



Vicenç Villatoro

Distorted vision

The imperviousness of the Castilian market to cultural output in Catalan

Historically, Catalan language and culture has had a mixed response from its Castilian counterpart. Admired during the Renaissance, during the modern period Catalan was identified with federalism; this placed it at odds with the Jacobin principle that underlay the Spanish state. The object of sympathy during periods of twentieth-century repression, Catalan culture soon found enemies when it declared independence. Today, Catalan cultural products are seen as a political instrument rather than a response to genuine demand. As a result, it is easier for a Catalan author to get published in German or Dutch than in Castilian Spanish.

The way two cultures view each other is rarely neutral and transparent. The view is always shaped by the lens of a certain type of prejudice, though not necessarily negative. We project stereotypes and hierarchies onto distant and unknown cultures that inevitably distort the reception of their cultural output. But we also make prejudgements, constructed from political or historical presumptions, about cultures that are very close and well known. In viewing an alien culture, no matter how close and familiar it may be, it is rare that only curiosity and receptiveness play a part. Curiosity is normally coupled with a preconceived notion about the nature of the other culture and about its relationship to the viewer's own culture. The view can be broadened by positive prejudices such as admiration, respect, or sympathy; but it can also be narrowed as a result of negative prejudices. These include scorn, political antipathy, or the internalization of a perceived hierarchy placing one above the other, on a higher plane.

While distance very often means that the impressions cultures have of each other are contaminated by stereotypes, proximity is often no better. Historically, the cultures of the Iberian Peninsula have shared a very clearly defined space and most have common origins, which might lead one to assume they developed in parallel. But because political relations in the interior of the Peninsula have always been tense, the relations between cultures have been partly to stereotypes, prejudices, and distrust that originated in politics. In the last few centuries, the Castilian view of the rest of the peninsular cultures — including the Portuguese — has been tinged by a feeling of superiority and a desire for hegemony.

Although it is not my wish to turn this article into an anthology of anecdotes, allow me to mention two that represent a certain point of view. As a journalist friend once pointed out to me, the attitude of the Castilian speakers is very different when they travel to Rome than when they travel to Lisbon. In Rome, many try to speak a more or less awful Italian, they try to make plurals end *i*, to Italianize their Castilian forms, at least in appearance. In Lisbon, it is

another story. There, the majority of Castilian speakers continue to speak in Castilian as if they had not left home, convinced that the Portuguese are able, or ought to be able, to understand them. A Castilian speaker tends to behave in Portugal like an English speaker anywhere else in the world: convinced that they are speaking a superior, necessary language, which everyone they talk to should know.

So if the Castilian regard for the Portuguese language and culture drops a degree in comparison to the Italian language, let's say, and two or three in comparison to the English, French, or German languages and cultures, it drops even further for any other peninsular language without the status that comes with having a State behind it. There is a story about a lady from a Castilian provincial capital who went to buy an item of food, and, upon examining it, went angrily over to the counter. It was unacceptable! Among the various languages on the label there was Catalan! Who did they think they were? To calm her down, the shopkeeper told her that it wasn't Catalan but Portuguese. In actual fact, the shopkeeper had no idea *what* language it was. But he knew that a label in Catalan would be considered an affront by his customer, while a label in Portuguese would have a certain justification.

Extending the anecdote a little, I am convinced that if the shopkeeper had not come up with the excuse of Portuguese, and had been forced to justify the presence of Catalan, it would have been better to say that it was in order to sell it in Andorra rather than in Barcelona. After all, in Andorra, Catalan is the official language. This is an argument more understandable in terms of the hierarchization of the peninsular languages rather than of the number of speakers or the cultural tradition. And what hierarchizes the peninsular languages is above all the degree of official recognition. The rest comes later. It is also decisive, but not so much.

In the last few centuries, Castilian culture's regard for Catalan culture has ranged from high to low, from that of the big man to that of the little man. Even more, however, it is the attitude of one who has all his documents in order towards one with ambiguous or fragile status. It is less a case of one language with more speakers looking down on the language that has far fewer, but more the attitude of the language and culture that has power, that enjoys all the benefits of official status, towards the language that does not. This attitude modulates over time. Over the last few centuries, Castilian Spain's view of the Catalan culture has had more to do with political circumstances associated with the language than a strictly cultural logic. It could be said that, as regards Castilian culture's current evaluation of Catalan cultural output, we are at a low point.

It is almost certain that in the first half of the sixteenth century, when Garcilaso and Boscà [Spanish Renaissance poets — ed.] adapted poems by Ausiàs March [late medieval Catalan poet — ed.] into Castilian, they did so from a standpoint of equality or admiration. Boscà — born in Barcelona — and Garcilaso tried to construct a new Castilian poetry by imitating both Italian and Catalan models, especially March. This was not from a viewpoint of superiority. On the contrary, they were looking from the position of a tradition under construction upon a tradition already in place. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, as Castilian was emerging, it looked upon Catalan and Italian with the admiration and respect with which equals or classics are looked upon. When Garcilaso turned "Amor, amor, un hàbit m'he tallat" into "Amor, amor, un hàbito vestí", or when Boscà made "Així com cell que en lo somni es delita" into "Como aquel que en soñar gusto recibe", they were placing Ausiàs

March on the same level as Petrarch. This had to do with individual and personal admiration for the work of March, but also with a respect for the cultural melting pot whence March came. They were not reviving works that they considered beneath the level of their cultural landscape. On the contrary, they considered them to be higher, advanced, and admirable.

Between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries, however, cultural and political events took place that were to transform this relationship. It would cease to be egalitarian, on a par, and become deeply unbalanced. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, literature in the Castilian language reached a moment of maximum splendour, which coincided with a certain decline in scholarly Catalan literature. Therefore, in a scale strictly of merit and modernity, Castilian gained the advantage over Catalan. Castilian became an international language. The models and fashions in the Baroque were imposed by Castilian, not only upon Catalan culture, but also upon many European cultures.

In any case, in the relationship between the Catalan and Castilian cultures, it was mutually accepted that what carried more weight was the political construction generated in the eighteenth century. We might say that at the beginning of the eighteenth century two ideas about the organization of political space clashed on the Iberian peninsula, going beyond a struggle between dynasties and territories. *Austriacisme* (the cause of the Austrian pretender, Archduke Charles) and *felipisme* (the cause of the Bourbon King Philip V) are not strictly dynastic concepts, between supporters of different dynastic legitimacies, nor are they the names of two perfectly territorialized factions. There were Castilian *austriacistes* and there were Catalan, Valencian, and Aragonese *botiflers*. There were two ideologies, or if you wish, two proto-ideologies, at the heart of the conception of the State, which were developed in the following century. *Felipisme* meant the French way, which considered that political space had to be constructed on legislative, institutional, and also cultural equality or homogeneity. From this embryo was born absolutism. However, the Jacobin concept — that a state is a homogeneous framework of laws, institutions, culture, and language — arrived later on. *Austriacisme*, on the other hand, was based on the maintenance of the furs (local rights and privileges) and envisaged the possibility of constructing a unified political space in which different laws, institutions, and therefore languages and cultures coexist. It would be the Anglo-Saxon model, the Dutch model, and to some extent the model of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Using anachronistic terms, we might say that at the beginning of the eighteenth century, two ways of organizing the Iberian Peninsula confronted one other: one that tended towards unity and cultural homogeneity, another that pointed towards a federalist view, based on diversity. The first option had more support in Castile, which from a hegemonic standpoint opted for the dominant role; the second had more support in all parts of the Crown of Aragon. The latter was hardly capable of imposing a single model all over the peninsula — among other things because it has never had a single model even in its own interior — and could therefore aspire at the very most to preserving its personalities through the articulation of diversity. Needless to say, these two different models of understanding the construction of the peninsular space contain — albeit in an unconscious and schematic way — a model of relationship between the languages and cultures of the peninsula.

As we know, the unitarists won. But not completely. Ernest Lluch has studied the survival of this *austriacisme* of diversity in the eighteenth century. In the mid-nineteenth century, the remains of the old *austriacisme* were revived with the impetus of the romantic conception of peoples and roots. This led to the cultural rebirth. At the beginning of the twentieth century, this double tradition of the old legal *austriacisme* and the new romantic particularism found political expression, above all through Catalanism. Lluch underlined the existence of a thread between these three states, though it was often unconscious. Catalanism hoisted flags of cultural diversity within the peninsula — formulating them through a sort of confederate Iberianism — that had a link, and not strictly symbolic or sentimental, with the old *austriacista* flags.

After the battle of Almansa, the French way to modernity was imposed militarily across Spain: in order to become a modern state, you had to construct a strong central power above a territory with legal and cultural homogeneity. An alternative route to modernity, which would be used in England or Holland, was defeated. *Austriacisme* was not solely a way of maintaining obsolete mediaeval structures. It was also a route to modernity. But it lost. The problem with Spain, unlike France or England, is that the route that won was not strong enough and the one that lost did not become weak enough. In other words, Spain chose the French unitarist way, but never managed to fully implement it. The late-*austriacisme* at the beginning, the romantic revolution later, and finally the emergence of Catalanism after the war of 1898, meant that this specific project of access to modernity was always unfinished, half-baked. Well, more than half, but by no means completely.

The result of these three centuries has been that neither the Iberian Peninsula, nor even the ambit of the Spanish state, have reached the level of cultural homogeneity sought by what might be called "the French way". Neither has the articulation of diversity in egalitarian terms that would correspond to a federal or confederate model ever been constructed. The old *austriacisme* has survived to a certain extent, from the opposition so to speak, while the old *felipisme* has governed Spain without wholly achieving its aims. In the French model, which tends to identify modernity with homogeneity, the persistence of the different languages and cultures within has been perceived as a burden, as an impediment to full modernization. First it was seen as a medieval hangover, then as Carlist, preventing the full formulation of Spain as a modern liberal state. The non-Castilian languages and cultures have not disappeared from the peninsula. They have not even been reduced to dialects, as patois lacking prestige, as in France or Italy. But neither have they become full cultural participants in "Spanishness", on an equal footing with the majority language, like minority languages in Canada, Switzerland, or Belgium. A model of asymmetrical pluralism, internally hierarchized, has been consolidated in the Spanish state. This is the legal, political, and even imaginary framework in which the relations between the different languages and cultures take place.

Castilian culture's view of Catalan culture is not the same as the French view of Occitan or the Italian view of Sicilian. But neither is it that of a German-speaking Swiss to a French-speaking Swiss. At the same time, the quantitative and qualitative level of the cultural output in Catalan over the second half of the nineteenth century, the entire twentieth century, and the first decade of the twenty-first century is enough not to become strictly invisible, but insufficient to deserve attention or any kind of theorization. We can distinguish three phases in the Castilian view of culture in Catalan, which have overlapped and followed each other, according to the political and cultural situations during the two centuries since the rebirth of Catalanism.

In some phases, and from some viewpoints, Catalan culture has been viewed as a nuisance, or worse, as a way of wasting the talent and energy of cultural players who could have more profitably chosen Castilian. It is a reproach very typical of the nineteenth century: "Catalan authors, you are wasting your time writing in a language lost on the republic of letters. You have talent, you have knowledge, what you ought to be doing is writing books in Castilian so that they would be more popular." The choice of Catalan is seen as an ideological obsession, unnatural, anti-cultural. We could make a long anthology of reproaches of this kind, from the mouths of Unamuno, Galdós, or so many other important authors writing in Castilian. From both conservative and progressive standpoints, the notion of a hierarchy between the Hispanic languages has been internalized. In some cases, the theory has been put forward that a language is a system of communication, with no associations of identity. The one that can broaden the scope of communication the farthest, the one that can reach most people, is therefore preferable and superior. Needless to say, the argument of communicative breadth has been used more often in favour of Castilian and against Catalan than in favour of English and against Castilian. Because deep down it is applied on the map of asymmetric pluralism that our strange eighteenth century has left us.

In other periods, culture in Catalan produced a feeling of compassion in some circles of the Castilian cultural world. This occurred above all in the periods when conservative dictatorships persecuted Catalan and stressed its inferiority, with a view to simply wiping it off the map (namely, during the dictatorships of Primo de Rivera and Franco). During these periods, movements of solidarity, curiosity, and above all compassion for Catalan output arose, along with claims for its right to exist. At times of maximum linguistic oppression, paternalistic currents of sympathy appeared, which seemed to show a certain interest — on the basis of inequality — in cultural output in Catalan. Very often, these forms of compassion disappeared when Catalan raised its head and demanded a substantial improvement in its legal status. This happened very clearly in the 1930s: Castilian intellectuals who demonstrated in favour of Catalan at the end of the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera were furious adversaries of the Estatut de Catalunya (Statute of Autonomy of Catalonia, 1979), precisely out of linguistic considerations. The process was repeated at the end of Francoism and the beginning of the democratic transition. For compassion to exist, it is necessary for the victim to continue playing the part of the victim. If they rebel against this role and demand equality, the compassion dries up.

There is a third phase, which we are in now. In a certain sense, it is a variation on the first: the existence of a culture in the Catalan language is perceived as a historical abnormality, as a strange resistance to modernity and rationality, but the volume and the force of the output means that its pure and simple disappearance is hard to imagine in the short term. I would say that the current attitude of Castilian culture towards Catalan is one of enormous suspicion. Deep down in people's minds exists the old concept of asymmetric pluralism: in Spain there is more than one language, but not all have the same worth. There is one universal, common language and culture and other local ones. The universal and common culture is constitutionally compulsory for all, while the local cultures are statutorily compulsory, but only in their respective territories. The hierarchy between languages and cultures is laid down in the constitution. It belongs to the thinking of the Spanish as a whole and to their legal organization.

In the collective imagination, there is another consideration. It is born of the cross between a model of constitutionalized, asymmetric pluralism and the understanding of culture as a market dominated by Darwinism, in which only the best survive. Here there is an initial perplexity: if we could all understand each other in Spanish, if producing culture in Spanish gives you a wider market, why are people still producing culture in Catalan? The answer is: politics. Due to a political desire for identity. While the market might go in favour of Spanish, politics goes in favour of Catalan. The rarity, the extemporaneity, of the survival of Catalan against the logic and rationality of cultural output could only be explained by its political intentions. There is Catalan because there is Catalanism. There is cultural output in Catalan because Catalanism needs it. There is cultural production in Catalan because the authorities support it.

This basic prejudice — the existence of a hierarchy between languages, the political nature of the support of Catalan, the overprotection of the cultural output in Catalan — is enormously widespread and acts, at times unconsciously, as a driving force behind the suspicion, the lack of interest, and ignorance from Castilian culture for anything done in Catalan. The idea has arisen that the cultural output in Castilian competes in the market. Meanwhile, output in Catalan, which cannot survive in the market, which cannot be left out in the cold, can survive only inside the protective hothouse of the public authorities. This view has it that Catalan survives only thanks to the institutional subsidies, oblivious to the demands of the market. The logical chain continues: if this is the case, a valuable author, capable of resisting in Darwinian fashion the process of selection of the market, will naturally write in Castilian. Who will write in Catalan? Who has the obsession, the zeal? Or who would be unable to survive out in the cold and therefore seeks the refuge of public authorities, who are interested only in the language of production, not quality. Who would be interested in a product that comes from this hothouse, in which the mediocre have taken refuge? What curiosity can a work born of over-protection arouse?

A map has been drawn in which Castilian and its cultural output are in the first division, while Catalan and its output are in the third, at best. Those who stay in the third when they could be in the first are either not good enough or driven by ideological zeal. Output in Catalan no longer arouses compassion, since it is no longer perceived as a victim. It no longer arouses admiration, since it is no longer perceived as an equal. It no longer arouses curiosity, since it is perceived as an artificial product from a hothouse laboratory. It arouses only scorn or indifference. Today, the reception of cultural output in Catalan is lower and more suspicious than ever. So much so, that for many authors writing in Catalan, it is easier to become known and recognized in Germany and Holland than in Castilian Spain. Catalan is studied in more German universities than in Spanish ones outside the Catalan countries. In Germany, cultural output in Catalan has to compete from a position of equality with the cultural output of many other small and medium-sized countries. In Spain, it has to compete with prejudice. With one slight difference: for a German observer, Castilian culture is the natural way to get to know Catalan. If the Castilian, which is perceived as its natural protector, pays no attention to Catalan cultural output, why should the German? If a Catalan novel has not been translated into Spanish, why should it be translated into Dutch? When very often, the Dutch publisher thinks of approaching the Catalan novel precisely through its translation into Castilian?

The result of all this is that the Castilian language market is impermeable to cultural output in Catalan or translated from Catalan, both as concerns literature, film, and even more so, music. There has been a backward step, even in relation to the end of Francoism and the beginnings of the transition, when the work of the great authors in Catalan — Espriu, Rodoreda, Pla — had a certain circulation in Castilian translation, and when the Catalan singer-songwriters — Raimon, Llach, Serrat — could perform with a certain continuity in the Castilian market. Of course, we are talking of big names, but also of a climate less hostile, perhaps due to the compassion already mentioned. Then, Catalan was clearly playing the part of the victim and had been unable to raise its head. Audiovisual output in Catalan suffers from a certain underratedness — this has been seen with the trajectory of a film like *Salvador*. As for the theatre, Catalan groups are prestigious, but not in proportion to the volume of their work. Each year, in the awards and acknowledgments that take place at state level, which ought to reward equally the output of all the cultures, we clearly see this underrating of Catalan products. At times for physical reasons: Catalan production has only been seen in Catalonia, while output in Castilian has been seen all over the state.

Can it be that this backward step in the reception in Spain of products in Catalan has to do with a drop in the quality of this output? Frankly, I refuse to believe it. Above all, because at the same time the reception of Catalan cultural products in other countries has increased. I repeat, for many authors it is easier to be translated, published, and valued in English, German, or Hungarian than in Castilian. Castilian publishers based in Catalonia have made serious commitments to spreading the word about the work of authors already established in Catalan — Monzó, Calders, Torrent — and the results have been disappointing. The market in Castilian rejects these products, without much fuss, without theorizing, but with a force easy to measure.

I do not think it is strictly a case of Catalanophobia. Catalan does not make Castilians feel nauseous. It is just that there is an extremely strong prejudice at work that places everything coming from Catalonia in a lower division, as local and of little interest. In the world of cinema, there used to be a myth that said that any film in which a black and yellow taxi appeared (the colour of taxis in Barcelona) would never succeed in Spain, because it would be perceived as local. There may be taxis from New York, all yellow, and it's universal. There may be white Madrid taxis, and it is not local. But anything from Barcelona is condemned from Spain's view as local. This is an ideological prejudice that has to do with the map of asymmetrical pluralism I mentioned above and the Darwinian concept that some languages are more suitable than others for communication and the market. A sort of enormous cultural diglossia: there are different languages and cultures, all have their place under the sun, but they are specialized. Castilian is used for some things, Catalan for others. Literature in Catalan, whether talking about the Holocaust, fashionable bars, or travelling in Africa, becomes local — in the diglossic myth — precisely because it is in Catalan. If it is in Catalan, it is for domestic use only. If it is in Catalan, it belongs to a hyper-protected world. If it is in Catalan, it is zealous, hyper-ideological, political. And who is interested in something local, politically marked, and in need of the protection in which the mediocre can survive?

I shall end with a personal experience of the world of linguistic prejudices, experienced in Catalonia not too long ago. In one of the periodic crises of the newspaper *Avui*, while I was the editor, we ordered a quantitative and qualitative survey about the paper's image. We asked above all people who

were not readers. Why didn't they read it, what did they find wrong with it? Two surprising replies appeared, among others. One, that we were a newspaper too ideologically marked. Another, that we were a newspaper useful for finding out what was happening in Catalonia, but not what was happening in the world. We asked them to be more specific. What did it mean, too ideologically? Too *convergent*? Too *independentista*? No, the excess ideology was that we were seen as being too Catalan. But the people telling us this could not give us any specific examples. *Avui* reached the conclusion that what made us a hyper-ideological newspaper — in a context in which the papers in Castilian were at war with each other, precisely because they were ideologically very marked — was the fact of being in Catalan. Choosing Catalan as the language of a newspaper stamped us ideologically. Choosing Castilian was ideologically neutral. As a newspaper seller said to someone asking him for a copy of *El Periódico*, when it published two identical editions in the two languages: "Do you want it normal, or in Catalan?"

Let's look at the second reproach. *Avui* was good when it came to Catalonia, but bad for knowing what was going on in the world. However, when we carried out this survey we were particularly proud of the international section, where we had taken on quite a few correspondents and had increased pages and resources. On the contrary, our section on Catalonia was not at its best. But the non-readers who did not want to buy *Avui* told us that to find out about the major international topics they needed to buy *La Vanguardia*, *El País*, or *El Periódico*. At that time, in my opinion, *El Periódico's* international section was no better than *Avui's*; on the other hand, their local or Catalonia section was far better than ours. The difference is that *Avui* was in Catalan and *El Periódico*, then, was in Castilian. And even for many Catalan readers, Catalan is the language of domestic things, around the house, while Castilian is the language to see the world with.

The view of Catalan from Castilian culture is filtered through lenses — political and historical — which tinge all they see. It is probable that the lenses with which we Catalans look at Castilian culture are also tinged. What is certain is that neither can be neutral. Catalan culture has at times been very unfair with the Castilian, for better or worse. It has condemned things, and it has also overrated things, according to people's prejudices. But, at least for the time being, the lenses with which Castilian culture looks at Catalan cultural output are so opaque that what remains is invisible or very unfairly reduced.

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