New Perspectives on James Joyce

_Ignatius Loyola, make haste to help me!

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Shedding Light on the Mystery of the First Catalan *Ulysses*: The Joycean Letters of J. F. Vidal Jové

*Alberto Lázaro Lafuente*
*Teresa Iribarren i Donadeu*

We are all familiar with the famous anecdote that Richard Ellmann notes about the young Jacques Benofst-Méchin, who was translating the “Penelope” episode into French and asked Joyce for the schema to the book: Joyce then protested humorously and said: “If I gave it all up immediately, I’d lose my immortality. I’ve put in so many enigmas and puzzles that it will keep the professors busy for centuries arguing over what I meant, and that’s the only way of insuring one’s immortality” (Ellmann 521). Indeed, we academics are busy with Joyce, not only trying to understand the enigmas and puzzles in his work, but also trying to clear up the mysteries surrounding the reception of *Ulysses* in countries like Spain. In the *XVII Encuentros James Joyce*, held at the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canarias in 2006, Alberto Lázaro read a paper on the finding of an unpublished Catalan translation of Joyce’s *Ulysses* made in 1966 by J. F. Vidal Jové, a writer and freelance translator from Manresa.¹ It was the first translation of *Ulysses* in Spain, made ten years before José María Valverde’s Spanish translation, and fifteen years before Joaquim Mallafré’s Catalan version. Although the text had been surprisingly authorised by Franco’s censors in 1967, the publisher, Alfredo Herrero Romero (AHR), never printed it. Unfortunately, the volume still rests in a box kept on the shelves of the General Spanish Archive.

¹ This paper was entitled “El misterio del primer Ulysses catalán: la odisea de Joan Francesc Vidal Jové” and was later published in *Estudios joyceanos en Gran Canaria: Joyce In his palms* (2007).
had around 900 pages. Vidal Jové then felt that they had been a bit optimistic when they had first thought that the translation could be ready in four months. Therefore, Vidal Jové suggested an extension. He reminded Alfredo Herrero that Joyce had taken seven years to write the novel, so at least he would need seven months to translate it. In some other letters we can see all the details of the contract they agreed to, such as the money Vidal Jové received for his job (35,706 pesetas — 33 pesetas a page); but, what is interesting to note is that the translation was really finished in seven months. In a letter dated 17 September 1966, he confirmed that he was sending the last volume of his work. The whole business was concluded in the following month, when Alfredo Herrero sent a cheque to pay for the last installment of the translation.

After this letter, sent in October 1966, there was a gap of over a year in which there was no communication between Vidal Jové and his publisher. Vidal Jové was surprised at the publisher’s silence and wrote to him in January 1968, asking for news about his Ulysses and some other books he had also translated for him. The irony with which he refers to the publisher’s behaviour gives us some interesting insight into Vidal Jové’s personality:

Cuando pienso en Vd. tengo una sensación de infinito, de misterio, de algo espectral, inconcreto e insólito. Yo tuve un amigo que se llamaba Alfredo, que me invitaba a whisky y que me encargaba traducciones de libros divulgados, y me las pagaba religiosamente. De pronto desapareció. Por su felicitación de Navidad, me enteré se dedicaba al toreo. Pero no me vi de lidiador en sus cartas y, mejor no se lo diga a sus herederos.

The last paragraph of this letter is also remarkable:

Si no está Vd. en la cárcel (hoy todo es verosímil) escribame Vd. teléfono. Si no es así —como espero— y no me contesta, únicamente los servicios de pompas fúnebres podrían justificarlo. Y aún no, a sus herederos.

Un abrazo, cordial y un tanto desesperado.

Eight months later, in August 1968, Vidal Jové insisted and wrote to Alfredo Herrero again, demanding an explanation as to why he did not answer his letters and why his translation had not been printed yet. Eventually, the publisher showed signs of life and wrote to Vidal Jové in November 1968. He apologized for not having written before, acknowledged Vidal Jové’s last letters and offered him some translations from French into Spanish. However, there was no reference to Joyce or Ulysses. The following day, Vidal Jové answered that letter and com-

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2 These letters will soon be published in the Barcelona journal Quaderns. Revista de Traducció.
plained that Alfredo Herrero had not given any explanation about the fate of his translation. It is important to note that he refers to the interest his Catalan version of *Ulysses* had aroused among some English professors: "Especialmente en lo que se refiere al *Ulysses* me siento en ridículo-cada vez que voy a Inglaterra y los profesores universitarios de lengua catalana me preguntan por mi traducción que esperan con gran interés." Surely, his son-in-law, George Cheyne, Professor at Newcastle University had something to do with this. Whatever the case, this is the last time we hear from the publisher. There is no other letter from him, so it is impossible to provide for the time being any definite reason why Vidal Jové’s translation was never published.

When Vidal Jové realised that his work was not going to see the light of day, he asked his friend Tomàs García i Mariet a poet, an important critic and a lawyer with lots of contacts in the Catalan cultural landscape. García i Mariet was a poet, an important critic and a lawyer with lots of contacts in the Catalan cultural landscape. García i Mariet translated into Catalan two poems from Joyce’s *Chamber Music* in 1932, which had been published in *La Publicitat*.

In a letter to García i Mariet of 16 October 1968, Vidal Jové stated that he wanted to recover his manuscript from AHR and see it printed. In his reply a few days later, Tomàs García i Mariet agreed that this was the best thing to do and added an interesting detail: he wanted to confirm if AHR was legally obliged to publish Vidal Jové’s translation, since he believed that the main objective of a writer was to publish his work. The problem was that there was no due date for publication in the contract they had signed. In the meantime, García i Mariet suggested finding a new publishing house that might be interested in the Catalan translation of *Ulysses* and willing to pay the sum of money Vidal Jové had received for his work, so that he could return the money to AHR and convince Alfredo Herrero to give him the manuscript back.

What publishing houses did García i Mariet suggest? He worked as a lawyer for Editorial Selecta, a publishing house founded in Barcelona in 1946, whose main aim was to promote Catalan literature, although it also published translations from foreign authors in their series "Biblioteca Selecta Universal". However, García i Mariet ruled out this publisher. He did not think that they would be interested in this "llibrot" (big book). He then suggested another publishing house, Edicions 62, where his son-in-law, also a lawyer, used to work. Nevertheless, this initiative was not successful. Vidal Jové also tried his luck with Alianza Editorial, for whom he was translating the chivalric romance *Tirant lo blanc*; but they would be interested in a Spanish translation of Joyce’s novel, not a Catalan version, and only if there were no problems with the copyright of the first Spanish translation published by the Argentinean Editorial Sur. This opened the door to a possible reason that might explain the problems Alfredo Herrero had when publishing his *Ulysses*: Vidal Jové told his friend García i Mariet that perhaps AHR had not got the rights of the Catalan translation.

Vidal Jové then wrote to his son-in-law in England and asked him to find out if AHR or somebody else had got the rights to publish *Ulysses*. As we mentioned before, George Cheyne (1916–1990) was a Hispanist at Newcastle University who at that time was writing a doctoral dissertation on the Spanish economist and reformer Joaquín Costa, published in 1972 under the title *A Bibliographical Study of the Writings of Joaquín Costa, 1846–1911*. Since he had also helped in the translation process, in this letter to Cheyne, Vidal Jové referred to the translation as “nuestro trabajo”. “Quiero hacer todo lo posible para que nuestro trabajo no se pudra en un cajón.” On the advice of some colleagues from the English Department, Cheyne wrote to Faber & Faber early in January 1969 and asked them for information about Joyce’s heirs or literary executors, so that he could find out about the owner of the Spanish copyrights and whether these rights also included Catalan. The answer from the person in charge of translations rights in Faber and Faber came a couple of days later. She confirmed that it was not usual for Spanish and Catalan rights to be sold together and informed that “any translation of *Ulysses* would have been arranged between the foreign publisher (in this case AHR) and the Society of Authors, *James Joyce’s executors*” in London. At that time the beneficiaries of Joyce’s literary estate were his children, Giorgio and Lucia. Lucia was institutionalized at St. Andrew’s psychiatric hospital in Northampton, England, and Giorgio had a severe drinking problem; therefore, they were using the Society of Authors as their literary agent. Anne Munro-Kerr of its Foreign Rights Department answered Cheyne’s queries a few months later. She stated that the Argentinean publishers only had the rights for the Spanish translation and that they would appoint a “sub-agent in Spain” to investigate and clarify the situation of the Catalan translation, since they had been “unable to obtain any information from the publisher”. Cheyne answered and thanked her on 29 August 1969, and that is the end of the story for the time being. No more news from the publisher or the Society of Authors.

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3 For a detailed study of the reception of Joyce in Catalonia, see Teresa Iribarren’s essay in *The Reception of James Joyce in Europe* (2004).

4 In 1951 Nora had died, and her children, Giorgio and Lucia, became the beneficiaries of the estate.
What we have is a long and peculiar letter that Vidal Jové sent his relatives in England, in which he refers to his translation of *Ulysses*. It is written in a style that resembles Molly Bloom’s interior monologue at the end of *Ulysses*. The idea to write a letter in this same style came to him because that very same day Alfredo Herrero had phoned, reminding him of Joyce. Here is a taste of this long Joycean letter:

Com que avui no fos aconseguir dir que el papi és un pesat car seria molt vist que corresponsió així esta carta no pel que diu ni per la seva forma literària sinó pel que en la mateixa s’accompanya em dedicaré a realitzar el propòsit que ja fa molts dies em volia el cap que es el d’escriure-us en estil joycian a sigui sense punts ni accents com ho estic fent i no sabeu pas el que costa el fer-ho si es té al mateix temps el propòsit d’ésser entès pel qui tingui de llegir la carta i en la mateixa no es vol dir una cosa qualsevol sinó que es volen dir coses concretes com es el meu cas doncs no puc pas deixar per a “tomorrow-morning” l’explicació del que significa aquest paper de color de rosa que us adjunto [...]

In this undated curious letter Vidal Jové seemed to give up. It was a lost cause. Alfredo Herrero had called him to ask for a translation of a book about Beethoven, but had given Vidal Jové no news about the Catalan *Ulysses*. There was no news from the Society of Authors either: “nunca más se supo”. In a defeated tone Vidal Jové wrote to his relatives in England: “es veu ben clar que no hi ha res a fer” (it is clear that nothing can be done about it).

The letters between Vidal Jové and his publisher have shown that the translator’s professionalism, seriousness and commitment. Vidal Jové and his collaborators, Assumpció Vidal and George Cheyne, were able to finish their gigantic work in just seven months, as agreed to with the publisher. Moreover, the irony and literary styles used in some of Vidal Jové’s letters reveal the witty and creative personality of this highly gifted translator and writer. Unfortunately, these letters do not answer the question of why this Catalan *Ulysses* was never published. Vidal Jové and his family never discovered the reason either. Could it be due to some financial problems of the publisher? Or perhaps due to copyright difficulties? Or both? Further research on the publishing house might give some clues, but no additional information about Alfredo Herrero has been found for the time being. What we see through these letters is how Vidal Jové tried his best to see his work published through other publishing houses, and the little interest displayed by these publishers to print a Catalan version of *Ulysses*, even though there was already a Catalan translation of *A Portrait*, published by Vergara in 1967. Finally, we understand the frustration Vidal Jové must have felt at seeing his dear *Ulysses* being ignored.

This paper is a tribute to his work, and we hope it will contribute to the rescuing of his translation from oblivion.

**Works Cited**


