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Pau Milà i Fontanals,

Apunts d'estètica [*Notes on aesthetics*]

A study, selection and translation of texts by
Joan Cuscó i Clarasó, Facultat de Filosofia-Universitat
Ramon Llull, Barcelona, 2011

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Pau Milà i Fontanals (Vilafranca del Penedès, 1810) is a key figure in Catalan thinking in the field of the theory of aesthetics. His constant struggle against the academicism which dominated the artistic world brought him to abandon his chair at the university and give up teaching, as he felt it limited his freedom of expression and he couldn't agree with the political treatment of the fine arts. This is when he begins to make patent the difference between academics and genius. Academicism tries to rationalize and rule the aspects of art while the individual genius doesn't weaken in his proposal to live an aesthetically free existence, unrestrained by norms which limit his creative liberty.

In the meticulous preamble of his book, Joan Cuscó refers to Milà i Fontanals as an art theoretician with a notable religious sense, a fact noted in many notes which show that faith, especially Christian faith, act as a pure inspiration for arts such as poetry. Milà also makes active use of art history, highlighting different stages according to the discipline in question. He also shows us that the tendency toward abstraction and the sublime took Milà to separate himself from certain social relations, such as happened with the "Societat Giró", over disagreements with its members.

The author of this collection gives evidence of how Pau Milà i Fontanals has been undervalued simply because he was eclipsed by his brother Manuel and fled tenaciously from mechanicism of the Academy. He also takes advantage of the introductory study to set in relief how Antoni Gaudí has been ignored as an aesthetic thinker.

As far as the interplay of influences, in the first place we find the indispensable elements of 15th century Italy, such as Michelangelo and Leonardo Da Vinci, together with one their predecessors, Giotto di Bondone, who inspired romanticism and naturalism. Milà was also a member of the group of Nazarenes, led by the romantic German painter Overbeck and his countryman Peter von Cornelius. But if he drank from excellent artistic springs, he also left an excellent legacy. After leaving the academic circles he started to exercise great influence with his oral teaching. The painter from Reus, Marià Fortuny, was his student and we find among his papers some of the notes from a class in aesthetics he took from his teacher. If that were not enough, Gaudí also received knowledge from Milà, knowledge which is clear in all his work; Gaudí's creations are based on liberty, simplicity and resemblance to nature – the inspirational source which combines geometric and organic order. In addition, Milà shared with Jaume Balmes, a contemporary thinker, a way of understanding aesthetics broken down into different parts: the effort of the artistic task, the figure of the artist who feels pain, religion when understood as an inspirational resource, the distinction between the beautiful and the sublime... Both maintained a constant battle to save society from materialism, skepticism and nihilism. Pau Milà i Fontanal's influence over his disciples was mostly in theory, fundamentally articulated through history, which makes it possible to live life more fully, implicating itself in the present while it preserves the artistic heritage.

The most important part of the book is the publication of all known texts by Pau Milà i Fontanals. Four texts are reproduced which range from 1847 to 1878. The first is an article on Giotto published in Madrid when Milà had returned from his stay in Italy (where he shows the roots of his theoretical orientations). The second and third are handwritten notes (hitherto unpublished) of classes on aesthetics and artistic theory which he gave at the Llotja in 1851-1852. The fourth corresponds to notes Marià Fortuny took in classes by Pau Milà (taken from a notebook dated between 1849 and 1850). The fifth is his pamphlet "Children's Aesthetics" (*Estètica infantil*) published by his students in 1878 and republished in 1904 (a series of verses about art).

The collected writings show the steps on the path that led to Milà's teaching of aesthetics and the characteristics of his system, followed by detailed distinctions among architecture, sculpture and painting, showing their typologies, techniques and fields. In the piece by taken down by Fortuny he denies that art is simply imitation, as that could come to be repugnant. Continuing from this premise, he concludes that art is the spiritual representation of an idea with the aid of palpable media, with the objective of arousing an emotion in the viewer: beauty.

Finally, we find the rhymes of Milà's *Estètica Infantil* which, although he despised them, were published by his students. These simple poems try to teach society about contemplation of and opinions on art, stressing that it is not simply decorative elements, but a foundation for a good civilization. At the same time, they attempt to guide the artist, to a greater or lesser extent, in the creative process: "In art, and everything else, better a little and good than a lot and bad" or "As the culture goes, so go the arts of beauty".

Translation from Catalan by Dan Cohen