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‘The Pain of Being and Not Being You’

Passion, Desire, and Queer Reading Encounters
in Maria-Mercè Marçal’s *La passió segons Renée Vivien*

Abstract:

La passió segons Renée Vivien is the only novel written by the Catalan poet Maria-Mercè Marçal. A novel of many novels, a collage of many languages and genres, by its very form it constantly and systemically dilutes the figure of the author and that of the narrator. Structured around a mysterious manuscript of a screenplay around the life of Renée Vivien, the book seems to problematize the ontology of a literary text. In my paper, I look at the conceptualization of the reading encounter in the novel, as illustrated by the passionate, yet spectral relationship between one of the main narrators, Sara T., and Vivien, an English-born author who wrote in French in the fin-de-siècle Paris, and whose life and work Sara studies. I read the novel in the context of the reader reception theory, as understood by Roman Ingarden, and later Umberto Eco and Italo Calvino. The places of indetermination in Vivien’s life, rather than abstract entities, are political, as Vivien’s disorienting, lesbian life – the backbone of the novel’s plot – has been subjected to systemic silencing and ‘straightening’ by her biographers. Marçal points to certain, socially determined, standardized patterns of filling in the silences of a literary text, patterns that are often a result of a heteronormative and patriarchal bias. The text, rather than a machine, is conceptualized as a site of a passionate encounter between the author and the reader, a destabilizing, queer romance as a result of which the reader’s self may, as Emma Wilson has put it,

‘be re-viewed and identification may thus precede, endorse, or disrupt a fiction of stable identity’ (Wilson, 1996: 5).

Keywords: Contemporary Catalan Literature, Queer Studies, Literary Encounters, Translation, Lesbian Writing

The only novel written by Catalan poet Maria-Mercè Marçal, titled *La passió segons Renée Vivien* (*The Passion According to Renée Vivien*, henceforth *La passió*), tells the story of the literary and romantic relationship between Pauline Mary Tarn, a British poet who wrote in French under the *nom de plume* of Renée Vivien, and Natalie Barney, an American-born writer, both of whom moved to Paris by the end of the nineteenth century. The novel is a collage of stories, memories, and documents assembled to represent the voices of four narrators: the metatextual *narradora*, Sara T., Salomon Reinach, Vivien’s biographer, and Kerimée, Vivien’s secret, married lover from Istanbul. In the present article, I will discuss different understandings of literary encounter: the reader-writer encounters metaphorized as desiring relationships, the dialogues between the implicit and the empirical author, and the encounters between languages and literary traditions as rendered in Marçal’s translations that are included in the novel. All of these literary encounters revolve around the dynamics of autonomy, identity and identification; they all are also represented in the text in terms of queer romance. The aim of this analysis is to inquire into the possible intersections between Marçal’s work of queering the heteronormative love stories and the potential of her novel to query, destabilize, or work on the structure of the novel.

The first sentence of *La passió* is pronounced in a dream, at night, by Sara T. – the main narrator who speaks to an inexistent audience, made up of fantastic, deformed creatures, deprived of eyes, limbs, or with snake hair.¹ Sara T. looks in the mirror, but there is no one there. Then, an Angel appears and gives her a message that she tries to retain

¹ The image of snake hair is of course reminiscent of the Greek Medusa. In Chapter Two of my PhD thesis, I explore in more detail Marçal’s reading of Medusa and monstrosity in general in the context of the patriarchal repression of women’s creativity and desire.

but does not fully understand: 'Llavors apareix l'Àngel i la desperta, ara sí, per fer-li una revelació fulgurant. Sara T. s'esforça per retenir cada so, cada sí·l·laba, cada paraula del missatge, que, de moment, no entén, com si fos fet en una llengua de la qual desconeix el codi' (Marçal, 1995: 15). ('That is when the Angel appears and wakens her, at last, with a dazzling revelation. Sara T. makes an effort to retain every sound, every syllable, every word of the message she does not yet understand, as if it were encoded in a language unknown to her') (Marçal, 2020: 8).² Sara T. hears the voice of the angel, she does not understand the message, but is able to relate to it; like Virgin Mary, she gives her *fiat* to whatever task the angel asks her to undertake. The angel, whose voice can be heard at night, suggests a connection with Hélène Cixous' essay *Vivre l'Orange*, Cixous' literary dialogue with Clarice Lispector and itself a reading of Lispector's novel *A Paixão Segundo G.H. (Passion According to G.H.)*. Cixous describes the moment of a first reading encounter with Lispector in passionate words:

A woman's voice came to me from far away, like a voice from a birth-town, [...] it was writing to no one, [...] in a foreign tongue. I do not speak it, but my heart understands it, and its silent words in all the veins of my life have translated themselves into mad blood, into joy-blood. A writing came with an angel's footsteps, – when I was so far from myself, alone at the extremity of my finite being (Cixous, 2003: 85).

For Emma Wilson, the reading encounter between Cixous and Lispector in the text is metaphorized in sensual, corporeal terms, almost as a sexual encounter:

Her imagery of flesh and blood immediately draws attention to the carnal nature of this encounter. In the eroticizing of a reading encounter between female writer and female reader, Cixous offers the spectre of a lesbian desiring relation (Wilson, 1996: 111).

² Unless stated otherwise, all translations of *La passió* come from the 2020 English translation of the novel by Helena Buffery and Kathleen McNerney.

The metaphor of reading as a sexual or loving encounter allows the readers to rethink the question of boundaries between the narrative personae from a different angle. Sara T., a scriptwriter from Barcelona, is researching the work of Renée Vivien and reading different accounts of her life in order to make a film based on her story. There also is a metatextual narrator: the figure of *la narradora*, a she-narrator whose main function is to draw the reader's attention to the structure of the novel and to continually signal and destabilize the testimonies of different characters, each of whom has his or her own version of Vivien. Sara T., often described by critics as Marçal's alter ego,³ could symbolize the author-person, or the empirical author, pointing to the insufficiency of those theories of reader reception that render the empirical author dispensable in interpreting his or her text. Such is the stance of Umberto Eco, who famously claimed that:

A text is a lazy machine that wants its readers to do part of its job, that is, it's a device conceived in order to elicit interpretations [...]. When one has a text to question, it is irrelevant to ask the author. At the same time, the reader cannot give just any interpretation, simply depending on his or her fancy, but must make sure that the text in some way not only legitimizes but also encourages a particular reading (Eco, 2011: 35).

If Sara T. stands for the empirical author, we may say that *la narradora* dialogues, perhaps ironically, with the notion of an implicit author in a text as described by Umberto Eco – are a semiotic figure, an organizing mind of the narrative.⁴ What Eco is expressing is that

³ See: Tanna, N., 'Sapphic Literary Genealogy in La passió segons Renée Vivien,' in *Maria-Mercè Marçal: Her Life in Words* (ACSOP, September 2017), p. 149.

⁴ This is of course not exclusively Eco's invention. The idea of Wolfgang Iser and Roman Ingarden that a work of art as a matrix that contains places of indetermination to be filled by the reader, listener, or spectator, clearly resonates in Marçal's text. Although the reception theory is a result of cross-lingual, transnational theoretical collaboration, it hardly acknowledges the importance of socio-political specificity in the reading encounter, which is, I think, the gap that Marçal points to via the figure of *la narradora*.

a text or a work of art should normally 'speak for itself.' What Marçal expresses, on the other hand, is that texts often continue to be reduced to their authors' circumstances, especially if the authors are women or queer individuals. When the organizing mind of Marçal's novel is thematized as yet another character, *la narradora*, pointing to her gendered specificity, the author is making a playful allusion to those empirical readers who, contrary to all logic, still expected the abstract, 'universal' model author to be a 'he.' The figure of the author is thus queried, queered.

According to Sara Ahmed, 'To make things queer is certainly to disturb the order of things. As I have suggested, the effects of such a disturbance are uneven, precisely given that the world is already organized around certain forms of living – certain times, spaces, and directions' (Ahmed, 2006: 162). The sense of obliquity, of being 'off line' or non-fitting is present since the beginning of the text, both in the plot and as a structural metaphor. For Monique Wittig, '[a]ll minority writers (who are conscious of being so) enter into literature obliquely' (Wittig, 1983: 67). The queerness of the topic, for Wittig, is often linked with an oblique, fractured, estranging narrative:

The minority subject is not self-centered as is the straight subject. Its extension into space could be described as being like Pascal's circle, whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. This is what explains Djuna Barnes' angle of approach to her text — a constant shifting which, when the text is read, produces an effect comparable to what I call an out-of-the-corner-of-the-eye perception; the text works through fracturing. Word by word, the text bears the mark of that estrangement which Barnes describes with each of her characters (Ibid.).

Wittig's text was, in fact, written as a result of a translation – she conceived of it while translating Barnes' *Spillway*, which is the subject of Wittig's essay. But the reflections on the novel by Barnes may well be applied to Marçal's *La passió*. The 'out-of-the-corner-of-the-eye perception,' in *La passió* becomes the gaze of the narrator projected onto the characters, which Marçal describes as moderately squinted:

‘Fa cinc anys em van caure a les mans uns versos d’una fosca bella,’ diu Sara T. I la narradora la deixa en aquest punt per projectar la seva mirada moderadament estràbica i a voltes sardònica sobre els altres personatges que la reclamen (Marçal, 1995: 13-14).

[‘Five years ago I stumbled upon verses of a dark beauty,’ says Sara T. And the teller of this tale leaves her at this moment in order to cast her somewhat squinting and at times sardonic gaze on other characters that beckon her attention] (Marçal, 2020: 8).

The narrator’s look, distanced, indirect in that it is confessedly ‘projected’ is also oblique, squinting, anything but ‘centered,’ ‘straight’ or ‘straight-forward.’ In the introduction to *La passió*, we also discover the feelings of *la narradora*, whose voice is organizing other accounts, towards her own account: ‘The teller of this tale is unable to draw this introduction to a close without confessing her frankly unexpected feeling of failure’ (Marçal, 2020: 9). Is it then the teller of the tale (*la narradora*) who speaks of herself in a third-person voice? Or is Marçal introducing here a fifth narrative voice: an implicit or ‘model’ author, a discursive entity that represents the ‘intention’ of a text to be deciphered ‘correctly’ by the model reader? Perhaps the very reason for complicating the narrative game of mirrors in the novel is to question the figure of an objective narrative voice as such. In the novel, the reader is invited, from the beginning, to care about the way the teller of the tale feels, to create an affective bond with her. *La narradora* feels that she has failed to create an exhaustive, perhaps objective account of Vivien, a version that she hoped would make a personal encounter with Vivien possible through literature.

The role of the model author to choose the fragments and put them together into a coherent narrative is thus metaphorized as a dilemma that involves death and survival, or indeed revival, of the object of representation. In her study of the concept of queer genealogy in the novel, Natasha Tanna points to the fragment in which Sara T. fantasizes about bringing Vivien back to life, to give her flesh and blood through words: ‘¿Com donar-te cos, encarnar-te, arrelar-te, fer que la meva sang recorri la teva ombra i, sense substituir-la, la converteixi

en vida, en saba, en moviment?' (Marçal, 1995: 91). ('How can I give you a body, make you flesh, root you, make my blood run through your shadow and, without taking its place, convert it into life, sap, movement?') The desired encounter between the reader of Vivien's work and the writer of her life is founded on a utopian intention of merging into one, as Sara T. confesses she is willing to give Vivien her own blood.

In the text, Sara T. travels to Vivien's grave and, while contemplating the tombstone, reflects on life, death, and representation or 'translation' of her research into a visual code. Order and coherence are an insistent desire for Sara T., who juxtaposes cohesion with movement: 'A partir d'un reflex que serpeja aigua endins, on m'és més fàcil de destriar només els traços que em retornen la meua imatge, deformada (com en els miralls de fira), de quina manera redreçar-te a tu, més enllà d'aquest joc d'encaixos, de peces movedisses (Marçal, 1995: 91). ('From a reflex that twists into the water is where it is easiest for me to pinpoint traces, and only traces, which return my own, deformed image (like in carnival mirrors), how can I straighten you, beyond that play of moving elements, of matching fragments'.) For Tanna, the verb *redreçar* in the above passage expresses Sara T.'s need for order or cohesion that would 'make Vivien's life cohere into a comprehensible narrative' (Tanna, 2019: 46). But the choice of words, as Tanna notes, is interesting indeed: *redreçar* means, among other things, 'to straighten.' Sara T. feels an overwhelming desire to 'tame the "wild" fragments that hint at how Vivien lived and interacted with those around her' (Ibid.). In order to finish her script, she needs to make the lesbian poet's life and oeuvre, paradoxically, more "straight": orderly, coherent, unambiguous. But, when looking for a "pure" or "clear" mirror image of Vivien, Sara T. can only see her own reflection, refracted by the moving waters of a puddle next to the grave. The resulting relationship between Sara T. and Renée Vivien, as well as between *la narradora* and the reader of the novel, is represented as an obsessive, impossible affection between two women who pursue a utopian narrative of romantic love as the merging of two into one. The problem of identification in the reading encounter could be read, perhaps, as

a metaphor to illustrate the fantasy of an unmediated reader-writer encounter across languages and time.

In *La passió*, the passionate encounters occur not only between the reader and the writer, the model author and her narrators, but also between the author and her translator, as fragments of Vivien's poems are incorporated into Marçal's novel. The narrative structure of the novel is at once brought to the fore and problematized, yet again, as *la narradora* takes on the role of the organizing mind that reassembles and translates fragments of texts by Vivien. Indeed, the figure of the author also acts as the translator throughout the entire novel – the fragments of Vivien's diaries or correspondence that Sara T. transcribes always appear already in Catalan. The reader-writer encounter, thus, also becomes the encounter between the author (Vivien) and the translator (Sara T.) In the next section, I discuss some of the consequences that Marçal's vision of writing as passionate encounter has for her translation strategies.

Passion, Translation, Cannibalism

In an article on Marçal, Dolors Udina provides detailed comments on Marçal's domesticating procedures in translating Renée Vivien's poem 'Je pleure sur Toi' ('I cry over you'), which Marçal includes in her novel. As Udina observes, in Marçal's version, 'Ploro per tu,' expressions were rephrased, domesticated or '*anostrats*' ('made ours') and a whole stanza erased – according to Udina, in order to 'cleanse' the poem of the exuberant Parnassian imagery and thus make it more 'contemporary' (Udina, 2008: 215). In the translation of the poem Marçal does not reproduce either the original division into stanzas or the rhymes (Ibid.). Udina attributes Marçal's translation strategies to the fact that translation never reflected Marçal's primary identity (Udina, 2008: 208). This is of course true, however, it should also be noted that Marçal's translations of Vivien are published as part of a novel, not as a translation, and so they too are subject to the same process of authorial choice as elements of Vivien's life. There are, however, examples of translations in the novel that seem to be focused on preserving as

many formal features of the original as possible. In one of her letters, Sara T. uses a fragment from Vivien's novel *Une femme m'apparut* (*A Woman Appeared To Me*) to write to her friend about Vivien's fear of maternity and of the deformation of her body. Vivien's verses 'les seins, qu'ont ravagé les maternités lourdes, | Ont la difformité des outres et des gourdes' ('the breasts, ravaged by heavy maternities, | Have the deformity of wineskins and gourds') are inserted, already in translation, into Sara T.'s letter to a friend, where they are rendered as 'maternitats feixugues que els pits han devastat | — són com bots i carbasses en llur deformitat' ('heavy maternities which devastated the breasts | — resemble wineskins and pumpkins in their deformity') (Riba Sanmartí, 2015: 473). As we have seen, and as Caterina Riba observes, Marçal prioritizes musicality in her translation, reproducing a similar syllabic count and rhyme (Ibid.). To preserve the alexandrine, she places *maternitats* (maternities) at the beginning of the verse and reduces the syllable count. In the second verse, she substitutes *outrés* ('goatskins, wineskins') and *gourdes* ('flasks'), two kinds of vessels used to carry water or wine with *bot* ('wineskin') and *carbasses* ('pumpkins'), alluding to empty pumpkins, which historically have been used to carry liquids, but also alluding to the heaviness of a woman's breasts when breastfeeding and evoking a sense of physical deformity. While *bot* is an exact equivalent of *outré*, the *carbassa*, a heavy and thick fruit, alludes to heaviness (Ibid.). Thus, Marçal preserves the sense of heaviness in the poem, as well as the image of an animal's skin – the woman's skin – as a vessel (Ibid.). However, in other instances, the formal features of Vivien's translated poems have been significantly altered.

Both Renée Vivien and her lover, Natalie Barney, whose love story is central to the plot of *La passió*, were born in countries of English expression, lived in Paris and wrote in French. Vivien's verses, as well as fragments of her novels and letters, translated from French into Catalan, are not published as translations, but incorporated into *La passió*, with the figure of a translator who is erased from the process. (Such translation practice also erases the name of the original author, whose status becomes closer to a fictional character, mediated by the

main narrator.) As a British-born writer who writes in French, under the pen name of Renée Vivien, Pauline Mary Tarn translated her imagery not only into French, but into the French conventions of the time, finding inspiration in Parnassian imagery and Symbolism. Vivien also rewrote Biblical and Ancient Greek myths, as well as translated the works of Sappho into French, which also influenced her own work. Marçal's strategy of incorporating Vivien's verses in translation into the novel's plot can thus be seen as a secondary transfer, an oblique look at an already altered text, a translation of not only a translation, but of a multilingual, heterogenous and queer body of texts.

Thus, the symbolic authority of the author in *La passió* is destabilized and queered from the outset and throughout the text. The result of this multilayered, intertextual, and hybrid composition poses the question of the possibility of (re)producing queer identity discourses in literature according to the text's intention, situating the literary 'horizon of possibilities' within the politics of representation. Marçal's vision of translating, which Caterina Riba compares to cannibalization of the source text, relies on breaking or overcoming boundaries between texts, authors, and languages (Riba Sanmartí, 2015: 479). Such boundary-breaking or blurring, however, risks abolishing foreignness and contradicting Marçal's intention of preserving the inner heterogeneity of the texts that she reads, translates, transcribes, and absorbs.

It is worth taking into account that Marçal is translating a fairly unknown, lesbian writer from French, a well-established language in the literary canon, into the minoritized Catalan, thus nuancing the monolithic understandings of both 'centrality' and 'peripherality.' On the other hand, she is translating her 'unfaithfully.' The omission of Parnassian (and also Symbolist) influences in 'Ploro per tu' seems to be a strategy used throughout the novel.⁵ Marçal is allowing herself to 'correct' or domesticate not all of Vivien's writing, but only the influence of the canonic French poets of the end of the century. Moreover, it is imperative to take into account other issues of (non)-representation, such as the relative invisibility of women and queer writers.

⁵ I would like to thank Helena Buffery for drawing my attention to this.

Given the marginal status of Catalan in the international publishing market, Marçal's translation choices bring the readers' attention to issues of multiple minoritization, which, according to Josep-Anton Fernández,⁶ have made it difficult, until very recently, to publish narratives about marginalized communities (for Fernández, the LGBTQ community) in the already minoritized Catalan language.

The representation of sexual dissidence, although not always focused on non-normative or minor uses of the Catalan language, does participate in shaping poetic signification in Catalan. In this sense, Marçal's interest in Vivien could also be defined as seeking the 'minor' within the 'major' language. Just as Deleuze and Guattari speak of 'those literatures that are considered minor' (Deleuze, Guattari, c1986: 14), the example of which could be 'the Jewish literature of Warsaw and Prague,' Marçal seems to point to the 'lesbian literature of Paris.' For the theorists, a minor literature 'doesn't come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language' (Deleuze, Guattari, c1986: 16). But to Marçal, the definition of minority exceeds what may be defined as an ethnic or a national minority. The speech of the minoritized becomes, as if, a language of its own, within an already existing language.

In playing with the idea of a translational hoax, Marçal is perhaps alluding to the famous case of forgery of Vivien's times, skillfully analyzed by Emily Apter in 'Translation with No Original: Scandals of Textual Reproduction,' namely Pierre Louÿs's *Les Chansons de Bilitis* (*Songs of Bilitis*, 1894), subtitled 'traduites du grec pour la première fois par P.L.' ('translated from the Greek for the first time by P.L.') that were disguised as the translation of poems by a sixth-century Greek-Turkish woman poet. The success of the fraudulent translation, according to Apter,

was helped along by the vogue of Greek revivalism in fin-de-siècle erotic literature. The work's reception was buoyed by the reading public's keen

⁶ See: Fernández, J.-A., *Another country: sexuality and national identity in Catalan gay fiction* (Leeds: Maney for the Modern Humanities Research Association, 2000).

appetite for Baudelairean Lesbos and Parnassian pastoral love poetry. The same appetite was responsible for the later popularity of Natalie Clifford Barney's 1902 *Cinq Petits Dialogues grecs* [Five Short Greek Dialogues] and Renée Vivien's free translations of Sappho that appeared in 1903. Anticipating Rémy de Gourmont and Natalie Clifford Barney's reinvestment of the Amazon myth, and André Gide's appropriation of Platonic dialogue for gay polemic in *Corydon*, Louÿs placed utopian sexual politics at the heart of his agenda in using Greek conceits to express feminine same-sex love (Apter, 2005: 150).

As we find out from Apter, Louÿs's intention was to 'rescue' the perceptions of lesbianism from the false accusations of promiscuity. Instead, he decided – not less scandalously – that a lesbian relationship should be represented as an impaired echo of a repressed 'mother's instinct.'⁷ Ironically, the interest in recuperating same-sex love narratives from below the layers of history, oblivion and heterosexual-washing, also cultivated by Vivien and Barney, was part of the same tendency that gave rise to one of the most blatant cases of pseudotranslation.

But, as I have argued, Marçal renders the specter of such 'genuine translinguistic encounter' as partially utopian, as it remains haunted by the projections of the translator, or reader, onto the foreign text, just like Louÿs' rendering of lesbian desire turned out a mere projection of the authors' gaze onto an imagined figure of 'deformed' femininity.

'Desig sense baranes': Writing as queer passion

For Marçal, writing is germane to passion, which, in turn, 'té connotacions d'intensitat i desmesura. Des-mesura: sense mesura. Fora de les mesures, dels molles unificadors dominants' (Marçal, 2020: 173), ('has connotations of intensity and disproportion. Dis-proportion: without proportion. Outside of proportions, of the unifying, dominant frames.') Disproportion and *desmesura*, from *mesura*, 'measure,' connote overcoming order, pushing against the 'universally' defined, patriarchal and heteronormative delimitation of desire, especially women's desire.

⁷ Ibid.

With reference to the representation of women's desire in Freud's psychoanalysis Luce Irigaray observed that 'the "feminine" is always described in terms of deficiency or atrophy, as the other side of the sex that alone holds a monopoly on value: the male sex. Hence the all too well-known "penis envy"' (Irigaray, 1985: 69). For Marçal, to push against the limits of expressing desire means to seek 'l'amor apassionat: transcendir, anar més enllà' (Marçal, 2020: 180). ('[P]assionate love: to transcend, to go beyond.') The poet mentions a 'cara forta, cara creativa,' a strong or creative side of passionate desire, which fuels writing (Marçal, 2020: 172). But, according to Marçal, passion and desire also have a 'cara fosca' or 'dark side':

El amor té sempre alguna cosa de terrible: els cims i els abismes poden suscitar un terror sagrat, perquè realment accedir-hi comporta perills. La proximitat de la bojeria és possiblement un dels espectres més reals. [...] Una altra: el canibalisme, menjar-se l'altre, ser menjada per l'altre... (Ibid.)

[Love always has its terrible parts: the peaks and the abysses may cause a sacred terror, because to engage [in love] entails certain dangers, one of the most real and proximate specters being insanity. [...] Another [terrible element is] cannibalism, to devour the other, to be devoured by the other...] ⁸

Passion, disproportion, peaks and abysses are all metaphors of the extreme, which relate to approaching, indeed exceeding, the limits or boundaries of order, rationality, sanity. To abolish boundaries, to embrace limitless desire, for Marçal, may lead to a loss of self-determination and thus, to being ingested by the other and/or to ingesting the other.

Marçal's definition of passion is in itself not clearly delimited: the poet mentions obsessive desire, but sometimes, as above, she identifies 'passion' with 'love,' sometimes distinguishes between the two; sometimes she seems to refer to relationships between people, sometimes to writing, intertextuality, or the influence between writers. The

⁸ Unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine.

fragments of Marçal's essays that relate to desire are usually impersonal, it is 'love' that acts as a personified concept, as if it were capable of doing things to – or on behalf of – the people involved. The metaphor of passion as a questioning of boundaries becomes, thus, a structural metaphor, symbolizing an elusive attitude towards boundaries and definitions which, as I will argue, also applies to the author's relationships with other writers and with languages other than Catalan.

Throughout her work, Marçal underlines the links between obsession, writing, and the annihilation of the self, which she links to the social exclusion that her protagonist, Renée Vivien, experienced as a lesbian woman writer. The passion, in Vivien, means desire, but also suffering and rebellion. In *La passió*, Sara T. describes Vivien as:

La Revolta encarnada, he dit més amunt. És l'excès del concepte que s'apodera del cos, allò que el converteix en vida sofrent, en passió? És només l'esforç ingent i fallit del cos per coincidir punt per punt amb la paraula, cobrir amb vida, matèria, segons, minuts i hores, tota la seva extensió immaterial, fora del temps? (Marçal, 1995: 104).

[Revolt incarnate, I have ventured above. Is it the excess of this concept taking over the body that turns it into a life of suffering, into passion? Is it simply the enormity of this failed effort by the body to coincide in every way with the word, to cover with life, matter, seconds, minutes and hours the entirety of its immaterial extension, beyond time?] (Marçal, 2020: 92).

Similarly to Sara T., her literary alter ego, Marçal admits to substitute an amorous passion with an obsessive interest in Vivien. Marçal perceives Vivien as rebellious and 'autonomous' and, at the same time, as vulnerable, given her obsessive ways of experiencing desire:

Renée Vivien em va fascinar per la seva vida anticonformista, per la seva afirmació del amor cap a una altra dona [...]. Però també em va fascinar perquè era algú que vivia l'amor amb una intensitat inusitada, un amor sistemàticament turmentat [...] i jo volia deixar enrere una etapa de la meua vida caracteritzada pels amors turmentats. Fixeu-vos en l'aparent contrasentit. D'altra banda, he seguit els passos de Renée Vivien amb

veritable passió. És com si hagués substituït l’obsessió amorosa per una persona per l’obsessió per un fantasma (Marçal, 2020: 172).

[Renée Vivien fascinated me because of her nonconformist life, because of her affirmation of another woman’s love [...]. But also because she experienced love with an exceptional intensity, a systematically tormented love [...] and I wanted to leave behind me the stage of my life characterized by tormented loves. Listen to this apparent contradiction. At the same time, I followed Renée Vivien’s steps with true passion. It is as if I had substituted obsessive love for a person by obsessing over a ghost.]

Passion and desire, in Marçal’s reading of Vivien, are inherently linked to suffering. Passion, for Marçal ‘és una paraula connectada amb els dos extrems: èxtasi i turments’ [is a word connected to two extremes: extasy and torment] (Marçal, 2020: 176). In one of the untitled poems from *Desglaç*, Marçal metaphorizes desire as a painful need for identification, impossible to fulfill: ‘Dolor de ser tan diferent de tu. | Dolor d’una semblança sense termes... | Dolor de ser i de no ser tu: desig’ (Marçal, 2017: 434). (‘The pain of being so different from you. | The pain of a resemblance without limits... | The pain of being and not being you: desire.’) Such understanding of passion is expressed throughout Marçal’s poetry in the concept of ‘desig sense baranes’ (‘desire with no barriers’), which may point to the abolition of boundaries that divide one individual from another.

There is something unrealistic in the way in which the ghostly, literary ‘passion’ between Vivien and Sara T. is represented in *La passió*. Indeed, we may say that Sara T.’s passion for Vivien *transcends* Vivien, if only to reaffirm the ‘I’ of Sara T. Over time, Sara T. discovers, however, that no other, ghostly ‘I’ will ever replicate her ‘I’ by way of a like-for-like ‘translation.’ Sara T., as mentioned in the previous section, calls into question the need of creating a ‘coherent,’ ‘straightened,’ ‘organized’ picture of Vivien.⁹ No matter how hard she tries, she keeps seeing her own reflection. Desire, thus, can never conclude

⁹ In *Queer Genealogies in Transnational Barcelona: Maria-Mercè Marçal, Cristina Peri Rossi, and Flavia Company*, Natasha Tanna explores in more detail

in a merging of two into one. Indeed, as the poet herself reflects, (via Susan Brogger) $1+1=1$ is an impossible equation, unless ‘un dels uns (la dona) era un zero’ (Marçal, 2020: 173). ([O]ne of the ones (the woman) was a zero.) Marçal summarizes this kind of narcissistic, self-affirming desire in an essay dedicated to Rosa Leveroni; she comments on Leveroni’s vision of an unfulfilled, inherently painful desire, aimed at reaffirming the poet’s ego. But such a reading of passion may also be applied to Marçal’s own writing: ‘la passió sempre va més enllà del individu concret que n’és el destinatari, té un sentit en ella mateixa perquè és ella que reforça el jo de la poeta, fent-la viure i sentir-se viure, i, de retruc, referma també la seva solitud’ (Marçal, 2020: 59). ([P]assion always goes beyond the concrete individual to whom it is addressed, it has meaning in its own because it reinforces the poet’s ‘I,’ making her live and feel alive and, coincidentally, it also affirms her solitude.)

To reaffirm one’s subjectivity, to reinforce the poet’s ‘I,’ these understandings of desire seem to entail abolishing the ‘I’ of the lover in order to communicate the poet’s precarious individuality. This could lead us to the other interpretation of Sara T.’s lack of reflection in the mirror: it is not the reader who devours the writer’s identity, but the reader whose reflection in the mirror – her identity – was absent in the first place that “loses” herself in a text and in another person’s language, thus becoming de-personalized and “devoured” even as she devours the other writer’s text. There is a trace in one of Marçal’s essays on writing and passion of linking destructive passions with the experience of exclusion or erasure from the symbolic, which Marçal relates to patriarchy: ‘l’amor passió tal com l’han viscuda algunes dones seria al mateix temps símptoma d’un desordre simbòlic femení i de l’expressió d’una subjectivitat que busca dotar-se d’un lloc en el món en primera persona’ (Marçal, 2020: 59). (‘[L]ove-passion, as experienced by some women, is at the same time symptomatic of

the subversive potential of destabilizing or queering the orderly, straight lines along which traditional genealogies and life stories are built.

a feminine symbolic disorder of the expression, of subjectivity, which seeks to find space in the world to express itself in the first person.'))

Passion as annihilation, for Marçal, is here related to a 'symbolic disorder,' which, in the context of Marçal's reflection of women's genealogies, could perhaps be compared to the 'orphanage' of women within literature and culture. Marçal refers to 'some women' who experience passion as a 'symptom,' as a result of living in an unequal or disordered society. However, the potentially stigmatizing language of 'some women's 'symptoms' and 'disorders' is mitigated by the gesture of sharing fragments of Marçal's own experience of a destructive passion in the form of poetry, especially in the collection *Terra de mai* (1982). The poems in *Terra de mai* tell the story of Marçal's love with a woman named Mai, who also appears in other books of poems – in *La germana, l'estrangera* and in *Desglaç*, and in Marçal's short story *El retorn* (*Return*). In her correspondence, Marçal described the relationship with Mai (her first same-sex relationship), as a turning point in her life and writing. She wrote: 'No m'havia imaginat mai que el meu cos pogués desitjar una dona d'aquesta manera' (Julià, 2017: 241), ('I had never imagined that my body could desire a woman in such a way') and 'Tinc la impressió [...] que la meva relació amb la Mai és una fita important en la meva redescoberta del meu cos i del meu desig... Sé que hi ha un abans i un després' (Julià, 2017: 242), ('I am under the impression [...] that my relationship with Mai is a milestone in my rediscovery of my body and desire... I know that there is a "before" and "after."') In the book, the poet draws on medieval *sextines* to illustrate the obsessive repetition, the insistent recurrence of the illusion of merging with the Other:

M'endinso pel paisatge del teu cos
i em trobo quan l'amor et fa de plata.
I, al punt on Mai comença a ser el teu nom,
se'm menja viva el teu mirall voraç,
i jo et menjo, i em menjo el teu desig
i el meu, que em fiblen amb dents de tempesta.
No vull tornar salva de la tempesta

que trenca límits pel sud del teu cos,
 on horitzons extrems criden desig
 i estimben astres pel séc de la plata.
 Em sé malalta d'espera voraç
 emboscada en l'oratge del teu nom (Marçal, 2017: 254).

[I sink into the landscape of your body | and I find myself when love covers you in silver | And, when your name becomes Mai [Never], | your voracious mirror eats me up, | and I eat you up, and I eat your desire | and mine, and the teeth of the storm sting me. | I do not want to return safely from the storm | which breaks the limits at your body's south | where extreme horizons scream desire | and stars fling down the creases of silver. | I know myself sick from the greedy wait | ambushed by your name's breeze.]

It is telling that, in the course of delving into passion, Marçal refracts the convention of the *sextines*, a poetic composition attributed to Arnaut Daniel, a twelfth-century *trobador* or bard who wrote in Provençal. The *sextines* were formed of six stanzas, with six dodecasyllabic verses in each, and one *tornada* – a final, shorter stanza of three verses. The last words of each verse from the first stanza are then repeated throughout the remaining stanzas, each time in a different, pre-established order: 1 2 3 4 5 6, 6 1 5 2 4 3, 3 6 4 1 2 5, 5 3 2 6 1 4, 4 5 1 3 6 2, 2 4 6 5 3 1. In the *tornada*, all the last words are repeated, two in each verse. The poetry of the Provençal bards was inspired by the ideals of courtly love: the tormented love of an idealized, inaccessible, almost unreal woman. In modern Catalan, one of the most prominent propagators of the genre was Joan Brossa, whose work was an important influence for Marçal (Marçal, 2017: 254). According to Julià, Marçal found the 'obsessive rhythm of the sextines' adequate to express the way in which she was experiencing her erotic relationship with Mai (Julià, 2017: 242).

Even though in *Terra de mai* there are no personal pronouns that would determine the sex of the lovers,¹⁰ from Marçal's numerous comments we know that the relationship she describes is between two women. The reiterative appearance of the word *Mai*, a woman's name, which also translates as 'never,' also suggests that the object of the poem is a woman, and so do the metaphors and descriptions of sexual encounters, such as 'el teu sexe i el meu són dues boques' (Marçal, 2017: 246), ('my sex and yours are two mouths'), which alludes to feminine sexual organs.

Such extreme passion, which results in mutual devouring, in which desire itself is devoured, becomes an obsessive and a destructive force. The lyrical 'I' does not want to 'return safely from the storm'; desire, as the 'breaking of limits' and the aspiration to 'extreme horizons' thus becomes linked to death. The tropes of courtly, idealized love are thus 'translated' into passionate, erotic descriptions of a lesbian relationship. The choice of words that are repeated is important: 'voracious' and 'storm' connote extreme experiences, danger, perhaps annihilation. At the same time 'body' and 'desire' suggest pleasure, 'silver' may relate to the moon, to reflection, to mirroring, while 'name' evokes the lover's name, Mai.

In her relationship with her readers, Marçal does not hide behind an abstract authorial figure. Instead, she invites the readers both to savor the exquisite flesh of her literature and to find out about some personal circumstances and relationship that inspired her literary explorations. Furthermore, she also invites us readers to witness the evolution of some of her ideas, especially those related to love and writing. In acknowledging her personal and literary transformation, Marçal seems to promote a certain permeability of the boundaries that, while separating the reader and the writer, still allow for connection.

¹⁰ As Marçal explains in her letters to Jean-Paul Goujon, she wanted to create a more inclusive account of a romantic utopia or 'paradise lost' to which her readers could relate regardless of their gender and sexuality (Marçal, 1996: 100).

Marçal compares the ‘tormented love,’ love as obsession, with the obsessive ‘love’ between the reader and the writer. Sara T. experiences her relationship with Vivien as an obsession which, in turn, responds to the complex dynamics of otherness and identification. At first, Sara T. understands desire, as well as the process of reading, as blending with the Other, across time, language, and even death. Sara T. cites Vivien’s verses (in Marçal’s translation) and confesses to having made them hers:

‘Pal·lides, respirant-nos la carn perfumada,
en l’evocació màgica de la nit
dieu: “Aquesta dona té l’ardor que em defuig...
Si fos viva! Ella sí que m’hauria estimat!”’

Es curiós: en un primer moment havia fet meu aquest darrer vers. Havia pensat de Renée Vivien això: ella sí que m’hauria estimat. Després he vist, a mesura que m’he endinsat en la seva història, que aquest sentiment reposava, com tantes altres coses, en una fal·làcia (Marçal, 1995: 382-383).

[‘Pallid and breathing your perfumed flesh | in the magical evocation of the night | you will say: “This lady has the ardor that flees from me... | If she was alive! She would truly have loved me!” It is curious: at first I had made this last line my own. I had thought this very thing of Renée Vivien: that she would have loved me. Afterwards, after going into her story, I have seen that this feeling, like so many other things, was based on a fallacy’] (Marçal, 2020: 337-338).

The allusions to intimacy, love, and desire in the passage may be read as metaphors of translation and reading, both understood as entailing impossible complementation and identification, as if ‘above’ or ‘beyond’ difference. Sara T.’s appropriation of Vivien’s verse ‘she would have loved me’ resonates with Cixous’ erotic vision of intuitive communication, almost without knowing each other’s language, without translation, rather than rendering such communication or identification possible, points to its impossibility. The questioning of the need for precise translation and the resulting permeability between translating and writing, when taken to an extreme, may substitute the

utopian vision of a sacred authority of the original text with another utopia: that of a perfect identification with the Other, which Wilson refers to as ‘troubled pleasures of pained identification’ (Wilson, 1996: 197). For Wilson, ‘Cixous denies the identity and agency of the Other’ (Wilson, 1996: 124). In Marçal’s novel, however, translation does occur, although, as noted in the previous chapter, translation, just like literary mimesis, reveals itself as always already counterfeit. In the last paragraph that she writes, Sara T. acknowledges the necessity of distance: the writer whose work she studies is not the same as Sara T. The only possible union, and the most fruitful one, between the author and the translator or the reader, indeed between two lovers, entails embracing difference:

A hores d’ara, sé que Renée i jo ens havíem de trobar així: per damunt d’aquest abisme que el temps i l’oblit han intentat d’establir entre nosaltres. L’equilibri només es fa possible a través d’aquesta mena de superació –momentània– de la mort que és un poema, un llibre, una pel·lícula... (Marçal, 1995: 383).

[Right now, I only know that Renée and I could only have met in the way in which we have: above and beyond this abyss that time and oblivion have tried to establish between us. Equilibrium is only possible through this kind of – momentary – overcoming of death that is a poem, a book, a film...] (Marçal, 2020: 339).

Even though Sara T. describes a physical encounter with Vivien as a utopian illusion, she still evokes it as, well, utopian, indeed as a place no-where *yet* in existence. *La narradora* becomes, thus, the manifestation of Sara T.’s desires: even though Sara T. acknowledges the impossibility of an actual encounter with the object of her desire, the fantasy persists, and exists, providing the framework for Sara T.’s story. As soon as she makes the assertion above, *la narradora* interrupts Sara T. and writes, in block capitals, the following:

LA NARRADORA, QUE FINS AQUEST MOMENT HA REPRESENTAT EL PAPER D’UN ESTRANY CORIFEU, OFICIANT EN MIG D’UN COR HETEROGENI I SOVINT REBEL, DECIDEIX ARA,

ESTRAFENT EL PAPER DE LA MORT I FENT GALA DE LA SEVA MATEIXA PROVERBIAL ARBITRARIETAT, ESTRONCAR EL CURS DE LA NARRACIÓ EN AQUEST PUNT (Marçal, 1995: 384).

[*The narrator, who up until now has played the role of a strange coryphaeus, officiating amidst a heterogenous and often rebellious chorus, now decides to take on the role of death and, making show of her proverbial arbitrariness, break the course of the narration at this point*] (Marçal, 2020: 339).¹¹

Conclusions

The last section of the novel, titled ‘Monòdia final,’ arguably constitutes the most significant reflection on the blurring between the voice of Marçal’s narrators and Vivien’s poetic voice. *La passió*, a novel of many novels, a collage of many languages and genres, by its very form asks similar questions, in that it constantly and systemically dilutes the figure of the author and that of the narrator. Marçal questions the patriarchal narratives of the reading-writing encounter, in which the author is a man and the reader – a woman, like in Italo Calvino’s *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler*. It also disturbs the metaphors of the masculinity of the original and the femininity of the translation, so aptly described by Lori Chamberlain.¹² Structured around a mysterious manuscript of a screenplay around the life of Renée Vivien, whose ‘original’ testimony is also absent, the book seems to problematize questions of literary ‘authenticity’ from its beginning till the last pages. The concept of literary authenticity in *La passió* appears intrinsically linked to the authenticity of language that the narrators speak, as well as to their authenticity as socially constructed, gendered personas. The testimonies of the sexually dissident characters in *La*

¹¹ In the English translation, the block capitals have been substituted with italics.

¹² See: Lori Chamberlain, ‘Gender and the metaphors of translation’ in *The Translation Studies Reader*, ed. Lawrence Venuti (London/New York: Routledge, 2000).

passió, transported across languages, countries, and cultural realms, resemble translations of a translation. The visibility and ‘translatability’ of their stories is always refracted, deformed, fractured. By recounting Vivien’s story and oeuvre, her personal and fictional relationships, Marçal creates a fictional account of a life, a version of multiple versions, in which history is mixed with literature, poetry merges with prose, diary and epistolary writing. Unlike Eco, who metaphorized the text as a machine, an autonomous, automatic being in which each element plays a specific role, Marçal speaks of the reading encounter in terms of a queer relationship, which eludes rigid roles. The reader of Vivien also becomes the writer of her life and the translator of her work. Sara T.’s passion, implicating an encounter between two subjects, reveals itself to be the encounter of the reader with an idealized persona of a dead author or, perhaps, an encounter of the reader with herself. It is telling that, while Marçal’s book alludes to the genre of biography or life writing, it is not only concerned with the ‘person’ of Vivien, but it also acknowledges the impossibility of an in-person encounter between the reader and the author. In other words, *La passió* could be read both as an account of mourning the death of the empirical author, in the Barthesian sense, and as an impossible love story between the reader and the author.

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