

# CATALAN WRITING

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## EDITORIAL

### The Health of Literature

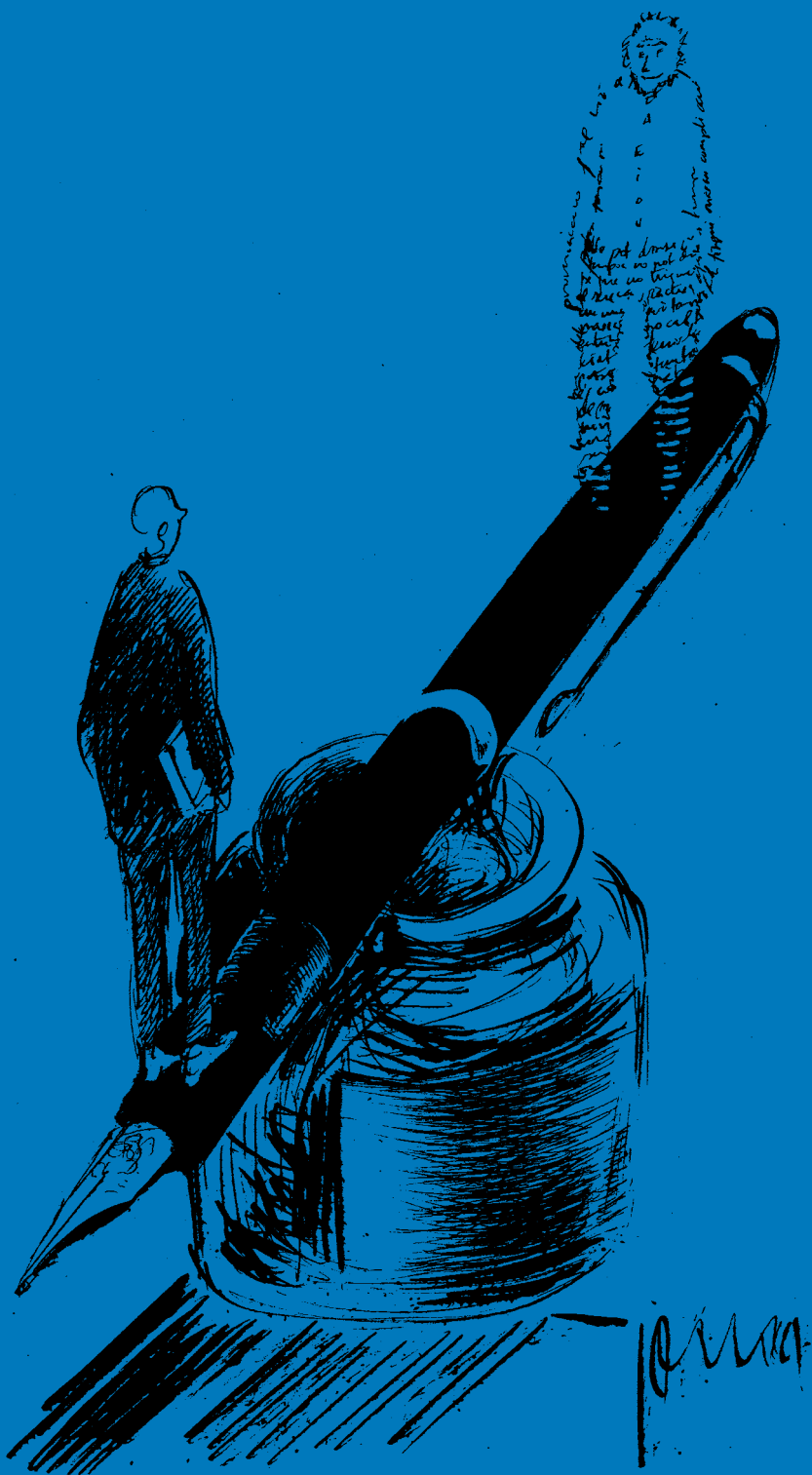
It seems to many of us that the diagnosis that might be made about the health of Catalan literature is not very different from one that might be made for other literatures. In other words, we tend to say that its health is fragile. But is it really fragile? We shall only know if we examine the symptoms.

All too often we consider secondary matters such as sales, promotion outside the country or the presence of literature in the mass media as unequivocal signs of the literary health of a country. We talk of these factors because they are quantifiable but, like fever, they do not identify the illness but rather result from it. Antipyretics such as the Frankfurt Book Fair can be applied but the problem still remains. What, then, is essential? I would say there are two things, and these are more difficult to quantify: the quality of the work and reading habits.

With regard to the former, one must say that excellent work is presently being published in Catalan but the problem lies not in what is being written but in the social perception of excellence. (And excellence is only consolidated and consecrated with

time, once the tribal battles are over and the author is lying in state.) This is not, therefore, a reliable symptom. As for reading habits, we tend to assert that they are losing ground to digital modes but I am not at all sure that this is the case. The problem resides, I believe, not in the quantity but the quality of the reading. There are many people who read in Catalan. It is also true that with the considerable expansion in the potential base of readers – made possible by the welfare state – it is even more painful that there are not more, many more, people who are moved by a sonnet by Shakespeare and who passionately prefer him to his successors. Yet, one should recall, perhaps, that the contemplation of art – the pleasure of recognising the power and complexity with which the artistic form expresses an experience – is a minority affair and will continue to be so. However, if we wish to alleviate this symptom, the remedy is not only to be found in promoting reading, but also in schools with the presence of literature as part of the basic education of citizens and, in particular, in a discourse about literature that brings the text into relation not so much with the context – author or society – but with common human experience. We should aim to admire the power and complexity with which literary texts express it.

RAMON PLA I ARXÉ



## ACTIONS & VOICES

### Catalan Philosophy in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries

If there is an salient feature of Catalan philosophy, it is the wish not to break with either tradition or modernity. Radical traditionalist or modernising positions aside, the nature of the Catalan philosopher is to seek accord, which is the case of Catalonia's political constitution through to the *Nova Planta* decrees. In Catalonia, the philosopher tries to achieve a harmony between ideas, conflicting powers, and between the future and the past.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the abolition of the *ancien régime* also saw the end of the Thomist Scholasticism that had gone hand in hand with it. The University of Cervera was replaced by the University of Barcelona and, from the shadow of Xavier Llorens i Barba (the Catalan Socrates), emerged two strands in our philosophy: the philosophy of common sense, inspired by the Scottish school, and the neo-Thomism of Jaume Balmes.

There can be no doubt that this “common sense” evokes the Catalan idea of *seny* (judiciousness, common sense): this is the certainty that there are primary truths that neither pure reason nor pure experience can guarantee, the former because it does not have its feet on the ground and the latter because it does not raise its head from the ground. Common sense or rational instinct, as some call it, is not a single faculty, but a composite of intellectual, sensitive and emotional faculties. Balmes, a student of Llorens i Barba, reinvented Thomism (as would Josep Torres i Bages) for an industrialised and democratic world; for him, Catholicism had been the centre of Catalan spiritual life and renouncing it would mean losing the country's essence.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there appeared with the Barcelona School a secular academic and non-academic philosophy that, without breaking with the past, assimilated European currents and used Catalan as its language until the Franco dictatorship thrust most philosophers into exile and led some to renounce their thinking, such as Eugeni d'Ors, the father of *Noucentisme*. It is only today that we are starting the recovery, in terms of thought and institutionally as well. We are both rediscovering ourselves and connecting with the world outside of Catalonia. Xavier Rubert de Ventós and Josep-Maria Terricabras, are two good examples of the current trend.

MIQUEL COSTA



## INTERVIEW

### JOSEP-MARIA TERRICABRAS: LANGUAGE AS THINKING

RAMON ALCOBERRO

**Josep-Maria Terricabras (Calella, 1946), has forged a long career as a writer and is one of Catalonia's best-selling philosophers. He is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Girona, one of the country's most prestigious research centres in the Humanities. As a theorist in the Wittgensteinian tradition, he is able to tell us about the sense of being a philosopher in Catalonia today.**

**You wrote your doctoral thesis on Wittgenstein in German; you published the papers of Wittgenstein at a congress held in Girona in English; and then you published in Catalan. This runs you the risk of not being very well-known outside the country. It would be much easier, when it comes to making your work known, to write in Spanish and yet you haven't done so. Why not?**

*In fact, I have work published in Catalan, German, Spanish, English, French, Italian and Basque. Generally, however, I write in Catalan, my native language. It shapes my thinking because both education and human experiences are primarily linguistic. I don't mean that they are 'only linguistic', but if a thought is good and interesting, there is always the possibility of translating it. First, I look for rigour and coherence. Then comes making the work known.*

**You're a maitre à penser in Catalonia and a political reference that transcends party affiliations. Yet, as a philosopher, you come from the analytical tradition and you practise a philosophy that seeks to 'dissolve' problems rather than resolve them. Am I mistaken?**

*You're right. My most basic philosophical training is influenced by Wittgenstein's work, which gives me the urge – and, I hope, the ability – to describe concepts clearly and rigorously. Social commitment doesn't come to me directly from philosophy but from an awareness of civic responsibility, which is acquired and cultivated in other milieus. But no theoretical reflection can give reality more consistency than it already has.*

**Fidelity to one's own cultural tradition is a major issue in all cultures of limited reach. When one chooses to think in a minority language is the choice made out of fidelity?**

*Theory is not produced to shore up reality, but to understand how it is shored up. Nobody thinks entirely alone, and neither is the individual made in isolation; or, if so, the job is badly done. I tried to explain this in my book *Aprendre a pensar (Learning to Think, 1998)*. Each person is a child of the times of his or her country and culture. When one accepts and knows one's own cultural tradition it is not to submit oneself to it but to manage it and, to the extent that it's possible, contribute to it and improve it.*

## ON POETRY

“Despite his enchantment by François Villon, Espriu's poetry is haunted by the Wisdom books of the Hebrew Bible, the Book of Job and Ecclesiastes in particular. Both are closer to Espriu than his chosen precursors in Negative Theology, Meister Eckhart, and Nicholas of Cusa, who himself creatively had misread Ramon Llull into a Negative Theologian. The wisdom of Job, Ecclesiastes, and Espriu is not prudential, but skeptical, which means a wisdom we are unable to comprehend as such, since necessarily it defeats poetry. Like Ausiàs March, Espriu is highly conscious that he cannot love God, as poor Job certainly did. Unlike March, Espriu also cannot fear God, since Hell has no reality for the poet of Sinera, who thus is closer to the Preacher of Ecclesiastes. (...) Espriu is an elegist, like March, and Catalan poetry, like American, can seem more elegiac than not. But for Espriu every canticle of grief is washed away by rain, since he perpetually leaps from one tense to another. Hamlet's final words: “The rest is silence”, could well be Espriu's also.”

HAROLD BLOOM

XL

Però en la sequedat arrela el pi  
crescut des d'ella cap al lliure vent  
que ordeno i dic amb unes poques lletres  
d'una breu i molt noble i eterna paraula:  
m'alço vell tronc damunt la vella mar,  
ombrejo i guardo el pas del meu camí,  
reposa en mi la llum i encalmo ja la nit,  
torno la dura veu en nu roquer del cant.

XL

But in the thirst the pine takes root,  
sprung from it towards the free wind  
which I order and name with a few letters  
of a brief, most noble, and eternal word:  
ancient trunk I soar above the ancient sea,  
shade and protect the treading of my path.  
In me sleeps the light, and I placate the night,  
I turn my hard voice into naked rock of song.

Harold Bloom, *Ramon Llull and Catalan Tradition*  
(Institut Ramon Llull, 2006)

Salvador Espriu, *Llibre de Sinera* (1963)

Salvador Espriu, *Selected Poems*. Translated from the Catalan  
by Louis J. Rodrigues (Carcamet, 1997)

## WORK IN PROGRESS



### ANTÒNIA VICENS

Born in Santanyi (Mallorca) in 1941, Antònia Vicens is one of the leading Catalan-language fiction writers of her generation. Since her first novel *39° a l'ombra* (39° in the Shade, 1967) she has been writing continuously and has produced eight novels, the most recent of which is *Ungles perfectes* (Perfect Nails, 2007), along with several collections of short stories, which have now been brought together into the single volume, *Tots els contes* (All the Stories, 2005). She has been translated into several languages, particularly German.

Fotografia: ILC

NOW

I've fallen into Tòfol's nightmare.

There are no barriers or signs to mark its space. But obviously it's their house because Aniceta and Josep are sitting on the sofa in the living room. She's wearing her dressing gown unbuttoned and you can see the fuzz hiding her slash, and he's completely naked with his tassel hanging down. It looks like they're having a nap after having stripped off.

The bruises that Tòfol has made on their necks out of possessive jealousy have taken on an extra thickness of thought.

And the ball of wool and the knitting needles, along with the sweater she's been knitting for-bloody-ever are floating over their hair. And in a pool of sperm is the book that Doctor Abril left her the day she confessed that:

She wasn't sleeping well.

As soon as she closed her eyes she saw the choppy sea. With flocks of gulls whose wings were falling off and they were drowning.

She was one of those gulls.

No. No way could she get used to the happiness of loving two men: Tòfol her husband, and Josep her lover.

Tòfol picked up the book and started reading aloud the underlined words: **To dissolve your guilt, ask for purification from the bottom of your heart. If you are purified ...**

He is startled.

It's not his voice.

What comes out of his mouth is a kind of barking that mixes with the Bong music coming from the room of the twins, Ros and Rosa, who are also placidly dead, the head of one resting on the genitals of the other.

He throws the book outside.

The book flies.

He tries to kick it.

The book remains suspended in the air. Angel or butterfly.

I go down to another level, down a slippery slope and end up in the middle of a path thick with mist mingled with the green aromas of the earth, the red of the wind and the blue of space.

A whole immensity.

Then standing up straight, like a dog-man, I take the lead and whip Tòfol who is on all fours like a man-dog, give him a good kick in the side, grab his collar and yank it hard and say:

“Let's go.”

We set off walking.

We walk.



# PUBLISHING NEWS



## Joan Sales

*Incerta glòria* (Uncertain Glory)

Tinta Bava  
Translated into French by Maria Bohigas and Bernard Lesfargues

For some critics, this is the great 20<sup>th</sup>-century Catalan novel, while others go still further and say it is one of the best Catalan novels of all time. The writer and publisher, Joan Sales, spent twenty years writing this lengthy book, his life's work. It is about the Spanish Civil War of 1936 to 1939 and also the memory of Republican Catalonia which was smashed and eradicated by the fascist victory. Many obstacles were placed in the way of the publication of *Incerta glòria*. For years it was impossible to publish the whole text due to the regime's censorship. Now, this universal novel is once again coming to the attention of readers, both within and beyond Catalonia. The French version was highly praised in *Le Monde*. This edition has a prologue written by Juan Goytisolo.



## Albert Sánchez Piñol

*Pandora al Congo*  
(Pandora in the Congo)

World of Books  
Translated into Russian by Nina Avrova

After the international success of *La pell freda* (Cold Skin), Albert Sánchez Piñol has published the second part of a trilogy marked by three common elements – a setting of hardship conditions, a female character who incarnates love and desire and a fantastic element: monsters. *Pandora al Congo*, unlike *La pell freda*, is a long novel, at almost 600 pages, and also is more complex, with a wider range of characters, settings and superimposed situations. We start with an anonymous writer who is commissioned to write the life story of Marcus Garvey, in hopes of saving him from dying in a London prison. Garvey is accused of murdering two aristocratic English brothers during an expedition in search of diamonds, gold and ivory in the Congo jungle.



## Quim Monzó

*100 contes* (100 Stories)

Frankfurter Verlag  
Translated into German by Monika Lübcke

Many readers discovered Quim Monzó thanks to his surprising speech at the opening ceremony of the 2007 Frankfurt Book Fair, at which Catalan culture was guest of honour. However, his work has long been translated and praised by international critics. An article in *The Independent* described Monzó as “one of the world's great short-story writers”. Monzó excels in his genre. He has been writing short stories for three decades now, as a chronicler of his times, always ingenious, caustic, lucid and essential. Now, the publishing house Frankfurter has brought together in a single volume all the stories that Monzó published up to 2001. Newly revised by the author, it includes a hundred short stories from the collections *Uf va dir ell* (Oof, He Said, 1978), *Olivetti, Moulinex, Chaffoteaux et Maury* (1980), *L'illa de Maians* (The Island of Maians, 1985), *El perquè de tot plegat* (What It's All About, 1993), *Guadalajara* (1996) and *El millor dels mons* (The Best of Worlds, 2001).



## Jordi Coca

*Sota la pols* (Under the Dust)

Parthian Books  
Translated into English by Richard Thomson

A writer of the 70s generation, Jordi Coca has received some of the most prestigious prizes in Catalan literature. *Sota la pols* was awarded the 2000 Sant Jordi Prize. The novel starts out as an autobiographical work. It describes how the early years of a boy's life are marked by his father's violence and authority, and also by the appearance of his first literary stimuli. We are taken back to the 1940s and early 1950s, to the grey, oppressive atmosphere of the harshest decades of the Franco dictatorship. “Books will be my salvation”, the boy says. *Sota la pols* is part of a broader literary project linked with the novels *Dies meravellosos* (Wonderful Days, 1996), *La noia del ball* (The Girl at the Dance, 2007) and the forthcoming title *Moure la nit* (To Move the Night).



## Carles Porta

*Tor. Tretze cases i tres morts*  
(Tor: Thirteen Houses and Three Deaths)

Berlin Verlag  
Translated into German by Charlotte Frei

Somewhere between reportage and the novel, *Tor* follows in the wake of Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*. This is the disturbing true story of a mountain in the Pyrenees, the disputes between two of the mountain's thirteen co-owners and, finally, the death of one of the region's two leading men after a judge awards him solo ownership of Tor Mountain. The story, related in first person, emerges from a report the author produced for Catalan television. Carles Porta subsequently spent eight years investigating this story that is full of hate, disputes, smugglers, local despots, blood, fear and unsolved murder.



## Mercè Rodoreda

*Mirall trencat* (A Broken Mirror)

Confluence  
Translated into Hindi by Vijaya Venkataraman

Mercè Rodoreda is one of Catalan literature's all-time great writers and has been recognised as such in many parts of the world. Her works have been translated into some thirty languages. The 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her birth is to be celebrated in 2008, with a series of academic and cultural events under the title of the Rodoreda Year ([www.anyrodoreda.cat](http://www.anyrodoreda.cat)). *Mirall trencat* is her significant novel, finished in 1974. It uses several voices to weave together the stories of three generations of a well-to-do family. In Rodoreda's own words, “What really interests me about the characters of *Mirall trencat* is that they enable me to take on the weight of the nostalgia that contains everything that I have lived intensely and that has now come to an end. They are neither good nor bad [...]. And they have secrets. It is a novel where everyone falls in love with the wrong person, and the ones who need love go out to get it, in whatever way it comes: in the space of an hour or in the space of a moment.”

MONTSERRAT SERRA

# ON STAGE

## FROM GRÖNHOLM TO GALCERAN

I was present at the final rehearsal before the premiere of *El mètode Grönholm* (The Grönholm Method) by Jordi Galceran at the Teatre Nacional de Catalunya (National Theatre of Catalonia). The atmosphere was one of defeat: the author unhappy; the actors disoriented; the director, perplexed. The play opened and the audience continued to laugh and applaud enthusiastically at the end, the whole theatre in a standing ovation. Since that May of 2003, *El mètode Grönholm* has been staged in 22 countries. More than two million people around the world have seen it, more than any other play in the history of Catalan theatre.

The story follows four candidates for an executive position in the waiting room of a multinational company and action (the hiring test) grounds us in real time. This is a brilliant *contemporary, classical comedy*. It is radically “contemporary” in the way it presents the disasters that arise from inventing identities. And it is a “classical” comedy in that it uses the mechanisms of the *pièce bien faite* and because it is the work of a critical moralist. Like Molière, Goldoni, Sheridan, Beaumarchais, Wilde and Shaw, Jordi Galceran (1964) is a lucid revealer of society's moral confusions. In *El mètode Grönholm*, he does this on two different levels. First, he condemns the use of *deception* as an instrument of power, and second – both more cruelly and compassionately – he shows the completeness of the damage caused by *self-deception*. Galceran writes thinking of each member of the audience as an individual. This and his talent make him a truly great playwright. *El mètode Grönholm* is a fine introduction to the author of *Dakota*, *Paraules encadenades* (Chained Words) and his most recent play, *Cancun*.

ESTEVE MIRALLES

# ON LINE

## Six recommended websites for Catalan poetry

*La Il·lustració Poètica Metropolitana i Continental* (Continental and Metropolitan Poetic Enlightenment)

<http://perso.wanadoo.es/lipmic/>

This website maintained by the Valencian poet Eduard J. Verger includes a multilingual anthology of Catalan poetry, a good selection of poetry from around the world translated into Catalan, the digital edition of the magazine *Cairell* (1979-1981) and a presentation of Verger's own work.

*Els entra-i-surts de Brossa* (The Ins-and-Outs of Brossa)

<http://www.uoc.edu/lletra/especial/brossa/>

This is the best on-line presentation of the poet Joan Brossa, who produced his work in the confluence between the avant-garde, theatrical, provocative and the plastic arts. Anyone who is interested in Brossa can also consult the website of the Joan Brossa Foundation at [www.fundacio-joan-brossa.org](http://www.fundacio-joan-brossa.org) (in Catalan, Spanish and English).

*Viu la poesia* (Poetry Lives)

<http://www.viulapoesia.com/>

An innovative selection of Catalan, Spanish and world poetry with search tools providing information by author, readership (adults, young people, children) and genre. Besides poems, it includes didactic proposals, audio and video and, in some cases, interactive material.

*Música de poetes* (Music of Poets)

<http://www.musicadepoetes.cat/>

This is a virtual space where music and literature flow together and where one can listen to a wide array of songs that many Catalan musicians have composed from the work of the best poets. The site is a co-production of the Open University of Catalonia, the Government of Catalonia and the Spanish Society of Authors, Composers and Publishers (SGAE).

*Mag Poesia* (Mag Poetry)

<http://www.mallorcaweb.com/magteatre/>

Over the last ten years, this Mallorca-produced website has been bringing together a wide-ranging anthology of Catalan poets and poems, Catalan versions of world poetry, rock and songs in Catalan, along with stage versions of poetry by the Magisteri Teatre group.

*Barcelona Poesia* (Barcelona Poetry)

<http://www.bcn.cat/cultura/barcelonapoesia1/>

This is the website of Poetry Week, which is held in May every year in the capital of Catalonia. Other notable events during the year are the Sant Cugat Festival of Poetry, the Mediterranean Poetry Festival in Mallorca, and the *Quinzena Poètica* in Vilafranca del Penedès.

JAUME SUBIRANA