Poetic objectification of a shattered subject: the alchemical poetry of Josep Palau i Fabre

Sergi Castella-Martínez
Department of Humanities (Haas Library) Universitat Pompeu Fabra Barcelona, Spain

ABSTRACT
A number of modern poets have presented their works as an alchemical endeavor. Their verses display the hermeneutical clues of an analogy that elaborates on a heterodox ancestral practice and that simultaneously assumes poetry’s experimental nature. Alchemical poetics constitute thus a specific alternative of contemporary poetic expression, and it stands out for its elements’ material treatment. The article describes and exemplifies various procedures of poetic objectification through which Josep Palau i Fabre’s works between 1937 and 1952 dissolve the traditional distance between object and subject and compose a world of objects where words, sounds and meanings arbitrarily collide beyond any subjective assessment. The material and practical aspects of an alchemical poetics lead thus to a reassessment of the objective shift of Aesthetics derived from the philosophical shattering of the subject, since the poetic elements and the poems themselves manifest the inaccessibility of any complete subjective experience of the objects, independently of their form and condition. The main goal of the article is to contribute on providing a clearer description of the nuanced belief that brings together an alchemical poetics and experimental poetics. The intuition of the world’s horizontal and arbitrary order manifests in the accumulative and apparently unsuccessful poetic attempts of attaining the actual, most authentic self. The alchemical condition of poetry consists in the succession and collision of images that are not bound to conceptual representation, but that rather reflect their status as essays, as fragments of an ongoing experiment that would be inert should its material condition and its inexpressible core not always be considered. Only in the succession and accumulation of such images finds Palau i Fabre’s alchemical poetry its consummation, faithful to the plurality and inconformity of all metaphors, and always pushed to further approaches, to endless experimentation.

The alchemist
From Blake to Rimbaud, a good number of modern poets have been influenced by the suggestive language of ancient and medieval alchemists (Roob 11). Their nuanced relationship with alchemy does not always follow the alluring yet fatalistic perspective of Baudelaire’s occasional mentions to Hermes Trismegistus (“To the Reader,” “Alchemy of Suffering” 4–7, 152–55), and they may instead emphasize other aspects of this ancient discipline, besides its boundless ambition. Alchemy is an art, a technical manner of conceiving and working with materials like metals, herbs and dyes. More than a stance concerning the representation of the world, it was normally understood as an embodied knowledge, halfway between a medical practice and an applied science that sought deep understanding of the self and the other. It stood out for “the iridescent multifariousness of the meanings of its semantic fragments” (Zielinski 352), as Derrida detected in Mallarmé’s extreme exploitation of the phoneme “or” (gold) (121–26). This latter characteristic shows perhaps its most evident kinship to poetry. To imagine poetic work on meanings, words and sounds as a sensual-intellectual compound can shape the analogy with alchemy and turn the poem, the book or the author’s mind into an experimentation table (Benamou 134–35). The comparison of alchemy and poetry also stresses the secretly kept, esoteric transmission of the art, since “difficult alchemical language manifests itself in Decknamen . . . , in knotty philosophical explorations, and simply in being foreign and unknown” (Bentick 146). The wise manipulation of elements is, in sum, a non-paragoned powerful kind of practical knowledge. It can even be understood in continuity or complementarity with natural science, as Shelley’s Victor Frankenstein does (Hall 79), insofar as the evergreen metaphor of the world as a readable book is sustained in one form or another (Blumenberg, The Legibility of the World 13–23). In 1891 scientific consensus already regarded alchemy however as “a subject so outgrown and alien to the spirit of the age” (Kedzie 113), and for much longer it had been more than often associated to
outcasts, non-Westerners or, of course, women (Strocchia 160–62). While Romantic ideas on geniality in the Arts can clearly favor those depictions of the poet and their poetry, the alchemical treatment of wisdom appears as an anthropological constant for poets and creators of all times in Eliade’s *The Forge and the Crucible* (1977).

In 1952, Josep Palau i Fabre (Barcelona, 1917–2008) gathered most of his poetic production from the late thirties up until that time and titled the collection *Poemes de l’Alquimista* (*Poems of the Alchemist*). This book had to bear a fake imprint as if it had been published in Paris so that it could avoid censorship, but despite its troubled publishing history it is nowadays considered a fruitful source of inspiration for poets and visual artists, such as the painter Miquel Barceló (Fundació Palau and Moral, “Profound Desire”). Palau’s short poems invite us to ask what kind of practice may derive from an alchemical image of poetry. He was strongly influenced by Ramon Llull (Raimundus Lullus, 1232–1316) and spent his life arguing for an alchemical element in the medieval philosopher’s thought, even though Lullist scholars had for decades agreed that none of the Pseudo-Lullian alchemical treatises were to be attributed to the Majorcan’s hand. The poet understood Llull and his *Ars*, the heterodox combinatorial method of contemplation, as a subtle form of alchemy. Llull’s philosophical works and poems shared with alchemy both the foundational premise, an authentic and productive hunger for the absolute (*Obres literàries completes II* 378), and the aspiration to contribute to the emergence of gold (*OLC II* 372). In an essay called “L’or de Ramon” (“Ramon’s gold,” *OLC II* 398–99), Palau quoted the following excerpt from the *Ars brevis* (1308): “The alphabet is included in this Art to enable us to make figures, mix principles and rules, and investigate the truth” (Llull, *Mnemonic Arts*). Palau highlights Llull’s frequent alchemical choice of words, like mixture or transmutation, to draw a parallel between the philosopher’s project and his own understanding of poetry as alchemy. In a first and superficial level of interpretation yet to be developed, we can say that Palau sees no substantial leap between the sublimation of the alchemical principles in the *Ars* and their transposition in poetry. In short, the mixture and blend of words might also enable the elaboration of figures, principles and rules, and the investigation of truth. Llull was in fact a poet and a narrator himself, and adapted his logical-metaphysical system to multiple genres with the unremitting passion of a preacher and a mystagogue (Vega, *The Secret of Life* 79). Besides this medieval authority, with whom Palau felt linguistically and intellectually attached, his proposal of an alchemical poetry was likewise enriched by the impact of other authors. He found Arthur Rimbaud’s lines illuminating, and was deeply influenced by the poems, letters and essays of Antonin Artaud, whom he met a couple of times in 1947 in the Ivy sanatorium, only months before he passed away. In a special issue of *K* that paid homage to Artaud, Palau remembered that both Rimbaud and Artaud dreamt of a universal language born from the destruction of the poet and the poem, as it appears in the end of the latter’s “Ci-Gît” (“Here lies”): “neither word nor idea” (*OLC II* 1208). Artaud had said in “Alchemical Theatre,” an essay from 1932, that a pure dramatic performance, devoid from conceptual dichotomies and released as brute force, could “dissolve all appearances into one unique expression which must have been the equivalent of spiritualized gold” (52), thus insisting on the essential identity between both practices, and arguing they both use finite means to bring gold to presence. As for “gold,” Artaud understands a conflagrating event of purification, the event of materialization of the real, fundamentally conflictive nature of the world (48–52). Artaud’s “Alchemical Theatre” reminds us of Lazarus Zetzner’s *Theatrwm Chemicum*, a six-volume collection published between 1602 and 1611 that gathered many alchemical treatises, including some attributed to Llull. Zetzner also published one of the most influential editions of Ramon Llull’s works, where he assembled and rearranged his tables and figures to form an *alphabetum cogitationum humanarum* (alphabet of human knowledge) (Schmidt-Biggemann 38–43). Josep Palau i Fabre worked with his own alphabet in pursuit of the emergence of gold, and identified the disintegration of the subject and imitative appropriation as the interpretive keys of the *Poems of the Alchemist*. In this study we shall bring together those keys in the wider framework of poetic objectification, which is the treatment of poetic elements as self-determining real entities that do not necessarily need assessment from a subjective concept (Brassier 253). To do so we must still specify how Palau approached the mixture of words, sounds and meanings, so that we can in the end provide a comprehensible intellectual context for his general understanding of poetry.

The Alchemist is a heteronym Palau used consistently in the time of production of the *Poems*. Both a mask and a character, this fictional author is the result of a concealment technique that, just like any other symbol, signals its own entity in relation to the components of the poem (Sòria 103; Perera Roura, “The Invisible Reader” 7). We will pay close attention to Palau’s poetic words, so that the images of an alchemical poet and of alchemical poetry become clearer in connection to broader aesthetic tendencies. Through various examples that cover different forms and contents we aim to put forward a new interpretation of Palau’s main poetic
technique, namely poetic objectification. This is the pumping heart of his grammar and leads to the horizontal juxtaposition of the poetic materials among themselves and with the poetic subject concealed under the name of the Alchemist. In short, we aim to show what an alchemical notion of poetry might imply for an author from mid-twentieth century and how poetic words display their own premises and expectations in the frame of a particular testimony of modern poetic experimentation.

The Alchemist’s objects

Palau i Fabre is mostly known for his aesthetic and biographical studies on Pablo Picasso, whom he befriended in France and for whom he had infinite admiration. His first and most important poetic milieu is however the city of Barcelona during the thirties, where poets like Carles Riba (1893–1959) or J. V. Foix (1893–1987) had developed Modernist or Avant-Gardist proposals that, from around 1918, had begun contesting the hegemonic position of scleroticized Symbolism (Geisler 69, Vallcorba 5). The bitter Yellow Manifesto (1928), published by Salvador Dalí and other intellectuals (367–371), openly mocked the Catalan literary establishment, and is a good example of Palau’s cultural atmosphere. At that time, most young poets already paid great attention to the European Avant-gardes and echoed their condemnation of the institutionalization of art. In the forties, however, Palau played a very active role in this literary system, because he belonged to the first generation of artists and poets who had to overcome the new dictatorial censorship and prosecution after the Spanish Civil War. He founded two underground literary journals in a few years (Poesia, 1944-45, and Ariel, 1946-1951). Moreover, he created publishing firms like La Sirena or Edicions de l’Alquimista to issue some of the first new Catalan works since the end of the war and the language’s prohibition (Perera Roura, “Poesia [1944-1945]”). In this disarrayed context, his poems are diverse in tone and form, and sometimes display the affirmative aspect of the Avant-Garde aesthetics, in that they seem firm proposals of a complete revulsion to the world (Von Beyme 38–39). In sum, they find themselves, as we will exemplify, on the crossroads between that expansive stance and a more ironic—not always ludic—hypertextual palimpsest seized by post-war Existentialism. Some compositions in the Poems of the Alchemist, dated from 1937 to 1952, had been published before, but they were all purposefully gathered under this title. Such a poetic gesture suggests that they can be understood as alchemical essays, the results of the Alchemist’s experiments disclosed from a secret Tractatus and loosely spread all over the laboratory’s table. Palau defined his own poems as “poetry understood not as an end in itself, but as means of exploration or experimentation” (OLC I 145), just as music, the microscope or metals were at other times. To grasp its implications we are required to deepen our gaze into his objectifying poetics and to reassess what the relationship is between the actors and components of the experiment.

In Revolution in Poetic Language, a text from 1974, Julia Kristeva reflects on the experimental nature of modern poetics. She understands that creation is a circular process of rejection concerning any fixed, given form: a process that is fed by a relentless, productive desire (113). Using Mallarmé and Lautréamont as examples, she describes a particular difference with regard to the analytical grasp of the creative process between the poets of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries:

The modern text combines rejection, its signifying reversal, and its “knowledge”: it constitutes a process, but one that analyses itself endlessly. By contrast, the nineteenth-century text, inscribing and representing the signifying process, does not summon the unary subject as a place to affix itself; what passes through the subject’s shattering in the process is not a known truth but instead its expenditure. (188)

With the shattering of the Kantian and the Romantic subjects as common ground, different approaches to poetry itself are taken in the two periods Kristeva mentions, even though the former inherits from the latter the experimental horizon and the emphasis on the Baudelairean image of the new. The “expenditure” of a formal, stable and definitive truth to which the poetic content may adapt harbors the objection of modern poetics in regard to tradition. Kristeva’s psychoanalytical perspective precisely summarizes the shift from nineteenth-century poetry to the Avant-Gardes and beyond as a thrust of consciousness towards the experimental nature of the linguistic phenomenon of poetry. Since Palau i Fabre’s poems are very often in dialogue with, or directly confront, the premises of Symbolism and Modernism, from Baudelaire and Rimbaud to Riba, we will analyze their words to figure out what is Palau’s position and perspective as far as the creative rejection of any fixed truth and subject is concerned.

We can begin our approach to Palau’s poetry through the poem “La pedra” (“The stone”), dated from 1942, which opens the second book’s first section, called “Poèmes épigrammâtiques” (“Epigrammatic poems”). We have already mentioned that Palau’s core poetic technique we aim to describe is objectification, and both mentioned titles usher us already to regard the compositions in this section as if they were carved in stone and/or were stones themselves.

Dura com l’aigua dura.
The very first line of the poem introduces a description of the stone and serves as a remarkable example of how Palau treats real elements as autonomous objects. In the last two lines, nonetheless, the poet enunciates that the idea of stone “in us reaches its prime,” and it seems that some kind of relationship between object and subject is still functional. Stress is placed in the stone’s own ecstatic givens: it is “a root to its very self” and it is “in eternal ecstasy.” These two positive aesthetic statements about the stone are tied to the object’s active presence, since “stone perpetuates/stone, pure image,” whether a human being observes it or not. The object is therefore complex and irreducible to a mere concept of the mind. The notions of “image” and “idea” are forcefully pushed beyond conceptual representation by Palau’s overload of the active presence of the object, but also by other means. The deliberate plurality of meanings in the first line is evident in the original version, since “dura,” the twice-repeated word, can function as an adjective that refers to a contra-intuitive common hardness of both stone and water, as Sam Abrams chose to translate it, but it can immediately be understood as the third person singular form of the verb “to last”: “It lasts like water lasts.” In any case, it seems clear that the author conveys a comparison between two paradigmatically different elements that unexpectedly share the properties of “hardness” and “durability.”

We are not so much concerned with any particular reading of this first line, but rather with pointing out that the epanadiplosis—and potential annotation, should we consider both meanings at once—opens the line to a plural and expansive expression of the indefinite attributes of the stone. According to Bachelard in The Poetics of Reverie, poetic imagination hosts the living splendor of the world. The poet discovers and celebrates inexhaustible objects—in Rilke’s words—, and the poem unfolds an open symbolism (Bachelard 134–135). In his own terms, Palau i Fabre stresses the combinatorial nature and indeterminateness of the net of relationships between objects, which surpasses any logical and univocal determination of the nature of the stone, perhaps of any object. Graham Harman has proposed an object-oriented terminology to address the poetic display of the multiple tensions between the sensual that is perceived and the real that remains occult. According to it, Palau’s allusion to the real qualities of the stone, irreducible to any conceptual logic, manifests the mysteriousness that involves the approach to a sensual object (Harman 220–221). The bond formed by the line “hard as water is hard” clearly exceeds the scope of the physical quality measured by the Mohs scale, and pushes imagination to the plexus of possible meanings which are all at once realized in what most definitely becomes a mixture of water and stone by their common qualities. These multiple presences are simultaneously brought forth by poetic means, in line with Surrealist poetics (Mersch, Ereignis und Aura 260–265): the actual lithic composition of “hard water,” for example, which is intelligible by scientific observation but most immediately by taste, is overlapped by the image of the ever-changing erosive-erodible relationship between stone and water. In the “Notes” to this poem, Palau uses his recurrent alchemical language to confess that he deliberately tried to alter the proportions of the poetic mixture—stone and spirit, object and subject in the poem. He did it so that “the first one, the stone, took part in it in the maximum possible proportion, at the expense of the second one. It consists in carrying the mimetic possibility of the spirit to the extreme” (OLC I 155). He therefore claims that he abstained from pervasively expanding the subject to the object as a means of knowledge, and adds: “I imagine this method to be entirely similar to the mystical ecstasy and to the Eastern method of fixation of an object, in order to obtain the supreme degree of elevation and the oblivion of oneself” (156). The Spanish poet José Ángel Valente also located the convergent point of poetic and mystical experiences in the substantiality of their words (60–70). The process of oversaturating the poem with the presence of the object is twofold.

The stone is not the only present object in its own statute: the poem, itself epigrammatic, receives by transposition the stone’s attributes, and as a stone perpetuates itself in eternal ecstasy. Palau aims to petrify the subject, devoid from any sovereignty on the ecstatic stone and only present in the last line. There, the stone’s givenness reaches a collective subject in a very peculiar material vehicle, that is, poetic words-stones, objects that collide and mix, the ingredients of an alchemy necessarily understood as a privileged space to undertake the distillation of the real entity of things beyond mental representations. The result is a still enigmatic spectacle that does not fulfill any representative purpose, as Roland Barthes said (26).

Palau begins the Poems of the Alchemist with an adage of his own, “man is an animal that pursues itself,” which elaborates on the Delphic maxim and emphasizes the active, practical aspect of a task always in fieri aligned with the Avant-Garde aesthetics: “The intention to revolutionize life by returning art to its praxis turns it into a revolutionizing of art” (Bürger 72). This is a core of restlessness, the
stray’s desperation, and states with no shadow of doubt that the main purpose of his creative practice is an introspective one, that could even seem solipsistic but that we must always understand as a communicative effort, since Palau imagines the poet as someone who finds in poetry a remarkable medium to dig into reality (Nobre 35). Such an image, a basis for Palau’s consequent practice, is not free however from the siege of anguish, as shown in the poem “Vaig com les aus” (“I do as birds do”), from which we reproduce the first four lines:

Vaig com les aus, quan han perdut lo fill, 
que giravolten sense haver consol, 
amb críts de sang alerten son estol 
com si lo món entrés en gran perill⁴ (OlC I 113; 1–4).

Alongside the acknowledgment of autogenesis as a task of collective implications (Balagué 18), we might want to highlight the verb to spin (“giravolten”), because Palau i Fabré’s alchemical poetic practice will mainly consist in the repetitive appropriation of voices, styles and techniques, like the impersonalizing “fixation” we have just seen, so that those materials become part of the experimentation object par excellence: the evasive self. It is clear, then, that in the poem—or rather through the poem, should we attain both theoretical and sensual aspects of language—the author seeks to obtain the transmutation of metals, the solidified gold, by essentially fragmentary means of significance, the poetic words. When Kristeva explores the linguistic and literary notion of significance (signification) she does not focus on the emergence of meaning in the reader but on “this unlimited and unbounded generating process, this unceasing operation of the drives toward, in, and through language” (17) that an author experiences as a pulsatile, productive practice. Kristeva emphasizes polysemy and heterogeneity as potential core features of any significant practice that is not strictly dependent on the stable, denotative function of scientific conceptualization: “If one grants that every signifying practice is a field of transpositions of various signifying systems (an inter-textuality), one then understands that its ‘place’ of enunciation and its denoted ‘object’ are never single, complete, and identical to themselves, but always plural, shattered, capable of being tabulated” (60). For now, we have mentioned that the Alchemist chooses and mixes the poetic elements within his reach first and foremost by treating them as real, autonomous objects, but we must yet delve into the experimental nature of his poetics. Palau would publish no other book of poems. He moved on to other genres, like plays, tales and essays, so we are invited to ask whether he imagined any limits or limited horizons to the poetic experimentation in general or to versification in particular. In other words, to remember Kristeva’s distinction between nineteenth- and twentieth-century poetry, we may find Palau somewhere between those two poles. On the one hand, we have already identified his exploratory rejection of the always unsatisfactory and provisional posited glimpses of truth in poetry via the shattering of the subject. On the other, we shall still pay attention to his more skeptical and analytical stance, in which objectification is even more condensed and both poetry and the poet are at the center of the alchemical essays. This is in the end a discussion on poetic significance in mid-twentieth century, for Palau’s proposal must be understood as an experimental poetology. The objectification of words, sounds and meanings that resembles the alchemical practice is in sum an idiosyncratic manner of expression imagined and essayed by the poet as a grammar: a practical poetic logic that never diverts from fidelity to the fertility of poetic language.

The Alchemist’s poetry

To take for granted the premise that poetry is a privileged event of linguistic experimentation does not require the reader to follow any particular scholarly tradition ad litteram. The possibility of a poetic doorway to an intelligible truth is not only a cultural commonplace but also a complex, multidimensional ongoing debate present in the academic panorama across a wide number of fields. Henrik Høgh-Olesen’s (15) psychobiological approach identifies in the simultaneously creative and embellishing impulse, or neophilia, a primary and exclusive characteristic of the human species. The philosophers of creativity have also pointed out its combinatorial nature (Gaut 1043) and its intimate relationship to a “non-truth-bound” imagination (Stokes 159), thus relating poetry stricto sensu to a wide range of human poetic practices. Angela Goddard’s definition of creativity sums it up in plain words: “making new connections by bringing together existing elements in a new way” (141). We can in short presume, following Giorgio Agamben’s Stanzas (75–76), that most of the contributions on this topic are indebted to a reassessment of the Aristotelian notion of imagination in De Anima (427b-432a): “Imagination is that through which some image comes about for us” (80; 428a). The Stagirithe understands this faculty as an aesthetic-intellectual mediation that presents and recombines the perceived and the thought even in absence of their actual referents. Imagination fulfills its purpose of recollecting and associating images without being restrained to the condition of truth or falsehood. Aristotle states that both contemplation and thinking happen only through images, and adds that “imagination, however, is different from affirmation and
denial, since the true or false is an interweaving of thoughts. But in what respect will the primary thoughts differ from being images? These are not images, but are not present without images either” (Aristotle 92; 432a10).

The disentanglement of imagination from strict representation that can be read in Aristotle implies an assumption of freedom for the linguistic practice, besides its historical boundaries. The naivé illusion of perfect adequacy between meaning and form is thus discomposed, as Bachelard pointed out in The Psychoanalysis of Fire (187). Poetry is regarded as that especially dense space where a myriad of intertwining and infinitely superposing images may exceed in form and meaning the limitations of discursive, representative language. Those images bring together the real and the possible, the already-occurred and the yet-to-happen that happens in the poem itself:

The specific pre-appearance which art shows is like a laboratory where events, figures and characters are driven to their typical, characteristic end, to an abysmal or a blissful end; this essential vision of characters and situations, inscribed in every work of art, which in its most striking form we may call Shakespearean, in its most terminalized form Dantean, presupposes possibility beyond already existing reality. (Bloch 15)

As a consequence of the aforementioned notion concerning the poetic realization of the possible, poetry is also singled out as a non-contradictory space where the diversity of means and meanings is displayed, a laboratory. Palau i Fabre’s own creative grammar is in effect incaibrated to repetition, variation and confrontation of the multiple. Despite its original form, it echoes these and other terms analyzed by the intellectual disciplines concerned with Poetics. In fact, the wide diversity of forms and authors of pre-historic cave paintings serves Høgh-Olesen (40) as an illustrative example of the intimacy and privacy of anyone’s language, and at the same time of its social historicity. This particular and non-isolable unity of content and continent of human poiesis had also been addressed by Jakobson (“Poetry is not only the area where sound symbolism makes itself felt, but it is a province where the internal nexus between sound and meaning changes from latent into patent and manifests itself most palpably and intensely” [373]), or Heidegger (“Perhaps this experience might awaken: all reflective thinking is poetic, and all poetry in turn is a kind of thinking” [On the Way to Language 136]). In the same direction, but from the perspective of Cognitive Science, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson argued that the constituent plexus of human expression is contingently enriched by each and every new metaphor, because they widen the experiential plexus of correlative meanings: “Since much of our social reality is understood in metaphorical terms, and since our conception of the physical world is partly metaphorical, metaphor plays a very significant role in determining what is real for us” (146). This role has been carefully studied by Hans Blumenberg (Aesthetic and Metaphorological Writings 112–116), who suggested that metaphors are beacons and vectors of the plurality of meanings (Vieldeutigkeit) that is essential to language, in addition to its permanent condition of disconformity (Widerstimmigkeit). Blumenberg understands poetry, then, as a space of outstandingly rich combinatorial unfolding (193–195). From Modernist aesthetic theory to contemporary philosophers, the communicative potential of poetry has been studied far beyond the historically accurate assessment of facts involving the creative process, in an understanding of poetic expression as a historical reality that remains open to every act of contingent reading, for “art happens every time we read a poem,” as Jorge Luis Borges said (21). Having preliminarily described the main aspects of Palau’s technique of objectification, now we will see that, in the Poems of the Alchemist, the poet prospected what were the significant possibilities of the poetic grammars that preceded him, definitely determined to explore as many styles and tones as possible, in a palimpsest-like relationship with tradition that turns others’ past essays into alchemical ingredients for new mixtures in the present day.

One of the first compositions of the Poems is called “Excés de primavera” (“Excess of Spring”). It belongs to the first section of the first book, “L’aprenent de poeta” (The Poet Apprentice), and is dated around 1937. This poem consists of a repetitive structure of heptasyllabic couplets that are alternatively full or broken in four 5 + 2 lines. It is a remarkable example of the expressive tension Palau feels in regard to the tradition derived from Symbolism, for he decides to imitate its style while simultaneously revolting against it with ironic procedures. This is already a partial sense of the title’s notion of “excess,” here attributed to spring, a lyrical trope and commonplace. The “excess” is also conveyed by another epiphenomenon that this time embraces the whole poem, since it begins and ends with the exact same choice of words. Once again, repetition and variation prove to be crucial for the expression of interrelation:

Encara l’ocell
e és bell,
i encara l’amor,
amor.
Elx amants s’estimen massa.
Ai, primavera que passa 5 (OLC I 25-26; 1-6, 37-42)

Neither the excess of love nor the temporality of spring suppose any substantial contestation of an ordinary lyrical objective correlative. The course of
spring appears to be tied to love in a conventional manner and one could say that the subjective microcosm finds its parallel in the objective macrocosm, but the words of these six first verses already start to show the directions of the "excess" announced in the title. Terms like "still" and "too much" insinuate the end of any docile and compliant demeanor toward the cosmic order. Despite the mentioned constant of repetition and variation, we must remember that most of Palau’s poems are not combinatorial, productive exercises in the manner of Raymond Queneau or Juan Eduardo Cirlot, but rather have a clear subject matter. We may detect the poet’s objectifying work, therefore, in the significant level of his poetic language. “Excess of Spring” presents moving images that fall from bloom to decay, the two agentive poles of the “excess” being sexual passion and vernal florescence. Their presence is unfolded in the first half of the poem but it nevertheless “winds down,” increasingly besieged by the suspected imminence of its end:

Tinc un sol cor i no es cansa.
(D’amagat l’hivern s’atansa.)
La mà s’ha marcit
al pit
per voler abastar
l’enlla.⁶ (23–28)

The suffering caused by the passionate desire shown by sexually ambiguous but intercourse-related images, as in “La rosa en esclat/-pectat—” (7–8) or “Les roses dels cels/-estels/-duen un fíblo”⁷ (13–15), has its counterpart, as we have mentioned, in the decline of nature. The sky, the birds or the flowers are similarly connoted as living forces evenly affected by their own fragility, as exemplified by the following lines: “El cel fa un atur/-atzur/-i resta suspès,/ malmès” (19–22) or “(D’amagat l’hivern s’atansa)”⁸ (24). The result is a polyphonic chorus stressed by the form of the lines, the parenthetical excerpts that suddenly change the poetic point of view, and the absence of any clear personal deictic center. These characteristics arrange the images in a horizontal plain of autonomous interrelation and dissolve what seemed to pursue a lyrical objective correlative. A deeper structure of the poem is uncovered, one that hinges on the same use of metaphors we saw in the display of the similarities between stone and water, but that in this case refers to the common nature of humans and the world beyond conventional subjective analogy. It is not uncommon in Palau’s early works for inert and living beings to be evenly treated and equally subject to passion. In “Desvetllament” (“Awakening,” OLC I 23), found in the same section of the Poems, a metaphor links the lovers’ communion with a small, closed space or a chamber. This metaphor disrupts what would be a common correlative structure of subject and object. The lines “olor i color d’ambre/la cambra”⁹ (1–2, 29–30) could have mediated a dense net of intelligible subjective feelings, but they rather emphasize the common bodily or material aspects of the elements present in the poem. This does not dissolve the object as a rhetorical pretext for subjective sovereignty, but presents a horizontal, active-passive plain of entity where objects (the lovers, the chamber) are displayed, autonomous and related at once because of their common and combinatorially attributed features. The poem is a heterogeneous mixture and a unity nonetheless. Such a horizontal relationship is nodal in “Excess of Spring,” and can be exemplified in the entangled confusion of the internal and the external of lines 30 and 36: “(El seu cor és nafra oberta)” and “(La nit és una estimada.)”¹⁰ Love belongs to human and nature alike, for they both wish and perish. At this point, when dramatic tension is at its peak and both the lovers and spring seem doomed by the inexorable, inclement winter, the pivotal element of the poem, “love,” is six times evoked in just fourteen syllables (lines 31–34), hence twisted into a repetitive, emphatic but nonsensical blabber. Michel De Certeau pointed out in the second volume of The Mystic Fable that the literary glossolalia widely spread among the mystics or the Dadaists is a phenomenon close to neology and contributes to disrupt the ordinary poetic or philosophical languages (337–340). In this poem it undoubtedly satirizes the affected lyrical exclamations, in a deforming and unreliable imitation of Palau’s contextual literature that moreover acknowledges the material condition of poetry. As we said, the poem is closed by the repetition of the first six verses, which no longer convey an accurate imitation of tradition, but a mimicking gesture that emphasizes its own distinctive character as an alchemical object, that is, a real object.

“Excess of Spring” has shown us very premature examples of two of Palau’s main strategies of poetic objectification: ironic distancing grounded on subtle interventions or sarcastic and profane scandal and, first and foremost, densification of the metaphorical matter so that any objective correlative between subject and object is effectively disempowered and a horizontal exteriorization of the material compounds of the poem is unfolded. Poem after poem, Palau lets the autonomous nature of beings appear, and his poetic voice appears too, a shattered subject that is neither alienated from the poem nor is its most determinant factor, but conversely another element of the mixture. It is subject to fission and fusion, to appearance and disappearance, and it is an objective presence of its own, irreducible but non-isolable. This is of course a strategy of centering the suspended subject, but in a twofold way, as we mentioned above, since the poetic images do not only convey an
aesthetic mode of perception by their significance in the poem. The poetic notions of plurality of meaning and disconformity are to be considered in the procedural nature of poetry so that they might display their whole expressive potential. Interpretation, as Steiner reminded us in Real Presences (18–19) is not only a matter of conceiving the significance of a text in the four possible levels of meaning Dante mentions in the Convivio, but rather an active process of deciphering, communicating and executing, thus bringing together the creative process of writing and the re-creative process of reading as different moments of interpreting in its common practical aspect (spielen). As Apollinaire thought, poetry is not interpretable in different ways, but must be interpreted always partially in superposed incomplete images (Jauss 15). Should we return to the image of poetry as alchemy, we might ask why the experiments are put down in writing. Palau explains the desired emergence of gold as an act of intense appropriation with respect to the poetic matter: “Only in the course of the experimentation does the apparently objective part, the words, become functional, but [this is] not until it has turned subjective, until it has transmuted to its own substance, untransferable. And nowhere but in the course of the experimentation does one realize how the experimenter becomes experiment” (OLC II 372). This quotation from the Quaderns de l’Alquimista (Notebooks of the Alchemist), a collection of essays written by Palau during the whole second half of the century, reflects the poet’s own analysis of his activity. To look for oneself is to become the experiment, to expose the self in and through the poem as a task in fieri. In other words, the shattering of the Kantian subject is a poetic consequence of the mixture of the objective and the subjective. Their horizontal and objectified relationship—with no ideal model, according to our observations—unfolds the plural, open potentialities of poetry and leads to the discovery of the self no longer as an alienating subject, but as an experiment whose most faithful witnesses are the poems. They are products of the Alchemist’s inquiries, and in the poems we find the fusing metals, the alembics and the other distilling apparatuses. Everything would however remain inert and inexpressive should we not understand Palau’s poetics in the light of the mentioned notion of interpretation. Paul Valéry (63) recalled Mallarmé’s answer to a tormented Degas: “My dear Degas, one does not make poetry with ideas, but with words,” and Valéry’s own thoughts on poetic work (travail) remind us that the poetic bond between alchemy and poetry, as we have mentioned in the beginning of this essay, is its embodied common ground, its approach to words, sounds and meanings as materials of a newness (Bachelard, Earth and Reveries of Will 236–237). While Artaud favored an eventual conflagration of the expressed: “neither word nor idea,” Palau generates units in form and content whose potential interpretation (deciphering, communicating, executing) is contingent on each and every actualization entailed by the act of reading, because poetry’s privileged position may “become functional, but [this is] not until it has turned subjective, until it has transmuted to its own substance, untransferable.” In other words, poetry fulfills its exploratory purpose only when it is neither bound to an external truth nor enchaired to an ideal model.

In an article called “Goethe the Sage” (1955), T. S. Eliot considers that a great poet is to be found there where “the two gifts, that of wisdom and that of poetic speech, are found in the same man” (241). He intertwines the classic sum of form and content schema to reflect on the presence of philosophical ideas in poetry, which never constitute a thorough system but are rather displayed as “wisdom,” which “is communicated on a deeper level than that of logical propositions” (264). Eliot faces the delicate matter concerning the difference between philosophical and poetic belief, and he does so because of his perplexity on account of the unorthodox scientific claims made by Goethe. He even asks himself the following: “Is it not possible that Goethe, without wholly knowing what he was doing, was to assert the claims of a different type of consciousness from that which was to dominate the nineteenth and twentieth centuries?” (254). We must note that Palau’s approach to Llull and to alchemy in general is very similar to Eliot’s intuition, and both poets’ remarks immediately remind us of H. G. Gadamer’s Who am I and Who are You?, written in 1973. Gadamer comments on Paul Celan’s Atemkristall (Breath-crystal) and elaborates on Celan’s image of his own poetry as a message in a bottle that eventually comes across someone willing to accept it. From such a radical obscurity of signs for which the actual separation of poet and reader in time and space are the inevitable cause, Gadamer synthesizes in plain words what he believes are the core elements of Hermeneutics. On the one hand, the contingent but potentially infinite insertion of meaning granted by each and every event of reading: “if the reader believes that he or she has understood these poems differently and better, still more is gained” (64). And on the other, the exclusion of any conclusive interpretation as the basic justification for such a never-ending hermeneutic circle: “Conclusive interpretation simply does not exist. Every interpretation seeks only to be an approximation, and would not be what it can be without taking up its historical-effective position [wirkungsgegeschichtlichen Ort] and thereby entering into the effective event of the work” (146). The products of the Arts—poems, buildings, installations or films—tend to be conceived as new units of expression and experience,
even when they deliberately choose not to convey any particular content, as in Robbe-Grillet’s *romans* (Kermode 150–52). The concept of unity and newness we bring forward “is confirmed in action, not as the apotheosis of a fulfillment—which would never have to be faithful to anything—but as the never resolved, never satisfied tension of a confidence whose object cannot be guaranteed” (Nancy 69). These palimpsest-like, accumulative notions of poetic truth and newness can be traced throughout the *Poems of the Alchemist*. The ironic imitations, the fixation of objects, the disintegration of the subject, and the horizontal bond of different elements: all these techniques of poetic objectification reveal Palau’s existential tension. The expectation of an eventual emergence of gold through the reacting manipulation of the poetic matter meets a certain frustration generated by linguistic choices that immediately sclerotize when invoked.

The *Alchemist’s* horizon

In most of his imitative attempts we can detect Palau’s process of appropriation that seeks to dissolve the distance between object and subject, but reveals instead the self as an object. We may cite “Alba dels ulls” (“Dawn of the Eyes”), a group of ekphrastic poems on paintings from Botticelli, Marquet, Rubens or Dalí among others (*OLC I* 28–32), or the section “Pots i potingues” (“Jars and concoctions”), where Palau addresses poems by Riba, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and by his admired and prematurely deceased Majorcan poet Bartomeu Rosselló-Pòrcel (1913–38). Halfway between rewritings and translations, the poems in this section are all characterized by a double research, simultaneously conceptual in the poem and poetic through the poem, on a disempowered, errant and extenuated subject. This subject finds no correspondence in nature or in tradition, as poetic words, sounds and meanings relate to each other because of their common non-identical entity, and human common ground is suspended above this newfound groundless net of relationships (*OLC I* 116–122). Palau even worked on an “Imitació de Rosselló-Pòrcel” (“Imitation of Rosselló-Pòrcel”), a composition of nineteen poems based in Rosselló’s own discarded drafts. Palau thus recombined the author’s personal lyrical images to erect a project grounded on an absence, but that is brought to actual reality through the poetic delving with the essential diversity of beings (Marrugat 109). Palau’s theory and practice of alchemical poetry seems therefore close to Rob Pope’s notion of critical-creative interpretation, “for we are all in various ways or at different moments performers and commentators, adopters and adapters, critics and creators. We are all operating on the critical-creative continuum; though each of us does so distinctly, in our own times and on our own terms” (251). Palau’s distinctive interpretation consists of exploratory homages like those mentioned, but also of blunt and destabilizing invectives against other tropes of the literary and philosophical tradition. “La rosa” (“The Rose”) dates from 1944 and belongs to the book with the macabre but suggestive, eloquent title of “Càncer”. It is a poem in prose that openly denounces the fatigue of Western poetic sediments: “Has fet parlar massa de tu, del teu perfum, de la teva beutat. No val la penal!” (*OLC I* 97). In one of the “Epigrammatic poems,” written between 1940 and 1942 and called “A la rosa” (“To the rose”), the tone is apparently different:

No dir-te, millor que tot.
Guardar silenci, emmudir.
Respectar la teva evidència.12 (*OLC I* 38)

Both poems are crystallized pieces of exhaustion, for they consider the stylization of the rose, or the poetic speech “about” the rose, as excessive, unnecessary or disrespectful. This latter poem, more succinct, presents the necessity of respecting the rose’s own manifestation, its “clearness” (“evidència”), its patent, real yet never fully describable presence. In the encounter with the rose that the poem discloses the inexpressible real is met, in line with the mystical element of language Wittgenstein pointed out in the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*: “6.522. There is indeed the inexpressible. This shows itself; it is the mystical” (90). The poet approaches the rose the way he approached the stone, as an autonomous object with whom he shares the world, but that is not entirely at hand. Others have also reflected on the futility of speculating on the wondrous inquiries posed by the seemingly miraculous presence of the rose. We are referring to the long tradition of mystical speculative texts of Beatrice of Nazareth, Hadewijch of Amberes, Marguerite Porete, Meister Eckhart, the *Theologia Deutsch* or Angelus Silesius, who were invaded by the certainty that no stable ground was to be found beneath our feet, their spirits exalted because of the realization of the essentially fragmentary nature of reality. In his study on Heidegger’s relationship with the mystics, John Caputo explains that “a reason can be rendered for the rose, but the rose cannot render it for itself” (63), therefore concluding that the rose’s presence does not need to be reduced to subjective reasons. The absence of ground felt by the mystics did not usually lead them to a silent and compliant life, but rather to an attitude of resistance and revolutionary linguistic practice, to “apophasic aesthetics” (Vega, *Art and Holiness* 122), which approach but never consume the unspeakable reality that God is. Without a definite religious horizon, but in a poetic practice that soundly tends to similar consequences, Palau exposes himself as a fool for having trusted in
the possibility of ever really grasping the flower, and closes the poem “The Rose” with a violent desire for collision that stresses the object and the subject’s equal autonomy and contingent interconnection: “Si et trobo un altre cop et masegaré, com quan era infant, et llençaré a un toll i t’anomenaré pel teu nom veritable, perquè ets la puta rosa!”13 (OLC I 97). The rose simply is. It is not a mere object for subjective domination, but a contingent and unrepeatable being that is subject to a net of interdependency with all other beings. An arbitrary collision with the human’s violent impulse of domination is, of course, possible. Palau addresses the same concern twice, and both poems devoted to the rose may seem very different in form and tone, but they constitute a space that lets the rose manifest itself as an object, an interconnected but utterly inaccessible being of the shared world. Palau does not pretend to represent the gold of the transmuted metals as if it was found by him simply because of any poetic gift. He instead struggles precisely because he meets himself on the crossroads of silence and words, and chooses to let words be in their “thingliness” as units in multiplicity: contingent events of the inexpressible ground of all objects (Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art” 46). This composes a fragile image of the world as a whole, where poetic objects show themselves (sich zeigen) and collide (begegnen) in the obstinate negativity of their relationships (Mersch, Was sich zeigt 40), and are not therefore protected against irrational violence or cosmic arbitrariness. In this image of the world, the rose and the “animal that pursues itself” find a common ground in their distinct modes of being in the world, and thus constitute objects of an alchemical poetry.

As we have seen, Palau’s relationship to preceding and coetaneous poets and thinkers is determined by the obstinate discovery of difference as the tense significant relationship between beings. Miguel de Beistegui spoke of heteronomy to describe the contingent harmonious tension in Chillida’s sculptures (165), simultaneously substantial and fragile, and we may employ the term for Palau’s images in fieri, that actualize their own entity through their collision. We must never forget that the context of the Poems is either war or postwar, repression or exile, and this makes it very difficult for the author to assume the possibility of an ever complete horizon of significance from which to draw meaningful, stable certainties. Armen Avanessian refers to the poetic dimension of language as a transformative reality: “Literature constitutes what could be called a non-arbitrary research laboratory of language” (29). The alchemical poetry is then one of its possible metaphorical frameworks, an exploratory and desperate poetic way. Palau keeps experimenting and expanding his palimpsest in the last two books of the Poems, “Fragments del Laberint” and “Atzucac” (“Fragments of the Labyrinth” and “Dead End”), composed in Paris, with poems that imitate prehistoric humans and animals, or that are written using the left hand. About the aesthetic consolidation of the palimpsest, we must remember Jameson’s warning: “This new mode of relationship through difference may sometimes be an achieved new and original way of thinking and perceiving; more often it takes the form of an impossible imperative to achieve that new mutation in what can perhaps no longer be called consciousness” (31). Such a risk was acknowledged by Palau in the prologue of “The Poet Apprentice”, where he compares his early poems with a boat’s oars he would carry for life: “I, from this point onward, would get back on track with the oars on the shoulder and, even though it might not seem so, a question would still be required: who carries whom?” (OLC I 19).

Above we have seen that the withdrawal of the subject and the fixation of the stone as an object contributed to the idea of stone reaching its prime, or maturity, in us. In the poem “Hölderlin,” from 1949, the limits of such appropriation are displayed and discussed: “Només—nua—una Idea, s’ha quedat astorada davant del mirall, en mirar-se. I si miro el mirall m’a stora aquella idea, miro amb aquella idea. No em veg”14 (OLC I 140). In the fixation of thinking, and in the intense appropriation of what were apparently the subject’s own ideas, Palau discovers a new object, the speculative Idea, perhaps a thriving idea collected from study, ascetic meditation or erotic mysticism, different from any other idea but also different from its own reflection. Even though the subject received and harbored it in its prime, and even though all the ingredients of the mixture are displayed in the poem, its conclusion can only be negative, for difference is the only dialectical form of wisdom to be expected in this experimental poetics. In the aesthetic premises of the poem, an idea is no different than a stone or a rose, in that it is always different to its image or concept. This negativity is nonetheless what fuels the poet’s productivity, whose life will be permanently sought through poetry, and whose poetry will remain, indefinitely, an essay. The paradoxical crossroad between silence and sound is Palau i Fabre’s closing statement, found in the last four lines of a poem called “Comiat” (“Farewell”), from 1946 but deliberately—and ironically—placed in the end:

Res no sabré ja escriure de millor.
Massa a prop de la vida visc.
Els mots se’m moren a dins
i jo visc en les coses.15 (OLC I 141; 10-14)

It is not gold, but poetry, that remains from Palau i Fabre’s alchemical lines, in the same way as it is not an infallible logic system, but the Ars, that remains
from Ramon Llull’s contemplative thinking. Palau spins around himself as an endless difference and above absolute indetermination, but each word, sound and meaning remains in “its own substance, untransferable,” a real object from which identity is permanently subtracted, but that, both inwardly and outwardly, is consistently interrelated and not subject to any necessity:

Even today, alchemy means to thwart or not to submit to the tyranny of computation, to the pretension of turning someone into a robot or making them reducible to calculation and to the canons of a computer. Alchemy, then, in that it is not strictly scientific—not chemical, not mathematical—, not reducible to a formula, is still, in this sense, an affirmation, perhaps a desperate one, of human freedom. (OLC II 372-373)

Drawing a very similar parallel between the medieval tradition and contemporary concerns, Pasolini’s approach to Dante in Divina Mimesis also embraces experimentation and failure as forms of opposition “to the monstrous homologation of progress, linearity and their aesthetics” (Gragnolati). Moreover, the study of the real, material, and utterly inaccessible nature of poetic objects has been recently engaged by the Speculative Realism movement (Washington and McCarthy), especially on the Romantic tradition but also on the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset’s metaphorology (Harman 105–24). Further research must be conducted on transdisciplinary poetics, performance, and other experimental practices, as far as the implications of “poetic objectification” are concerned. They may show more clearly that writing, modelling, inventing or performing are for poets and creators continuous and metamorphic processes of exploring and experiencing the real, in its own emerging but ineluctable status. Palau’s poetic grammar would definitely change over time but would never be appealed or find rest, and a detailed description of the continuities between the alchemical cycle in verse and his drama or prose is yet to be written. In the meantime, we must still wonder whether his obstinate production, never subsumed to the silence he paradoxically demanded if one had to approach the rose, must be understood as a failed practice. Palau’s technique and conceptual coherence has shown us that his is an experimental poetics which cannot be fully understood if its practical, finite and frustrating aspects are not included. In “Alchemical Theatre” Artaud wrote: “All true alchemists know that the alchemical symbol is a mirage as the theatre is a mirage” (49). The experiment’s fleeting conflagration is an ephemeral event, a performative poetic act that grants provisional access to the conflictive nature of the world. Even though Palau disintegrates the subject and unfolds a poetic world of arbitrarily colliding objects, he still understands human poetic freedom as a privileged mode of expression. His alchemical poetry proves to be an ongoing endeavor where the poet proceeds to an unceasing and multifarious exercise: an *ars combinatoria* of poetic elements. These essays lead to an ever-changing glimpse of himself as an equally limited element in the confusing world of colliding objects, a provisional image that provisionally quenches his thirst for the absolute, the only gold within his reach, but still the most precious.

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1 From now on, all quotations from Palau i Fabre’s works, both poems and essays, will be identified by OLC, that stands for *Obres literàries completes* (Complete Literary Works), and by the roman number that identifies which of the two volumes contains the quotation. This edition of Palau’s works is the last one controlled by the author. The first volume gathers the poems, plays and tales, while the second contains his essays, articles and memorie.

2 “Alphabetum ponimus in hac Arte, ut per ipsum possimus facere figuras et miscere principia et regulas ad iunvigitandum urritatem” (Llull, *Raimundi Lulli Opera Latina XII* 194).

3 “Hard as water is hard./A root to its very self./In eternal ecstasy/stone perpetuates/stone, pure image./the idea of stone/in us reaches its prime” (Abrams 9).

4 “I do as birds do when they have lost the offspring,/as they spin without solace,/with blood-soaked cries they warn their flock/as if the world were to be in great danger.”

5 “Still the bird/is fair,/and still love/is love./The lovers love too much./Ah, spring that winds down!”

6 “I have just one heart and it does not tire./In hiding winter comes,)/The hand languished/on the chest/for the desire to grasp/the beyond.”

7 “The rose that sports/–sin/” (7–8), and “The roses in the skies/–stars/–bear a sting” (13–15).

8 “The sky stops/–azure/–and remains suspended,/spoiled” (19–22), and “(In hiding winter comes)” (24).

9 “Amber smell and color,/the chamber.”

10 “(Her heart is an open wound)” and “(The night is a lover)”

11 “You have made everyone talk too much about you, about your perfume, about your beauty. It is not worth it!”

12 “Not to say you, the best./To stay quiet, to fall silent./To respect your clearness.”

13 “If I find you again I will crush you, just like when I was a kid, I will throw you into a puddle and I will name you by your true name, because you are the fucking rose!”
"Only—naked—an Idea, remained astounded in front of the mirror, looking at itself. And if I look at the mirror that idea astounds me, I look with that idea. I can’t see me."

"Nothing better can I write anymore./Too close from life I live./The words die inside me/and I live in the things."

**Notes on contributor**

Sergi Castella-Martinez (Barcelona, 1994) is a Ph. D. Candidate in Humanities and Predoctoral Scholarship Holder (2018-2022), and prepares a dissertation on the poetic and religious thought developed through Ramon Lull’s contemporary reception. Ba hons in Humanities (2012-16) and M. Phil. on Comparative Studies of Literature, Art and Thought by the UPF (Barcelona, Spain), his main interest is the comprehension of the contemporary poetic expression of the religious experience and thought through contemporary Literature and Visual Arts.

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**ORCID**

Sergi Castella-Martinez http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1649-9067

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