

NOTHING IS TRANSMISSIBLE BUT THOUGHT / SPANISH EDITION OF LE CORBUSIER'S *MISE AU POINT*

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“This text is one of struggle, a series of thoughts and conclusions dictated by experience. It is fitting therefore to read them as though Corbu were still among us, and in fact he is” (Le Corbusier 1966a: 5)¹. Thus begins *Mise au point*, the book that Le Corbusier left incomplete at his death on 27th August 1965. The work, written in July 1965 (Le Corbusier 1966a: 5)², and published for the first time in Paris in the second quarter of 1966, was edited by Jean Petit and by the

¹ “Ce texte est un texte de lutte, une suite de constatations et de pensées dictées par l’expérience. Il convient donc de le lire, comme si Corbu était encore parmi nous, et il l’est”.

² This data was mentioned by Jean Petit, although there is no evidence today of the manuscript that Le Corbusier would have examined on that date. The book edited by Jean Petit begins precisely with this indication: “The text of this book was written by Le Corbusier in July 1965” (“Le texte de ce petit livre a été écrit par Le Corbusier en juillet 1965”).

publisher Forces Vives. It is a sort of spiritual testament, written when Le Corbusier was 77 years old, in which he speaks about his relationship with institutions and governments, public opinion, work and architecture. But he also talks about human qualities, truth, fraternity, life and death, oscillating between a past bitterness and future optimism. It is an end-of-life recapitulation of what is essential, what is untransmissible. At the end of the 1920s Le Corbusier claimed “I have only one teacher: the past; only one education: the study of the past” (Le Corbusier 1930: 34)³; in this book he speaks about a particular past – his own. This text is contemporaneous with the revision that he did of the book *Voyage d’Orient*, and the publication of *Le Corbusier: lui-même* (Le Corbusier 1966b, 1970). The three texts look backwards; but while the *Voyage d’Orient* is a portrait of what was probably the most important voyage of his life and *Le Corbusier: lui-même* recapitulates his oeuvre, *Mise au point* is ultimately his intellectual autobiography. It was republished in various editions (Le Corbusier 1987) and translated into various languages – such as English (Le Corbusier, Zaknic 1997), Italian (Le Corbusier, Messina 2008) and Korean (Le Corbusier 2013), – but is only now being published in Spanish in a facsimile edition (Le Corbusier, Torres 2014).

If we are hoping to get close to the author’s words – to feel the silence that settles after the writing is finished, and smell the ink still wet on the page – then reading a translation almost always feels like a depriva-

³ “je n’ai qu’un seul maître, le passé, et une seule discipline, l’étude du passé”.

tion. Each language has its own inner linguistic form, which reflects the private universe of the people that express themselves through it; it is therefore difficult to find a word in one language that is exactly identical to another word in another language. Although a translation can reconstitute what may be called the surface level of the text, it is not always possible to fathom the absences, rhythms, allusion, and meanings attributed by the author himself. Thus, the news of the publication of the Spanish edition of this book will not be very important for the inhabitants of countries where that language is not spoken, if it were not for the fact that this is a very special edition, perhaps the best ever done from a translation of *Mise au point*.

Indeed (if we allow ourselves for a moment to plunge into a pool of Babel, or lose ourselves in a gallery of reflecting mirrors), the reading of the original French version may even benefit from being accompanied by the Spanish version, edited by Jorge Torres⁴ and the publisher Abada⁵, with its rich support notes. The observations that these contain, which make the reader a better and more informed listener, not only clarify some contextual details and correct some small mistakes⁶, but also make connections with a number of books that Le Corbusier most probably read over the course of his life⁷ and also with a series of texts previ-

ously written by him – showing above all the anthological nature of the work. According to the editor, this work often alludes to and paraphrases passages from texts included in Le Corbusier's various books⁸, letters⁹ and texts¹⁰. There is a very obvious intertextuality – which, ultimately, is no more than a reflection of what is clear in his architecture, – which does not allow this work to be analysed as a single autonomous work but rather as a discourse emerging from various complex interlinking and repeated thoughts.

In the Spanish edition, the text is also accompanied by a second volume (for some reason actually longer than *Mise au point* itself), which contextualizes Le Corbusier's written works, shedding light on the writing process, his literary style, its peculiarities and even the degree to which Jean Petit, editor of the first edition, intervened. From a rigorous systematic in-depth analysis of the primary sources existing in the archives of the Le Corbusier Foundation in Paris (which houses most of the documents and objects that Le Corbusier owned in life) and the Accademia di Architettura di Mendrisio (where we can find most of the documents belonging to the editor Jean Petit), it reconstitutes the process of conception from Le Corbusier's first outlines to the book that was finally published by Jean Petit. It also tries to answer question such as: "Does the text proceed [...] from a manuscript, today disappeared, which was practically finished by Le Corbusier [...]? Or was it Jean Petit who, after Le Corbusier's death, gathered together a series of

⁴ Jorge Torres is a recognised researcher of Le Corbusier's oeuvre, full professor at the Technical School of Architecture at the University of Valencia, author of Torres, J. 2004. *Le Corbusier. Visiones de la técnica en cinco tempos*. Barcelona: Fundación Caja de Arquitectos, organizer of Torres, J. (ed.) 2012. *Le Corbusier, Mise au point*. Valencia: General de Ediciones, and organizer of the international conferences Le Corbusier. *Mise au point* (2011) and *LC 50 years later* (2015).

⁵ This publisher, whose series on the History of Art and Architecture are coordinated by Juan Miguel Hernández León and Juan Calatrava, has already published a book by Le Corbusier, as well as two others about his oeuvre: Le Corbusier. 2003. *Aircraft*. Madrid: Abada; Sbriglio, J. 2005. *Le Corbusier. La Villa Savoye*. Madrid: Abada; Pauly, D. 2005. *Le Corbusier. La Capilla Ronchamp*. Madrid: Abada.

⁶ These observations shed light on various matters, such as the Marseille Housing Unit, Le Corbusier's 1950 trip to Bogotá, his gold medal from RIBA, his opinion about the United States of America, his perspective on eclectic architecture, on the requirement for the "diplôme obligatoire" (compulsory diploma), on the figure of the builder, on the brise-soleil, on the Café de Flore and Café La Rotonde and on the Ball of the Petits Lits Blancs, on the biography of some of the people mentioned, either explicitly (such as Maurice Jardot, Constantino Nivola, Jerzy Soltan, Girsberger and Augusto Tobito Acevedo) or implicitly (such as Eugène Claudius-Petit, Serge-Alexandre Stavisky and Bernard Zehrfuss). They also correct small inaccuracies, such as the date of Le Corbusier's visit to the Charterhouse of Florence.

⁷ 1955. *La Sainte Bible*. Paris: Le Club Français du Livre (FLC V 20); Choisy, A. 1903. *Histoire de l'Architecture*. Paris: G. Baranger (FLC Z 077); Gide, A. 1935. *Les Nouvelles Nourritures*. Paris: NRF (FLC J 84); Miller, H. 1945. *Tropique du Cancer*. Paris: Éditions Denoël (FLC J 178); Montaigne. 1745. *Essais de Montaigne*. Londres: Jean Nourse et Vaillant (FLC J 152 1); Rabelais. 1951. *Œuvres complètes*. Paris: Gallimard (FLC J 162).

⁸ Le Corbusier. 1928. *Une Maison – un Palais*. Paris: Éditions G. Crès et Cie; Le Corbusier. 1935. *La Ville Radieuse*. Boulogne: Éditions d'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui; Le Corbusier. 1937. *Quand les cathédrales étaient blanches*. Paris: Plon; Le Corbusier. 1937. *Œuvre complète, 1910–1929*. Zurich: Les Éditions d'Architecture; Le Corbusier *et al.* 1945. *Une civilisation du travail. Les trois établissements humains*. Boulogne: Denoël; Le Corbusier. 1948. *New World of Space*. New York: Reynal & Hitchcock; Le Corbusier. 1955. *Le Poème de L'Angle Droit*. Paris: Verve; Le Corbusier. 1955. *Architecture du bonheur. L'urbanisme est une clef*. Paris: Les Presses d'Île de France, Cahiers Forces Vives; Le Corbusier. 1960. *Le Corbusier 1910–60*. Zurich: Girsberger; Le Corbusier. 1960. *Creation is a patient search*. New York: Frederik A. Praeger.

⁹ Le Corbusier's letter to Jean-Jacques Duval of 7th November 1961 (FLC U3 9 145); Le Corbusier's letter to Albert Jeanneret of 29th July 1965 (FLC).

¹⁰ Draught of the invitation to the exhibition "Les arts dits primitifs dans la Maison d'aujourd'hui" (The so-called primitive arts in the House of today) July 3 1935 (FLC U3 9 375); "Fond du sac", 1948–1955 (FLC F2 10 251–315); "Fin d'un monde. Délivrance", 1950–1963 (FLC A3 7 458–503); "Déclaration. Cap Martin, 18 Août 1853" (FLC E2–5 146); "Tout arrive enfin à la mer", December 22 1954 (FLC U3 7 438, FLC U3 7 432–437, FLC A3 2 659–664); "Conférence Bruxelles. Pavillon Français, 26 juin 58" (FLC C3 10 125–132); "Texte de LC pour la B.B.C.", January 27 1959 (FLC U3 11 257); "Lettre des directeurs des Maisons des Facultés Arts, Lettres, Médecine", 19 October 1959 (C3 11 89–96); "Conditions de nature, urbanisme efficace et efficient", July 1961 (FLC C3 10 37–45); "L'Espace indicible" (FLC B3 7 584–585).

writings selected by him and paragraphs to be written [...] so as to obtain a coherent structure? Is this, therefore, a book by Le Corbusier, or by Jean Petit?” (Torres 2014: 24). In search of answers to these questions, the research undertaken by Jorge Torres ultimately transcends many of them. This second volume invites the reader to reflect upon the great themes that concerned Le Corbusier throughout his life, particularly in his last years. But above all it invites us to think about architecture, as the title suggests. This volume is thus concerned with his tradition, in the purest etymological sense of the term: with what Le Corbusier has handed down to us, the legacy that he has bequeathed (from the Latin, *traditio*) (Le Corbusier, Torres 2014: 9–18)¹¹ – though this consists less of concrete responses than precise questions. Throughout *Mise au point*, there are various such questions: “But how can one justify, how can one explain the existence of shellfish, lizards, dogs (good fellows), and others, elephants, men and women...”, “Where are the observers?”, “How much will remain of this vast potential, of so much purity?...”, “Before planning one must occupy the land, and where is the land?” “Why wait for misfortune or catastrophe to happen before taking useful decisions?”, “To be content, to be happy. And not to be paid. Who follows me?” (Le Corbusier 1966a: 7–9, 16, 25, 48, 52)¹².

As there is naturally something a little strange in writing about a text that discusses another text that speaks of things, and as writing involves highlighting, indicating, calling attention to something, we cannot avoid presenting an isolated sentence from the original text as a kind of challenge. We hope that this may convince any reader that the publication of this edition may be a good reason for going back and reading Le Corbusier, and particularly *Mise au point*: “The pattern of behavior of today’s young people, who follow the example of their elders, does not necessarily seem to me to be the discovery of a transitory aestheticism but a profound, passionate, and intimate search for all the professional secrets they need to construct objects with precision [...]” (Le Corbusier 1966a: 16)¹³.

¹¹ As Juan Calatrava clearly explains in the excellent prologue to the 2nd volume of this edition.

¹² “mais quelle justification, quelle explication fournir à l’existence des coquillages, des lézards, des chiens (types bien), et éléphants, des hommes et des femmes...”, “Où sont les observateurs?”, “Combien en restera-t-il de tant de possibilités, de tant de propriété?”, “avant l’aménagement, il faut occuper le territoire, et où est le territoire?”, “Pourquoi attendre le malheur ou la catastrophe pour prendre les décisions utiles?”, “Être content, être heureux. En ne pas passer à la caisse. Qui me suit?”

¹³ “La ligne de conduite pour les jeunes qui prennent aujourd’hui le relais des aînés ne me semble pas devoir être la découverte d’un esthétisme passager, mais la recherche profonde, passionnée, intime, de tous les secrets des métiers qui permettront de constituer des objets précis et exactement faits [...]”.

Finally, this book condenses the only thing that, for Le Corbusier, was truly transmissible: his thought. In the year of the fiftieth anniversary of his death, we can once more affirm: “There is no death for the works of the soul”¹⁴.

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¹⁴ “il n’y a pas de mort pour les œuvres de l’esprit”. Passage from Le Corbusier that appears in the draught of the invitation to the exhibition “Les arts dits primitifs dans la Maison d’aujourd’hui”, on 3rd July 1935 (FLC U3 9 375).

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