

## ■ review

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# Pere Coromines. *La mort austera*, Barcelona: Acontravent 2010

Honorat Jaume i Font

Societat Catalana de Filosofia  
hjaume@gmail.com

*La vida austera* (Austere Life, 1908) was a huge success at the time and was translated into French, Spanish and Italian, which gives some idea of Coromines' prestige both in Catalonia and abroad, where reviews situated the work as ranking with the "transcendental idealism" of Carlyle or Emerson. The book should be seen as belonging to the genre of essay or literature of ideas. The eminently personal tone of the text, one that is steeped in spiritualist sentimentalism offset by commonsense reasoning, a tone that very much reflects the epoch, should not make us lose the sense of what the work was attempting and indeed achieved at the time of writing: effective reflection on the moral principles of personal life and social life. The aim was to demonstrate that a coherent and dignified life was explicable whether further from or closer to the religious principles of an omnipresent Christianity. While that might not be necessary today, it should not stand in the way of our understanding that this was a difficult task to achieve. Pere Coromines' work is located precisely at this point: the underpinning of a particular kind of life that could dovetail with Christianity with regard to key questions of a certain puritanical rigorism while also aiming to lay the foundations of this model with vital reason alone, without hypocrisy or renunciation. The endeavour was, then, to construct a non-clerical morality based on rational consideration of human nature. Addressing a public that was gaining access to the written word—a readership arising in particular from the literacy-promoting and encyclopaedic labours of cultural centres— and, in second place, "men of letters" with a certain critical spirit, Coromines' book was so successful because that readership was being created all over Europe at the time. His son, Joan Coromines, recalls that this was a work "... of the kind that leaves an indelible impression in its words, its concepts, in the culture and in the language in which it is written".

*La mort austera* (Austere Death) is the last part, the fifth and final book of *La vida austera*. At the end of this edition one finds a collection of quotes

from the other four books that accompany the former work: *Les albes de la vida* (Dawnings of Life), *Els dies venturosos de la joventut* (Joyous Days of Youth), *La santedat humana* (Human Saintliness) and *Les delícies de la terra* (Delights of the Earth). The publisher also includes *Elegia de València* (Elegy of Valencia), a poem that traces the author's life and that was read by Joan Coromines on the day of his father's funeral. One is also appreciative to find, apart from Carles Duarte's Prologue, the three Prologues by Pere Coromines for the 1908, 1909 and 1911 editions of *La vida austera*. As happens with other books by Coromines, an introduction titled "Història d'aquesta obra" (The Story of This Work) is not lacking either. Hence, in a few pages, one can obtain quite an accurate idea of the work as a whole. Bearing in mind the tastes of our own times, this is by no means a bad decision.

Pere Coromines started to write *La vida austera* at the end of 1905 and finished it in 1908. At the time he was working at producing the Extraordinary Culture Budgets for the Barcelona City Council and in the Institute of Catalan Studies (1907), of which he was a founding member. A letter addressed to Coromines by Joan Maragall in January 1909 praises the work, saying, "I have found in your expression a wholesomeness, a purity, a power of style so irresistible that it alone would oblige me to agree with everything you say: this is the sincere word of a man who speaks out for good and with marvellous clarity" (cited in P. Coromines *Obres Completes* (Complete Works), Barcelona: Selecta, 1972, p. 1163). In his introductory piece, "Història d'aquesta obra", Coromines explains its origin: "The death of my father, the terrible blow it was for me, gave birth in my heart to the aim of starting a new book, a sort of exemplary booklet that traces the life of man, from the first days of life through to his last breath, a collection of pleasing comments on simple existence with which I would present the austere practices I learned from my father and to which he owed the salvation of his character and the conquest of new happiness. The steps of an austere life, of love for the truth, of indomitable energy, of healthy foresight, of hard work and sacrifice; the ideals of virtue and a firm resolution never to move away from reality, guided my pen at the time."

*La mort austera* begins with reflections on death and immortality for human beings. Coromines offers a vision that is a long way from pessimism and gloomy resignation before death: man acts immortally and "... this is the cause of his optimal view of existence". He acts immortally: he knows he must die and this is painful to him but in his heart is the certainty of immortality. Coromines presents the saintly man (of a lay or humanistic saintliness that does not square with the artificial theological or pious term) as one who is capable of transferring his heart into thought while always banishing the presence of death. From this concept of immortality are derived rules of conduct: "We must work in accordance with the most intimate law of our immortal nature,

strengthening the vital columns of our virtue which would be debilitated by contemplation of death.”

Pere Coromines outlines a series of interpretations of death formulated throughout history in thought, literature and art, passing through Egypt, Greece, Galilee, Rome, Europe, the thought of Anaxagoras, of Epicurus, the *Book of the Dead*, the poet Lucretius, the medieval Dance of Death, the paintings of Dürer, miniatures in manuscripts, the popular representations of life after death in Dante, et cetera. The human being, knowing he is immortal, experiences the dilemma of irrational annihilation. Coromines therefore notes: “Human reason in its divine power of invention has represented the survival of our being”. He warns the reader that the human being will not attain immortality by either intellectual or doctrinaire means. Immortal life is “... the natural gift of an austere life full of noble valour and powerful ideality”. At this point, he summons up the scene of almond trees in bloom. The setting, the landscape and the company (of his wife and son) lead imperceptibly to happiness. Time is forgotten and contingent images disappear. This is immortal life, Coromines would say. Here, he takes one step further: the peoples of western civilisation can “act immortally” when considerations of death are expunged from reality.

Coromines invites the reader to safeguard health and love. It is good “... to take care of the body’s health so as to achieve the purest spirituality” since physical pain, in anticipating the certainty of death, perturbs the immortal power of man. Love “... is the irresistible disposition of our being”. When he loves, the life of man is full and immortal. If there is no love there is no life and Coromines says, “... so if you wish to live life immortally, give your heart the love it yearns for”. Otherwise, the lie and cowardice disturb immortality, usher in the presence of death and deny dignity. Speaking of faint-heartedness, Coromines would exhort action: “When human society offers you the laurels of glory summon up all the bravura of your heart and accept them swiftly and resolutely”.

The urge to cast out death should not be the cause of man’s ingenuously forgetting it. Death is a breaker. It breaks everything that man is capable of thinking and feeling. He thus does not hesitate to say that “... as men of good sense and virtue, we must consider death as the end of our existence, without self-deception.” Coromines does not find enough elements of guidance in “strictly human” tools. We are in the domain of finite experience yet wish to invade what is infinite. Whether a life might follow present life, Coromines would say, “... is not something that could be affirmed or denied in the closed field of human concepts and experiences”.

He reflects upon old age and the proximity of death, closing the penultimate chapter with a layman’s prayer from which I cite a fragment: “We

walk boldly towards saintliness, we take care of the prodigious marvel of our body and are always craving a loftier ideality. May our actions remain intense and powerful until exhausting the treasure of our human existence. Thus, never forgetting that we must die, we shall drive away the image of death and when our hour arrives we shall face it unwaveringly, with calm courage.” With these words he might end *La vida austera*.