

Poison Without Antidote for the Historical Socrates and French Classical Tragedy in *El verí del teatre (The Poison of the Theatre)* by Rodolf Sirera. (An extreme dose of sadism to put a stop to the excesses of theatrical fiction)¹

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Socrates' serene attitude before his death –although this is questioned–, as described by Xenophon in his *Apologia Socratis* becomes for the playwright Rodolf Sirera a useful reference in an effort to reflect boldly on the limits of theatrical fiction in another clear example of the Classical Tradition, including that derived from Baroque Tragedy. However, in this case, it is judged severely to make us more conscious of the risk of turning life into a mere theatrical performance and human beings into actors and actresses in a play they did not write.

Key words: classical tradition; Socrates; Rodolf Sirera; *El verí del teatre (The Poison of the Theatre)*; classical tragedy, baroque tragedy, Racine; Sade; French Enlightenment

For Ramon Simó

Rodolf Sirera, the Valencian playwright, subtitled his play *El verí del teatre (The Poison of the Theatre)* with the following remark: “*Dialogue between an aristocrat and an actor*” (“*Diàleg entre un aristòcrata i un comediant*”)³. “Dialogue” is used here with the conventional meaning of “a conversation between two or more persons” but, in fact, this meaning has little to do with what a true dialogue is in the Platonic sense, namely, the backward and forward movement of words (*lógoi*) through (*diá*) the space between different speakers all endowed with the same intellectual stature. They all strive to understand first and define afterwards the nature of concepts such as “Justice”, “Beauty”, “Good”, etc. However, as readers of the Platonic dialogues, we know perfectly well that Socrates does not very often use such a “cooperative” research method⁴. Indeed, by means of the maieutic method, he attains the indisputable Truth and finally intellectually overcomes collaborators who turn out to be quite ignorant. Therefore, the triumph is on the side of the excellence or intellectual aristocracy of the great master of Athens. By contrast, in *The Poison of the Theatre*, we witness an unequal dialectical dispute in which a marquis –clearly based on the Marquis de Sade– cruelly imposes his own truth on a plebeian actor, whom he never sees as a real interlocutor but simply as a means to give free rein to his uncontrolled passions. In

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³ Sirera, Rodolf 1978, p. 85; all the quotations in Catalan are taken from this edition and the page numbers in brackets refer to it. The English translation is by John London, who used a different title: *The Audition by Rudolf Sirera*, published in Playtext, 1988.

⁴ In fact, those that come after the “Socratic dialogues” of his first period: *Crito, Euthypro, Laches, Lysis, Charmides, Hippias Major, Hippias Minor, Ion*.

short, the Marquis also has intellectual aspirations but his method, unlike that of Socrates, does not consist of making others give birth to the truth with which they are pregnant but rather murdering them in order to validate his personal thesis.

On the following page, Sirera dedicates his play to Joan Brossa and adds a passage from the First Preface of *Britannicus* by Jean Racine: ‘*What would we have to do to satisfy such demanding judges? (...) Merely distance ourselves from all that is natural and fall prey to the wildest fantasies...*’ (‘*Què caldria que féssiem per deixar satisfets jutges tan exigents? (...) Únicament ens hauriem d’allunyar de les coses naturals, per deixar-nos caure entre els braços de les extraordinàries...*’)⁵. In effect, Racine was criticized for having created a too cruel or a too good Nero, and some critics were even shocked by the fact that he chose such a young man as Britannicus as the hero of a tragedy. This is why he asks himself whether he should distance himself from natural things and fall prey to the wildest fantasies. In his opinion, this would be very easy, since: ‘*instead of a very simple action, containing little matter as would be expected of events taking place in a single day... (it would be sufficient) to fill this action with so many events that they could only happen over the course of a month, with a wide range of scenic resources, the more surprising the less probable, and with many declamations, during which the actors would be made to say exactly the opposite of what they should*’⁶.

From this point of view, it would be very difficult not to support the “simple” or “natural” option, but Racine and Corneille are outstanding figures of French Classical Tragedy and “naturalness” was not precisely its most distinctive feature. Tragedies of that period followed the Greek and Roman model, taking their themes from Greek mythology or Roman history, and thus reviving in eighteenth-century France a world which was then both ancient and extraneous⁷. They were written by men in love with the Classics such as Racine, who was trained by the Jansenists of Port-Royal, and were written for a public lacking the vitality of Renaissance audiences⁸. European and also French society was concentrated in great cities centred around a royal court. Let us think for example of the grandeur and magnificence of Versailles with its large gardens, as artistic as they were symmetrical, and let us also recall the luxurious clothes and long wigs of the French nobility and the great development of the decorative arts and allied concerns. In the theatre, scenery and costume attained a high degree of refinement and opulence, and this was the period of professional actors and actresses who were genuinely admired by their audience.

Nevertheless, French Classical Tragedy was not on a par with Greek tragedy or Renaissance theatre and, as a consequence of the erudition of its playwrights and of the limited themes they dealt with, it was meant for a cultivated and therefore restricted audience. The protagonists were kings, princes and aristocrats, a focus openly revealing the monarchic structure of the society rather than following Aristotle’s suggestions that

⁵ ‘*Que faudrait-il faire pour contenter des juges si difficiles?... Il ne faudrait que s’écarter du naturel pour se jeter dans l’extraordinaire*’ (Racine, J. 1950, p. 387; all the quotations correspond to this edition).

⁶ ‘*Au lieu d’une action simple, chargée de peu de matière, telle que doit être une action qui se passe en un seul jour... il faudrait remplir cette même action de quantité d’incidents qui ne se pourraient passer qu’en un mois, d’un grand nombre de jeux de théâtre, d’autant plus surprenants qu’ils seraient moins vraisemblables, d’uns infinité de déclamations où l’on ferait dire aux acteurs tout le contraire de ce qu’ils devraient dire*’, p. 387 (the translation is mine).

⁷ See, for example: Rousset, J., 2009; McMahon, E. N., 1998; Louvat, B., 1997; Rohou, J., 1996; Delmas, C., 1994; Gossip, C. J., 1981; Highet, G., 1951.

⁸ See, for example: Sayer, J., 2006; Forestier, G., 2006; Blanc, A., 2003; Niderst, A., 2001 i 1978; Couprie, A., 1995; Péliissier, G., 1995; Highet, G., 1951.

the subject of a tragedy must be the actions of the best men⁹. However, the worst aspect was that, in order to adapt themselves to the ruling aristocratic social code, the playwrights accepted more complex and rigid limits than those deriving from classical theatre in general or from the specific Aristotelian suggestions. The social conventions of the period were due to social restrictions: they avoided words such as “knife”, that were related to vulgar occupations; they avoided intense and powerful images, opting for well-known metaphors, always seeking symmetry and adopting the most complex rules of versification¹⁰. We need to bear this in mind to understand Rodolf Sirera’s reasons for creating a marquis in favour of radical anomy.

The first stage direction demands the readers’ attention: “*Paris 1784. A private drawing room in a rococo mansion. Furniture in keeping with the taste and style of the period... a big latticed window, through the panes of which we can witness the inexorable advance of dusk... A servant... is lighting the candelabra with almost ceremonial slowness*” (“*París, 1784. Sala privada de rebre d’un palau rococó. Mobles d’acord amb els gustos i l’estil de l’època... un gran finestral... s’observa l’avanç inexorable del capvespre... Un criat encén parsimoniosament els canelobres*” -91). In effect, even a scant knowledge of the history of European Art leads us to equate the Rococo style -sometimes considered the final phase of the Baroque- with an extreme decorative refinement applied to architecture, sculpture and the arts in general. While one of its distinctive features was the imitation of all sorts of natural forms, such as branches and leaves, there will be probably general agreement with my opinion not to consider the Rococo style to be “naturalist” or “unsophisticated”¹¹. However, we are on the verge of the French Revolution (1789), that great and cruel historical shock, so that “the inexorable advanced of dusk” could be read as an allegory rather than as mere chronological precision, that is to say, as the premonition of a dark future threatening an extremely elegant world which, needless to say, was not less cruel than the revolution that would “execute” it. On the other hand, a Rococo palace always contains candelabra of many sorts but the marquis living there –who is so in love with theatre that he has invited a famous actor- might have lit them not because it was growing dark outside but because, as he is disguised as a servant, they will illuminate, as on a stage, his personal performance in which he is sure he will succeed.

The actor is Gabriel de Beaumont and, at this moment, he is becoming angry because, for almost an hour, he has been expecting to be received personally by the Marquis and not by the Servant. The servant –that is, the disguised Marquis- has offered him a wine from Cyprus in order to make his wait more bearable and, right away, begins to make comments and ask questions:

‘On stage you look taller’. Gabriel: ‘On stage, the audience is only given the points of reference we want to provide’. Servant: ‘And your voice...’. G: ‘It’s stronger, more powerful... That’s only logical. Speaking with you, now, I don’t have to worry about projecting my voice. There aren’t any problems to do with distance or acoustics’.

‘... sembleu més alt en l’escenari’. Gabriel: ‘En l’escenari, l’espectador no té més punts de referència que els que nosaltres volem subministrar-li’. Criat: ‘I la

⁹ *Poètica*, II: Since living persons are the objects of representation, these must necessarily be either good men or inferior (σπουδαιους ἢ φαύλους)... It is just in this respect that tragedy differs from comedy. The latter sets out to represent people as worse (χειρόους) than they are today, the former as better (βελτίους τῶν νῦν)” –translated by W. Hamilton Fyfe, 1973.

¹⁰ Beaudouin, V., 2002.

¹¹ See, for example: Weisgerber, J., 2001.

vostra veu...'. G: *'Resulta més vibrant, amb més cos... És cosa lògica. Ací, parlant amb tu, no m'he de preocupar per col·locar-la. No hi ha problemes de distància o de sonoritat'* (93).

Gabriel does not know it yet but the Marquis is making him act in a preliminary experiment, in which the projection of his voice does not have any role to play. He is interested in the opposition of "fiction" and "reality: *'You mean that, when you act, you don't behave on stage the same as you do in real life...?'* (*'Voleu dir que, quan actueu, no us produïu sobre l'escenari exactament el mateix que en la vida real...?'*). Gabriel, quite naïvely, reveals the secrets of his art: *'Of course not. That would be impossible... If I did, nobody would listen to me properly and I wouldn't be able to convey the character's emotions'* (*'És clar que no. Això seria impossible... Si així fera ningú no em sentiria correctament, o bé no arribaria a transmetre als altres els sentiments del personatge'* -93). He even reveals that these emotions are also to some degree the actor's emotions, since *'when you act, there comes a point at which you can't distinguish where fiction begins or ends'* (*'quan hom actua, arriba un punt en què no pot distingir on comença i acaba la ficció'* -94). And the fake servant, basing himself on his avowed enthusiasm for the theatre and taking into account that *'you really have to feel what you express on stage'* and *'you express what you feel'* (*'cal sentir... allò que s'expressa'* i *'s'expressa ... allò que es sent'* -94), dares to contradict him:

'... you yourself argued just now that you have to resort to a certain kind of speech... the correct projection of your voice... That is conventional. Besides, how can you really experience the emotions of Racine's characters, for example, when Racine, and all the other great writers of the past, express themselves through verse in a way which, as far as I can see, is hardly natural and, what's more, with words which aren't even in common use?'

'... vos mateix heu afirmat abans que heu de recórrer a determinada manera de parlar... la correcta col·locació de la veu... Això és convencional. I, per altra banda, com participar sincerament dels sentiments dels personatges de Racine, posem per cas, quan Racine, com tots els clàssics, s'expressa per mig del vers, d'una forma que, segons jo arribe a entendre, no és natural i amb un vocabulari que, per altra banda, tampoc no és un vocabulari d'ús corrent?' (94).

Thus, it now becomes quite clear why it was necessary to refer above to Racine and the conventions of French Classical Tragedy and, although there will come a point at which the reference to the final moments prior to Socrates's death will become highly significant in the course of this dialogue, for the time being, French eighteenth-century and its main protagonists continue to lie at the heart of Sirera's drama. Indeed, as far Gabriel is concerned, the reflections he has just heard might come from a philosopher such as Diderot rather than from a servant. No matter that this servant reminds him that social classes *'are also a convention'* (*'són també una convenció'*) and that *'you can rise from poverty to power, just as you can sink from power into poverty'* (*'es pot accedir de la misèria al poder, o del poder a la misèria'* -94). Gabriel is conscious that his position in society *'is always rather precarious'* (*'es manté tot temps en precari'*), that it depends on his art and at the same time art *'depends on the tastes of a period'* (*'depèn també dels gustos d'una època'*). He also knows perfectly well that, for aristocrats, in spite of his fame, he will always be merely *'an actor'* (*'còmic'* -95), whereas they, like the Marquis who invited him, have and exercise real power. Therefore, Gabriel is now quite certain: *'You must be one of those who secretly*

subscribe to d'Alembert's Encyclopaedia!' *'Decididament, tu seràs un d'aquells que estaven subscript d'amagat a l'Enciclopèdia!'* -94-95)¹².

Here then is, the age of Enlightenment -consciously supplanting the Baroque- and instilling its utilitarian rationalism, its intellectual anti-conformism and rejection of transcendence, its sensualism and empiricism; in short, the enlightenment of society with the help of the light of Reason¹³. And Diderot, one of the most outstanding figures of the period, excelled in both the defence of human dignity and the search for a personal truth.

The false Servant now admits to Gabriel that being an actor is the most despised and yet most envied profession, because *'everybody feels the need to act once in a while... I mean, in real life; offstage'* (*'tothom sent la necessitat de representar alguna volta... en la vida real... fora dels escenaris'* -95); and reveals to him that he is in fact the Marquis and not the Servant, and that he has been acting and *'I was dressed as a servant, so I had to be a servant... But clothing is always a disguise'* (*'anava vestit de criat, doncs havia de ser un criat... però el vestit és sempre una disfressa'* -96). Gabriel, however, is not convinced by this unexpected revelation until he finally sees the Marquis dressed as a marquis, although he already knows from intuition that he is talking to a dangerous man of clandestine ideas from whom it is worth escaping: *'You're keeping me here against my will!'* (*'Em reteniu, ací, contra la meua voluntat'*). However, as if he were the Greek sophist Antiphon, one of the great intellectual anti-conformists of the so called "Greek Enlightenment" -for whom human beings remain within the law only because they fear to be seen not observing it-¹⁴, the Servant-Marquis answers: *'Unfortunately, there aren't any witnesses here to prove it'* (*'Dissortadament, no hi ha cap testimoni que ho demostre'* -97).

The Marquis is now dressed as a marquis; Gabriel is now quite aware of the new situation. He begins to talk to his interlocutor respectfully, and the Marquis making use of the experiment he has just carried out, expounds his thesis:

'In real life... we all act... all the time... these daily performances are vital for the survival of the social status quo... Even for our own survival as individuals... Ah, if Monsieur Rousseau's theories were taken seriously, we'd live in a kind of hell on earth... The noble savage... No... Man at his most primitive is not exactly kind-hearted... Of course, he's hardly hypocritical, I'll grant you that... But that sort of sincerity, Gabriel... exposes us for what we really are. And we're worst than the cruellest beasts in the jungle... I'm speaking from my own experience'.

¹² On Diderot and the Encyclopaedia movement, see, for example: Quintili, P., 2009; Ballstadt, K. P. A., 2008; Stark, S., 2006; Ogée, F. & A. Strugnell (eds.), 2006; Trousson, R., 2005; Duflo, C., 2003; Proust, J., 1967; Morley, J., 1914.

¹³ See, for example: Gregory, M. E., 2010.

¹⁴ Antiphon, who was undoubtedly one of the most outstanding sophists regarding their well-known opposition *phýsis / nómos*, wrote: "Justice lies in not transgressing the provisions of the law in the city where one lives as a citizen. So, a man will practise justice for his own benefit if, in the presence of witnesses, he obeys the laws, but when no one can be cited as a witness of his actions, he obeys Nature's orders (εἰ μετὰ μὲν μαρτύρων τοὺς νόμους μεγάλους ἄγοι, μονοῦμενος δὲ μαρτύρων τὰ τῆς φύσεως). Indeed, while legal provisions are imposed, Nature's are unavoidable: the legal provisions are the result of an agreement, they are not innate, while Nature's ones are innate, and are not the result of any agreement" (Col. 1). So, if when transgressing the provisions of the law, one is not observed by those who have come to the agreement, one will be free from shame and punishment... Indeed, laws have been adopted for the eyes" (τὰ οὖν νόμιμα παραβαίνων εἰ ἂν λάθῃ τοὺς ὁμολογήσαντας καὶ αἰσχύνῃς καὶ ζημίας ἀπήλλακται... νενομοθέτηται γὰρ ἐπὶ τε τοῖς ὀφθαλμοῖς) (Col. 2) -Diels-Kranz 1966; the translation is mine.

‘En la vida real... actuem... tots nosaltres, tothora... Aquesta actuació quotidiana és... absolutament necessària per a la supervivència del status social... per a la nostra pròpia supervivència com a individus... Ah, si prenguéssim seriosament les teories del senyor Rousseau, aquest món seria una mena d’infern... El bon salvatge... No.... L’home en estat natural no és precisament bo... Es manifesta d’una manera autèntica, això sí... Però aquesta autenticitat, aquesta sinceritat, amic Gabriel... ens mostraria com realment som. I som pitjors que les feres més terribles de la selva... Us ho dic jo, que en sé’ (99).

Rousseau certainly had connections with encyclopaedists but he did not share their optimism. In his opinion, customs were ameliorated neither by arts nor by sciences, so he opted for utopian praise of both Nature and the true man, the noble savage, rejecting civilization and the supposed benefits derived from Reason¹⁵. At any rate, at the outset the Marquis’s words should have calmed the actor because they seemed to validate civilized daily social actions. Gabriel himself will regret the *‘actions of extreme cruelty among our civilized contemporaries’* (*‘casos de crueltat extrema en el seu segle tan il·lustrat’* -99), but the Marquis asserts that he did not pronounce his prior words *‘with moral revulsion’* (*‘rebuig moral’*) or with a *‘pious condemnation’* (*‘condemnació pietosa’*), but with a *‘certain... aesthetic admiration’* (*‘certa admiració estètica’* -99). His life, therefore, is devoted to *aísthesis* or, in other words, to both the cultivation and enjoyment of the senses, and he is able to imagine the real pleasure felt by wicked men and murderers, whereas Gabriel continues to defend, so to speak, the canon: *‘How can such evil be... beautiful?’* (*‘Com pot tenir la transgressió... bellesa?’* -99).

Needless to say, Gabriel does accept not the theories of his speaker and, as a consequence, the Marquis opts –as he has in fact from the very beginning- for the use of *empeíria* or direct experience. He tells the actor that he wants him to perform a play written by him, *‘a piece of research’* (*‘obra d’investigació’*), in order to prove, contradicting Diderot’s thesis, that the best actor is not the one who is *‘most distanced from their characters’* (*‘aquell que més allunyat roman del seu personatge’*) and pretends he is *‘using his mind’* (*‘fingeix d’una manera cerebral’*)¹⁶, but rather the one who, rejecting certain techniques which obstruct the emotional identification with the character, becomes precisely the character and lives his life as intensely as his own, *‘and even loses all awareness of his own individuality’* (*‘perd la consciència de la seua pròpia individualitat’* -102). This extreme position or transgressing prescribed rules guarantees the incarnation *stricto sensu* of emotion in the very person of the actor, violating the prescriptions of cold and decadent Reason:

‘I told you before that this play wasn’t... like those which satisfy the decadent tastes of our times... It’s a free adaptation of the life of Socrates, from Xenophon’s Apology... I’m not really interested in the plot itself... I could have written the play about any other character, or setting... Socrates is just a pretext... It’s not really about his life... It’s about his death. The process of his death, that is what I wanted to examine... The only thing we don’t know about Socrates –and so many other characters- is, precisely, their death... the process of their death... feeling the intensity of their death...our own death... Feeling without rhetoric... making our bodies experience, our minds perceive... the

¹⁵ See, for example: Martin-Haag, E., 2009; Radica, G., 2008; Robinson, D., 2006; Simpson, M., 2006; Qvortrup, M., 2003.

¹⁶ Cf. with the total thesis of *Paradoxe sur le comédien*, 1995.

inescapable advance towards self-destruction' Gabriel: 'You mean, lead the condemned man to the gallows?'. Marquis: 'But I don't just mean that... If only we could, through some kind of imitative magic, penetrate and observe their inner life while still being ourselves... then, what sublime delight, what pleasure for the mind!... in this, our dreary age of rationalism!'

'Us ho he dit abans que aquesta obra no era... una obra semblant a les que satisfan els gustos... decadents... de la nostra època... És una adaptació lliure de la vida de Sòcrates, segons l'apologia de Xenofont... la història en si mateixa no m'interessa massa... Podria haver escrit l'obra sobre un altre personatge, o una altra situació... Sòcrates és un pretext... no es tracta de la seua vida... sinó de la seua mort. El procés de la seua mort... això és el que he volgut considerar... L'única cosa que no sabem de Sòcrates –ni de molts altres personatges- és... el procés de la seua mort... sentir amb ells la seua mort... la nostra pròpia mort... Sentir sense retòriques... constatar en la nostra carn, percebre en la intel·ligència... l'avanç inexorable de l'ensorrament'. Gabriel: 'Acompanyar el condemnat fins al patíbul, no és això?'. Marquès: 'Però no únicament això... Si poguéssim, per alguna espècie d'encantament mimètic, penetrar en la seua interioritat, i viure-la, sens deixar de ser ensems nosaltres mateixos... llavors, quin plaer més sublim, quin plaer de coneixement... en una època de racionalisme i d'ensopiment com és ara la nostra!' (102-3).

To experience the death of a human being! Would it be possible without abandoning the most unavoidable duty of any actor, that is, to pretend, to imitate? No, it would not, but the Marquis now abhors all kinds of words and declamations –mere rhetoric, in the end- and he wants to murder them by giving Gabriel a lethal dose of his favorite poison: sensation (*aísthesis*). He wants to observe the actor experiencing Socrates' death or, in other words, the Marquis is now practicing a radical Hedonism, “making our bodies experience and our minds perceive”, in order to ridicule an era that worships Reason but at the same time restrains itself and is afraid –the Revolution has not yet arrived!- of its most extreme possibilities. And, following this devilish plan, Sirera takes special care with the stage direction:

“The Marquis draws back the curtains... and a kind of apse is revealed with tiny grilled windows, but no door. The walls are made of plain stone. It looks like the 'theatrical' scenery for a medieval prison. In the centre of this stage... is a great stone seat... like a royal throne”.

“El Marquès descorre les cortines ... i hi queda al descobert una espècie d'absis, amb estretes finestres enreixades, i sense cap porta. Els murs són de pedra, sense treballar. Sembla el decorat “teatral” d'una presó de l'edat mitjana. Al centre d'aquest espai... un gran seient... de pedra, que recorda un tron reial” (102).

This space is not really a church but it does look like it. Even bearing in mind that, just in the centre under a sort of apse, there is a royal throne and not an altar, we cannot help thinking that we are about to witness a bloody sacrifice offered to an unmerciful God, and we can also not help thinking of a rack, an element which, on one hand, is extraneous to the decorative refinement of the Rococo style but, on the other, suits both the “theatrical scenery for a medieval prison” and the boldness of a sadistic mind.

Gabriel is now prepared to read the passage of the Marquis' play. He would prefer not to be seated in order to be able to create a few tragic gestures, but the Director –that

is, the Marquis- reminds him that he is supposed to be dying. He does not even care, despite being so addicted to realism, that he is not dressed as a Greek citizen. After having read the page suggested by the Marquis and after a long silence, Gabriel starts to declaim:

'Tell me friends... Tell me, you who are by me in this fatal hour... what is expected of me... what pose does history require me to strike... in my death... A heroic pose, with an expression of eternal rest on my face... An example to be followed... But history knows nothing about death... about the deaths of individuals... History despises isolated cases. It generalizes. It has no desire to know about symptoms, vital processes... It is only interested in the results. And about me? What am I in all this machinery? Nothing more than a myth. And myths cannot cry out. (Pause. The Marquis unconsciously begins to shake his head gently in disagreement, but Gabriel, gradually becoming more and more involved in the scene, does not notice) But men are the ones who die... And men die painfully, in convulsions, crying out for mercy... they die pathetically... soiling their bedclothes with excrement and the blood of their vomit... and they're scared... they're scared... terrified... not by a religious fear of what awaits them... no... by a nameless fear... the physical fear of the physical death everyone suffers... because death is consecration, it's the great ceremony of fear'.

'Digueu-me, amics... Digueu-me vosaltres, que m'acompanyeu en aquesta hora terrible... quina cosa s'espera de mi... quina actitud em demana la història que adopte... en la meua mort... Una actitud heroica i un rostre ple de serenitat... Una imatge exemplar... Però la història ho ignora tot sobre la mort... sobre la mort dels individus... la història rebutja els casos aïllats. Generalitza. No vol saber de símptomes, de processos vitals... L'interessen només que les resultes. I jo? Què sóc jo, dins d'aquest mecanisme? Únicament un mite. I els mites no poden cridar'. (Pausa. El Marquès de mode inconscient, comença a denegar suaument amb el cap, però Gabriel, que va a poc a poc, endinsant-se en l'escena, no arriba a adonar-se'n). *'Però els qui moren són els homes... I els homes moren entre dolors, entre convulsions, entre crits'¹⁷... moren de manera miserable... embruten els llençols amb vòmits de sang i amb excrements... i tenen por... sobretot això... tenen por... una por espantosa... no una por religiosa al que hi haja darrera... no... és la por innominada... la por concreta a la concreta mort de cadascú... perquè la mort és la consagració, és la gran cerimònia de la por... ho compreneu?' (105-106).*

The Marquis said earlier that he was in favour of radicalism but the truth is that, at the moment, he looks rather like a judicious man. He appears to know Greek and Roman writers and, moreover, he has obviously read Xenophon's *Apology of Socrates* from a critical perspective. In his opinion, there is too much serenity in it –an almost stoic serenity if I may use an evident anachronism-, and he has decided to strip away the heroic patina with which that ancient author may have obliterated the more human

¹⁷ What the Marquis writes contrasts clearly with what one can read, for example, in Plato's *Phaedo* (117 d-e), in which, leaving aside Socrates's well-known serenity before his death, the master even reprimands Crito and Apollodorus in these terms: 'What conduct is these, you strange men! I sent the women away chiefly for this very reason, that they might not behave in this absurd way; for I have heard that it is best to die in silence (ἐν εὐφημίᾳ καὶ ἡσυχίᾳ). Keep quiet and be brave' (ἀλλ' ἡσυχίαν τε ἄγετε καὶ καρτερεῖτε). "Then we were ashamed and controlled our tears" (translated by H. N. Fowler, 1913).

features of the great master of Athens. The Marquis lives in a period ruled by the goddess Reason and, taking on the role of the defending counsel of heroes throughout the centuries, suggests that the historical Socrates could not be himself and that he ended up playing a role he did not write; that the heroic pose, the expression of eternal rest in his face and his exemplary image were all adopted by him under the orders of History. However, “to adopt” always implies incorporating something extraneous, thus masking –like in the ancient theatre- our true face and personality. In this reading, history annihilated Socrates by dispensing with his specific nature as an individual and turning him into a false archetype, and finally into a fiction; he was submitted to a retrogressive process “thanks” to which he became a myth rather than a human being, thus becoming a “tale” that ignored his true “I”. In the end, it was the man and not the myth who died “pathetically, soiling his bedclothes with excrement and the blood of his vomit”, events not worthy of contemplation and consequently not theatrical (*theâsthai*). The Marquis implication is that Socrates was really scared and never pretended not to fear his already more “paraphysical” rather than metaphysical future, and, in short, that he experienced not a nameless but a personal and non-transferable death, because “death is consecration, it’s the great ceremony of fear”.

Nevertheless, we should not think that the Marquis’s reading is, philologically speaking, a leap over Xenophon’s text. On the contrary, Sirera, the playwright who created this particular character, knew how to read the ancient text and to discover what one might call the theatrical rather than philosophical reasons for Socrates facing his death. Subsequently, his revolutionary and sadistic Marquis has turned the myth into a man, thus returning to him both the agony and the fear peculiar to any human death. Let us see, then, the terms in which Socrates made his apology according to Xenophon:

‘For I have realized that my whole life has been spent in righteousness toward God and man,- a fact that affords the greatest satisfaction; and so I have felt a deep self-respect and have discovered that my associates hold corresponding sentiments towards me. But now, if my years are prolonged, I know that the frailties of old age will inevitably be realized. –that my vision must be less perfect and my hearing less keen, that I shall be slower to learn and more forgetful of what I have learned (νῦν δὲ εἰ ἔτι προβήσεται ἡ ἡλικία, οἷδ’ ὅτι ἀνάγκη ἔσται τὰ τοῦ γήρωσ ἀποτελεῖσθαι καὶ ὄραν τε ξείρον καὶ ἀκούειν ἥττον καὶ δυσμαθέστερον εἶναι καὶ ὦν ἔμαθον ἐπιλημονέστερον). If I perceive my decay and take to complaining, how’, he had continued, ‘Could I any longer take pleasure in life? Perhaps’, he added, God in his kindness is taking my part and securing me the opportunity of ending my life not only in season but also in the way that is easiest. For if I am condemned now, it will clearly be my privilege to suffer a death that is adjudged by those who have superintended this matter to be not only the easiest but also the last irksome to one’s friends and one that implants in them the deepest feeling of loss for the dead.... For when a person leaves behind in the hearts of his companions no remembrance to cause a blush or a pang, but dissolution comes while he still possesses a sound body and a spirit capable of showing kindness, how could such a one fail to be sorely missed? (ὅταν γὰρ ἄσχημον μὲν μηδὲ δυσχερὲς ἐν ταῖς γνώμας τῶν παρόντων καταλείπηται (τις), ὑγιὲς δὲ τὸ σῶμα ἔξων καὶ τὴν ψυχὴν δυναμένην φιλοφρονεῖσθαι ἀπομαραίνεται, πῶς οὐκ ἀνάγκη τοῦτον ποθεῖν εἶναι). It was with good reason’, Socrates had continued, ‘that the gods opposed my studying up my speech at the time when we held that by fair means or foul we must find some plea that would effect my acquittal. For

if I had achieved this end, it is clear that instead of now passing out of life, I should merely have provided for dying in the throes of illness or vexed by old age, the sink into which all distresses flow, unrelieved by any joy' (εἰ γὰρ τοῦτο διεπραξάμην, δῆλον ὅτι ἤτοιμασάμην ἂν ἀντὶ τοῦ ἤδη λῆξαι τοῦ βίου ἢ νόσοις ἀλγυνόμενος τελευτῆσαι ἢ γήρα, εἰς ὃ πάντα τὰ χαλεπὰ συρρεῖ καὶ μάλα ἔρημα τῶν εὐφροσυνῶν) (caps. 5-9)... 'But further, my spirit need not to be less exalted because I am to be executed unjustly; for the ignominy of that attaches not to me but to those who condemned me. And I get comfort from the case of Palamedes, also, who died in circumstances similar to mine; for even yet he affords us far more noble themes for song than does Odysseus, the man who unjustly put him to death' (cap.26)... "With these words he departed, blithe in glance, in mien, in gait, as comported well indeed with the words he had just uttered" (παραμυθεῖται δ' ἔτι με καὶ Παλαμήδης ὁ παραπλησίως ἐμοὶ τελευτήσας· ἔτι γὰρ καὶ νῦν πολὺ καλλίους ὕμνους παρέξεται Ὀδυσσεύς τοῦ ἀδίκως ἀποκτείναντος αὐτόν... Εἰπὼν δὲ ταῦτα μάλα ὁμολογουμένως δὴ τοῖς εἰρημένοις ἀπήει καὶ ὄμμασι καὶ σχήματι καὶ βαδίσματι φαιδρός) (cap. 27)¹⁸.

Well then, let us now be openly critical. Is it not quite obvious that Xenophon himself portrays Socrates as being greatly worried about the image that he will leave to the rising generation? Indeed, the image retained by the eyes of those who might see him dying in old age tortured by all sorts of pains need not be ugly or unpleasant. Therefore, might not the fact that Socrates rejected escape imply to some degree that he chose a theatrical death, that is, one that would be worthy of contemplation (*theâsthai*)? Socrates's life was undoubtedly just and coherent but he also took into account the life to come and the possibility of becoming like Palamedes the subject of beautiful hymns. Consequently, we will never know whether, had he been less worried about "performing" -so to speak-, Socrates might have accepted leaving behind another image, for instance, that of an old man determined not to hide the effect of the passage of time on his body and mind. Alternatively, should we return to Antiphon's thesis: that Socrates' impressive serenity prior to his death was meant for the eyes of others?

On the other hand, the Marquis stated that he is not interested in the plot itself and that he could have written about any other character or setting but, in my opinion, this is hardly credible. The iconoclastic intellectual exercise we have just read can be applied to Socrates, an outstanding figure in the centuries-old Greek Tradition that Western civilization has criticized from many points of view, including the ethical one, denouncing social ills such as slavery and misogyny. But could this very iconoclastic intellectual exercise have been applied to Christ's agony at Calvary? Those who told that story could not obviously avoid the pain, the anguish and the passion inherent in the redeeming act -'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'- but, while not concealing the sensations, very probably no one would dare to maintain that, in view of the situation, in those accounts there is an excess of serenity and majesty in a figure who was both God and man. If I mention this, it is because it may be worth remembering at this point that Oscar Wilde, the famous aesthete and intellectual who admired Christ as a great and bold reformer, also considered him to be an artist, that is, someone who also thought about the possibility of leaving us a valuable icon -an idea

¹⁸ Translated by O. J. Todd. The Loeb Classical Library. London: William Heinemann Ltd; Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1951.

that did not in any way shock Wilde, on the contrary. In other words, Christ would have perceived the positive effect the theatrical dimension –“iconographic” *stricto sensu*- of his death would have for his mission:

“To the artist, expression is the only mode under which he can conceive life at all... And feeling, with the artistic nature of one to whom suffering and sorrow were modes through which he could realise his conception of the beautiful, that an idea is of no value till it becomes incarnate and is made an image, he made of himself the image of the Man of Sorrows, and as such has fascinated and dominated art as no Greek god ever succeeded in doing” (171)¹⁹.

However, leaving aside this brief parenthesis, let us remember that the actor, having finished his recital, is waiting for the author’s verdict and, although the Marquis had earlier abhorred the rationalism of the period, he often follows it, allowing Gabriel to reject his arguments with a simple and accurate logical exercise:

Marquis: *‘Your style of acting doesn’t manage to convey what’s happening to the character... How can I understand, when I can’t feel what you’re supposed to be feeling?... All I mean is you can’t adequately perform what you haven’t ever experienced directly and personally. Because you’ve never gone through the agony of real death’.* Gabriel: *‘If I’d gone through the agony of real death, I would have died, and then I wouldn’t be able to perform the part... Characters who die on stage every night come back to life after the performance is over. And that’s how plays are repeated, day after day’.*

Marquès: *‘La vostra manera d’interpretar no arriba a transmetre allò que succeeix al personatge... Com puc comprendre, quan no puc sentir?... El que jo vull dir... és que vós no podeu representar de manera correcta allò que no heu experimentat mai... d’una manera directa i personal. Perquè vós mai no us heu estat morint... de veres’.* Gabriel: *‘Si m’hagués estat morint, m’hauria mort, i aleshores no podria fer teatre... Els morts de cada nit sobre l’escenari, ressusciten en acabar-s’hi la funció. Les obres de teatre es repeteixen, d’aquesta forma, un cop i un altre’ (106-107).*

And, since Marquis would like to make his play into ‘a unique example’ (*‘un exemplar únic’*) like his pictures but, once again, the actor is able to contradict him by pointing out that *‘you can’t frame a theatrical performance, like a picture, or put it on a shelf’* (*‘una representació teatral no es pot emmarcar com un quadre ni col·locar en un prestatge’*) (107), he decides to unmask both his play and himself. Gabriel is beginning to feel unwell and the Marquis knows the cause: the wine from Cyprus he has given. The Marquis’ experiment is *‘an experiment in physiology applied to an actor’s technique’* (*‘experiència de fisiologia aplicada a la tècnica de l’actor’*) –that is, he makes the actor believe that he has poisoned him. Why? Because he wants *‘to know’* (*‘saber’*) (109) beyond the cold and rational attitude consisting of “contemplating” what is performed by an actor who is also cold and rational, or, what amounts to the same thing, to go beyond the social conventions of French Classical Tragedy. Gabriel’s previous intuition now becomes real: *‘You’re a murderer!... You’re mad! You’re inhuman!’* (*‘Vós sou un assassí... Esteu boig! Sou un monstre!’*) (109). However, the Marquis does not agree:

¹⁹ The numbers between brackets correspond to *O. Wilde. De Profundis and Other Writings*. London: Penguin Classics, 1986.

I'm not a murderer! I'm a scientist! The realm of aesthetics is artificial, and I can't bear artificiality. The only thing I'm interested in is the study of human behaviour. Human beings are real, living things, and the study of them gives me greater pleasure than all your plays and symphonies put together!... Now you're really afraid and your fear isn't simulated! You know you're going to die... like my character! Fiction retreats, defeated by reality! There are no longer two views of the world. Only one view, one unique view, the truth! The truth, above all emotions and social conventions'.

'No sóc un assassí! Sóc un científic! L'estètica és una ficció, i jo no puc suportar allò que no és de veres! L'únic que m'interessa és l'estudi del comportament humà! Els sers humans són coses reals, coses vives, i aquest estudi produeix en mi major plaer que totes les vostres obres de teatre... Ara sí que teniu por!... és autèntica! Sabeu que aneu a morir... de la mateixa manera que el meu personatge! La ficció es retira, vençuda per la realitat! Ja no hi ha dues visions del món ni de les coses! Una visió tan sols... única, la veritat! la veritat per damunt de tots els sentiments i de totes les convencions socials...!' (109-110).

A true sadist, the Marquis now shows the actor an antidote and uses extreme methods to blackmail him: Gabriel must recite the passage once again and *'it's going to have to be your best performance... If I don't like it... I won't give you the antidote'* (*'ha de ser la vostra millor actuació... Si a mi no m'agrada... no us donaré l'antídot'* -111). Now he must abandon all the restraint, balance and affectation peculiar to the performance of Baroque tragedies. It is time to eschew affectation and, acting against himself, to embrace tension, savagery and sacrifice; it is time to give way to naturalness, feeling, vitality, rhythm, body and sweat. Once again the stage direction is almost more essential than the play itself:

"He is tense... even his slightest, most insignificant gestures are moved by a primitive desire to transcend his present wretchedness as an actor, and raise it to the category of a great sacrificial rite, offered up to the implacable categories of a supreme beauty, free from affectation. Acting against himself, contrary to his own intuition, contrary to his convictions and his artistic experience, Gabriel devotes body and soul to the search for vibrant intonations which are, at the same time, full of humility, and completely removed from the rhetorical formulations he used in his first reading of the extract. His acting thereby becomes so natural, so sincere, that his first performance seems artificial by comparison. He speaks very slowly, alert even during the pauses; he is carried along by his own rhythm, and is brilliantly fused with his character. In his eagerness, the Marquis holds his breath and stares at the actor's face. Thick beads of sweat begin to appear on the foreheads of both men".

"Els nervis en tensió... fins i tot els gestos més mínims i més insignificants es veuen animats per un desig salvatge de transcendir les misèries presents de l'actor, i elevar-les a la categoria d'un gran ritus de sacrifici, ofrenat a les implacables categories d'una bellesa suprema i sense afectacions. Actuant contra ell mateix, contra la seua pròpia naturalesa, contra les seues conviccions i la seua experiència artística, Gabriel es lliura en cos i esperit a la recerca d'unes entonacions vibrants i, alhora, plenes d'humilitat, completament allunyades de les formulacions retòriques que va emprar en la primera lectura

del fragment de l'obra. La seua actuació resulta tan natural, tan sentida, que sembla, per contrast, artificiosa. Parla molt lentament, escoltant els silencis, deixant-se arrossegar pel seu propi ritme vital, meravellosament compenetrat amb el seu personatge... El Marquès, anhelant, conté la respiració, esguardant amb avidesa el rostre de l'actor. Gruixudes gotes de suor comencen a amarrar el front dels dos homes” (112).

This Marquis is certainly not Xenophon; it is not enough for him to suggest that Socrates combined his great serenity with a bit of “acting”; he wants to assassinate what he sees as a genuine lie or fiction, that is, the historical Socrates and his very worthy death. He also rejects any remorse; on the contrary, he has achieved his goal, that his speech, full of realism, should become incarnate in the person of the actor and now, second by second, he is going to contemplate and enjoy a unique performance. The actor has agreed to perform because he still hopes to survive but, when the director opts for such a radical approach, it is impossible to satisfy him. The Marquis makes Gabriel drink a fake antidote, imprisons him inside a cage and then tells him that he is once more disappointed with the performance, making the following revelation:

‘I haven’t given you any antidote, Gabriel. In fact, I’ve just poisoned you... I never said that wine... was poisoned... The only real poison, the only lethal poison, for which I swear, there is no known antidote, is the one you’ve just drunk... Your time is up, and you can’t make any more decisions about your life or your actions. Death is making you its slave. It’s locked you in its prison... and make sure the doors are firmly shut... from now on, the course of your agony starts to become dangerous... And I want to be able to contemplate it at my leisure, without having to worry about my safety’.

‘Jo no us he donat cap antídod, Gabriel. Tot el contrari. Us acabe d’enverinar... Jo mai no us he dit que aquell vi... estigués emmetzinat... Això ho heu suposat vós... L’únic verí vertader, l’únic verí mortífer, contra el qual, us ho jure, no existeix cap antídod conegut, és el que acabeu d’aprendre fa un moment... El vostre temps s’ha acabat, i ara ja no podeu decidir sobre la vostra existència, ni sobre els vostres actes. La mort us esclavitza. Us ha tancat en la seua presó... i s’ha curat d’assegurar-ne bé les portes... d’ara en avant, el curs de la vostra agonia esdevé perillós... I jo desitge poder contemplar-lo tranquil·lament, sense haver de preocupar-me per la meua seguretat’ (114-15).

By virtue of a sort of a devilish transubstantiation or “some kind of imitative magic” mentioned above, the body and the whole person of the actor will become the body of the only Socrates of which the Marquis is able to conceive: a suffering Socrates, precisely the reverse of the false myth. The Marquis is a murderer in a dual sense: he kills both the persons and the fictions, he kills both the actor and the theatre in order to enthrone Reality. In fact, he has already surpassed the imminent Revolution, but as a true son of his century, he does not realize that his experiment is also contaminated by an evident cold rationalism: *‘You’re not going to act for me. You’ll be playing for real... The only way of adequately acting out your own death... is... when you actually die’ (‘No és una representació el que aneu a oferir-me. És una realitat. Ho compreneu? L’única manera d’amostrar satisfactoriament la pròpia mort... és... quan moriu de veres’ -116).*

It does not matter; he triumphs over his victim in the end: Gabriel has fallen asleep because of the effect of the first drug but will wake up very soon and, then, *‘the poison,*

the real poison, will gradually begin to act on your body... very slowly... and painfully... for several hours ('el verí, el verí vertader a poc a poc començarà a actuar sobre el vostre organisme... molt lentament... durant algunes hores, i de manera dolorosa' - 116). The Marquis has surrendered to Reality and has assassinated Theatre. Nevertheless, he respects the ritual of which any performance consists and he deludes himself by fulfilling it:

'Let's respect the conventions and the formality of our art... We'll go and sit down... And now... with your permission, I will stop talking. The curtain has just risen. A rather delicate piece of music is being played on violins which are concealed from view. The stage is lit by scores of candles, and, the leading actor, dressed for the ceremony, is getting ready to make a dramatic entrance... Ah, this moment of expectation is sublime... Just think of the tension which can be concentrated in these few seconds before the first speech... But let's stop talking now... Will members of the audience kindly remain in the seats?... Let's respect all the ritual and quiet. Not a word. Tonight is the opening night and the performance is about to begin... right now'

'Respectem les formes i les convencions del nostre art. Anem-hi, doncs, a seure. I ara... permeteu-me que deixi de parlar. Acaba d'alçar-se el teló. Sona una música molt dolça de violins invisibles. L'escenari llueix amb la llum de canelobres, i l'actor principal, vestit de cerimònia, es prepara per fer-hi una entrada dramàtica... Ah, quin moment més sublim, aquesta espera... Quina ansietat tan gran pot concentrar-se en aquest pocs segons que precedeixen el primer parlament... Però callem... Els espectadors hem de romandre quiets en els seients... respectem tots els ritus. Callem. hem de guardar silenci. Aquesta nit és una nit d'estrena, i la funció va a començar... ara mateix' (116-17).

A performance within another performance. To sum up, by means of his drama Rodolf Sirera gives us an extreme dose of sadism in order to make us reflect on the limitations of theatrical fiction in general and on its excesses in particular. On the occasion of the performance of *The Poison of the Theatre* at the Poliorama Theatre in Barcelona Rodolf Sirera wrote in the program:

"My father said that the worst thing about theatre was not only the unruly life led by artists... but also and above all the fact that, when men and women taste forbidden fruit, there is no human power that can help them resist its wicked seduction... And what is the one thing in theatre more perverse than theatre itself? Fiction... the act of simulating before the audience, in the here and now. This is why my plays... are infused with this obsession with dramatic structure, and its limits and rules... I have written... plays that were performances, dramatic biographies of imaginary actors... plays not intended to be performed that questioned the existence of the audience or its location in space... the subject has always been the same: the seductive nature of wickedness. Simulating, lying, living. Only death is the unique truth. Only death imposes its limits. And only in the theatre is death, the real truth, betrayed. Perhaps in no play other than *The Poison of the Theatre* is this theoretical discourse developed in such a harmonious way... The concepts of "fiction" and "reality" used by Gabriel and the Marquis collide from the very beginning of the play and... are questioned... as tools of knowledge, as methods of delimiting a true reality –if such should exist and the play ends rejecting any chance of understanding

reality itself... We shall never know, then, if the experiment has taken place. Death will be... the only true reality. The author would have hastened to turn this potentiality into an action if it had not been proscribed by other conventions, not exactly those that govern theatre. There comes a point at which the author, like his character, must stop, precisely the point at which the poison they have both imbibed begins to show its inevitable effect”.

“Deia mon pare que la pitjor cosa del teatre no era només la vida desordenada dels artistes... sinó, sobretot, el fet que quan hom tasta la fruita prohibida no hi ha cap poder humà que el permeti resistir-se a la seva perversa seducció... ¿I quina cosa resulta més perversa en el teatre que el mateix fet del teatre, la ficció... l’acte de fingir davant l’espectador, ara i ací? Per això, en el meu teatre... planeja... aquesta obsessió pel joc dramàtic, els seus límits i regles... He escrit... obres que eren representacions, biografies dramàtiques d’actors imaginaris... peces irrepresentables que posaven en dubte l’existència de l’espectador o la seva ubicació en l’espai... el tema n’és sempre el mateix: la seducció de la perversitat. Fingir, mentir, viure. Només la mort és l’única veritat. Només la mort imposa límits. I únicament en el teatre la mort, la veritat objectiva, resulta traïda. Potser en cap altra obra com *El verí del teatre* aquest discurs teòric es desenvolupa d’una manera tan harmònica... El conceptes de ficció i realitat que empen Gabriel i el Marquès s’enfronten als pocs minuts de començar l’obra i... són posats en qüestió... com a instrument de coneixement, com a mètodes de delimitació d’una realitat objectiva –si és que n’ existeix cap-, per acabar negant qualsevol possibilitat de comprensió de la mateixa realitat... No podrà, doncs, saber-se mai si l’experiment s’ha arribat a realitzar. La mort serà... l’única realitat segura. A convertir en acte aquesta potencialitat... s’hagués apressat... l’autor, si aquesta possibilitat no li hagués estat negada per altres convencions, que no són precisament les que regeixen l’escena. Hi ha un punt on l’autor, com el seu personatge, s’ha de detenir. Just aquell on el verí que tots dos s’han administrat comença a manifestar, inapel·lablement, els seus efectes”.

In order to bring home to us the excesses of theatrical fiction, Sirera chose French Classical Tragedy and created a Marquis who asserts that he wants to assassinate the theatre in the person of one of its famous actors. As an aristocrat, he too may soon die on the guillotine when the French Revolution takes place, because he is very aware in the end that *‘you can rise from poverty to power, just As you can sink from power into poverty’* (*‘es pot accedir de la misèria al poder, o del poder a la misèria’* -94). The actor has even suspected that the Marquis must be one of those who secretly subscribe to d’Alembert’s Encyclopaedia, although the aristocrat’s intellect goes beyond the paradoxically restricted limits which the goddess Reason in the Age of Enlightenment appears to have imposed on his wild impulses. Moreover, the experimental play he has written neither follows Aristotle’s principles nor goes beyond their rigour –as French Classical Tragedy certainly did- but rather fights against them. In other words, if Aristotle’s *Poetics* (VI: VI, 2-3) maintains that: “Tragedy is, then, a representation of an action that is heroic and complete and of certain magnitude... it represents men in action and does not use narrative, and through pity and fear it effects relief to these and similar emotions” (ἔστιν οὖν τραγωδία μίμησις πράξεως σπουδαίας καὶ τελείας μέγεθος ἐχούσης, ἡδυσμένῳ λόγῳ χωρὶς ἐκάστῳ τῶν εἰδῶν ἐν τοῖς μορίοις, δρώντων καὶ οὐ δι’ ἀπαγγελίας, δι’ ἐλέου καὶ φόβου περαίνουσα τὴν τῶν τοιούτων παθημάτων κάθαρσιν -translated by W. Hamilton Fyfe, 1973), then the Marquis,

being the sole member of the audience –*stricto sensu* now- will reject both pity and fear as clear signs of intellectual decadence, thus surrendering to *Hedoné*, to Pleasure.

Once again, a contemporary playwright opens the trunk containing the great characters of Greek and Roman Antiquity and there he finds Socrates and his worthy death. As we have seen, all he has to do is to choose a suitable context and, bearing in mind that his aim is to reflect on the limits of theatrical fiction, make them the nucleus of an hypercharacterized binary opposition²⁰: a) the Age of Enlightenment; Diderot; Rococo style; French Classical Tragedy; the voice projection; tragic gestures and all sorts of stage conventions including versification and unusual vocabulary; acting; performing; fiction; lies; decadent taste; rationalism and intellectual lethargy, b) sadistic revolution; reality; naturalness; truth; feeling; the end of rhetoric; unrestricted cultivation of sensations; transgression of fixed rules; physiology; human beings wilder than beasts; cruelty; rejection of social conventions; envy of both wicked men and murderers; research; experimentation; emotion; extremism; intensity; a refusal to hide misery, anguish, fears and unspeakable desires; poison; and finally, assassination.

Returning a verdict is the task of the audience and, of course, the readers of *The Poison of the Theatre*.

Nevertheless, from my point of view it would be unforgivable to end this article without mentioning the so called “social function” of theatre, clearly present in Rodolf Sirera’s plays, often intended to awaken our minds and our conscience –*The Cave (La caverna)*, inspired by Plato’s well-known image (*eikón*), may be the most suitable example in this playwright’s work²¹. After attending a performance of *The Poison of the Theatre* and after reflecting on its theoretical content, our minds should be also able to identify –or perhaps to discover for the first time- the excesses of fiction that causing the wide range of undesirable falsehood –*lato sensu*- we meet every day. This could in fact, be a joint exercise but, in this case and in view of the obvious solitude of the writer who pens an article and stamps his authorship upon it, I can only hope that my personal reflections are perfectly transferable to those who read my words. Well then, as a consequence of the clear intellectual provocation represented by *The Poison of the Theatre*, the following subjects come to mind:

- a) The permanent act of hiding feelings of every sort such as fears and personal anxieties behind masks –which may either protect or deceive-, whereas men and women should be able to speak freely –in line with the guidance of contemporary Psychology- to a world which in turn should be able to accept human limitations and rejecting perfectionist ideals that too often only cause frustration. As theatre is the topic currently under discussion, I cannot avoid mentioning the role played by masks in Eugene O’Neill’s plays, in particular *Mourning Becomes Electra*;
- b) The fascination caused by what is spectacular in every sort of event –whether musical, religious, sporting or others, a phenomenon which, if I am not mistaken, is growing stronger every day in contemporary society, with the help of huge stages, impressive musical effects and large screens filled with images and messages, ideal perhaps owing to their theatrical nature for touching and seducing the audience, although also ideal for making men and women forget the “essence” of what has brought them together at the moment;

²⁰ On Rodolf Sirera’s theatre, see, for example: Gallen, E., 1999; Benet i Jornet, J. M., 1982; Rosselló, R. X., 1999 and 2009; Pérez, R., 1998. I sobre el teatre a València: Enrique, H., 2000; Carbó, F., 1997; Palomero, J., 1995; Sirera, J. Ll., 1981.

²¹ See, for example: Gilabert, P., 1999.

d) History, a science which so often throughout the centuries has become a sort of impressive “written performance” –and thus theatrical up to a point- of false heroism and epic achievements, not to mention the permanent and deliberate omission of the true protagonists of historical events, the unknown men and women –particularly women-, doomed to inconsequence and destined to play no worthy role;

e) Classical Antiquity itself, Greece and Rome –probably Rome more often than Greece-, recreated on the screen like an impressive architectural show, worthy of being contemplated and admired but carried to such a degree that, as a reaction, one can only applaud Pasolini’s decision, for instance, not to reproduce architecturally the world of his *Edipo re* and *Medea*.

Undoubtedly, the list could be long, but the purpose of this article was a different one and, frankly speaking, I think that it has been already accomplished.

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