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DEATH AND THE CRISIS OF REPRESENTATION IN NARCÍS OLLER'S *LA FEBRE D'OR* AND PÉREZ GALDÓS'S *LA DE BRINGAS*

Elisa Martí-López

What comes to my mind when thinking about the nineteenth century is the critical and ideological possibilities – and dangers – of *Iberian Studies*. What new avenues of reflection are being opened up, and under what new and old constraints? The critical contributions of studies that aim to “congregar, confrontar” the work by Narcís Oller with that of Benito Pérez Galdós, or to study “las interrelaciones literarias dadas entre dos de las tradiciones peninsulares – la castellana y la catalana – ante una propuesta literaria específica como es el Realismo” (Arroyo 1998–1999, 18) are indeed relevant to the understanding of these two authors and the functioning of the Catalan and the Spanish literary systems. However, I find myself resisting the idea that the study of Iberia requires some sort of comparative approach, and uneasy discussing Oller and Galdós side by side within a critical paradigm whose practices and political implications for the study of the literatures and cultures of the Iberian Peninsula are unclear. Moreover, I think that these two authors’ interest in representing urban experience in the late nineteenth century claimed different allegiances, resorted to different narrative strategies, and resulted in highly different city imaginaries. I agree with Joan Gilabert and Joan Ramon Resina that these authors present diverging representations of the city: “la glorificación del presente” drives Oller’s writing of Barcelona, while Pérez Galdós’s concern was “el rechazo absoluto del pasado que es anacrónicamente presente” (Gilabert 1977, 157; see also Resina 1994–1995, 261).

The question to pose to comparative approaches and, more particularly, to all studies written under the rubric of *Iberia* is what Iberian imaginary, if any, they bring forth. Are we reproducing old forms of national imagination framed now by wider or looser – and not always explicit – notions of territorial coherence? Is *Iberia* a premise for new literary and cultural affinities? Moreover, is *Iberia* a new definition for a national inside (conceived now as multipolar and multilingual) and a foreign outside? Is it the continuation of the privileging of production over reception? What new exclusions do *Iberian Studies* effect? How should we read the Modern Language Association’s recent decision to link *Iberian Studies* to Spanish (but not to Catalan or Galician) in its new forum format? As the Modern Language Association’s decision clearly brings forth – *Iberian Studies*’ “natural” place is with Spanish – it is questionable how effectively *Iberia*, as critical object, supports an epistemology that undermines the deeply

rooted hierarchical positionality of different Iberian languages and literary traditions. In more general terms, it is not evident to me why we should privilege – and, thus, institutionalize – *Iberia* as the frame for a set of multipolar and multilinguistic relations that can be inscribed more productively in other ways.

At the same time, I am intrigued by the critical possibilities *Iberia* as both object of representation and site of enunciation may open for the discussion of literature and culture. The deconstruction of the capital as metaphor for the nation and other deeply naturalized and hierarchical oppositions, such as that between capital and provinces, are exciting critical developments for the thinking of *Iberia*. In this sense, still pending is a radical revision of well-established readings of Galdós's Madrid that reproduce the Spanish State's discourse on the nation and, thus, are "a means of political legitimation" of the State (Resina 2001, 59; see also Martí-López 2005, 148–167). I find, however, that these critical insights are of little use when writing about Oller's *La febre d'or*. Barcelona has quite successfully resisted its political and literary reduction to a province (vis-à-vis Madrid as capital) and, thus, its subsumption into the imaginary of the Spanish nation. At the same time Barcelona, while functioning as *cap i casal* of Catalonia, has never been the capital of a nation-state. How, then, does one write about Oller for a collection on Iberian Studies? Here I try to contribute to this volume in a way that avoids any a priori notions that might confirm the existence of *Iberia* instead of contributing to its critical discussion.

Oller's novel, *La febre d'or*, is the focus of this essay, but not the only work I discuss. I have decided to try my hand at *Iberia*, discussing Oller alongside both a personal literary enjoyment – Galdós's *La de Bringas* – and a critical one – Hazel Gold's and Jo Labanyi's readings of the novel, in particular, their analyses of the cenotaph which opens *La de Bringas*. In another collection I would have privileged other enjoyments that would give Oller's work different and always provisional contexts of discussion. The recognition of such enjoyment is my critical compromise with the discussion intended by this collection of essays. Since I have nothing to add to these critics' analyses of Francisco de Bringas's cenotaph, I have chosen both Galdós's literary image of the hair cenotaph and Gold's and Labanyi's analyses of it to bring the discussion of death and the city in *La febre d'or* to the point where I would like to start.

A "close-up" of a hair cenotaph

The hair cenotaph at the beginning of *La de Bringas* (1884) is "the most arresting feature of Galdós's novel" (Franz 1996, 259). At the time of the novel, hair cenotaphs were already obsolete but, as has been pointed out, it is not its obsolescence that makes it "arresting," but rather the description of its aberrant shape. The description of the extravagant hair memorial Francisco de Bringas is putting together throughout most of the novel takes up the entire first chapter, thus effectively delaying the beginning of the story-as-plot. The meticulous and ironic description of this *memento mori* by the narrator focuses exclusively on the object itself, on its monstrous – chaotic – nature. No indication is given at this time of its intended recipient or function, and only at the very end of the chapter is its maker identified: it is Francisco de Bringas, husband of the protagonist. Later on we are told that the hair cenotaph is Francisco's cheap way – at no cost for him – of repaying Manuel Pez for the favor of securing employment for the Bringas's young son.

Literary descriptions are never simply a likeness of something else, but rather a way of building and conveying meaning and, as Hazel Gold comments, the cenotaph – the juxtaposition of disparate motifs that characterize its overall composition – "is no mere costumbrista digression but rather a principal device in the unification of the work" (1986, 54). As summarized by Gold, the cenotaph's "ineradicable heterogeneity" includes "virtually every icon

of death known to Romantic painting and sculpture (“torches, urns, amphorae, owls, bats, winged water-clocks . . . floral crowns, etc.), . . . details from diverse sources (the pyramids of Egypt . . . the temples of classical antiquity . . . and – among many other things – gargoyles of the great cathedrals of the Middle Ages),” and a “disordered mix of architectural styles (Classical, Gothic, Plateresque, late Renaissance, and Tyrolean)” (55). Francisco de Bringas’s execution of the hair memorial is “simultaneously reminiscent of every major form of printmaking, etching, engraving, woodcut drawing, pencil sketching and includes hair from different sources (the deceased girl, mother and siblings)” (55). All of this adds up to an “oppressively over-ornamented mausoleum” whose “heterogeneity means virtually nothing” (54). The meaning of cenotaph is an “empty tomb” (61).

The empty sign of the tomb and the ocular illnesses that result from the meticulous work it requires – Bringas suffers temporary blindness and blurred vision – have been discussed as a metaphor for Bringas’s blindness to his wife’s spendthrift and sexual exploits, as well as for the political decadence of the ruling classes just before the 1868 Revolution. In her reading, however, Gold analyses how the cenotaph and the ocular illnesses it produces articulate the novel’s reflection on the problematics of perception and representation: “the blur of indifferenciation which clouds his existence is nowhere more evident than in the *cenotafio*” (1986, 56). In particular, the cenotaph represents a form of false knowledge, a misrepresentation of reality – a literal realism – Galdós is interested in denouncing: “Unable to perceive where reality lies in his own life, his [Francisco de Bringas’s] attempts to picture reality in the *cenotafio* can never transcend the mechanics of technique. In perhaps no other Galdosian novel does the reader find such a mordant critique of a certain brand of realism that paradoxically bears no allegiance to the real” (66).

We find out later that the cenotaph at the beginning of Galdós’s novel is meant to commemorate the death of Juanita Pez, the young daughter of Manuel Pez, a well-established and affluent civil servant. The cenotaph – a representational displacement of death – thus stands for an absence and for what is hidden: the corpse and its putrefaction. Following Gold’s connection between the cenotaph and the novel’s reflection on the production of meaning – “At the same time that Bringas is observed creating the *cenotafio*, the narrator is engaged in his own special brand of creation: the production of meaning within the text” (1986, 61) – I propose that we read the incongruent ornamental excess of the cenotaph not as a short-sighted literalism. Rather, it could be read as the positing at the beginning of the novel of the radical gap between representation and what Georges Bataille called the “irrevocably real,” that is, what “is not susceptible to traditional representations . . . [what] is external and foreign to ideal human aspirations” (Schleifer 1993, 312). The cenotaph, thus, is a metaphor for the struggle for meaning, for the futility of all forms of representation. This approach opens up different possibilities of interpretation. What if the ironic tone the narrator adopts when describing the cenotaph replicated Bringas’s self-assurance in representation? Could this irony be a foretelling of the narrator’s complacent and corruptive ways, a mark of what critics have described as the narrator’s lack of an authoritative voice? Moreover, what if the duplicity of language found in the narrator’s irony would be the result not only of the ridiculous heterogeneity of the cenotaph and its literal realism, but also the appropriate verbal style for the articulation of the empty sign represented by the cenotaph? Death, as has been often pointed out, is outside of language. What, thus, if we read the “depersonalized clichés” (Gold 1986, 61) that describe the cenotaph as signs for the radical ineffectiveness – arbitrariness – of all meaning systems and representations? Jo Labanyi’s reading of the cenotaph goes in this direction.

In Labanyi’s analysis, “Francisco Bringas’s hair picture provides a false start” (1990, 26). This “false start” – the pause brought on by the description – initiates the novel’s self-conscious

exploration of literary representation, our reliance on the beginnings and endings that frame stories, and the limits of narrative perspective. In *La de Bringas*, “references to blurred vision and distorted perspectives are part of a wider examination of what happens when framing devices fail to hold” (25). Moreover, Galdós’s novel shows how “the same perspective that confers intelligibility to the story is an illusion” (27). In Labanyi’s reading, like in Gold’s, Bringas’s hair memorial is also a “flawed work of art” (27), but it is so for a very different reason. If, in Gold’s analysis, the cenotaph represents a short-sighted realism and its failure to capture reality – “it is a worthless object” (1986, 49) – for Labanyi, the cenotaph is a *mise-en-abyme* exploration of the limits and dangers of representation: “The cemetery represented in the hair picture is an attempt to contain heterogeneity in a deathly stasis, but by including so much that the artistic structure breaks down, it defeats its own purpose” (27). Thus, the cenotaph plays out the danger of bourgeois confidence and reliance on closed frames to represent reality. And it is precisely the failure of framing devices to hold representation and to produce meaning, and death “as object lesson in the importance of framing” (27), that I discuss in *La febre d’or* by Narcís Oller.

Panoramic views: from gold to carpentry by way of death

In *La febre d’or* (1890–1892), “the first attempt in Catalan literature to produce a bourgeois epic” (Resina 1994–1995, 259), death can be found at every step and at all levels. Death is often used by characters to talk about themselves and others, and about city experience; it organizes the novel’s plot both structurally and symbolically; and it is key to the novel’s narrative strategies. In my reading of *La febre d’or* the representation of death (or, rather, of death’s metonymies), with its “structural dialectic of revealing and concealing” and its “inevitable configurations of power and powerlessness” (Goodwin and Bronfen 1993, 19), is directly related to the narrating of a city constituted by speculative exchange relations. Moreover, I contend that, in Oller’s novel, the limits of realist writing as a means to represent – give form and meaning to – Barcelona’s modernity are exposed precisely through death. Death both articulates and destabilizes the narrative strategies the novel puts forward to order and make sense of the chaos of Barcelona’s particular processes of modernity.

La febre d’or focuses on a period of two years – from 1880 to 1882 – when the bullish stock market that started in 1876 and lasted until 1886 had the greatest impact on Barcelona. Oller wrote about the effects of speculation and of fraudulent financial companies investing in the extension of the railway through the quick rise and fall of a self-made man, Gil Foix. The rapid success and ruin of a self-made man – one of the great themes in the nineteenth-century novel – allows Oller to build “a historical canvas of fin-de-siècle Barcelona” (Resina 2008, 15). The titles of the two parts of the novel – “Pujada” (ascent, rise, climb) and “Estimbada” (falling down a “timba,” or precipice), respectively – use spatial metaphors for movement to describe the “ups” and “downs” of the social fortune of the novel’s protagonist. The fact that, in later editions, Oller preferred “Estimbada” instead of “Cayguda” (fall, downfall) – the title used for Part II in the 1892 edition of *La febre d’or* published by *La Il·lustració Catalana* – would indicate that the titles of the two parts of the novel also point to the cause of Foix’s social mobility: gambling or, in this case, playing the stock market, two activities often confused in nineteenth-century fiction (“timba” also means “gambling house”).¹ “Pujada” (up) and “Estimbada” (down), the spatial metaphors that summarize Gil Foix’s story, also can be read as Oller’s preferred spatial viewpoints from which to depict Barcelona. The choice of visual perspective – that is, viewing the city from above, from street level, or from below – is not an inconsequential one: it determines the image of the city being described (Pike 1981,

33). In *La febre d'or* Oller combines the street-level view (down) and the perspective from above (up). The remarkable thing about this is that death always makes its appearance in all perspectives from above and in significant instances of street-level view. In all of these instances, death indicates the problematic reliability of what is being represented (Barcelona), as well as testing the limits of the realist representation of the city's modernity.

In *La febre d'or* panoramic views constitute moments of suspended action when Barcelona's visibility or lack of visibility is the central focus of the narrative, and they all have at their core particular figurations of death. These moments are but few in the novel. On these occasions, the city is laid out in front of numerous characters, but only two stop to observe it attentively: Gil Foix and his daughter, Delfina Foix. These instances are quite different in the visual scope they provide and in the amount of writing the novel invests in them – from a few paragraphs to a simple word – but in all of them, the novel plays out its dependence on death not only to make the city's modernity visible, but also to explore the limits of realism's reliance on visibility to represent Barcelona's modern image. In this essay, I focus my analysis on the panoramic views narrated when Gil Foix looks at the city from above.

The first panoramic view we encounter in the novel appears in Part One, Chapter XIII, during a party given by Giró – a speculator who has had a few lucky strikes playing the stock market – at his newly acquired *torre* (summer house) in Pedralbes, at the time a rural area outside Barcelona. When Gil Foix, his wife, and daughter Delfina approach by carriage the white walls surrounding the *torre* to attend the celebration, it is remarked that the entrance to the property – with its “reixat de ferro . . . llargues parets . . . emblanquinades i amb llurs cerreres eriçades de vidres” – is that of a burial ground: “Era ben bé l'entrada d'un fossar” (I, 168). This observation – the identification of the entrance to a fashionable summer house with that of a burial ground – is less unexpected if we realize that Delfina's state of mind when arriving at Giró's *torre* is highly perceptive to issues of wealth and representation. She has spent most of her ride musing over her young uncle Francesc, a painter, with whom she is falling in love. She is angry at her uncle's mockery of her elegant dress, and at his refusal to enter the art marketplace. Fashionably and expensively dressed in preparation for Giró's party, happy to be a valuable asset in the upscale market of marriage, she does not understand his refusal to circulate – “conèixer i tractar la gent rica” (I, 163). More importantly, she is angry at her own incapacity to know him, to see through his mockery and judgmental wit: “Era desesperador, per a ella, pensar que unes voltes el veia d'una manera, i tot d'un plegat d'una altra, sempre, sempre enigmàtic, mai prou clar” (I, 161).

Still infatuated with a deceiving baron interested only in her father's wealth, she nevertheless has not forgotten nor ceased to believe in the old pre-capitalist view – pragmatic but essentialist – on work and family inherent in her *menestral* origins. Thus, when one of her fashionable friends reminds her at the party that marriage in their social circle is about wealth and not love, she thinks the idea “repugnant.” “restà tota pansida, com vexada en el més íntim del cor” (I, 171). From the very beginning of the story, Delfina is able to articulate a suspicion of reality that later on in the story will take her to dissociate herself completely from the risks of desire and debauched spending her father has embraced, to become what Leo Bersani has described as a “heroine of stillness,” a character “whose main function seems to be to smother desire, to stifle all movement” (1976, 77). Being a heroine of stillness, her suspicion of reality takes the form of a belief in fixed images, that is, in a world where signs and values have objective referents even when hidden under confusing appearances. Annoyed with her uncle's “mirar indesxifrable,” frustrated with that “ésser estrany” whose eyes refract reality instead of reflecting it, she wishes she could read her uncle's “mind” and “heart” looking through and beyond his eyes: “alguna nit, se n'hauria anat de puntetes a obrir-los per veure què hi havia

allí dins” (I, 161, 163). There, she believes, she would find her uncle’s true value: “que aquell xicot era molt formal, molt bo, molt intel·ligent . . . tot un home” (I, 161).

Aware of the problematics of visibility and representation, Delfina recommends that her uncle visit the houses of the wealthy to “observar, veure, què es el que falta als artistes d’aquí quan volen pintar o descriure el món elegant” (I, 163). Moreover, when her uncle refuses to accept her mother’s request to make a painting of a saint intended as a gift for her husband – “Que hi voleu combregar . . . o ballar, a la sala? . . . Jo, jo pintar sants? Per qui m’heu pres?” – she understands that Francese’s rebuff is an objection to both the object and the manner of representation proposed to him, and that, like his “gargots” – doodles – it responds to “un tractat de filosofia artística, o cosa així, que ella endevinava” (I, 162, 163). And when her uncle mockingly suggests that she choose an appropriate painting for her father from a well-known art gallery, Sala Parés, she responds defiantly: “ja ho veurà, si hi entenc; ja ho veurà, si sé escollir” (I, 162). It is not surprising that Delfina’s concerns about the appearance of people and things, and how they are represented, precede the description of Giró’s *torre* and the gathering of fashionable Barcelona as “un fossar:” “The representations of death often serve as metaphors for the process of representation itself: its necessity, its excesses, its failure, and its uses for the polis” (Goodwin and Bronfen 1993, 4). Giró’s *torre* as *fossar* provides both the frame and the meaning for a *mise-en-scene* where the value of things as well as people is its representative value. Death mirrors the endless circulation of signs tied to no referent, the endless sliding of signifiers played out in the speculative wealth Giró’s *torre* has come to represent: the *torre*, the old site of landed wealth – it used to belong to a marquise – has recently been auctioned twice: “¿No es més just, senyor Giró, – says Foix – aquest vaivé de la propietat actual?” (I, 169). “Villa Nabab” or “casino burgès” are the proper names for the *torre* according to Emilia Llopis, an opinionated and *cursi* bluestocking whose early experience in Paris may explain her talent to name the fashionable Barcelona (I, 181, 172). At the party, one of Giró’s sons tells his friends that the family decided against naming the house after his dead mother because it would remind them of her: “Li volíem posar el nom de la mamà; però la mamà és morta, i cada cop que hi vindríem ens recordariem d’ella” (I, 181). They were right. To maintain the illusion of representation – its deception and pretense – one needs to keep their spectral nature hidden, just like the Catalan bourgeoisie hid the body’s putrefaction under ostentatious mausoleums in the *Cementiri de Montjuïc*. Thus, the same long line of elegant carriages entering the *torre*’s gate reappears later on in a funeral procession to the *Cementiri de Montjuïc* from where Barcelona’s modernity again becomes visible to Gil Foix (I, 168, 297).

From Pedralbes’s heights, Gil Foix views and admires with great exclamations the “boniques vistes que allí es descobrien” of Barcelona (I, 169) – “Vista Alegre” is another name the family is considering for the *torre*. He feels the bourgeoisie’s pleasure for “the boundless city,” its clamor “for space and visibility” after the demolition of the city walls (Resina 2008, 21). Through his eyes, the city as a whole seems to become visible: he “surveys the expanding city” in a detailed description “in which Foix’s gaze traces the emerging topography” of Barcelona (2008, 21). The legibility of the city from Giró’s *torre* is sustained by the apparent distance that transforms a character or narrator into a “solar eye” – a “god-like perspective” – and the panoramic view into an organized topography (de Certeau 1988, 92). Indeed, the view from Giró’s *torre* encompasses a diversity of objects distinctly enumerated within clear coordinates: “A l’esquerra, un tros de Barcelona . . . estenen-se al peu de Montjuïc. . . . Sos barris de Llevant . . . la costa . . . Montjuïc, [la] platja . . . els blancs poblets de marina” (I, 169). This “solar eye” view that transforms “the bewitching world by which one was ‘possessed’ into a text that lies before one’s eyes” (de Certeau 1988, 92), makes Barcelona both visible – it extends itself in front of the character and readers – and deceptive. The narrated view is a text

that lies: “The same perspective that confers intelligibility is an illusion” (Labanyi 1990, 27). It is not only that the panoramic view of the city “hid[es] the unpleasant sources of value” (Resina 2008, 44) creating false knowledge. The view of Barcelona from Giró’s *torre* also subverts the realist reliance on visibility to represent the city’s modern image. Bernat Foix, brother of Gil – a failed inventor who sees social and economic upheavals as “lleis naturals” (I, 167) and the guarantors of human progress – is not deceived by the illusion of totality and meaning – the harmonious whole – sustained by the “detailed description” of Barcelona’s topography: “no tanco els ulls davant de la veritat, per trista o esfereïdora que sigui” (II, 179).² He identifies speculative wealth as the origin – or point – from which the view of the city originates, and, consequently, its inevitable and also necessary distortion of reality: “Els diners del joc no duren gaire, i els que es fiquen a la Borsa a mi em sembla que s’embarquen en un globo de paper. El globo els enlaira per ensenyar-los panorames encisadors; però tot plegat s’encén, i, barrabum! a baix!” (II, 179). It is thus not surprising that the other possible name mentioned for Giró’s *torre* is “Villa Oro” (I, 181). Just as the fleeting ownership of the Pedralbes property marks its entrance in the capitalist economy and its transformation from index – the site of aristocratic, landed, money – into sign (a commodity), the impossibility of fixing a name that would properly represent Giró’s *torre* – the constant sliding of signifiers used to name it: Villa Nabab, Buena Vista, Vista Alegre, Villa Oro; no definitive name is ever given – transfigures Giró’s summer house into a *fossar*. Giró’s *torre* as *fossar* metaphorizes the crisis of representation – the “fever” – that informs Oller’s panoramic views of Barcelona’s modernity. As we will see, the city’s “panorames encisadors” turn out to be, like death, “a signifier with an incessantly receding, ungraspable signified, always pointing to other signifiers” (Goodwin and Bronfen 1993, 4). But before discussing Barcelona’s problematic visibility from the paper balloon made out of money – or, in Gil Foix’s words, out of “el barrim-barram actual de la riquesa” (I, 166) – and its effects on realist representation, we need to discuss why it is the narrator, not the character himself, who gives voice to Gil Foix’s gaze and takes upon himself the task of describing Barcelona’s modernity.

Barcelona’s panoramic view leaves Foix – a character whose financial success has transformed him into “un discursaire” (II, 48) who often overwhelms family and business associates with “llargs parlaments” (I, 165) – speechless: the view in front of him, says the narrator, “li travava la llengua” (I, 169). As businessman and man of action, Foix himself proudly acknowledges to his wife and daughter his ineptitude for details on their way to Giró’s *torre*: “M’he acostumat ja a veure les coses a l’engròs, en gran, a abarcar d’una mirada els grans horitzons del negoci . . . i a despreciar, per insignificants els detalls. És el secret dels grans homes” (I, 165). Foix’s “grans horitzons” are not those of a contemplative observer or detached flâneur, but rather those of the city dweller who “allows time only for activity” (Moretti 2005, 126). For him, the city is not so much a space to be viewed but, rather, “the most gripping story possible” (126). In Foix’s “gripping story,” the making of his fortune and reputation in Barcelona by playing the stock market – “El carril seria un fet dintre de pocs dies . . . Si els Nords seguien pujant, seria ric, i ric de debò, ben aviat” (I, 164) – the city is simply a “background,” not an “object of attention in and for itself” (Moretti 2005, 126). Because he does not yet have enough capital at the time of Giró’s party to project upon the city his own ambitious business plans, the city appears out of focus. All Foix sees is the undifferentiated object of his desire, the great expectations arisen by the city – not the city itself. It is the excitement for, the anticipation of things to come, that fill him with an emotion that cannot be put into words – “li travava la llengua – but his eyes reflect – “feia espurnejar els ulls” (I, 169). Foix’s view of the city from the *Cementiri de Montjuïc* after the funeral of his mother-in-law later on in the novel – after he has acquired enough financial power to think he can make his dreams come true – confirms

both his incapacity to see the city and the ensuing loquacity triggered by his projects: his gripping story in the making is the city under the focus of his ambition. It also confirms Oller's reliance on death to look into questions of visibility and representation.

After depositing his mother-in-law's body in the cemetery, his mind again full of business ventures, Foix takes his associates to the top of the cemetery to explain his last project: an "arsenal marítim" (II, 34). "Els horitzons se m'eixemplen" are his words (I, 187). From the cemetery, Barcelona's visibility is determined by Foix's ambitious plans: "Sa vista, encesa d'ambició, s'esplaiava per aquella immensa plana" (I, 298). The "immensa plana" is the background for the narrow focus of Foix's ambition delineated here in the stretch of beach and land where he wants to invest. The narrator, aware that Foix does not see the city at his feet but, rather, his own success story – the city dweller's life is "always framed and defined by exigencies of a temporal order" (Moretti 2005, 126) – focuses instead on his eagerness and activity, on his constant movement: "I tot era moure's, anar i venir, i assenyalar amb aquell bastó inquiet els grans rodals de terra que ja veia seva, que adqueriria sens dubte" (I 298). The city that Foix does not see and the arsenal that is not there generate the long "discurs" that his friends – transformed into "oients" – listen to with deference and resignation, but that the narrator does not care to reproduce: "Sos acompanyants el seguien, l'escoltaven sense pestanyejar, com l'estat major d'un general que traça el pla de batalla" (I, 298).

The Foix "discursaire" swings here into high gear to put into a flow of words his incapacity to distinguish seeing from desiring and possessing. Gil Foix is not Eugène Rastignac, who – viewing Paris from the high ground of the Cemetery of Père Lachaise at the end of *Père Goriot* – understands that "Paris must be legible if one is to possess it" (Brooks 2005, 133). Foix's visionary perspective of Barcelona from the *Cementiri de Montjuïc* conceals "the space that catches human beings by their throat, and does not let go" (Moretti 1998, 90) in order to support his illusory representation of both himself and the city. The complexity and hostility of the city vanish in front of him and are replaced by a "panorama encisador" he does not recognize for what it is: the "lie" before or, rather, in one's eyes. This is his mistake. If Rastignac's introspection from Père Lachaise – that ends with his brief defiance: "A nous deux maintenant!" – initiates his conquest of Paris, Foix's lack of attention to details – his "grans horitzons" – and "rius de paraules" mark his false consciousness (I, 167).

At the top of the cemetery, death reappears in another of its displacements to correlate the cemetery as point of view – death as a trope about representation – and that of the paper balloon made out of money with Foix's false consciousness. Surrounded by business associates, a sudden thought stops Foix's verbosity to remind him that a wealthy man like him should have a pantheon. The pantheon – the radical gap between representation (the fashionable tomb) and what it hides (the body's putrefaction) – stands for the delusional nature of Foix's representation of both himself and the city based on debauched and libidinal spending. The "arsenal" Foix's desire sees is not in the "immensa plana" and it will never be. However, in the empty site of the cemetery where he focuses his false consciousness – "el punt on el faria fer [el panteó]" – he will build a (funerary) monument to the spectral representations of speculative wealth that make him temporally a very rich man and Barcelona a modern city.

The "barrim-barram" of wealth, the "zum-zum" made by people (I, 166, 169), and Foix's speechlessness at Giró's *torre*, all find their voice in the novel's narrator. An allegorical description by the narrator of "tot aquell trasbalsament de riquesa invisible" that constituted Barcelona's modernity (Oller 1962, 132) substitutes for the indistinct words uttered by Gil Foix, his difficulty in naming what he sees, and his inability to metaphorize the city.³ Speaking from Foix's perspective, and identifying with his emotion (but not his pragmatic aims or prosaic style), the narrator gives form and meaning to the luminosity

and glowing sparks found in Foix's teary eyes. In the narrator's view, modern Barcelona is a blast of light and color. The city is like a *luminista* painting by Roig i Soler (I, 170). Under the bright light that dazzles the eye, the distinctiveness of objects and the limits of spaces become an undifferentiated "conjunt de tons finíssims" where one thing seems to melt – evaporate – into the next.

The only reference to Barcelona's industrial wealth or urban development are the chimneys in Poble Nou that, in the narrator's description of the city, become "alteroses xemeneies." The rest of the city is a "gilded" landscape – everything is "daurat," "tot daurat" (I, 170, 181) – not so much by the "gold" of the novel's title, but rather, by the "fever" of speculation that substitutes for it. Barcelona's metaphorical "radiance" cancels out all pretense of bourgeois objectivity – and Realism's claim to transform reality into objective information – to voice instead the bourgeoisie's own subjectivity. As Emilia Llopis – the *cursi* bluestocking – comments, that afternoon, at Giró's *torre*, light was a "claror enlluernadora" (I, 172). The city's metaphorical "radiance" does not describe the city, but rather represents "the optimism of a class that mirrors itself in something that is alive and growing" (Resina 2008, 21). It is a figment of the bourgeoisie's imagination. The dazzling light in Foix's eyes – his excitement for things to come – corresponds to the confident self-image the narrator shares with the Catalan bourgeoisie and also with Narcís Oller. In fact, the narrator's luminous showing of Barcelona – its allegorical brightness – seems to take its cue from Oller's object of narration – "l'ardent febrada del 80 i 81" – and the author's own excitement: "desitjava deixar historiada la gesta més esplendorosa de l'estimada Barcelona dels meus dies" (1962, 105). Narcís Oller's "objectiu temàtic no era la ciutat sinó la riquesa i el progrés" (Castellanos 1997, 150).

The narrator's view of the city as a blast of light and color that dazzles the eye and blurs one's vision not only mirrors the Catalan bourgeoisie's optimism of those years, but also the origin of its speculative wealth. In the narrator's dazzled eyes and Barcelona's specular representation, the stock market is an "ardent" venture, and brokers, "haurat[s] Jason[s]." The allegorical subjectivity that metaphorizes Barcelona's modernity captures, at the expense of Realism and its claims to objectivity and thingness, capitalism's endless process of exchange tied to no referent or objective value, the specular nature of speculative wealth. Barcelona "blanca, nova, immensa, com una gran metròpolis" both appears and disappears under "la brillantor del sol" that lights up and dematerializes its different neighborhoods. Moreover, in the narrator's impressionistic "llapissades" (I, 169) we find the "metonymic confusion" that characterizes the bourgeois sign and threatens realist writing (Barthes 1999, 40): Barcelona recedes under its signifiers. Like Balzac's obsession with detail, the reverie and dreamy quality of Barcelona viewed from a paper balloon made out of money menace – "with collapse, mined from within by the thread of non-meaning" (Brooks 2005, 33) – Oller's Realist purpose to chronicle the transformation of Barcelona into a modern metropolis. Realism's frames of representation fail to hold the vision of the crazed new heroes – "L'espectacle que allò ofería era el d'un nosocomi de delirants excitants fins el més alt grau" – as well as that of their chronicler, Oller, whose admiration and fear transfigure them into "nous argonautes" en "perillosa expedició a Colquida, sens el favor d'una altra Medea ni saber qui d'ells seria l'haurat Jason" (1962, 132).

At the end of the novel, Gil Foix, ruined and psychologically unstable, has a last chance to view the city. Following the doctor's recommendation, his wife takes him for a walk to "la Bona Nova" from where the sea and "un bon tros del Pla de Barcelona" are fully visible (II, 174). There Gil Foix stops to contemplate the city one last time and, suddenly, starts sobbing: "començà a plorar, i plora que plora, no el podien arrencar d'allí" (II, 174). The city is finally in focus but, just like before, Foix has no words to express either what he sees or his emotion;

his failure, the frustration of his desire. Back at home he falls into a delirious hectic activity, again planning ways to regain his dream: locked in his room, “somiant amb l’arsenal, vinga fer càlculs i més càlculs, despacientant-se, enfurismant-se, rebatent la ploma a cada instant perquè les operacions no li sortien bé” (II, 174). For a while, every time they take him out into the city, he falls into the same feverish activity. Bernat, saddened by his brother’s nervous breakdown – he is suffering from “neuràstenia” (II, 175) – points out that Gil’s failure is not due to his “bona fe,” as his daughter thinks, but rather to his lack of vision: “[anava] a ulls clucs” (II, 178). Gil Foix himself seems to have finally arrived at the same conclusion. His grandiose plans for Barcelona shattered for good, he locks himself in his room “a les fosques” (II, 175). The darkness that surrounds him represents both his inability to see and a new consciousness: knowing that he is unable to stop his desire from creating false views of himself and the city, he gives up his sight (vision). Locked in a metaphorical tomb, darkness substitutes for the dazzling light of false knowledge, but also threatens to stop the energies unleashed by a debauched libidinal economy and the illusion of totalizing views that sustain the bourgeoisie’s and the novel’s historical optimism: progress and modernity.

The “cure” for Gil Foix – and for *La febre d’or*’s precariousness of limits – seems to be found in carpentry. At the very end of the final chapter, Bernat and Francesc discover Foix in the painter’s room engaged in making frames for his son-in-law’s paintings. Foix, says his brother, has returned to his origins, since his old craft was carpentry: “Potser això el curi” (II, 182). They think he is working out of pride: “l’orgull,” says Francesc, “se li rebel·la a deixar-lo viure a despeses meves. Somia amb renumerar-me!” (II, 182). Thus, Foix’s activity is, for these characters, another sign of his delusion. But perhaps there is another reason for his activity, a reason that may shed light on why in Galdós’s *La de Bringas*, Francisco de Bringas’s ophthalmologist also recommends that he – a character so radically different from Gil Foix – spend time engaged in “trabajos mecánicos” like carpentry (2000, 158–159). For very different reasons – debauched libidinal spending and the hoarding of capital, respectively – both the stock market player and the miser have the same problem of vision: their incapacity to picture reality. Gil Foix’s (and also the narrator’s) excessively imaginative dazzled eyes, as well as Francisco de Bringas’s “strabismic close-up” (Gold 1986, 57), threaten the bourgeois reliance on close frames for representation. “[U]n nuevo armario para la ropa” for Rosalía is Francisco de Bringas’s new project, his old understanding of art as mirror of the hoarding of capital remains unchanged. In *La febre d’or* wooden frames seem to be the metaphorical solution to contain Realism’s failing devices of representation. Carpentry, a *menestral* craft, refers us to an earlier pre-capitalist time when money “revealed” and was an index that “furnished a fact, a cause, it had a nature” (Barthes 1999, 39). Like the old “reliable” money, Gil’s wooden frames stand for a conception of art in which the work reveals reality’s ultimate truth, for the belief that the image has a referent other than the endless sliding of signifiers. These wooden frames would be Gil’s – and maybe Oller’s – guarantors of the truth of representation. Oller knows, however, that frames are no longer, in John Berger’s (1972) words, a “safe let in a wall” where the “visible has been deposited” (as quoted in Labanyi 1990, 27). Gil’s “bastiments” will support his son-in-law’s social and financial success – “‘ja veuràs com s’enfila,’ predicts Bernat” (I, 179) – and frame his modernist paintings: the doodles that put an end to Realism. Oller’s retelling of one of the great themes of the nineteenth-century novel, the rapid success and ruin of a self-made man, “inaugurated Barcelona as a literary subject” (Resina 2008, 15), but it is the crisis of representation that threatens *La febre d’or* that marks the definitive entrance of Barcelona in modern literature.

Notes

- 1 On the confusion between gambling and playing the stock market in nineteenth-century fiction, see Moretti 2005, 122.
- 2 Bernat “formula ya desde un principio la dialéctica social por la cual se moverá toda la obra” (Gilabert 1977, 140–141).
- 3 The process of “reduc[ing] the city to words . . . is one of metaphorization” (Pike 1981, 12).

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