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# **The Significance of Haiku in the Poetry of Joan Salvat-Papasseit**

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## **Resumen**

“Vibracions” y el resto de la poesía escrita por Joan Salvat-Papasseit (1894-1924) basada en la forma poética japonesa del haiku se suele considerar un mero divertimento exotista de carácter menor. En el presente análisis se argumenta que Salvat-Papasseit no sólo conocía muy bien la tradición del haiku, sino que esta forma le sirvió como vehículo para expresar las ideas estéticas que empezó a defender en su poesía a partir de 1917. El alto grado de significación de sus haikus pone en evidencia que ocupan un lugar simbólicamente central en su producción poética.

## **Palabras clave**

Joan Salvat-Papasseit, literatura catalana contemporánea, haiku.

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## **Abstract**

“Vibracions” and all the other poems written by Joan Salvat-Papasseit (1894-1924) based on the Japanese haiku lyrical verse form, have generally been viewed as a mere flirt with exoticism and of minor importance. I contend that Salvat-Papasseit the poet was in fact not only very familiar with haiku poetry, but that through this verse form he found a vehicle to express his own aesthetic ideas which he began to advocate in his poetry from 1917 onwards. The significance of haiku poems is such that one could argue that they are a central symbolic feature of all his poems.

## **Key words**

Joan Salvat-Papasseit, contemporary Catalan literature, haiku.

# **THE SIGNIFICANCE OF HAIKU IN THE POETRY OF JOAN SALVAT-PAPASSEIT<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Introduction**

It is a well known fact among scholars, students and readers of Catalan literature, that Joan Salvat-Papasseit gravitated towards the Japanese haiku verse form in a series of poems entitled “Vibracions” which appeared in his second book of poems, *L’irradiador del port i les gavines* (1997: 103-140), and also in later collections, particularly in *Poema de la rosa als llavis* (1997: 203-293). However, the exotic origins of these poems has meant that they have been conveniently marginalized to mere anecdotal recognition in the history of contemporary Catalan literature, a fact which reveals prejudices in critical studies of them. One common argument is that little needs to be said other than point out their Oriental origins, since this is an anomalous feature of Catalan poetry at that time, and so their relatively minor importance is self-evident. Another is that their brevity has also led to them being considered as minor poems, and scholars have preferred to look for major themes in Salvat-Papasseit’s longer poems which lend themselves to easier comparative analysis with contemporary literary currents.

Another example of how they have been relegated is illustrated by scholars who have had the occasion to publish more in-

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depth critical analysis of these haiku poems from an Oriental perspective. Such critics have assessed Salvat-Papasseit’s haiku poems somewhat negatively on the basis that they do not conform to the rules governing the composition of haiku poems in the Japanese tradition. Kobayashi states that “el seu intent roman encara experimental” (107), while Julià and Suzuki hardly make mention of his haiku poems, and go so far as to dismiss the entire production of haiku poems in Catalan during the period between the two world wars, stating that, among other observations, “sólo por razones internas de falta de rigor, los primeros haikus catalanes adolecen de serias irregularidades métricas, sin que por ello constituyan de ningún modo un paralelo con las corrientes orientales contemporáneas” (95).

In this article I wish to redress the inadequacy of these two critical views of Salvat-Papasseit’s poetry by arguing that, first, “Vibracions” and his later haiku poems blend perfectly with his literary trajectory and become a key element in his poetry; and, second, that his heterodox approach to the original Japanese tradition is not based on his lack of knowledge of the Japanese form, but rather a deliberate attempt to avoid mimicking. When Salvat-Papasseit composed his haiku poems he was not attempting to follow in the footsteps of Japanese poets, but rather to compose modern literature within the European literary movement of his time. Furthermore, the fact that the poems in “Vibracions” fail to adhere to the canons of the classic haiku poem can be explained by the way he tailored the original haiku form to his own ends. Both of these arguments are, in effect, two sides of the same coin..

## **Salvat-Papasseit’s involvement with haiku**

The study of Salvat-Papasseit’s haiku poems has to begin from the consideration that the original Japanese cast is not so much his end objective but rather a point of departure. Rather than

look for Japanese haiku characteristics in the composition of his poems, we should identify those characteristics of traditional haiku poems that appealed to Salvat-Papasseit as a poet and led him to adopt and adapt them to his own literary ends.

The main source of Salvat-Papasseit's knowledge of haiku poems was the essay by Paul-Louis Couchoud, "Les épigrammes lyriques du Japon", which had been re-edited in 1916 as part of the volume *Sages et poètes d'Asie* from which two sections were later published in the Catalan newspaper *La Veu de Catalunya* in February 1920. The publication of Couchoud's essay was a response to the interest in haiku poems among the French reading public that had been generated by Julien Vocance's "Cent visions de guerre". Couchoud's essay was aimed at a general readership, easy to digest and is an excellent source because it includes a large number of translations of haiku poems. From the paragraphs that discuss haiku poems which feature landscapes, there is one which particularly caught Salvat-Papasseit's attention:

Plus facilement qu'un objet de détail, les trois petits traits pourront faire entrevoir un large paysage. Leur brièveté est plus à la mesure de l'immense que du minuscule. Ils sont semblables à une vibration qu'aucune autre ne limite et qui s'elargit d'elle-même presque indéfiniment. De fait, les recueils de haïkaï sont pleins surtout d'impressions très vastes de nature. (1916: 73)

Salvat-Papasseit does not delve much into the landscape motif in his haiku poems, but the comparison with a "une vibration qu'aucune autre ne limite et qui s'elargit d'elle-même presque indéfiniment", as well as precision, "Leur brièveté est plus à la mesure de l'immense que du minuscule", are aspects which are easily attributable to his haiku poems. Both in his "Vibracions" and in his later haiku poems, portrayed incidents are minimal—at times non-existent, given that the poem is built on a single static image—, but the resonances that they awaken are far-reaching, because, as Couchoud also states, a Japanese haiku

poem is, "une impression vive qui peut éveiller en nous quelque impression endormie" (58). "Vibracions" are impressions that, when they connect with the subconscious of the poetic voice, awaken a consciousness of the world: the impressions and sensations that are described are meaningful in that they reveal this intimate repressed state of awareness.

While it seems clear that the title of the collection itself, "Vibracions", may well be attributable to Couchoud's use of this word, it may also have its origins in the quote given below, published in volume 5 of *Un Enemic del Poble*, in which Torres-Garcia, paraphrasing Couchoud's definition, seeks the complicity of Rafael Barradas and Joan Salvat-Papasseit:

Una vibració, un instant, un acord d'idees i de mots, de sons, a banda i banda del no-res. (...)

Un crit, en la solitud, repetit per mil ecos, fora de l'espai, en la nit absoluta. (1917: 1)

This quote from Torres-Garcia postdates Couchoud's essay, and the fact that he borrowed the image of a vibration that resounds incessantly, illustrate Torres-Garcia's interest in the haiku verse form—or at least the description given in "Les épigrammes lyriques du Japon"—and was also the subject of conversations with his fellow Uruguayan Barradas as well as Salvat-Papasseit between 1916 and 1919 (Carmona: 116). In fact, the origin of the term "vibracionisme", which Rafael Barradas gave to his paintings at this time, could easily be the Couchoud passage quoted earlier, and the "acord d'idees i de mots, de sons" evoked by Torres-Garcia can be identified with Barradas' "vibracionisme d'idees" (García-Sedas: 28). In a letter dated September 28, 1919, Barradas described a "vibrationist" experience to his fellow artist, Torres-García, in the following manner:

Este fenómeno me pasó otra vez, hace cosa de cuatro o cinco meses, un día, estando VIENDO en un café, pasó un batallón, es decir, unos sonidos de trompas y tambores y unas campanas de tranvía. Simultáneamente sonaba un piano en el café, pero que quedaba fuera del café. VIBRABAN todas las cosas, que, en realidad, no lo son. YO VIBRABA de tal manera que CREABA las COSAS, —y como digo— me pasó lo que ahora: me hubiera pegado un tiro en la cabeza, precisamente en la CABEZA. (García-Sedas: 136)

Barradas describes sensations from without as if he were actually responsible for generating them because, for reasons unknown to him, these sensations awaken dormant impressions in him, as does a haiku poem in the reader. Barradas thus reassigns the literary phenomenon described by Couchoud to the field of visual arts.

Obviously one has to be wary of oversimplifying this argument. Barradas, like Torres-Garcia and Salvat-Papasseit, was trying to create an art form that was in tune with the art of his period, and he achieves this formally by fusing Cubist and Futurist techniques which create a sense of movement by means of deconstructing objects at different levels (Torre: 377). However, this does not detract from the argument that the haiku form could have been a source of inspiration. In fact, both Barradas the “vibracionista” and Salvat-Papasseit in his “Vibracions”, draw their inspiration from the Japanese haiku form by employing synesthesia, in stark opposition to the method used by Symbolist artists, so that: “la barreja de sensacions, projectant-se unes dins les altres en l’espai del poema, pot suggerir una certa fusió de les coses entre elles mateixes —i de les coses amb l’ànima” (Santaeulàlia: 25). Put another way, we need to look for the roots of Salvat-Papasseit’s haiku poems in the western Symbolist and post-Symbolist tradition, in turn traceable to Swedenborg’s theory of correspondences. In effect, Josep Maria Junoy, was not far wrong when he reproached Salvat-Papasseit for being a “mena de troç preciós del cor esberlat del gran Maragall” (8).

The influence of Diego Ruiz, who frequently cites Swedenborg (1906: 92, 96 and 99; 1907: 71) in “Vibracions” is only relatively surprising. Salvat-Papasseit’s admiration for Ruiz’s ideas is a well known fact, and traces of Ruiz’s influence are also evident in Torres-Garcia’s theories (Mas López 2004: 193-194). Diego Ruiz’s vitalist beliefs led him to search for knowledge through direct experience with reality, but, as humans, our capacity to speculate cannot put us in contact with the underlying harmony in the universe –the goal of all philosophical inquiry:

En este sentido, aun en el conocimiento fragmentario se revela la tendencia á la unidad, expresión incompleta del principio de la armonía. Esta tendencia es patente en todos los sistemas filosóficos. Así, se toma una de las manifestaciones del espíritu por base de todas (Voluntad, Conciencia, Idea, Sensación, etc.) o bien dos de tales manifestaciones, que pueden llegar á ser hasta contradictorias, á reserva de unir las en una síntesis. (1907: 97)

Ruiz relies on an intuition similar to that which the resonances of the Japanese haiku poems offer to attain true knowledge of the universe (Balaguer Pascual: 64-65). It is not abstraction but rather immediacy which can provide an explanation of the universe as a whole, as is illustrated in the following quote: “Veiem el món no per fórmules ni per lleis abstractes, sinó ab color, ab línies, ab remor, en aquesta vida del temps y de l’espai” (1907: 23). Salvat-Papasseit follows this same path of reasoning in his “Vibracions”: he records sensations or emotions that, by their very intensity, connect him to the world and make him feel an integral part of an infinite continuum, as do Barradas and Torres-Garcia at this time:

Si no tinguéssim intuïcions, que són a manera de revelacions, de quelcom que fragmentàriament se’ns vol descobrir, i si l’instint no ens portés amb insistència cap al descobriment d’això desconegut, podríem arribar a creure que la finalitat de la vida era sols *ella mateixa*, aquest continu canvi o transformació de tot. (...)

Hi ha que abandonar tot precepte, per ser quelcom de fixo, que em lliga i em limita. I així, per comptes de repetir quelcom après, direm coses pròpies. Per comptes de xerrar, procurem ser exactes. I siguem honrats, almenys en el parlar. Diguem sols el que sapiguem. Exactament com se reflexen les coses, en la nostra consciència. Partim del *fet viu*, de la nostra actual consciència. (Torres-Garcia 1980: 218-219)

The predilection of a haiku poem to express that which is attainable through the senses makes it an ideal vehicle to search for this kind of intuitive knowledge that eschews abstraction. Japanese *haijin* (haiku poets) limit themselves to expressing a motif or an experienced moment, and leave whatever implications can be drawn to develop in the readers' senses. The intuitions found in a haiku poem are by necessity fragmentary, given the brevity of its verse form, but they allow one to discern that which is absolute, hidden behind the hustle and bustle of everyday life.

Consequently, the brevity of a haiku poem, far from being a limitation for Salvat-Papasseit's literary ends, works in his favour, since it only provides for evoking intuitive feelings and leaves no room for digressions that are not directly linked to experience (Rodríguez-Izquierdo: 24-26). In short, expressed in Torres-Garcia's terms, the practice of composing a haiku poem obliges one to be precise and does not allow for verbosity. Maragall himself, who became an important source for Salvat-Papasseit's poetry in his later years, defends the view of speaking far less and only when there is a real desire to express something in his "L'elogi de la paraula": "parlar molt menys i sols per un fort anhel d'expressió" (663). Seen from this perspective, the composition of "Vibracions" can be related to the "Mots-propis" of Salvat-Papasseit himself and with the synthetic and often obscure style of the short philosophical essays by Diego Ruiz:

La lliberació de la ofuscada facultat d'especular y l'anorreament de la pedagogia; però també la eliminació de tot lo convencional. (...) la nostra convicció ens portaria, ens impulsaria, sí, ens obligaria, segons el tremp del nostre temperament, a escriure'l llibre de modo que cada paragraf sintetisís tota l'idea de l'obra, no com si cada paragraf fos un fragment d'un tot que sols ab la darrera pagina's completaria, sinó com si'l paragraf fos ja la obra sencera. Això es, indubtablement, un mètode més *difícil* (en el sentit corrent), emperò es també'l més sincer, el més espontani (...). (1907: 22-23)

How could Salvat-Papasseit resist the temptation of a verse form such as that found in haiku poems, whose brevity required the "eliminació de tot lo convencional" and could also serve as the ideal vehicle to put into practice the literary proposals of Marinetti?

(...) Unica preoccupazione del narratore rendere tutte le vibrazioni del suo io.

Se questo narratore dotato di lirismo avrà inoltre una mente popolata di idee generali, involontariamente allaccerà le sue sensazioni coll'universo intero sconosciuto o intuito da lui. E per dare il valore esatto e le proporzioni della vita che ha vissuta, lancerà delle immense reti di analogie sul mondo. Egli darà così il fondo analogico della vita, telegraficamente, cioè con la stessa rapidità economica che il telegrafo impone ai reporters e ai corrispondenti di guerra, pei loro racconti superficiali. (70-71)

Marinetti speaks of the profundity of life as an analogy and the speed of telegraphic systems instead of Swedenborg's correspondences; however, this passage, which is so close in content to the quotations from Ruiz, Torres-Garcia and Barradas, explains how Salvat-Papasseit discovered haiku poems as a vehicle through which he could compose avant-garde literature. Furthermore, it is well within the realms of possibility that the title "Vibracions" could have originated from the common use of this term by Couchoud and Marinetti. If "Les épigrammes lyriques du Japon" opened the way for Salvat-Papasseit to the haiku verse form as a vehicle for poetic expression, then Marinetti, along with Diego Ruiz, furnished him with an artistic and literary theory that would help him to adapt it to become the cornerstone of his poetry from *L'irradiador del port i les gavines* onwards.



The child's perception is pure, it has not yet been tarnished by custom, and so "enclou totes les síntesis del món", that is, it is capable of achieving the absolute vision that the artist strives for in his/her work. Children, like the genius Ruiz talks about in "De la interpretación biológica del genio" using a child as a comparison, approach each of their life experiences without hindrance or reservations, and for this reason they take place in absolute time, the eternity mentioned earlier (Gavaldà i Roca: 32). Both Barradas and Torres-Garcia were fascinated by children's art and toys (Mas López 2004: 206), and in Salvat-Papasseit's later poems, as well as in his haiku poems, in addition to children we find highwaymen and pirates, characters which belong to the world of children's literature —particularly in *La luna nueva. Poemas para niños*, by Rabindranath Tagore. Characterised in this manner in "Bru mariner d'amor", "Mocadoret al coll", "Aquell vell mariner" and "Damunt mon vaixell" (Salvat-Papasseit 1997: 118, 136, 140), the poetic voice openly expresses emotions —particularly love— which allow the "I" to fuse with the cosmos: "i així seré immortal perquè d'aquí ha nascut el meu JO dins el TOT," as expressed by the poetic voice at the end of "Marxa nupcial" (1997: 119-121).

The world of children provides a thematic solution to the conflict of the *Poemes en ondes hertzianes*; and the haiku poems of *L'irradiador del port i les gavines*, provide what we could call a technical solution. The long poems in his first collection present the intuition of the first person narrator trying to escape from an asphyxiating situation; in "Vibracions", and in his later haiku poems, brevity obliges Salvat-Papasseit to sift the wheat from the chaff and present his intuitions in a pure and synthesised manner. Here Salvat-Papasseit describes fleeting moments when the poetic "I" fuses with "everything", but these moments remain suspended, completely separated from the unravelling of events, and encased in an eternity only glimpsed at odd moments in his first book of poems.

This effect of suspending time, or resonances of a lived experience, is a characteristic of Japanese haiku poems, which, not forgetting the words of Couchoud, contain "une impression vive qui peut éveiller en nous quelque impression endormie". So, it is the adoption of this verse form which allowed Salvat-Papasseit to describe the essence of sensations or emotions that he experienced, and to record the absolute fusion of the poetic subjective voice with the experience itself, which is also a characteristic of the haiku tradition (Rodríguez-Izquierdo: 25-26).

From a traditional Japanese perspective, one of the criticisms one could make about "Vibracions" and the rest of Salvat-Papasseit's haiku poems, is that the majority deal with the theme of love, which is never a relevant motif in works of the classic haiku authors. One could argue that Salvat-Papasseit touches on this theme through the influence of the Japanese tanka poems: although absent from Couchoud's essay, they are included in Michel Revon's anthology of Japanese literature. The fact that Salvat-Papasseit was familiar with this work is illustrated in poems such as "Volves de zèfir" (1997: 117), which systematically resorts to words with double meanings inspired by the classic Japanese tanka (Mas López 2004: 175-176). This, however, is not the case here. The theme of love is present in "Vibracions" because love is the core emotion which allows the poetic "I" to project itself through experience and become one and the same: while the haiku provides the formal vehicle for expression, love provides the content that justifies its use. Rather than trying to explain the presence of the love theme in Salvat-Papasseit's haiku poems based on the argument that this is a feature of the Japanese tanka, it could simply be that Salvat-Papasseit was manipulating the haiku form for his own literary ends.

Earlier I stated that "Vibracions" provide a formal versification solution to the problem posed in *Poemes en ondes hertzianes*. As an inclusion to this collection, Salvat-Papasseit places them just before "Marxa nupcial", the central poem in *L'irradiador*

which, to a certain degree, brings to an end his rigorous adherence to avant-garde attempts. From the second part of *L'irradiador* onwards, Salvat-Papasseit steadily moves towards more traditional verse forms, a direction that is well illustrated by his sonnet “Pantalons llargs” (1997: 128)— and his popular ballads. The last books published by Salvat-Papasseit combine avant-garde and more traditional verse forms, and are often used to vocalise a reality which the poetic voice feels an integral part of, even though this was seen as a hostile reality in *Poemes en ondes hertzianes*.

Therefore, “Vibracions”, and the underlying poetic discourse, also present in poems such as “El record d’una ‘Fuga’ de Bach” and “Marxa nupcial”, act as a crossroads between these two facets of Salvat-Papasseit’s work: they act as a bridge between the stance of artistic and social confrontation in his first period and the conciliatory and integrating outlook in his second period. Clearly, if Salvat-Papasseit the poet in his later years came to adopt an attitude of celebrating life —not an idealised life, but that of a working class person like him— it was in part due to his experimentation in “Vibracions”, which at a time of personal crisis served as a basis for expressing facts and convictions upon which he based his vitalist views from then onwards.

After “Vibracions”, Salvat-Papasseit only resorted to the haiku form on the odd occasion, but always in very significant contexts. *L'irradiador* had already appeared opening with a haiku poem which served as a prologue, and all his subsequent published collections —except the posthumously published “Óssa Menor”— also opened with haiku poems (1997: 105, 143, 157, 205). *L'irradiador* also included a haiku poem which took the form of a calligramme, “Les formigues” (1997: 135), which had originally been published in volume zero of *Proa*. *Proa* was a project very dear to Salvat-Papasseit, a vehicle for making known his new approach to overcoming the confrontation

between traditional and avant-garde art. The fact that he chose “Les formigues”, a tremendously synthetic and suggestive aesthetic and vitalist manifesto (Mas López 2004: 176-178), is particularly indicative of the importance he gave to this poem.

“Proverbi” (Salvat-Papasseit 1997: 324), the penultimate in the collection published after his death, is a poem which bids farewell to life, imitating the practice among Japanese haiku poets when they realised they were close to death. *Óssa Menor* opens and closes with each calligramme, taking up a pre-assigned position, which leaves “Proverbi” symbolically as the haiku poem which marks the end of Salvat-Papasseit’s poetry and life.

Apart from “Les formigues” and “Proverbi”, we only find two other haiku poems in his published collections that postdate “Vibracions”: “Si, per tenir-la” and “Si n’era un lladre” (1997: 229, 275), which appear in *Poema de la rosa als llavis*. However, both of them appear between brackets that are much larger than the letters in the text, whose function is the same as the contrived placing of the prologue haiku poems and “Proverbi”: to isolate the haiku poems from the other poems and place them on a different level.

So what exactly is this different level? It is the level of sensitivity, intuition, the eternity which is achieved through the fusion of the ‘I’ and the universe, a different level to that of daily life and the succession of mundane events that are generated therein; in other words, the very same eternal, suspended time that we find in “Vibracions”. In *Poema de la rosa als llavis* there is a clear juxtaposition between the majority of the poems which tell of stories of love and describe real (or apparently real) life events, and the two haiku poems which contain intuitions of the poetic ‘I’ about the nature of the lived experience (Mas López 2004: 183-186). These intuitions are not shared with the loved one, nor even reflected in the story, because they are enriched

moments of self-awareness precisely because of their intimate nature and, therefore, revealing.

In the case of the haiku poems which act as a prologue, such as “Les formigues” and “Proverbi”, we find a similar situation: they do not contain facts but rather intuitions. Salvat-Papasseit’s collections of poems focus on experiences —whether real or imaginary, although Salvat-Papasseit himself said that he had never written anything without “mullar la ploma al cor” (1977: 77)—, but he used other verse forms to this end: for example, popular ballads more or less reworked. The haiku poems are expressed in the context of eternity and a state of consciousness which Torres-Garcia and Barradas spoke of, “fora de l’espai, en la nit absoluta”, and also outside the main body of his poems. The haiku poems contain intuitions that occur by chance which serve as a setting for the poet’s song. That is why Salvat-Papasseit uses them as a prologue: the haiku poems express absolute and inescapable truths and become a poetic seed which grows to fruition in the poems that come after.

### **The haiku as an expression of life itself**

So far I have commented on the reasons why Salvat-Papasseit became interested in the haiku verse form and the way in which his haiku poems fit in with his poetry. In the last part of this paper I would like to take up this issue not so much from a literary stance as from the point of view of life based on “Proverbi”, the poem in which he bids farewell to a life which lasted only thirty years.

Below I have reproduced this poem, eliminating the comma which Joaquim Molas inserted at the end of the second verse in his edition of the complete poems of Salvat-Papasseit:

Així la rosa enduta pel torrent,  
així l’espurna de mimosa al vent  
la teva vida, sota el firmament.

Although it comprises three decasyllables —that is, thirty syllables instead of the seventeen required in traditional Japanese haiku poems—, the poem generates a sensation of brevity as a result of the same consonance rhyme at the end of each of the three verses and the fact of placing all the stressed accents in parallel paired syllable metre. A verbal torrent is thus achieved that decants into the final word, the “firmament” highlighted by the single rhyme scheme. The arrangement of the stressed syllables suggests a fusion between the consonance rhymes of the poem —“torrent”, “vent” and “firmament”—, which, taken together, act in opposition to the assonance rhymes which precede them—“rosa”, “espurna de mimosa” and “vida”—, in such a way that this triple juxtaposition would be an amplification of the basic opposition which governs the poem, the opposition of “vida” and “firmament”, and would suggest that human life is subject to the laws imposed by the world and the chronological time which governs it.

Salvat-Papasseit himself undermines this reading by not placing a comma at the end of the second verse. The comma introduced by Molas in his edition is a perfectly reasonable insertion because the parallelisms of the verses seem to require it. However, Salvat-Papasseit placed a comma after the word “vida”, forcing the reader to look for semantic continuity in the section “al vent la teva vida”. The result is that the layout of the words does not project towards the word “firmament” which ends the poem, but rather towards “vida”, and there seems to be, in contrast, a space which cannot be recovered, marked by the comma between these two words. Examining the meaning of the preceding words in detail, one realises that they all describe life in terms of brevity, beauty and intensity, and place “vida” in opposition to the absolute and imperturbable “firmament”.

The final message of this poem, which never closes, emerges precisely from the interaction between the two readings that it suggests: one would want life to be (in addition to intense) eternal, and that the word “vida” should be the culmination of the third verse. Similarly, the final word is “firmament”: a firmament, but, which only achieves an effective presence in the light of the human experience that Salvat-Papasseit evokes so eloquently, not only in “Proverbi” but also in the rest of his haiku poems.

The proverbial value of the poem is introduced by the possessive pronoun “teva” which accompanies “vida”: the reader is thus addressed and, by extension, all of humanity, who experience the same impossible yearning as the poetic “I”. However, we cannot leave aside another attribute transmitted by the second person singular: the referential distance from the poetic “I”. Furthermore, if we read “meva” instead of “teva” in this particular poem, this conjures up the real life Salvat-Papasseit, the poet suffering from tuberculosis who must have known that his life, in all probability, would be very short.

The typical Catalan way of thinking perceives the author almost always evoked as the personification of “l’home entusiasta” (Aisa and Morros) through antonomasia, which Diego Ruiz spoke of. After the publication of “Vibracions”, Salvat-Papasseit does not really touch on sad or pessimistic registers, and poems with a predominant melancholy tone are a rare feature, examples being: “Nadal”, “Pantalons llargs”, “Tot l’enyor de demà” and “Nocturn per a acordió” (1997: 124, 128, 129, 304). This almost certainly reflects his temperament, but it also seems to indicate that this is a conscious decision.

In July or August 1918, one month after getting married, Salvat-Papasseit suffered the first serious bout of the illness that was to end his life, and immediately after this he wrote two

poems that were an exception to his poems in general and which focus on the theme of death: “Missenyora la mort” and “És tot fosc i jo al llit” (1997: 332-333). These poems were published together in *La Columna de foc* but were not included in any of his poem collections until *Poesies completes*, edited and published more than fifty years after his death. Thus, Salvat-Papasseit separated them from his published collections in two ways: first by publishing them in the magazine *La Columna de Foc*, Reus, and not in *Un Enemic del Poble*, the magazine he edited at that time and in which, in contrast, some of his early poems appeared; and secondly, by not including them in any of his books of poems, which gathered together practically all the works in verse form that he had previously published in various periodicals.

This isolating of his poems about death is entirely coherent with a “love of life” orientation seen in Salvat-Papasseit’s poetry from the second half of *L’irradiador del port i les gavines* onwards; in other words, from the point after “Vibracions” are inserted. In his first book of poems, *Poemes en ondes herzianes*, Salvat-Papasseit focuses on describing a series of experiences in which the social setting stifles brief hints of illumination. In contrast, his second book of poems, as well as all of those which followed, seem to be written from an awareness of death which is close at hand, and obsessively entreat living life to the full, to achieve eternity through intensity rather than by prolonging time.

It is particularly illustrative to compare the contents of Salvat-Papasseit’s poem which bids farewell to life with “Elogi del coet, per a dir en la nit de sant Joan”, a gloss by Eugeni d’Ors published on June 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1906, in *La Veu de Catalunya*, and included in *Glosari 1906*. The fact that this was a source for Catalan writers who gravitated towards haiku poems during the time of Salvat-Papasseit, is illustrated by the fact that Josep

Maria Junoy, one of Salvat's personal friends, manipulated this form reproducing some of the verses to contradict Ors' opinion that haiku poems simply recorded natural events and were not constructed arbitrarily, i.e., according to human judgments or taste (Mas López 2005: 119). The following quote illustrates these points:

Coet, Coet, alegria i lleugeresa de ritme perfecte!

¿A què comparar-te, Coet, sinó ab aquestes àgils vides, simples per lo linials, i, per lo corbes, gracioses, fàcils per la llur absoluta conformitat a la llei d'una vocació clara? Així la vida de Mozart, diuen. Així la de Rafael—bellesa, amor, amistat, somriure... —Curtes vides perfectes, talment un epigrama de vida. Curtes, per lo perfectes. «El baró amat dels déus mor d'hora», és dir antic. ¿No fóra el Coet, també, un benamat dels déus? (...)

—Més aviat caldria anomenar als Coets *epigrames*, en el noble i clàssic sentit del mot, com a n'aquelles ditxoses vides que he dit. O bé, ara, *haikai*, en record d'aquells *haikai* japonesos de què entre nosaltres ha parlat aquell poeta que era més digne entre nosaltres de parlar-ne.

I, té, jo li faria al Coet, una mena de *haikai*:

La Columna és ben dreta,

però els déus amen més del Coet

la corba—un xic escèpitca... (Ors 1996: 164-165)

The trajectory of the spark in "Proverbi" is strikingly similar to that of the rocket in the haiku poem by Eugeni d'Ors: a curved line heading up to the sky, but, burning out before reaching it, it seems straight. Another of Salvat-Papasseit's haiku poems, here the opening poem in *El poema de la rosa als llavis*, also draws on the image of the rocket flame, and that of the gods who inhabit the firmament:

Botons de foc al cor

la fiblada d'amor—

però els déus s'hi tatuaven. (1997: 205)

All said and done, despite the vitalism which runs through his works, "Proverbi" clearly demonstrates that Salvat-Papasseit was aware that he was working against time, and that his models from real life had to be figures such Mozart or Rafael, authors of extraordinary works who lived but a short life. In other words, the most that he could hope to achieve was to live his life like an intense but brief haiku poem. Seen from this perspective, the merits of his poem bidding farewell to life is an acknowledgement of the limits of life itself while at the same time expressing the beauty of the world and the intensity of the desire which it inspires.

## Conclusions

It is clear that haiku poems enjoyed a privileged position among the poems of Salvat-Papasseit, even if their brevity and relatively small number might suggest otherwise. To begin with, we have "Vibracions", a turning point between the crisis expressed in *Poemes en ondes hertzianes* and the praise of life that predominates in his later publications. Later, after *L'irradiador del port i les gavines*, the haiku poems become the building blocks that form the symbolic foundation for Salvat-Papasseit's poetic expression, and provide an image that synthesises this expression with great eloquence, culminating in "Proverbi".

Salvat-Papasseit's haiku poems accomplish all of this by exploiting the original characteristic verse form which he uses as a vehicle for his own aesthetic ideals (in common with Torres-Garcia and Barradas) and which he developed in an attempt to resolve the conflicting artistic currents of his time. So, his deviations from traditional haiku metre and themes (or whatever other deviations may be found in Salvat-Papasseit's haiku poems) cannot be explained in terms of a lack of knowledge of the Japanese haiku tradition, but rather the wish to make use of this verse form in another context and with

different objectives than those sought in traditional Japanese haiku poems.

Whatever analysis one wishes to make of the quality of Salvat-Papasseit's poetry—and which in no way undermines the rest of his poetry—, one cannot deny that Salvat-Papasseit's approach to the haiku verse form merits more than mere anecdotal recognition, and is an example of his painstaking commitment to the aesthetic conflicts posed throughout all his poems.

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