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The International Significance of Catalan Culture?*

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Before I begin, may I just briefly tell you about two things that are essential in any conversation: what it is that I want to talk about, and from what standpoint I want to talk about it. I want to talk to you about the role to be played in the international concert of cultures by a culture which is sometimes invisible, sometimes only partly discernible, but which for more than a century has sought to be a comprehensive modern culture: that is, Catalan culture. My purpose here is not, therefore, to express my opinions—although I have them—on the political disputes about the relationship between Catalonia and Spain or about the institutional formulas that ought or could better serve the plurality and diversity that exists within the Iberian peninsula. I want to put forward some ideas about the world of culture, as though these political and institutional issues were totally alien to it, even though we know that this is not altogether the case.

Now from what standpoint do I wish to speak of this? At the present time, as you have already heard, I am the director of the Institut Ramon Llull, a body which has been tasked by the governments of Catalonia and the Balearic Islands to achieve greater international projection, internationalisation, of Catalan culture, the culture which is created in the language which is proper to these communities and shared by them, and more generically the culture which is produced in these two territories. But I don't want my address here today to be the expression of any official doctrine; rather, these are the opinions of someone who, because of institutional responsibility at the present time, and a lifelong literary and cultural vocation, has taken an interest in Catalan culture and its role in the world. I will therefore not be expressing the opinions of any government or official institution, but rather my own personal impressions, with the conviction that the experience of Catalan culture has aspects that can be interesting and worthwhile in a much wider debate.

Since the Romantic movement, in the middle of the nineteenth century, in Catalonia and later in the Balearic Islands, and other territories where Catalan is spoken, there was a movement, known as the *renaixença*, that is, renaissance in Catalan, which took, at first intuitively and later as a matter of policy, two surprising decisions. The first of these was to define the community itself in terms of language and culture. The second was to revive—for the republic of letters, they said—a Catalan culture which at that

time consisted mainly of folk sayings and colloquialisms, and resuscitate it as a comprehensive modern culture, in the image—albeit to scale—of the great cultures which are its neighbours: Spanish, French, German or Italian. These two decisions were to have great social and cultural transcendence. They would make it possible, on the one hand, to maintain the social cohesion of the community through almost two centuries of very radical demographic changes, economic transformations and political convulsions. And on the other, they were to endow the reborn Catalan culture with an extraordinary vitality, which brought the world some very important figures—best known above all in the field of fine art, which needs no translation—including figures such as Gaudí, Miró, Dalí, Tàpies and Barceló, as well as many others—and which adopted the major currents of universal culture as its own, from the classical avant garde to the principal literary and poetic movements of the twentieth century.

I shall begin by considering the second of these ideas. Since the late nineteenth century, Catalan culture has aspired to be a culture that is able to explain the contemporary world and one which forms part of its cultural debates. Catalan intellectuals, artists and writers have sought to build up a significant personal opus, but also to participate, through this personal opus, in the construction of a comprehensive national culture that would be the heart and soul of their community. May I offer a clear example? At the moment, the Tate Modern in London is showing an extraordinary exhibition on Miró, entitled *The Ladder of Escape*. The thesis of the British curators of this exhibition is, if I may offer my own interpretation, that Miró's work was born of political commitment, that it has to be read in time and in space. And when it comes to defining this political commitment, the curators underline his rejection of totalitarianism, but also and above all his roots in a cultural tradition, in a landscape, in a country.

Miró can be understood as a contributor to the Surrealist movement, as a product of the great avant garde waves of the first third of the century. But Miró can also be understood on the basis of his roots in Catalan culture, and of his willingness to form part of a cultural project which is at the same time a project for society. And Miró was not alone. He had friends who were painters, writers, poets, musicians. They all took part, each in their own way and with their own aesthetic, in this common project. Each wished to build their own work. But between them they wanted to build a culture and through this culture, an ideal country. Miró, like all of them, can be explained through the crossover between an axis which we might call vertical, or diachronic, which consists of tradition and the future cultural project; and a horizontal axis, synchronic, which is being part of modernity, the avant garde movements and most specifically Surrealism. Miró is at the crossroads. And at this crossroads he does not stand alone. The reason why he is better known than the others may be because his work is more valuable, it may be because the plastic arts need no translation. But he shares with the others this double objective: rooted and modern. And the root is called Catalan culture. A Catalan culture which, for him and for many others in the course of this century and a half, is either modern or is nothing.

Coinciding with the Miró exhibition at the Tate Modern, the Institut Ramon Llull, which I am privileged to direct—and which has collaborated with the Tate to mount this

exhibition—decided to arrange, under the generic title *Miró and Catalan Culture*, a series of very varied cultural activities, ranging from contemporary dance to ancient music, from cinema to sculpture, from circus to jazz, with Catalan and Balearic artists such as Jaume Plensa, Jordi Savall and Pere Portabella. These are in some cases activities specially organised by the Institute itself, and in others, activities that have been programmed for these dates in and around London by a variety of organisers, in all sorts of genres. They have been grouped together under this title to send the same message as the one I want to stress here today. All these artists feel themselves to be, and are, participants in a culture, namely Catalan culture, which they share with Joan Miró. All of them recognise Joan Miró as a benchmark for their own culture, as a part of the cultural matrix they belong to, and they share with Miró the conviction that this cultural tradition must not be broken, but must be constantly renewed to adapt itself to contemporary debate, to new aesthetic movements and even to new political, economic and intellectual circumstances.

The aim of the programme *Miró and Catalan Culture* is to tell British society—in the same way that Catalan society is told, and anyone else who wants to listen—that there is a modern Catalan culture with the will to participate in the universal cultural debate. And that if we are interested in Miró, it is worth while for us to take note of what this culture has to offer us, because it is born of the same womb, because in a certain sense all these artists are heirs of Miró, but at the same time share with Miró a common heritage: a tradition and a will. In the end we may or may not be interested in the work of any one of them. But essentially, a figure such as Miró's—or that of others—becomes a guarantor for an entire cultural tradition.

One of the leading Catalan literary critics, Joan Triadú, who died recently, educated in England while Franco was in power and a translator of classical poetry, as well as being a militant Catalanist, said that the twentieth century had been the golden age of Catalan culture. In spite of the existence of these big names that everyone has heard of—Miró, Dalí, Gaudí, Tàpies, Barceló and so many others, and of less well-known but still important figures such as Espriu, Alcover, Maragall, Villalonga, Rodoreda, Porcel, Riba...—this assertion seems paradoxical. For a large part of the twentieth century Catalan culture lived under authoritarian regimes in Spain that were explicitly against everything Catalan. The dictatorships of Primo de Rivera and of Franco explicitly persecuted Catalan language and culture. Nonetheless, in a century that was politically so hostile, the output of this culture was extraordinary. The reason is, perhaps and mainly, this aspiration to modernity, this central position of the culture in the common project, this added impetus that comes about when personal aspiration to quality is combined with a shared wave of construction. It was a golden age for Catalan culture because this culture had decided it was going to be central and modern. And for another reason too: without a favourable political climate, this culture has survived and flourished thanks to a complex, active civil society, a rich network of societies and associations, private patronage and a civic commitment by members of the public.

A few moments ago I mentioned Joan Triadú, one of the most important Catalan critics and furthermore a convinced, militant Catalanist. His case perhaps illustrates one of the key reasons Catalan culture of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries can now

be, today, a culture that is attractive to everybody, that is worth taking into account and which is capable of participating—at its own weight—in the debate of the world's cultures. Nationalism has often been defined as an excessive taste for everything that is one's own, and hence a tendency to consider to be good everything that belongs to one's own community—irrespective of any criteria of aesthetics or quality—and to regard as bad everything that comes from outside it. To a great extent, without it ever being possible to make absolute generalisations. The success of Catalan culture in the twentieth century was to do precisely the opposite. Joan Triadú, who was considered one of the critics most explicitly committed to Catalanism, theorised and practised all his life that it is precisely because Catalanism is founded on culture that it had to be a project in pursuit of cultural excellence. and therefore that it should set higher standards for its own cultural output and require greater access to the exterior world so as to form part of the major universal cultural currents. In a play on words that is impossible to translate, his surname, Triadú, could be read as meaning "he who chooses the hard way". That is to say, as a person with demanding, very severe, criteria with respect to one's own production. Catalanism did not represent any kind of greater laxity for one's own production, but rather, a more demanding attitude to it.

The result is difficult to quantify and qualify, but it means that Catalan culture today, although it remains unknown or invisible for many sectors of international society, is a culture with major assets. Assets in terms of names and works. Assets in terms of what we might call the sociology of culture: considerable levels of production, dissemination and consumption. More than seven thousand titles a year are published in Catalan. And the presence of Catalan in the field of translations, information technology and the mass media is more than notable, probably more so than any other language which is not an official language throughout a nation-state. It is a culture that has been Guest of Honour at the Frankfurt Book Fair, with a strong tradition in fine arts and stage arts: we could draw up a gleaming catalogue—bearing in mind its scale—but it would probably be unnecessary. Those of you who are interested can find all the information you need on the website of the Institute it is my privilege to direct. But today I would like to make some more general observations. The fact of placing culture at the centre of the definition of the community itself, of having decided to generate a comprehensive modern culture and of demanding high standards for itself has resulted in not only a cultural output of remarkable calibre, but also another thing of value that we can contribute to the universal dialogue of cultures: an ongoing and very specialised reflection on the relations between roots and modernity, between innovation and tradition. This has often been our theme, our speciality. Our experience can be useful for others. Particularly if we consider that this issue—the relation between tradition and modernity, the synchronic and diachronic axes in cultural influences—is probably today, in a society that is highly interconnected and very mixed, one of the central issues for universal culture.

I would like to conclude this first point of the two that I initially declared, with something that may seem an aside. All of you are well aware that there is a political debate in Catalonia and in Spain—and I would say the debate is livelier and more intense in Catalonia—on the way the territory of the state of Spain should be organised. In this political debate, there are those who want and propose the

independence of Catalonia—or indeed in some cases, of the Catalan Lands, including the Balearic Islands and Valencia, the creation of a new independent state within the European Union. Others consider that a confederal state should be created, a confederation of nation-states, which would even embrace the whole of the Iberian peninsula, including Portugal. Yet others believe that the state of Spain should continue to evolve toward an explicitly federal structure. Others consider that the present State of Autonomous Communities already provides a sufficient response to Hispanic diversity, whether it be left as it is, strengthened, or watered down. Finally—or perhaps not finally—there are those who think that the best arrangement is a unitary, uniform state, in the French tradition and Jacobin in inspiration. This debate is alive today and has been going on for a century, with moments of great virulence. It is an impassioned debate and personally, as a member of the public, I have my own opinions about it. But there is one thing I would like to stress: everything I have told you so far, all this evidence of will to shape a contemporary Catalan culture that is rich, comprehensive, creative and modern, all of this does not belong to this debate. What I mean is, it's not a question of building our own strong culture as a way toward independence or toward greater autonomy. Sometimes it is just the opposite: there are some who call for independence, autonomy or federalism precisely because they believe that this culture can only be preserved and enriched in a certain political or constitutional scenario.

I mean to say with this that the work of my Institute to raise the profile of Catalan culture, and in general everything that is done to consolidate a Catalan culture that is able to participate in the universal cultural debate, is not strictly political in nature; more precisely, the work of the Institute does not imply any particular conception of political relations between Catalonia and Spain. Its work is compatible with all the very varied political conceptions of these relations as long as they believe that, whether in an autonomous Community or with independence, whether within a federal state or in a unitary one, it is worth while to preserve the diversity of cultures and specifically to preserve and strengthen the vitality of Catalan culture in particular. And this is today in Catalonia, and I would like to believe also in Spain, an objective that is explicitly shared by political formations with different and contradictory ideas about what the relationship between Catalonia and Spain ought to be. It is an objective proclaimed by the Spanish Constitution and by the Statute of Catalonia. It is therefore an objective that is shared by almost the whole of the Spanish and Catalan political spectrum, and only rejected by those who believe that Spain ought to become a unitary, homogenous, uniform state, eliminating all cultural, linguistic and national differences there might be within it. This was the attitude of the dictators and totalitarian regimes that Catalonia and Spain suffered in the course of the twentieth century, who sought to create this uniform Spain by force, wiping out pre-existing cultures. Apart from this centralist conception, the rest of the political spectrum can accept, and explicitly does accept, the commitment to a Catalan culture that is alive, vigorous, modern and able to go out into the world to describe its own experience, for the benefit of everyone.

I shall deal rather more briefly with the second aspect I wanted to discuss: the choice of culture and particularly language, as the distinctive trait on which to build the community has given Catalan culture a remarkable role in social cohesiveness. We can

therefore reflect both on the role of culture as a fundament of identity and as a cohesive force, against the risk of social fracture and the polarisation of communities. From the point of view of the sense of community, of the feeling of belonging—obviously, not from the point of view of political and administrative citizenship, of the rights and duties of citizens—Catalan culture was chosen a century and a half ago to be the backbone of the community. This has had, viewed from the perspective of history, some notable positive effects and constitutes the core of an experience which it is perhaps worthwhile to share.

At the start of the twentieth century, the population of Catalonia was about two million and the birth rate was rather low. If there had not been—as is the case—a great influx of immigrants, first from the rest of Spain and later from other, more distant, territories, Catalonia would have ended the century—maintaining the same birth-rate—with a population of about two and a half million. In fact by the end of the century it had six million inhabitants. The difference is the result of the wave of immigration. Catalonia has received a very large number of people from outside, the vast majority of whom are not Catalan-speaking and have their own system of cultural references, which furthermore in most cases coincides with the language and hegemonic reference system of the State, with the benefits of official status. The real population at the end of the twentieth century more than doubled that forecast without immigration. In the words of Anna Cabré, the direct or indirect effects of immigration explain 60.3 per cent of the current population of Catalonia. In other words, out of six million inhabitants, 3.6 million are the fruit of immigration. Catalans descended from those who were living in Catalonia in 1900 (many of whom were in any case not Catalan, but had arrived from elsewhere) amounted to only one in four of the inhabitants of Catalonia at the end of the century.

Faced with this phenomenon of large-scale immigration of people whose language and cultural references were different from those that existed in Catalonia, plus the low birth-rate and the very precarious situation of Catalan language and culture—persecuted for many years by dictatorships and hostile authoritarian regimes—it would have been easy to prophesy that either Catalan language and culture would disappear, or that they would evolve toward minority status and a residual role, or indeed that there would be a confrontation and a division of the country according to places of origin, a situation in which furthermore Catalan and Catalan culture would obviously have been likely to loose out. But none of that happened. One might argue about how much conflict there has been, about whether the vitality of Catalan language and culture is very great or not so great, but neither disappearance, nor residualisation nor confrontation has occurred. What has been the key to this? The answer is that very many of the people whose origins lie amongst Spanish-speaking immigrants—or speakers of other languages—have not only taken Catalan language and culture as their own, but have also joined, and been readily accepted into, the emotional community that this language and this culture define. Insofar as belonging to the emotional community was not measured in terms of blood, nor of origin nor of skin colour nor by religion, but by the adoption of the language—without forgetting the language of their place of origin!—and assumption of the system of cultural

references, people who have arrived in Catalonia from elsewhere have felt welcome and felt they were accepted.

A paradox has thereby come about, one which has been highlighted by Francesc Candel, a writer who belongs to this group of Spanish-speaking immigrants, and author of the book *Els altres catalans* (the other Catalans), where he said that the part of Spain with the most immigration is also the part with the best-defined cultural personality of its own, with a more clearly defined individual character. Is it a paradox or is it just the opposite? And if precisely the preservation of a strong cultural identity, founded on the language, has been a practical tool to achieve and preserve the cohesiveness of the community, to avoid fragmentation and confrontation, precisely why was this particularly necessary and urgent in a country with such high rates of immigration? Anna Cabré has said that the contribution of immigrants to the current demographics of Catalonia is, in terms of the twentieth century, as high or higher than might be the case in Argentina, Canada and Australia. Nonetheless, Catalan culture has not disappeared, it enjoyed its golden age in the twentieth century and divisions in the community of Catalonia do not seem at the moment to be particularly serious. The fact that the definition of community has been made precisely in terms of culture and language, which can be acquired, which can be added to those you already had in an act of individual will, may have been the key to the success—comparative success, like all successes—of this experience. And a case which deserves to be known and analysed when throughout the world today, social cohesion and the healing of confrontation or fragmentation between communities occupying the same territory is one of the great issues for universal debate. And the relation between culture and this social cohesiveness, one of the great challenges facing the world of culture. To project Catalan culture abroad also means to share this experience and see how it can be useful in other settings.

As I told you at the beginning, the designated function of the Institut Ramon Llull, of which I am the director, is to project Catalan culture abroad. In my personal view, internationalising a culture does not mean simply raising awareness of it, publicising it abroad, obtaining visibility for it. All that too, but not just that. Sometimes, cultures tend to want mechanisms for projection that do not call their internal functioning into question, but which are simply loudspeakers pointing outwards, like the old commercial travellers who tried to sell their own products in all markets. In my view, internationalisation is more than that, and more important: it is to position a culture in an international setting. To make it sit at the table with other cultures of the world to make itself heard, but also to listen. To sell, but also to buy. To offer its experience, but also to orient its actions towards the universal debates of the contemporary world. To assert its tradition, but also to compare it with the other traditions. It is to make the frontiers between it and the other cultures permeable.

Contemporary Catalan culture has assets of creativity, modernity, that can make it interesting in an international context. It has a lot to learn, but also things to offer. The Miró Exhibition at Tate Modern, and also the programme of parallel activities that accompanies it, are the proof of this. But quite apart from these leading figures and these exceptional works, it has the result of a double experience to offer. Firstly, the

result of the experience of a relatively small, limited culture to commit itself to modernity, to be present in the world, to listen to the principle signals of the times. Secondly, the experience of putting culture at the centre of the definition of the community itself, at the centre of the feeling of belonging, and to use this as a cohesive factor that promotes coexistence in a world where we are all more things at the same time. Things that have to do with the place where we live, but also with the generation to which we belong, with the music of the whole world we have listened to, with the films from all over the world we have seen, with the books from all over the world we have read. We are living ever more at the crossroads of our own tradition and the transversal forces of our times. Catalan culture is an experiment in the management of this crossroads, in times of great demographic changes, of the arrival of human beings from many places, and of the need for coexistence in the same space and with the same citizenship. To internationalise Catalan culture is also to offer our experience to see how far it can be useful above and beyond our immediate situation.

Thank you very much.