of dreaming […]. The immersion is in them much stronger, the instability more persistent. (Rodriguez 2012, 343)

2 Joan Ramon Resina argued that Foix's writing had no relation to Breton's programmatic automatism, but that he was rather his forerunner in a specific sense: the relocation of poetic activity to the indecisive territory between wakefulness and sleep (Resina 1997, 33).

3 This topic has attracted considerable critical attention. Lluís Montanyà (1936, 55) claimed that the poet obeyed a melody that flowed from something more intimate than words. Gabriel Ferrater, in his 1966-67 lectures at the University of Barcelona, compared Foix with Pound and Brecht due to their shared strategy of separating the notion of verse from the notion of mellifluousness or harmony, replacing the latter with the notion of semantic solidity (Ferrater 1987, 64-5). Regarding the poetic nature of Foix's prose poems, cf. Terry 1985, 100-5; Morris 1986, 135-9; Castells-Cambray 1987, 113-14; Geisler 1988, 70; Gavagnin 1991, 153-5; and finally Quintana i Trias 2016, who focused on the narrative and occultation resources in *The Star of Mr. Perris*.

In one of the "Meridians" (22-01-1930), Focius gathered several authoritative appraisals of Max Jacob from the French press, and quoted Apollinaire's opinion on his apparently simple yet odd poems:

> Max Jacob's lyricism is flavored by a delicious style, sharp, bright, and often delicately humoristic, which makes it somewhat inaccessible to the arrogant lovers of rhetoric and of the System: those who consider rhetoric and not poetry. ("Max Jacob", 22-01-1930, 5)

Nearly twenty years later, the poet adopted a similar polemic tone to praise Jacob's compositions in the first issue of the magazine *Ariel* (1946):

> [His poems,] so bright, annoy the pharisee and baffle the pretentious, but the philistines put on a laughter and would want us all to laugh with them. They ignore that humility is, to the purest among poets, the expression of highest wisdom. (Foix 1946, 16 [OC 4, 133-4])

The polysemy of brightness and clarity serves Foix to highlight the proximity of surrealist fantasy and supernatural intuition, that is, the religious element in Jacob's works: "From the surreal to the supernatural, exceptional spirits breeze through" (Foix 1946, 16). Vallcorba noted that, in 1918, Foix's close friend and poet Joaquim Folguera (1893-1919) had already perceived an intimate affinity between Jacob and Foix, especially in regard to their shared enthusiasm for paradoxes ([Folguera] "Poesia catalana" 1918, 89). Vallcorba (2002, 58) expanded on Folguera's parallelism and added to it that both poets were "displeased by the mimetic nature of poetry" and had "faith in the possibility of the creation of autonomous and independent literary universes".

3.2.2 "No Work Is, in the Final Hour, Useless"

The quarrel around the autonomy of art and bourgeois taste is crucial here. Foix's permanent attacks against various modes of formalism and, above all, aestheticism, echo the deliberate antagonism against it led by many avant-gardists (see Bürger 1984, 16-48; Marcuse 1977; Bru, Martens 2006). He opposed the consideration of art as an autonomous, self-sufficient phenomenon, and despised its institutionalization, aimed at the appeasement and distraction of the public. Nevertheless, avant-gardist solutions did not seem to convince him. In the first issues of the magazine *Monitor* (1921-23), directed by Foix and Josep Carbonell (1897-1979), the poet vehemently argued that art had to abandon the illusion of autonomy, for it only

led to apoliticism, which was its most undesirable feature (cf. Foix 1921, 1 [OC 4, 21-5]). In the 1925 essay called "some Considerations on Avant-Garde Literature" (*AC1925*), published in the second issue of *Revista de Poesia*, he returned to this same topic. With the futurist experience especially on mind, he argued that the avant-gardists had merely substituted the dictum 'Art for Art's sake' with "Adventure for Adventure's sake" (*AC1925*, 68 [OC 4, 28]). Moreover, he claimed that they lacked the idealism that had been cherished by the romantics, as well as their humanitarianism (*AC1925*, 68). Foix concluded this article with a blunt judgment:

> [O]ne would advise them to stop writing. If their literature does not exercise the beneficial social function that is assigned to it […] why waste so much paper, so much useless book? Don't ask them. They'll answer, if they like you and want to be polite, that it's for sport. (*AC1925*, 68)

A few months earlier, Breton had published his *Manifeste du surrealisme* (1924), defining surrealist practice as follows:

> Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express – verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner – the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by the thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern. (Breton 1969, 26)

Meanwhile, Catalan avant-gardists read and commented on the famous lecture by the critic Henri Bremond at the Institut de France. According to Bremond, pure poetry presents itself as a practice akin to prayer and mystical contemplation, as it overcomes transcends rational discourse and confronts mystery directly, without mediation. In summary, poetry led poets to grasp the infinitely superior, invisible reality:

> Real, unitive knowledge, we say, of the two activities that the entire present work aims to compare to one another. In both, in the poet and in the mystic, there is grasping, possession of the real. (Bremond 1926, 211)

The writer and journalist Lluís Montanyà (1903-1985), who would sign the avant-gardist *Yellow Manifesto* together with Salvador Dalí and the critic Sebastià Gasch (1897-1980) in 1928, praised Bremond's efforts to remove rhetoric paraphernalia from French poetry, and considered him the leading theorist of an aesthetic revolution (Subiràs i Pugibet 1999, 217). The critics Josep Maria Castellet and Joaquim Molas argued however that Bremond's discourse was rooted in the

long tradition of romantic art and symbolism, and that the adventure of 'pure poetry' was the epigone of intellectualist symbolism (Castellet, Molas 1963, 92). Foix is thus not an epigone but a renovator of these discourses. Much closer to Jacob than to Bremond, the poet claimed a social and public space of intervention and engagement for poetry, stemming from its direct connection with mundane reality. This is why, when commenting on Breton's *La position politique du surrealism*, he stated:

> Art, then – and poetry –, according to Breton […] pursues its own revolution. With independence from any immediate, political or social revolutionary end. This conclusion, for us, is not a bolt from the blue. ("Notes sobre llibres" 1935, 31)

In the 1925 essay on avant-garde art (*AC1925*), Foix positioned himself against the absence of political and social implications in the works of certain previous artists, "to whom avant-gardism was a clever game, an aesthete's indulgence, a display of literary exuberance (Apollinaire)" (*AC1925*, 66).[4] This attitude is, for Foix, the complete opposite of avant-gardism. Yet, as though Guillaume Apollinaire himself had spoken directly to him with the lines: "Soyez indulgents quand vous nous comparez | A ceux qui furent la perfection de l'ordre | Nous qui quêtons partout l'aventure" (1918, 199), Foix ended his essay with a tone of conciliation. He blessed the artistic autonomy sought by some avant-gardists with subtle slyness:

> No work is, in the final hour, useless. Less still boldness of spirit. Dadaism was an exercise in irresponsibility. Here you have the athletes who have most profited from it: the Surrealists. Leave them to their orgy: the neophyte's madness! Balance regained, they will discover a few images that are fresh and new, quite useful, and they will free the imagination from the dregs that infect it. (*AC1925*, 68; Venuti, 141[5] [OC 4, 29])[6]

4 Foix was being deliberately polemic when he refused to call Apollinaire or Salvat-Papasseit avant-gardists. Joan Ramon Resina (1997, 12) argued that he did not agree with their apparently absolute creative freedom, tied to ludic experimentation, but nevertheless always reintegrated in an ordered and appeasing tradition. See Balaguer 1997, 56-61; Marí 2002, 206-22; Santamaria de Mingo 2007, 115; and Marrugat 2009, 226, for Foix and Folguera's intense interest in and sincere admiration for Apollinaire.

5 Lawrence Venuti translated a later stage of this text, published in *L'Amic de les Arts* in 1927 (*AC1927*), but this paragraph remained untouched.

6 In a 1985 interview, Foix acknowledged having drawn from Breton "some principles that served my literature", while introducing other, less "subversive" ones, that the leader of Parisian surrealism lacked (Foix 2014, 226). In his old age, the poet sought to deemphasize the subversive and engaged features of his poetic and political standpoint

3.2.3 Suffocating Darkness: Nothing Escapes Transformation

The dense, oneiric tapestry of *Gertrudis* is no antic of a neophyte. Foix conceived ardor and freedom as positive values to be harnessed by the poet, the politician, and the journalist alike (*AC1925*, 68). Pure psychic automatism is almost never among his poetic coordinates, nor is a revelation of the mechanisms of thought exempt from aesthetic or moral concerns (Bou 2024, 53). In the orgy without apparent end of dadaists and surrealists, however, he perceived that poetry had a social function that escaped the immediate intentions of their authors. The concession "no work is, in the final hour, useless" does not insinuate an acquiescence of automatic and irreflective artistic practices, but an idea of the nature of poetry transcending style. Foix was well aware of the importance, the impact, and the renewing potential of surrealism, as is proven by a project of his – unaccomplished –, of publishing an anthology of surrealist literature with illustrations by Miró or Dalí.[7]

Gimferrer eloquently explained that *Gertrudis* is constituted by an "almost obsessive system – typical of oneiric processes – of *leit-motive*, repetitions, interrelations, and corresponding references", and that it is a "tapestry of complex relationships, superimposed and interwoven" (Gimferrer 1984, 12). The collection of these poems proposes the kaleidoscopic reading of disorganized and fragmentary entries of a diary. While many avant-gardists reacted to the existential ennui with the most dangerous acrobatics of the soul (*AC1925*, 68 [OC 4, 28]), Foix instigated the proliferation of the fantastic and the unbelievable in the 'poetic real' (*DC*, "On the Poetic Real", 780-2), for both the fantastic and the unbelievable were as real as the words – fountains, trains – used to present them.

Inside this hermetic labyrinth without initiation rite, the speaker is suffocated between walls, the abyss, and the night sky, which condense the intimate mystery of the meaning of his actions: "Or is it that so many thousands of stars glittering in the celestial blackness fail to exalt the joy of my solitude?" (*G*, "She Assured Me…", 11; Venuti, 7). In this poem, the third of "Daybook 1918 (Fragments)", darkness thickens and becomes inevitable: everything is endarkened. It is unclear whether this utter darkness is the result of the erection of the tallest walls that secluded the spiteful lover in the previous poem, but the longing for solitude seems fulfilled:

during the first decades of the century, following a strategy of particularization of his own approach to avant-gardism, as will be outlined below (cf. Bou 2024, 59-68).

7 Salvador Dalí connected Foix with the Parisian surrealists. In a letter from around October 15th, 1933, Dalí wrote: "Dear friend Foix: As soon as I arrived in Paris I told Breton about your project, and he is very interested" (cf. Santos Torroella 1986, 113).

> The stables lie empty, as do the houses. Only my horse and I wander the village, night and day, through the labyrinth of its shadows. (*G*, 11)

The "abyss", the "celestial blackness", and the "shadows" of the town and of the objects mirror the general darkening of everything around the poet, including his black horse. The horse, a traditional phallic symbol, insinuates sensual unrest and frustrated concupiscence in the paintings of Füssli (*The Nightmare*, 1781) and De Chirico (*Lotta di centauri*, 1909),[8] and it also signifies the poet's thoughts and words (Boehne 1980, 27). In the third poem, it is singled out, as the others and their riders vanished, but the image of the horse is also a crucial element in the unceasing transformations. In a different poem, the cathedral frequently visited by Gertrudis mutates, "and in its place, vastly deserted, stood a statue of my horse in polychrome glass, gleaming in the faint rose windows of the hillsides" (*G*, "How Many Times…", 12; Venuti, 9). This monument to onanism glows and keeps the scene in a *chiaroscuro* that proves indispensable for guaranteeing some kind of visibility, but under no circumstances a definitive orientation for the speaker, who stumbles amidst equivocal, transformed elements.

The philosopher Dietmar Kamper referred to the space and home of existence as an "ewige Dämmerung" ('perennial twilight'). With this metaphor, he aimed at outlining life in the borderlands, characterizing forms of dwelling that are always mediated by uncertainty and aimlessness. To the cartographic desire emerging from a life lived in *chiaroscuro*, Kamper indicated its corresponding poetic figures: "But of course people do not only dwell. They also make expeditions, excursions over the limit of the middle realm" (Kamper 1995, 63). A significant number of Foix's poems are vertebrated around diverse forms of adventure amidst eternal twilight. Josep Romeu, in his prologue to *From "Daybook 1918"*, considered this a fundamental feature of his poetics: *"At the basis of his stance, at the very onset of Foix's departure, is the enthusiasm for risk and the attraction for the adventurous research"* (Romeu 1956, 9).

Along these adventures, alarming and discomforting voices that come from the outside often appear as distinctive elements of the enshrouding darkness. These are thematized by the poet as anonymous talk, plural and impersonal, and they are always regarded with skepticism. These sources of unreliable reasons – and even just

8 Bou explained that Foix kept a painting by his childhood friend Josep Obiols, made in the style of De Chirico: a naked young man riding a horse on a beach (Bou 2024, 109). In one of the "Meridians", dedicated to Chirico, Focius highlighted his secret and fragile voluptuosity, regarded as a primitive power that brings humankind closer to beasts. The poet also pointed out Chirico's plastic sensation of loneliness, shared with Böcklin, Lorrain, and Poussin ("Chirico", 04-05-1932, 3 [OC 4, 546-7]).

noise – are in stark contrast to the speaker's obsessive process of contraction:

> She assured me that two hundred young men lived in the village, each the owner of a black horse like mine. But I scrutinized their stables, one by one, and I exposed her ruse. (*G*, "She Assured Me…", 11; Venuti, 7)

> They told me you had resumed the ancient custom, returning to the temple every day. Yet today when I arrived there, the temple had disappeared. (*G*, "How Many Times…", 12; Venuti, 9)

> They had told me that behind the curtain you would be rehearsing a new circus attraction, but the curtain hid only a very high wall enclosing the hypothetical gardens of the great castle where the moon dissolves, every night, in piperidine. (*G*, "At Six in the Afternoon…", 14; Venuti, 23)

The last quotation, from the eleventh of the prose poems, refers explicitly to the vanishing and transformation of exteriority, that is, of the beloved and her own space, suffocated by the density of confusing and darkening images of the poetic space. Josep Maria Balaguer believes that Gertrudis exceeds by far the category of mere pretext or ideal, and that she harnesses a living reality which manifests itself in direct opposition to the ideals and desires projected onto it (Balaguer 1997, 66-7).

From the beginning to the end of the eleventh poem there are images related to the theme of darkness. The beginning incardinates the action:

> At six in the afternoon – not twelve at night – we laid the dusty frames against the corner so that they might cast their violet shadow over the entire street. (*G*, 14; Venuti, 23)

Immediately, two darknesses, cosmic and human, come together and begin to overlap: "at nightfall, […] a row of shadows sketched biblical landscapes in phosphorescent traces" (*G*, 14). The poem states that only an hour has passed, but oppressive darkness is already total, and Gertrudis' disappearance and transmutation culminates in death and dismemberment:

> I called, without response, at every house; I followed the tunnel, in vain, from one end to the other. At seven, however, when I went off to moan about my misfortune in the gloom of the stable, I discovered the proprietor in mad Miquel's back room, under the stealthy light of an oil lamp, holding your severed head, where he was trying on several subversively curled wigs. (*G*, 14)

This image conveys the possibility of violence against female characters and is therefore intimately related to the cruel lover. Such forms of violence, consisting of deformation, mutilation and putrefaction, were not exceptional in the *fin-de-siècle* aesthetics, in artists like Raimon Casellas and poets like the young Foix (Sobrer 2003, 182). To Gabriella Gavagnin (1991, 161), these violent images are to be connected directly to the thematization of impotence:

> These images thus depict a shattered reality, scattered into a thousand fragments, impossible to reassemble. In it, establishing contact or communication proves to be impossible.

Whether understood as a labyrinthic tapestry or as a shattered mirror, plurality associated with dismemberment, anonymity and indetermination, is a key feature of *Gertrudis* and of the thematization of darkness. It prevents the resolution of the conflict and keeps the satisfaction of desire in permanent tension:

> May doors and windows be walled up. May no flags fly above the tower. May seaweed grow monstrously and block passageways. (*G*, 13; Venuti, 17)

Gertrudis' lovers, the rivals, multiply too, and their deaths open no future expectations and cause only incremented bitterness:

> Deep in the pools of his pupils, however, I saw you with the flower at your lips and the weapon in your hand. Why have you abandoned me, Gertrudis? (*G*, "When We Were Standing Together…", 14; Venuti, 21)

In addition to the multiplication and overlapping of confusing figures, the polyphony of anonymous voices contributes to the oppressive disorientation as well, due to their unreliability and instability. They continuously lead the poet to encounter transmuting, disturbing objects that only enhance his utter loneliness (Boehne 1980, 42).

3.3 Frustration and Failure: "Plaça Catalunya – Pedralbes"

Foix's early prose poems do not offer much hope regarding the attainment of a safe, secluded space for the speaker, in which to hide from concerns and failure, and from which to eventually reconstitute a coherent image of himself and of the world. This pessimistic tone pervades throughout *Gertrudis*, as shown by its last poem, "Christmas Story".[9] The lover desperately looks for his beloved Gertrudis, fol-

9 Published beforehand in the ninth issue of *L'Amic de les Arts*, in December 1926.

lowing a pointless mountain route and encountering the most unusual characters:

> I heard the noise of voices and hearty laughter, which I believed came from revelers who were heading home, but it was in fact caused by hundreds of night watchmen, ecked in festival garb like the one from my neighborhood and laden as well with their nocturnal gear. The hilltop was crowned not by any ruined castle, which I had imagined to be the site of the ballroom where my darling spent her evenings, but rather by a gloomy barracks for carabiniers. (*G*, 29-30; Venuti, 104-5)

Several previously mentioned poetic motifs converge in this poem. The speaker is captive between walls, a prisoner in his own home and village: "Every passage was closed" (*G*, 29). Despite his isolation, unrest does not end, and the images of natural and artificial exteriority become threatening, thus revealing an unquenchable desire: "Why was that absurd bloom of poppies at the height of the walls, beyond reach? […] But where was the railroad? Where were the trains?" (*G*, 29).

This desire that never abandons the disoriented speaker is frequently thematized in *Gertrudis*, and throughout Foix's works, with the narration of a departure from the enclosed space, in which the subject ventures out in a state of almost complete bewilderment, to face utter confusion and ever-transfiguring signs. Besides the framework of unrequited love, other poems in *Gertrudis* convey such adventures in a more straightforward way. In the poem "Plaça Catalunya – Pedralbes", the earliest in the book, the pretext is a bizarre tram ride that, apparently, should return the poet from Barcelona to his hometown, Sarrià. The tram has no driver, and only the inspector accompanies him. The features of this man mutate as soon as the text begins: "he was wearing a beard, and I could have sworn his face had been shaven when he appeared before me" (*G*, 21; Venuti, 33). From the tram, the landscape and all its images are unknown to the puzzled and anguished speaker: "I caught only three cypresses close to the Gràcia station, slipping by, but they were completely displaced" (*G*, 21).

The situation closely mirrors the futile trip through hills and valleys described in "Christmas Story". The equivocal voices of the anonymous multitude lead the poet into a world of nocturnal transformations, and the character of the "watchman" resembles the tram inspector, for he acts as his guide but, a moment later, he becomes a swarm of people trying to chase him through the forest. His machinic features also accentuate through the narration, thus emphasizing the impossibility of communication or the satisfaction of the speaker's desire. When they try to understand where they are and how

they got there, the identification of space is made impossible by an endless list of extravagant names, leading to total decomposition of linguistic significance:

> The watchman closed his eyes and said: "No, no. Nak, Nak, Nak… Nagpur, Nak, Nak… Nakhitxevan."
>
> I followed him: "Pp. No, before: Dj, Dk…" I had lost the meaning of the vowels, however, and was ignorant of their value, even their spelling. (*G*, "Christmas Story", 31; Venuti, 106)

Such graphic dissolution of sense is analogous, as Bou asserted, to the decomposition of the name "Gertrudis" in Foix's second book, *KRTU* (Bou 2024, 96). In the first edition of *Gertrudis*, in 1927, the title page displayed a drawing by Miró: a horse, a star, and a feminine figure, circled by an irregular line, as well as the letters of the name of the beloved, which are progressively reduced in size until they become completely unreadable (Bou 2024, 96). And in the poem "KRTU", in the homonymous book, Foix prevented the possibility of recognition of the beloved by the meaningless combination of these already condensed letters:

> Farthest away, four men disappeared on the horizon, each of them laden with a hefty letter of the alphabet. Read together, the different letters spelt a mysterious name: KURT, URKT, TRUK, UKRT, TURK, KRUT… It belonged to the main character in my dreams.
>
> "We shall be late to the ball", I would have said at that point if my speech had answered to my thought. (*K*, 50; Venuti, 112)

Dissolution, confusion, and depersonalization, they all point at what Marco Alessandrini called the "unattainable inexhaustibility of desire" represented by Gertrudis (Alessandrini 2017, 92). Miró's design on the book's cover is not that different from the ink wash drawings by Dalí printed at the side of the "Christmas Story" published in *L'Amic de les Arts*.[10] The character depicted in the first of these simple, black paintings is identified with a subtitle: "*…the night watchman…*" The dark, bipedal shape wears a cape and carries exaggeratedly big keys, but it lacks any facial features ("Conte de Nadal", December 1926, 11). Dalí was acting as a pioneering hermeneut of the words: "The watchmen all looked and carried themselves in ways that made them identical to my companion" (*G*, "Christmas Story", 30; Venuti, 105).

10 *L'Amic de les Arts* (1926-29), was a monthly magazine published in the city of Sitges, founded and directed by Josep Carbonell (1897-1979), J.V. Foix's close friend. It was a pioneering avant-garde magazine that covered both literature and the arts, while also commenting on local news and life (Kent 2012, 147-8).

The frustration of love and the impotence of recognition are two of the most prominent vectors of desire in *Gertrudis*, and they conflate into a deeper suspicion about the impossibility of finding stable enough realities, both in poetry and in life. As Patricia Boehne synthesized: "we are left with a wavering doubt as to what is real, a vague sense of the folly and disillusionment in the quest for beauty, truth or Gertrudis" (Boehne 1980, 28). Foix's strategic blocking of every chance to provide a stable image of the human being resembles the notion of 'anti-myth' attributed by Hermann Broch to Kafka and Joyce, due to their skepticism about the mediumistic nature of poetic creation and to their thematization of *Hilflosigkeit* as a form of impotence (Broch 1955, 164).

The frenetic transformations left behind by the poet in each prose poem, such as the dislocated cypresses near the Gràcia station in "Plaça Catalunya – Pedralbes", showcase the ambivalence of the adventures. They invoke both hope and hostility, and the frustration of expectations built around them does not prevent the poet from venturing out again into the unknown. When they end, he is usually enclosed again in an oppressive space of discomfort, as invaded by darkness as the claustrophobic and useless refuges in the first section of *Gertrudis*. The open space of the adventures and these suffocating spaces are Foix's two forms of thematizing helplessness.

"Plaça Catalunya – Pedralbes" explicitly addresses the destruction of the speaker's identity that happens during the adventure, and it articulates it by means of a very peculiar space of darkness and enclosure. The tram inspector forces the speaker to get off and walk in some indeterminate forest. There, he tortures him and forces him to wear a cilice made of cast-metal letterpress types. The inspector's mutating identity changes once more, always unstable, but now reveals a name – that of Josep Maria López-Picó (1886-1959), a renowned, religious poet:

> I found myself facing the poet López-Picó, who, appalled at being discovered in his crime, immersed his arm in the dark cloud that oozed around us, blackening his hand to soil his face and disguise it. (*G*, 21; Venuti, 35)

The executioner darkens his bloody face and transforms again while leaving the scene: the process of recognition remains incomplete, and all logical expectations built into the narration fade. The poet is left on the floor, bruised and wounded, surrounded by the enigmatic "dark cloud". The inspector-executioner-poet López-Picó has turned into a single, menacing eye that gazes upon him. The final paragraph pushes the paradox of fulfilling the original desire for solitude to its extreme, for the apparent consolation is, in fact, a narration of the speaker's annihilation – alone, in the dark, rendered insignificant:

> The poet had disappeared in front of me. A hint of gaiety brought round my heart while the hair shirt loosened itself from my body. The ex-inspector's eye was another star of an unwonted glitter. It distilled a honey that softened my lips and, in singeing the thread of my memory, exalted me to the heavens while intoning the most charming canticles of Scheherazade in a gesture of gratitude. (*G*, "Plaça Catalunya – Pedralbes", 22; Venuti, 35)

The starry night reappears, bringing with it the futile sensation of protection that it evoked in the third poem of "Daybook 1918 (Fragments)": "Or is it that so many thousands of stars glittering in the celestial blackness fail to exalt the joy of my solitude?" (*G*, "She Assured Me…", 11; Venuti, 7). The joy and honey that dulcify the speaker's lips while the cilice detaches from his body are analogous to the thousand scintillating stars that praised his solitude. In both cases, but especially in "Plaça Catalunya – Pedralbes", any contentment is destroyed by the perception that agonizing solitude is insufficient to correspond to an inexhaustible desire. The vanishing of the body and the burning of the "thread of my memory" that result from the poet's "divinization" are signs of a funerary rite, accompanied by a song descending from the sky, "in a gesture of gratitude" that embraces and comprehends the entirety of life at the moment of death.

Balaguer interpreted Scheherazade's song as a testament to the possible resistance against destruction and sacrifice. He argued that the narrator of the poem discovers that the false reality insinuates an authentic one, and that only amidst the ruins of the former can one enter the latter. Literature, according to the critic, is the instrument for destroying the former false reality, because it reveals its falsehood to the mind (Balaguer 1997, 63). The emphasis on demolition may also be evidence of a subversive, creative stance derived from the writings of Reverdy or Apollinaire. However, it is noteworthy that the singularity of Foix's narration lies in the obscure communication it establishes between poetic and real matter due to their obscure confusion. His accumulation of unusual images builds a segment of reality that remains as confusing and obscure as its factual referents. In the bitter irony of the narration of one's own death, a vitalist pulsion remains even if the poet attempted to find guidance in annihilation. Far from that, his poetic objects provide only confusing and mutating images that overlap with a puzzling and ever-transforming real world. The poet is trapped in the inevitability of adventure, renewed with every loss, disappearance, and incomprehensible event.

In Foix's early prose poems, unrequited desire made an impotent and frustrated lover wander from an enclosed, purportedly impenetrable, private space to other equally suffocating places. Violence against Gertrudis and against himself, as well as the continuous transformation of characters and settings, prevented any comfort.

In conclusion, this chapter has shown that darkness is thematized as a precondition of the confusion and indetermination of the narration, and as a veil that eventually enshrouds the narrator in the assumption of his failure and the frustration of his desire. In the section called "Notes on the Sea", still in *Gertrudis*, dark objects will reappear intimately connected to the questioning of the possibility of finding stable poetic images to provide some sort of knowledge. A close reading of these poems will allow scrutiny of the poetic objects that correspond to Foix's frustrating but endless adventures.