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L'Ametlla 1966: Josep Benet's cultural offensive*

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Abstract

By 1966 the anti-Franco activist Josep Benet had drawn up an ambitious programme for Catalan nationalization that would use culture as a pivot. Drawing on unpublished archival material, this article traces the origins of this programme of opposition to Franco's regime and contextualizes it in the framework of the institutions and debates of the 1960s, while formulating a discussion regarding the process through which progressive nationalism became hegemonic in Catalonia.

Keywords

anti-Francoism, culture, intellectuals, opposition

L'Ametlla 1966: el programa d'ofensiva cultural de Josep Benet

Resum

L'any 1966 l'activista antifranquista Josep Benet va acabar de formular un ambiciós programa de catalanització per mitjà de la cultura que es concretava en un seguit d'accions i projectes. A partir de material d'arxiu inèdit, aquest article reconstrueix quina va ser la gènesi d'aquest programa d'oposició, el contextualitza en el marc de les institucions i els debats intel·lectuals de la dècada dels seixanta i formula hipòtesis sobre el procés mitjançant el qual el nacionalisme progressista va aconseguir l'hegemonia del sistema cultural català.

Paraules clau

antifranquisme, cultura, intel·lectuals, oposició

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On 8 January 1966 Josep Benet read a paper regarding the cultural survival and *redreçament* ('recovery') of Catalan to a semi-clandestine meeting of intellectuals and bourgeoisie who had come together in the home of Fèlix Millet in the town of L'Ametlla del Vallès (Benet, 1980). Thus was launched the first of the *Jornades* (conferences) regarding current problems of Catalan culture. The talks and resulting debates represented a key episode in the early stages of the hegemony of progressive nationalism. The purpose of this article is to analyse Benet's programme – not an easy task, as no account exists of this intellectual aspect of Catalonia in the 1960s. We consequently have no map of an exciting period when, despite the widely shared primary goal of defeating Franco's dictatorship, tensions developed that – even as they made the hegemony of progressive nationalism possible – led to a deep schism in Catalan nationalism.

Cultural identity and political identity

In mid-1959 Benet began contributing his "Notes and Comments" column to *Germinàbit*. Benet had been secretary, since the late 1940s, for this publication of former Montserrat Abbey pupils, which Max Cahner and Ramon Bastardas eventually subsumed into the *Serra d'Or* journal. In his column Benet discussed cultural issues, gradually fashioning, in small doses, a draft Catalan nationalization programme that would use culture as a pivot. He chose to use the word *redreçament* ('recovery') because, at that point in the mid-1950s, his programme was aimed at driving the para-political movement fostered by the historian Jaume Vicens i Vives. It is likely that, as Benet outlined his programme, he discussed it with Vicens i Vives, as the historian had strengthened Benet's own conviction that history should be an instrument of civil cohesion. Benet felt that his ideas could best be given expression through a new entity called Òmnium Cultural, recently founded to protect and promote Catalan culture.

Not long after, in late November 1961, Benet wrote to the Òmnium Cultural founders congratulating them on their initiative and taking the opportunity to make some suggestions – above all, that Òmnium Cultural should equip itself with an advisory council. Just a couple of days later, Òmnium Cultural directors decided to create an advisory committee. Benet had recommended that this body should include people who, "given their activities, had useful experience and knowledge" of the reality and needs of Catalan culture; he referred, in particular, to "people who, despite having limited resources, had made important contributions to Catalan culture."¹ Benet particularly had in mind Jordi Carbonell and Joan Triadú – but was also probably thinking of himself. The advisory

committee's role, according to Benet, would be to "draw up a general plan of activities in line with the economic possibilities of Òmnium Cultural and the current situation of the country." Such a plan should avoid improvisation and would establish priorities. Benet – himself not one to improvise – recommended a plan that included making Catalan language and culture known abroad, encouraging research into social and political history and fostering the writing of memoirs and of children's literature. Some such ideas had already been given voice in the "Notes and Comments" column, but, for one reason or another, had failed to make an impact. In December 1961, the first issue of a magazine for children, *Cavall Fort*, was published and, in October 1962, a subcommittee on the teaching of the Catalan language was created within Òmnium Cultural, to be coordinated by Joan Triadú.

What at first had been little more than a handful of notes followed by a brief proposal had, by January 1966, developed into an ambitious cultural intervention programme. This maturation process cannot be understood without considering a series of related events that, between 1961 and 1965, generally intensified opposition to Franco and meanwhile garnered considerable prestige for Benet. A first step in Benet's programme was to found a publishing house dedicated to essays; Benet attempted to do this in early 1960 with Jordi Pujol. As a result of Pujol's arrest, however, the project had to be temporarily shelved – just when Benet had commissioned a book on Valencia from Joan Fuster (and it seems that Benet and Pujol also had the idea to commission one on immigration from Francesc Candel). A year later, Benet invited Cahner and Bastardas to take on the publishing house project, which would start with the publication of essays by Catalan authors and translations from the French *Que Sais-Je?* popular science collection. In the summer of 1961 Cahner went to Fuster's home town of Sueca in Valencia with the contract for *Nosaltres, els valencians*. On 12 May 1962 the first Edicions 62 book was printed, assigned to a collection called *Llibres a l'Abast* coordinated by Cahner and Benet. By the end of 1961 Cahner had discussed, with Josep Maria Castellet, the preparation of an poetry anthology analogous to Spain's *Veinte años de poesía española*, with the outcome that the militant *Poesía catalana del segle XX* was published in 1963. Benet was beginning to break new ground and the archives contain a revealing list of possible titles that he probably drew up between 1962 and 1963. Thus, apart from Joan Fuster's commission, the Catalan poetry anthology and *Art o societat* by Cirici, he had plans to publish books by Josep Maria Llompart, Oriol Bohigas, Jaume Nualart and Francesc Candel, under possible titles such as *Notícia de les Balears*, *Combat per una arquitectura vivent*, *Els suburbis* and *Nosaltres, els immigrants*, respectively. *Els altres catalans*, written by Francesc Candel, would

1. Unpublished documents cited in this manuscript were consulted in Josep Benet's personal archive. All translations, except where otherwise indicated, are the author's.



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arrive in bookstores on St. George's Day (Catalonia's national holiday) in 1964. It was the first bestseller of a publishing house that deliberately aligned itself with the reconciliatory process that was being grafted onto Catalan nationalism (Amat, 2012).

For Benet, 1963 was a memorable year. The date of 22 April is recorded in the first edition of his remarkable book, *Maragall i la Setmana Tràgica*. Only two days previously, the communist Julian Grimau had been executed, possibly in revenge for Jordi Conill's implication in an attempt on Franco's life: futile now for Benet to go up to Montserrat Abbey with his colleague Josep Solé Barberà and ask Abbot Escarré to intercede for Grimau. And only eleven days previously, in Rome, Pope John XXIII had published the encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, one of the most important texts in contemporary Catholicism. Commenting on this encyclical at a conference on 28 February 1964, Benet – for the first time perhaps – produced his main theoretical contribution to understanding Catalonia under Franco in terms of cultural genocide. After years of sailing against the tide, the winds now blew in his favour. In 1963 the Pòrtic publishing house was founded with the aim of filling one of the gaps Benet had pointed out to the founders of Òmnium Cultural: the promotion and publication of memoirs. Its first publication was *Memòries polítiques* by Claudi Ametlla, the veteran journalist who formed the core of a pluralistic political group. Ametlla had been designated by José María Gil-Robles to draw up a list of Catalans to be invited to the 'Contubernio de Munich', an anti-Francoist meeting to be held in Munich (June 1962). Benet was chosen to go, but could not attend; in his stead went Rafael Tasis, the Catalan nationalist destined to play a key role there. The publication of Ametlla's *Memòries polítiques* was the excuse to pay this author a tribute at the end of May 1963; Benet attended an act during which Tasis read a letter from Abbot Escarré that was strongly applauded.

On 20 May 1963 a campaign in favour of Catalan officially began that took advantage of a legal loophole; it consisted of repeatedly sending petitions to the vice-president of the government demanding "full use of certain basic rights without which we feel that not only the existence but also expansion of Catalan is threatened." This broadly supported petition featured the signature of Benet, that of Millet – who was to become the visible face of a campaign backed by Òmnium Cultural – and, at its head, that of Abbott Escarré. Escarré – endorsed by the powerful symbolism of the Abbey of Montserrat – was beginning to adopt a critical attitude to the dictatorship that culminated in a series of explosive statements made to the journalist Jose Antonio Novais, in the company of the writer Albert Manent and Benet, and published on the front page of *Le Monde* on 14 November 1963 (Manent, 1999). This intensification of opposition to Franco drew immediate reprisals: Òmnium Cultural was closed down on 2 December, the Casal de Montserrat in Barcelona (belonging to the Abbey) was burned down on 22 December and *Serra d'Or* was suspended on 11 January 1964.

These and other repressive acts could not contain the deeply felt sentiments inspiring opposition in Catalan society. As Maurici Serrahima noted in his diary, "if we hold firm, we have our base, which is now strong" (Serrahima, 2005). The grassroots strengthening of Catalan nationalism was well underway; it eventually found institutional expression in the Assembly of Catalonia, an anti-Francoist platform founded in 1971. Catalan nationalism, understood in a broad sense, had put down deep roots.

Since dynamics of this nature is very difficult to conceive of in terms of mere resistance, I tend to understand the period less in terms of resistance and more in terms of opposition or of transition towards normalization. Around 1963 no one doubted that Catalan culture was surviving. The challenge of resistance was to resist the attempted genocide. And the flame of continuity was still alive: "Those who in 1939 augured the death of Catalan culture must now confess that they were thoroughly mistaken," said Benet in *L'Ametlla* in 1966 (Benet, 1981). The launch of a new *Renaixença* brought the era of resistance to a close. The time had come for opposition – active and Catalan-inspired.

History, the loaded weapon of the future

In 1963, with the publication of *Maragall i la Setmana Tràgica*, Benet rounded out his already multifaceted character with that of the intellectual (Amat, 2009). On 13 May 1963 he received a highly laudatory letter from Agustí Calvet (alias Gaziel) regarding his book. In the same letter Gaziel also recorded some thoughts on Catalan nationalism, expressing particular concern regarding any possible recurrence of 1939. "My understanding is," said Gaziel to Benet, "that our entire history needs to be profoundly reconsidered and then rewritten, most especially the political and social ideologies deployed since the *Renaixença*. Because if intellectual formulas, ways of feeling and political and economic guidelines lead people to a catastrophe like 1939, of necessity we must infer that they were entirely illusory and deeply erroneous, and not just false, but even fundamentally harmful." This idea was formulated by Gaziel for the first time during the Civil War in a short essay called "Introduction to a new history of Catalonia", unpublished but included posthumously in Gaziel's book *Quina mena de gent som* (Gaziel, 2009). This book was probably being written when Gaziel read Benet's book; in his prologue, written around 1964, he affirmed again that rethinking the history of Catalan nationalism was a vital task, but one that he felt too old to undertake, but which he hoped would be tackled by Vicens i Vives' disciples. Gaziel revealed, without giving too many details, that this project was one that was coming close to materialization:

A fixed idea that I had during those years of the Civil War was the need, urgent I felt, for a meeting to take place after



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the war attended by a select group of survivors who would be capable of reflecting in depth on the remote and current causes of Catalonia's troubles – a constant in its history – to see whether, given time and the necessary resources, they could keep the flame burning and, from their experience and the lessons learned from the tragedy, to prepare some kind of ideological and practical compendium that could serve as a standard and guide for future generations of Catalans. Someday maybe I will relate what Francesc Cambó and I were preparing in this regard.

This thinking was remembered with nostalgia by Gaziel in his prologue to *Quina mena de gent som*. Cambó had been keen on the idea of founding a Spanish-American institute of higher learning with headquarters in Paris or Brussels, as told to Gaziel in Montreux; a report describing how to create such an institute included a section on rethinking the history of modern Catalonia. The project, however, was aborted on the outbreak of the First World War.

The relationship between Benet and Gaziel was meaningful yet tragically brief, as Gaziel died on 12 April 1964. Before he died he asked Benet to be the editor of his unpublished work. Benet, perhaps, was the first reader of *Quina mena de gent som* and, before anyone else, would be aware of the Gaziel-Cambó project. I am of the opinion that Gaziel was influential in Benet acquiring the conviction that Catalan nationalism was linked to Catalan ability to rewrite history. This conviction would lead Benet to include, in his programme, the idea of creating an institute dedicated to the study of the history of Catalonia and embracing the causes, development and consequences of the Civil War. The Benet archives contain a document dated November 1964 titled "Notes on the project to create an international foundation of the history of the war in Spain (1936-1939)." Benet commented as follows: "Now that 25 years have passed since the war it is possible to study it objectively and calmly." From the perspective of the two opposing sides, the design was aseptic; Benet's desire for objectivity, I suspect, was an attempt to combat the "25 Years of Peace", a campaign (probably the regime's most important propaganda effort to date) orchestrated by the Minister for Information and Tourism, Manuel Fraga Iribarne. Military victory was increasingly being viewed as the crude source of the legitimacy of the dictatorship; it was therefore necessary to represent the instauration and continuance of the dictatorship as necessary to achieve peace.

Like Benet, Fraga was aware of the importance of promulgating a particular interpretation of the Civil War. The official account was, in fact, increasingly being undermined by a small Parisian publishing house, Ruedo Ibérico, founded by a group of second-generation exiles. Ruedo Ibérico was an example that Benet mentioned in L'Ametlla as a possible model for a Catalan publishing house. Launched in December 1961 with the publication of the translation to Spanish of Hugh Thomas' *The Spanish Civil War*,

in 1963 it published Herbert Southworth's *The Myth of Franco's Crusade*, also in translation to Spanish. The impact of the latter was so devastating that Fraga, to counteract it, created the Special Section for Civil War Studies under Ricardo de la Cierva (Southworth 2000; Forment, 2000). Benet, on reading Thomas' book, lamented the fact that the references failed to cite a single work written in Catalan or that analysed the war in Catalonia. Study of the latter, therefore, would be the aim of his planned institute: a book on Catalonia in relation to the Spanish Civil War. This work, "as much needed as it is demanded", would endeavour to explain Catalonia's role in this war and the consequences to both Catalonia and the world. It would also ensure the continuity of the Vicens i Vives school of history. It is not unlikely that, in the figure of the director of the institute, Benet profiled a post that would suit him down to the ground.

Around late October or early November 1964 Benet went to Paris to observe something of the functioning of foundations dedicated to the study of the First and Second World Wars and the Resistance. He very likely visited the historian Ernest Labrousse, director of Pierre Vilar's thesis *La Catalogue dans l'Espagne moderne* of 1962, of which Edicions 62 had commissioned a translation. It is also likely that he was aware that Òmnium Cultural had opened an office in Paris. A letter, meanwhile, provides concrete evidence that he approached an anti-Franco think-tank: the Centre for Studies and Documentation headed by Julián Gorkin (Amat, 2010).

A Catalanist think-tank

The Centre for Studies and Documentation grew out of the Congress for Cultural Freedom, an international body secretly managed by US intelligence, based in Paris and with committees around the world. The activity of the Spanish committee was twofold. It supported both the Paris centre and an active cell in Madrid that brought together liberal intellectuals in drawing up anti-Francoist ideology. Headed by Dionisio Ridruejo, the Madrid cell had a full-time secretary and a Catalan delegation composed of Josep María Castellet, Llorenç Gomis and Marià Manent. To avoid legal problems, in 1965 it was established as the advisory board for the publishers Seminarios y Ediciones SA. With these ever present examples, Benet was inspired to further develop his programme, definitively given shape in L'Ametlla.

One of the Spanish committee's responsibilities was to distribute research grants. Beneficiaries included Joaquim Molas and Rafael Tasis; Benet was also awarded a grant in April 1964 so that he could continue researching the labour movement in Catalonia. All members of the committee were, in fact, gifted copies of *Maragall i la Setmana Tràgica*. At Spanish committee meetings, Benet reinforced his profile as an intellectual. A month after Benet's trip to Paris, the first of the Catalonia-Spain encounters



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(*Coloquios*) was held in L'Ametlla (Amat, 2010). Antoni Badia i Margarit was commissioned to conduct a survey on the social use of Catalan and Millet gave full details of the petitioning campaign. Spanish intellectuals also pledged to sign a manifesto in favour of Catalan; this manifesto was written by Benet and Jordi Carbonell, who, commissioned to carry it to Madrid, reported that it got lost on being passed from one person to another. The *Jornades* of 1966 copied the design of the *Coloquios*. If the *Coloquios* had been conceived of as a form of arranging regular encounters between intellectuals from different Spanish nations, the *Jornades*, according to Benet's notes, sought to "organize regular encounters between intellectual and economic figures so that they could together debate and examine the cultural problems of our country and propose and promote solutions."

Benet wanted, in fact, to create an entity comparable to the Spanish committee of the Congress for Cultural Freedom that would defend and promote Catalan culture but with a political edge; he was also undoubtedly aspiring to being appointed as its ideologue and administrator. Benet knew that the Catalan committee could only become a reality if the anomalous situation of Catalan culture was publicized internationally. Internationalization was one of the issues raised in L'Ametlla by Castellet, Molas, Cirici and Ricard Salvat; this kind of publicity, however, would require funds – which was why members of the bourgeoisie were invited to attend the meeting. Benet largely understood that implementation of the programme would redirect funds then flowing to Òmnium Cultural. But, leaving aside the business people involved in Òmnium Cultural and the renewal of support from Millet, Benet believed that he had found the patron who best shared his ideals: Jordi Pujol.

Pujol, released from prison in mid-1964, was beginning to play a role in Catalan nationalist circles, writing clandestine articles and outlining para-political actions; in August 1964, for example, he contributed a review of *Els altres catalans* to *Serra d'Or* and before long he was a member of the editorial board. He would argue that *Serra d'Or* should, as well as publish in Catalan, become an instrument for the nationalization of culture. He had similar ideas about Òmnium Cultural, which, however, despite its otherwise satisfactory achievements, was failing to act according to a systematic programme to nationalize culture. As head of the Banca Catalana, Pujol would channel funds into initiatives to further disseminate Catalan socially – what he referred to as "building Catalonia." Pujol and Benet understood each other perfectly.

From mid-1965 Benet acted as a kind of advisor to Pujol who sent the former projects to be evaluated regarding their feasibility and political value. Benet wanted his whole programme implemented and Pujol, I suspect, did not refuse. As can be deduced from a letter of December 1965, Benet's idea, shared by Millet, was to create a "secretariat of initiatives"; this would channel Pujol's activities in favour of Catalan nationalism under Benet's

guidance or management, or, at the very least, would develop Benet's programme. In October 1965 Benet drew up a report regarding the creation of a 'promotion department' – the name was not important, but its content most certainly was. The report described possible activities, the most ambitious of which was to establish an institute of modern history for Catalonia. Another was to launch a campaign to promote the Catalan language that would include actions such as addressing a letter to bishops gathered for Vatican II, requesting a manifesto of support from Madrid intellectuals, publishing a book entitled *Què és Catalunya?* inspired by the *Que Sais-Je?* collection and engaging the Congress for Cultural Freedom in protecting the Catalan language. Yet another idea was to organize an international Catalan language week in some location abroad.

Yet another initiative would be the creation of a Catalan publishing house abroad – as the Catalan equivalent to Ruedo Ibérico. One of its first publications would be a volume of patriotic poetry, published to bring younger generations of Catalans into contact with 'civil poetry'. "This volume should be published" wrote Benet, "to show the new Catalan generations that this kind of poetry exists in Catalan and is not, as it might seem to be, exclusive to Spanish." The first Paris publication by Ediciones Catalanes, in 1969, was *Poesia catalana de la guerra d'Espanya (1936-39) i de la resistència*, by Stephen Cartwright, pseudonym of Joaquim Molas.

Conclusion

Two months after the *Jornades*, Benet, at the request of Pujol and Millet, left his desk at Serrahima law firm to devote himself full-time to implementing his programme, his salary to be paid clandestinely by Òmnium Cultural and Banca Catalana. Over the short or long term, all the programme's goals would be achieved, even though Benet felt, at an intermediate stage, that he had failed – and that Pujol was to blame. I cannot ascertain to what extent precisely they agreed to cooperate. Pujol wanted Benet to support him in his efforts to carve out a centre ground for Catalan nationalism to be led by Pujol – as Benet's cultural policies could be useful to Pujol. Benet, however, prioritized implementation of his own programme, since, in mobilizing culture in strengthening Catalan nationalism, he would ultimately become the visible face of *redreçament*. Such misunderstandings between Benet and Pujol deepened a schism that marked Catalan cultural life during the period when it approached normalization.

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