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). 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), and published for the first time in Paris in the second quarter of 1966, was edited by Jean Petit and by the 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); 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 re-published 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 depriv-

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”).

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, 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 mistakes⁵, but also make connections with a number of books that Le Corbusier most probably read over the course of his life⁶ and also with a series of texts previously written by him – showing above all the anthropological nature of the work. According to the editor, this work often alludes to and paraphrases passages from texts included in Le Corbusier’s various books⁷, letters⁸ and texts⁹. 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 notes, drafts and support notes of notes, the complete version of a book that is not transmissible but thought. It also tries to answer the question of why some words are written in italics in the book, while others are not, for example. In the Spanish edition, the text is also accompanied by a series of notes and texts that make the reader a better and more informed listener, not only clarify some contextual details and correct some small mistakes, but also make connections with a number of books that Le Corbusier most probably read over the course of his life and also with a series of texts previously written by him – showing above all the anthropological nature of the work. According to the editor, this work often alludes to and paraphrases passages from texts included in Le Corbusier’s various books, letters and texts. 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.

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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 requisition 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, Girberger and Augusto Tobito Acedo) 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.


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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).

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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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References


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 pro- pretez?”, “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?”, “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 cons- tituer des objets précis et exactement faits […]”.
13 “il n’y a pas de mort pour les ouvres 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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