

**Broken Without Becoming Shapeless:
Exile, Form, and Love in Carles Riba's
*Les elegies de Bierville***

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Abstract

This essay reads Carles Riba's *Les elegies de Bierville* as a profound meditation on the transformation of historical trauma into an ethical architecture of form, song, and love. Moving beyond a purely documentary account of post-Spanish Civil War Catalan displacement, the essay argues that Riba constructs a tightly ordered journey of return: spiritual, erotic, civic, Orphic, and theological. At the center of this poetic sequence lies a sustained struggle against Indifference, identified here as the work's ultimate existential antagonist. By tracing the book's internal movement—from the shattered horizontality of Elegy I to the vertical monumentality of the ruined temple at Sunion, from erotic knowledge and civic responsibility to Orphic descent and divine intimacy, and finally to the disciplined restraint of the concluding “Endreça”—this essay shows how Riba deploys classical measure not as aesthetic escape, but as a rigorous discipline of moral survival. Ultimately, it offers a mature philological and existential reflection on how a self, a language, and a culture can be broken without becoming shapeless, and how Riba transforms raw suffering into a universal affirmation of human solidarity.

Keywords: Carles Riba; *Les elegies de Bierville*; Catalan poetry; Twentieth-century Catalan literature; Exile literature; Spanish Civil War exile; Classical reception; Sunion; Orpheus; Pompeu Fabra; Catalan philology; Civic humanism; Poetry and theology; Poetics of trauma and form.

I first read Carles Riba (1893-1959) as one is expected to read him in Catalan philology: with reverence, discipline, and the tacit understanding that difficulty itself was part of the inheritance. Riba was never a poet of immediate surrender. He demanded syntax, memory, classical culture, philosophical patience, and a willingness to dwell inside opacity until opacity became structure. Returning to *Les elegies de Bierville* (Barcelona, 1943; Santiago, 1949) decades later, I found not a text that had become easier, but one whose difficulty had become more meaningful. The young student tries to understand Riba; the older reader begins to understand why Riba had to be difficult. The poems do not merely express exile. They construct a form capable of surviving it.

Written in the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War, during Riba's exile in France, *Les elegies de Bierville* belongs historically to the literature of displacement, defeat, and cultural survival. Yet the poems resist being reduced to documentary testimony. Their historical wound is unmistakable, but Riba does not allow catastrophe to remain raw. He subjects it to measure, myth, erotic knowledge, civic memory, Orphic descent, and theological struggle. The result is not consolation in any easy sense. It is a disciplined transformation of suffering into voice.

In *Les elegies de Bierville*, Riba transforms exile from a historical catastrophe into a structured journey of return: spiritual, erotic, civic, Orphic, and theological. The poems ask how a self, a language, and a culture may be broken without becoming shapeless. The ultimate antagonist of the sequence is not physical displacement, nor suffering, nor even death, but Indifference. Against it, Riba constructs an ethical architecture of form, song, and love.

The first elegy begins not with Greece, not with heroic clarity, but with secrecy: “Era secret el camí.” The movement is horizontal, shaded, uncertain. The speaker walks through a landscape in which the visible world has become a trembling analogue of inner displacement. He is

“bandejat de tants ahirs d’alegria,” a line of extraordinary compression that defines exile not only as geographical expulsion but as temporal banishment. He has been exiled from his own yesterdays. The injury is not simply that he is away from home; it is that continuity itself has been broken. The self no longer inhabits its past naturally.

Yet this first poem does not end in mere desolation. The park is “estremat,” and within it something seems about to be reborn: “jo no sé quin déu mort, fill de la font i del verd.” The god is unnamed because the sequence has not yet earned its names. Sunion, Ulysses, Orpheus, Erato, and finally “el meu Déu” remain latent within that first mysterious dead god. Elegy I offers no doctrine and no completed return. It offers expectancy. In the secret path and the trembling park, exile becomes the condition in which rebirth may be suspected before it can be understood.

The second elegy answers that organic uncertainty with sudden architecture. “Súnion! T’evocaré de lluny amb un crit d’alegria”: the cry is joyful, but it comes “de lluny.” Distance has not weakened the image; it has intensified it. Sunion appears as height, marble, sun, sea, and wind. Against the wounded horizontality of the first elegy, the ruined temple offers vertical form. It is “Temple mutilat,” but it remains “blanc a l’altura.” This is the first great lesson of the sequence: to be mutilated is not necessarily to be defeated.

Riba’s classicism here is not decorative. It is ethical. Sunion does not erase loss; it gives loss a shape. The temple is broken, but it has not collapsed into formlessness. Its purity is not the innocence of what has never suffered, but the dignity of what has endured: “ric del que ha donat, i en sa ruïna tan pur.” This line is central to the whole work. The ruined temple is rich because it has given. Its value is not possession but donation; not intactness but form under loss. In Sunion, the exile learns how to stand: broken without becoming shapeless.

The erotic elegies that follow do not abandon this architecture; they internalize it. Elegies III through VI turn from marble and promontory toward the body, love, memory, and contemplative knowledge. At first, love appears as youthful paradise, but not as passive happiness. In Elegy III, the lovers open “llur paradís ple de llum, de voluntat i de risc.” The sequence insists on the ethical seriousness of joy. The happy are not those who merely receive happiness, but those who will it: “dels feliços, agraden / únicament als déus els que han volgut, com els déus.” Against exile’s passivity, love becomes a chosen act.

Elegy IV concentrates that erotic knowledge into a single suspended image: a woman undressing in solitude, the tunic sliding along raised arms, the torso revealed while the head remains briefly captive in linen. Riba’s eroticism is intense, but never merely descriptive. The body becomes an event of rhythm, time, and sacred witnessing. “La sang juvenil del món torna a córrer”: the private erotic instant releases the youthful blood of the world. The woman swims toward “l’estiu excessiu,” accompanied by “ella i els déus i els meus ulls.” The poet’s gaze does not consume the body; it receives its revelation as form.

Elegy V interiorizes this revelation. Under the “cúpula verda,” the speaker becomes “el naufrag que en l’illa profunda / on reneix de la mar, súbitament reconeix / una pàtria d’antany.” The language of homeland enters the erotic and spiritual register. This “pàtria” is not simply Catalonia, but neither is Catalonia absent from it. It is the homeland of the soul, of love, of

origin, and of cultural memory, all resonating together. The beloved becomes “l’esposa secreta,” and the poem moves toward “nit més enllà de la nit.” Eros becomes return, but return as inward recognition.

Elegy VI completes the sequence by making explicit what the previous poems had enacted: Eros is a form of knowledge. Riba addresses lovers with one of the sequence’s most piercing admonitions: “Si goséssiu saber / tant com goseu posseir!” Possession is not condemned, but it is insufficient. The body must be known, not merely held. The true rest of lovers is not exhaustion after pleasure, but contemplation of “el bell cos amorós,” now more present because no longer reduced to possession. The poem ends in a state of deep memory: “Recordant; sense saber: recordant.” Love awakens an ancient knowledge older than consciousness itself.

From this erotic epistemology, Riba turns toward the mythic grammar of return. Elegy VII begins: “He navegat com Ulisses pel noble mar que separa.” The sea is noble because separation has become ordeal, measure, and transformation. Ulysses allows Riba to think exile not as static absence but as journey. Yet return is not simple restoration. The poem asks the essential modern question: “¿repatriats o arribats?” After exile, does one return home, or arrive somewhere newly estranged by the journey itself? Ithaca is “regne petit,” not imperial triumph. To enter its hidden cave requires “un front humil sota la llinda i un salt.” Return demands humility and risk.

Elegy VIII gives the corresponding myth of source. At Delphi, the spectacular apparatus of prophecy yields to the fountain: “Però el que importava / era la font.” The lesson is bodily and ethical: “cal acotar-s’hi només.” One must bend. Greece here is not a museum of heroic grandeur but “una Grècia tenaç i discreta,” a tenacious and discreet Greece offering itself against “el neguit d’ignorar.” Castalia gives water to voice. The lovers’ experience becomes “la doble veu sobre el mateix instrument / d’un destí compartit.” Only after the exile has passed through Ulysses and Castalia — return and source — can the poems assume civic speech without becoming rhetoric.

Elegy IX, dedicated to Pompeu Fabra, is the great civic awakening of the sequence. Fabra’s presence matters profoundly. He is the figure of linguistic form, grammatical discipline, and Catalan civic dignity. Riba frames this civic meditation through Greek history: “Glòria de Salamina vermella en el mar a l’aurora!” and “Adormits en el vent de Queronea, xiprers!” Salamis and Chaeronea stand as opposed emblems: freedom saved and freedom defeated, dawn and mourning, red sea and cypress wind. Through Greece, Riba speaks the catastrophe of Catalonia without reducing the poem to political statement.

The center of Elegy IX is the phrase “ésser civil.” Biological birth is not enough. One becomes fully human through law, language, culture, freedom, and shared form. Riba speaks of “la furiosa llavor per al meu ésser civil,” and later affirms: “sé que no fórem fets per a un destí bestial.” This is one of the sequence’s great anti-barbaric declarations. To be human is not merely to possess a body or survive history. Humanity must be earned through reason, measure, law, and the refusal of degradation. In this context, Fabra becomes more than a dedicatee. Catalan language itself becomes a structure of civic resistance, a way of refusing bestialization.

The civic vision is Catalan, but never provincial. “La llibertat conquerida” belongs wherever it is won. “On sigui del món que és salvada, se salva / per al llinatge tot dels qui la volen guanyar.” Conversely, when liberty is defeated anywhere, “tota la terra en sofreix.” The poem’s ethical scope is universal because its cultural rootedness is real. Riba does not abandon Catalonia in order to speak universally; he speaks universally through the disciplined density of Catalan historical pain. The defeated, summoned by hope, “van retrobant-se soldats.” Exile becomes responsibility.

Yet civic responsibility is not the final depth of the sequence. Elegy X descends still further, into Orpheus, memory, and the shadow where poetry itself is born. “He somiat amb Orfeu a la porta oberta de l’Ombra”: the threshold is crucial. Orpheus stands between life and death, speech and silence, memory and oblivion. Riba does not retell the myth; he internalizes it. The Orphic descent requires “morir al present” and to discover within the soul a “secreta... orella.” Poetry is no longer primarily vision. It becomes listening in darkness.

Memory appears as “perdut arxipèlag,” a scattered geography of coves, quarries, springs, and lost presences. Eurydice is “velada,” veiled, because the lost beloved cannot be recovered by possession. She can only be approached “entre la mort i el meu cant.” In Elegy X, Eurydice is woman, memory, childhood, homeland, and the dispersed object of song. The Orphic poet seeks not to dominate loss but to gather it through “el necessari mot.” Poetry becomes necessary speech: not ornament, not self-expression, but the word capable of liberating what has been scattered.

This is why the speaker can call himself “jo el gloriós instrument / i vosaltres l’amor.” The poet is not proprietor of meaning. He is instrument. The Orphic act opens within him a “fontana / viva de mi mateix,” an interior Castalia. What was once external source becomes inward spring. Through song, the self becomes capable of being played by love. Elegy X therefore defines poetry as sacrificial mediation: descent into shadow, recovery of memory, liberation of the dispersed beloved, and rebirth of the poet as instrument.

Elegy XI transforms that Orphic self-knowledge into theological drama. The divine language of the poem is deliberately unstable. Riba speaks of gods, God, “Algú,” “l’invisible Vivent,” and “divins indiferents.” This is not contradiction but tapestry. The pagan gods remain beautiful, but their beauty is insufficient because it is indifferent. The poem rejects “l’atzur, oh divins indiferents!” The true antagonist now appears clearly: not sorrow, not mortality, not exile, but Indifference.

Against that indifference, Elegy XI introduces the astonishing intimacy of “Algú, dintre de mi.” This Someone within the poet “s’havia / tot de sobte estimat,” as though the divine needed the poet “per a conèixer-se en mi.” The claim is daring. The human self becomes the temporal space in which the divine suffers, awakens, and knows itself. Riba’s earlier erotic language now reveals its necessity. Only the reciprocity of “els perfectes amants” can image this mutual increase between human and divine. “Del que de mi mateix ell em donava, he donat”: the poet gives what the god has given him through himself.

The theological climax does not abolish exile. The speaker is “tornat a l’exili on callen les coses.” But he returns transformed. Inside defeat he creates dawn: “dins la posta que em venç creó l’aurora brillant.” This is not optimism. It is the disciplined creation of meaning under conditions that continue to wound. The “invisible Vivent” has not used the poet as “un alberg de pas”; rather, he has been reborn in him, completing “el meu compte / de sofriment terrenal amb el seu propi diví; / fins que tot fos amor.” Suffering is not denied. It is completed in love.

The final declaration of Elegy XI is one of Riba’s greatest achievements: “Saber-nos, jo i Qui no em deixa... / contra la Indiferència... / home entre els homes jo, déu contra els déus el meu Déu!” The poet does not become divine. He remains “home entre els homes.” Human solidarity is preserved. But his God stands “déu contra els déus,” not as one more mythological figure, but as the intimate living presence opposed to indifferent beauty. The poem’s theological answer is inseparable from its human one: against Indifference, one must love, suffer, sing, and remain among men.

After such a summit, the final elegy wisely lowers the voice. Elegy XII, “Endreça,” is brief, restrained, and decisive. Under “la noble expandida tendresa dels arbres de França,” beside the “curs just i fidel” of French rivers, Riba reveals the poetics of the whole sequence: “he volgut donà’ a l’abundància del cor una antiga / regla que l’acordés amb el pudor de la veu.” The heart is abundant, but abundance alone is not poetry. It requires “una antiga regla.” Riba’s classical form is the ethical corset that prevents trauma from collapsing into exhibition or formless lament.

The phrase “el pudor de la veu” is essential. Riba does not choose silence, but neither does he choose raw confession. The voice must have modesty, not because pain is small, but because pain is sacred enough to require discipline. The ancient rule does not repress the wound; it allows the wound to speak without betraying itself. This is the final meaning of Riba’s difficulty. His syntax, meter, and classical density are not evasions. They are forms of moral tact.

The poems themselves now become envoys: “Arribareu sense mi a la pàtria expectant, elegies.” Literature returns where the body cannot yet go. The homeland is “expectant,” waiting for voice, and the elegies travel “de dolor a dolor,” driven by impatience. Yet even here, Riba acknowledges that measure is never total mastery. Addressing Erato, he asks forgiveness if “l’onada / ara i adés ha saltat sobre els teus nombres severes.” The wave sometimes leaps over the severe numbers. This is the productive tension of the whole sequence: form must contain the wave, but the wave must remain powerful enough to strain form.

The path that began secretly in the trembling park ends as a disciplined voice sending itself home. Between those points Riba has passed through Sunion, Eros, Ulysses, Castalia, Fabra, Orpheus, God, and Erato. These are not decorative allusions or separate symbolic episodes. They are stations in a single architecture of recovery. Exile shatters the self; Sunion gives it vertical form; Eros teaches it knowledge; Ulysses and Castalia prepare return and voice; Fabra turns the self civic; Orpheus sends it into shadow; God transforms suffering into love; Erato returns the whole abundance to measure.

To read *Les elegies de Bierville* is therefore to watch an exiled heart refuse both collapse and indifference. Riba does not make suffering beautiful by denying its violence. He makes it speak

by submitting it to form. The greatness of the sequence lies in this severe mercy: pain becomes voice, voice becomes return, and return becomes love strong enough to stand against Indifference.

Primary Text

Riba, Carles. *Les elegies de Bierville. Obres completes*. Ed. Enric Sullà. Barcelona: Edicions 62, 1984.