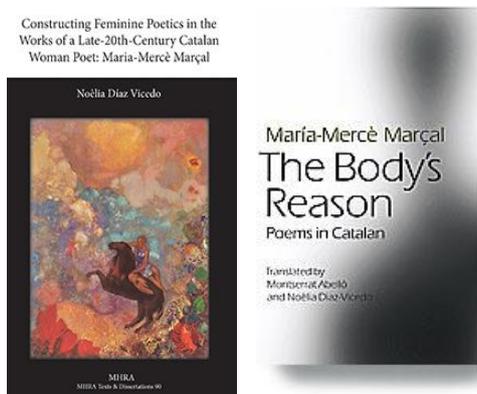


Noèlia Díaz Vicedo, *Constructing Feminine Poetics in the Works of a Late-20th-Century Catalan Woman Poet: Maria-Mercè Marçal*, London, The Modern Humanities Research Association, 2014; ISBN: 978-78188-001-2.

Montserrat Abelló and Noèlia Díaz Vicedo (trans.), *Maria-Mercè Marçal's The Body's Reason: Poems in Catalan*, London, Francis Boutle Publishers, 2014; ISBN: 978-1903427-83-5; £9.99.



Maria-Mercè Marçal has enjoyed recognition in the Països Catalans since her first book of poetry won the prestigious Carles Riba prize in 1976 and her work has increasingly been the subject of scholarship there, particularly since her death in 1998. However, her oeuvre has received

scant attention internationally and Noèlia Díaz Vicedo's volume is the first book-length monograph to be published in English on Marçal's literary production. As such, alongside the same critic's recent translation in collaboration with Montserrat Abelló of the posthumously published *Raó del cos* (2000) as *The Body's Reason* (2014), it is a significant contribution to efforts to bring to the attention of a wider readership the work of a key figure in the development of a feminist movement in Catalonia and Spain.

In this ambitious study, Díaz Vicedo analyses Marçal's first six books of poetry, which were collected in *Llengua abolida (1973-1988)* (1989), thus covering all of the poetic works published during her lifetime. Díaz Vicedo argues persuasively that Marçal's poetry emerged from her lived experience, detailing her focus on the female body and its interaction with the writing process. She proposes that Marçal develops and enacts a theory of sexual difference that is

neither essentialising nor constructivist. Her challenging argument is informed by the Italian feminist philosophy –*il pensiero della differenza sessuale*– of two groups that influenced the poet: 'Librerie delle donne di Milano' and 'Diotima'. She also contextualises the production of the verse within the biographical developments in her life, including her marriage to –and divorce from– Ramon Balasch, the death of her father, and her relationships with women. Díaz Vicedo adeptly explores the evolution in Catalan thought throughout the works studied, positing her poetry as a powerful example of writing as self-creation.

Chapter One, 'The Hermeneutics of the Body', explains the theory behind this critical reading of Marçal's poetry. She outlines the importance to feminism of theorising the body in a prevailing climate of postmodern feminism which has striven to move beyond it. Díaz Vicedo suggests that this dismissal of materiality is, in fact, a result of the very biological determinism from which it attempts to dissociate itself; given its perception of the body in a purely corporeal light which ignores its importance for subjectivity and the specificity of experience. The critic details purposefully how the sexual difference at the heart of the Italian feminism that influenced Marçal saw the female body as key to challenging the universal and neutral subject implied by hegemonic discourse that is, in reality, male. For the Italian thinkers of *'il pensiero'*, equality as sameness simply involves the subjugation of women by inclusion rather than exclusion; their assimilation into the patriarchal order is thus a form of silencing. Díaz Vicedo argues adroitly that the approach of *'il pensiero'*, far from implying the existence of a universal female subject with a fixed experience as Judith Butler feared, recognises and allows for differing experiences amongst women, with a focus on their particularity as individuals. As well as extensive references to the American, Díaz Vicedo situates her argument within debates on corporeality and language in the work of Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Jacques Lacan.

The pertinent selection of extracts from the poems themselves in the second chapter, 'Poiesis', is welcome after a theoretically dense first element. Díaz Vicedo's exploration of poetry as self-construction

centres on three areas: the poetic subject, the moon, and the idea of the shadow across the six books. She considers how Marçal challenges the Aristotelian concept of poesis –the idea of a poet universally speaking for all subjects– through contextualising her poetry in a specific, female experience. One example of this is her inclusion of the experience of pregnancy, which is pioneering in the sense that this topic had not previously been the subject of Catalan-language poetry. Díaz Vicedo proposes that for Marçal, poesis involves a process of 'making clear', of creating a sense of order in the chaos of life, chaos which is itself necessary in that it provides the possibility for the emergence of the subject. She also displays a nuanced awareness of the limitations of, and challenges to, the celebrated process of self-creation.

The third chapter, 'The Poetics of Space: Reconfiguring Reality', concerns the notion of creativity as birth and poetic production as a means of reconstructing female identity in society. The chapter briefly explains the philosophy of the first poetry group to which Marçal belonged, *El Mall*, which was heavily influenced by J.V. Foix. Díaz Vicedo explores the evolution in Marçal's perspective on the socio-cultural function of poetry with reference to her theoretical works, highlighting her utopian vision of reform that 'dispels the understanding of reality as a monolithic and unchangeable sphere' (107). She goes on to flesh out two different symbologies related to birth in the poet's thinking. In the first, the legend of Saint George and the dragon from the Catalan tradition, the dragon is cast as the excluded writer, a threat, as chaos without place in the existing order. For Marçal, the red roses that bloomed from the dragon's blood when it was killed represent the possibilities of birth and transition. The second is the classically influenced myth of Athena's birth and the ongoing dilemma of the female poet caught between Athena, who represents a sort of reconciliation with patriarchy, and Medusa, who remains outside the patriarchal sphere and aims to destroy it. The quotations from Marçal's theoretical writings are well-selected but more extracts from the poems themselves would be welcome to illustrate more emphatically the direct connection implied between poetry and reality.

The final chapter, 'Love and Passion: Towards the Process of Self-Transcendence', studies the expression of love for another in poetry and the extension of the boundaries of the self through that love. The focus falls upon *Terra de Mai* (1982), which received little circulation or visibility when it was first published. Díaz Vicedo suggests that the main reason for its disregard by critics at the time is that it is unclear that 'the other' in the poem is a woman due to the absence of gender markers. However, her comments on later reception of the book suggest that a homophobic critical protectionism of Marçal's character may have had its part to play in its unfortunate reception. The critic explains how same-sex desire is central to Marçal's extension of the boundaries of the self, where the other can be seen as the self in a form of reflection. The argument is persuasive and well-illustrated with extracts from the poems. However, the potential pitfalls in the 'utopian vision of the self as creator of the other' (147) are not really drawn out. The idea of one as a creator of another, even where both are female, might be seen in some quarters as problematic. A sense of passivity and submissiveness in the other woman might run the risk of recalling patriarchy's attempts to control women, which have rightly been lamented. Though powerful and coherent in itself, the nuances of this utopian vision would thus benefit from further exploration.

Overall, this comprehensive study is testament to the author's intimate knowledge of both Marçal's poetry and her theoretical works, including unpublished archival material from the Biblioteca de Catalunya. The debates addressed in the book will surely encourage further study of the poet in the broader field of Hispanic and international literature, as well as in relation to the Catalan tradition. We can look forward to further ground-breaking insights on Marçal from Díaz Vicedo, particularly with regards to how *Raó del cos* (which is not studied in this volume) fits with the evolution of the poet's oeuvre.

The Body's Reason is Marçal's first book of poetry to be translated into English. It is a bilingual edition of a posthumous volume that includes the final poems that she wrote. The Catalan original appears alongside the attentive, nuanced translations,

helpfully exposing English-speaking readers to the original language whilst simultaneously making the poems' content available to them. Lluïsa Julià's foreword to the 2000 edition is also translated and appears at the start of the book, providing a valuable insight into the story behind the original volume. Prior to her death, Marçal was preparing to publish two books - *The Book of Maria* and *The Body's Reason* - but was unable to do so as she battled with cancer. Julià decided the final selection of poems from files on Marçal's computer and her manuscripts, and ordered the poems following the poet's guidelines regarding the compilation of the volume.

The book continues to deal with a number of themes that featured in Marçal's previous poetry such as memory, women in the Biblical tradition, and language; but she continues her pioneering role with the introduction of the topic of cancer into the sphere of Catalan poetry. Reflections on illness and the materiality of the body lead her to consider mortality and ephemerality. As with all of her verse, the volume is tinged with a rebellious spirit and is clearly marked by her feminism. The poet devoted much of her life to establishing an international genealogy of women's writing through translating into Catalan writers such as Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette, Marguerite Yourcenar, Leonor Fini, Anna Akhmàtova, and Marina Tsvetàieva, as well as through her literary production itself. This book is no exception. As Dominic Keown points out in his foreword, readers familiar with Anglophone poetry will notice Marçal's dialogue with Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath, who also made powerful comments on the challenges of womanhood in their works. The significance of matrilineal genealogy in Marçal's work is explicit in the poems dedicated to figures who influenced her, including Mallorcan poet Maria-Antònia Salvà, and Renée Vivien, an English-born poet who wrote in French whose life inspired Marçal's only novel, *La passió segons Renée Vivien* (1995). There is also a poem in three parts dedicated to Marçal's mother.

Unlike her previous output, which largely embraces classical forms such as sestinas and sonnets and reveals a rigorous concern for structure, this volume heralds a rejection of classical versification. Central to some of the poems is their layout on the page, the most

obvious example being the playful calligram that appears at the end of the volume, which consists of a series of higher case XY and XX representing chromosome combinations. Other poems such as 'The scar divides', with its aesthetically arresting lines of between one and three words which appear to represent visually the scar to which Marçal refers in the poem, reaffirm the experimentation with form. Abelló and Díaz Vicedo sensitively capture the exuberance of Marçal's free verse, which stands out all the more given the subject matter of the collection.

In their translator's note, Díaz Vicedo and Abelló comment that they considered translating Marçal to be an attempt to save her from death. Their words chime with Walter Benjamin's conviction in 'The Task of the Translator' (1923) in which he asserts that a good translation permits the original an 'afterlife' through 'transformation and renewal' of the text. Abelló and Díaz Vicedo meet their challenge: the poetic energy in this volume, both in the original poems and in their poignant translations, reveals Marçal's passion for life, even in the face of death. This approachable and impactful edition will draw an international readership to the work of a captivating poet whose other books will hopefully be made more accessible through future translations spurred by this highly commendable endeavour.

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