Carme Riera: Seduction of the Word

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The literary work of the Majorcan Carme Riera (1948) is cross-eyed by thematic motifs and narrative methods that travel from one book to the other. Fiction writer, essayist, and professor of Spanish literature, as well as an avid reader, she is a master of technique that captures the reader from the first page, since she knows the exact dose of intrigue, lyricism and irony to pour into each situation to ensure that he or she will not abandon the story. She has declared several occasions that literature is an exercise of seduction by whoever is writing, to make the reader enter into the game of mirrors and reflections, simulacra and maskings that is writing. The careful manipulation of the Catalan language— permeated with Majorcan word variants; the richness and precision of her vocabulary; the style of her syntax: the apparent spontaneity of her characters’ colloquial registers; and the intertextual winks with which she alludes to classic and modern works, inserting herself in her own discourse—is the first focus of attention for anyone getting acquainted with her. In the Rierian oeuvre three clearly differentiated formal patterns can be distinguished: an intimate style of marked confidential accent, ironic distance, and the immersion in the secret. Riera again uses the omniscient point of view and, following the handbook of trompe-l’oeil, to give life to her characters, and uses humor is also key to a gothic intrigue, whose central character is an employee who travels to the Open Sky, 2000) the story of the descendants of the Jews burned by the Inquisition. This is a choral novel, written in the third person, in which the complex interior world of the characters conquers the soul of the readers, ensuring that they feel emotionally invested in their doubts, anguish, and suffering. With these three novels, which as of today constitute the peak of Rierian fiction, the writer constructs an authentic trompe-öeil to give life to her characters, and uses polyphonic discourse to construct a reality that is impossible to see from just one point of view. The methods used to express this destabilizing vision vary from one book to another, but the final result is the same: to transmit a Weltanschauung in which there is no room for absolute truths, but rather a permanent dialectic contrast with what is fairest from ourselves.
Te deix, amor, la mar com a penyora (I Give You, Love, the Sea as Pledge, 1973)

Carme Riera’s world of a lived dream, most imaginative and personal, with its victims chosen among delicious pain and disorders, is often shaped with convincing vigor out of the disquieting poetry of inexplicable realities. It is an “initial” world, a sketch, still wavering, that we should allow to harden, rise above, and stand out.

(Joan Triadu, “Panorama de narració breu: Les veus solitàries d’una forma Bureu” (Panorama of Short Narratives: The Solitary Voices of a Free Form), Serra d’Or, 197, 1975).

Jo pos per testimoni les gavines (Let the Seagulls Be My Witness, 1977)

Inherent in this work, even more than its testimonial, subversive, or denunciative value, is an underlying poetic quality that reclines it for literature, understood in the strictest sense. C. Riera has a very clear idea of what literature is and how it has to be made (a certain idea of literature and how to practice a genre). Because of this, and an attentive and refined sensibility, the writing of C. Riera obtains sure affective modulations in readers with literary educations in the canons of poetic prose, and sentimental educations in the oppressive bourgeois morals of our sad post-war. Thus, stylistic creation is undoubtably an effective treatment to medium minimal subjects, barely perceptible emotions or movements, and obsessions that verge on madness or the marvelous.

(Enric Sulfós, Els Marges, 11 September 1977)

Una primavera per a Domenico Guarini (A Spring for Domenico Guarini, 1980)

The novel departs, one might say, from fiction understood as an experience of culture and, in the manner of some French and English novelists of the twentieth and thirty, as pleasure and entertainment. Which does not mean that the book is far from lived experience, but that it is situated in a more elevated plane of comprehension. There is found, justified, the fundamental interest of the novel; a work of transition that tells about a transition, a “modification,” completed through a voyage, ostensibly geographic (significantly, by train, and the text itself gives the “Buttoorian” clue), that has journalistic aims and ends up as an interior voyage of the soul: that of the journalist who is the novel’s main character. The initial quote of Racionero already gives us a hint: “I will speak of the voyages of the self through its inevitable masks [...] because, where is worth going, if not toward oneself?”

(Maria Campillo, “Carme Riera, l’art com a revelació” (Carme Riera, Art as Revelation), Serra d’Or, 265, 1981).

Epítels tendrisúmuls (Tender Epithelium, 1986)

The new and, at the moment, most recent step is that of the stories of Epítels tendrisúmuls, a book in which the writer, like so many creators worried about the process and about their own endeavor, presents the eternal theme of their existence is a simple excuse to speak of the battle of finished works and with a charm of a compositional mixture of its elements.


Jo de miralls (Mirror Images, 1989)

Carme Riera knows how to turn the tables on the opponent using a skillful game; and there are no lack of games and mirrors. The work is situated in an imaginary South American country—with many particulars belonging to Argentina—and this fact becomes another game inside a game, because the country described in the novel “The Reveal,” supposedly written by Corbalán, is also imaginary. A similar parallèleism between the description of love scenes and the description of torture is present in the first chapter of part one. Teresa Mascaro is also a reflection of Bettina Brentano. Otherwise, the feminine characters do not have a central role in the work. Even Blanca Álvarez de Paz, who in the beginning seems to be a key protagonist of the novel, is in the end the least clear character, although she is evidently the starting impulse of the work. However, her existence is a simple excuse to speak of the battle between Corbalán and Gallego, a battle expressed easily by the author, in which there are no winners, only losers. Carme Riera, without renouncing the careful language that we always find in the whole of her literary work, seems to leave behind the lyric features of her stories to deepen the narrative resources of the best novels.

(Anxo Agudo, “Carme Riera en clave de seducción” (Carme Riera in Seduction Code), La Vanguardia, 9 June, 1989).

Contre l’amor en companyia i altres relats (Against Love in Company and Other Stories, 1991)

Whatever the tone she employs, Carme Riera’s energetic voice winds throughout her stories with a profound narrative wisdom and a full command of the most fine-drawn faces. For, despite the satiric tone as the main character, Contre l’amor en companyia does not lack for small incursions into the fantastic (like the poetic image of the bleeding unicorn in “La dame à la licorne”) or subtle lyric touches with melancholy facets. The quality of Carme Riera’s prose is made of many ingredients; in the delicate balance between expressive will and the requirement—self-repression—for synthesis, she skillfully composes small masterpieces that cleanly stand out with the solidity of finished works and with a charm of a compositional neatness that can harmoniously interlock the subtle mixture of its elements.


Dins el darrer blau (In the Last Blue, 1994)

Dins el darrer blau is a novel told, in third person by an omniscient narrator, with a classic structure of introduction, conflict, and denouement. In the “final note,” the author explains that the action is based on real events that occurred in Palma, between 1687 and 1691, when a group of converted Majorcan Jews, upon trying to flee to Livorno, were detained and condemned to be burned at the stake by the Inquisition. But although Carme Riera starts perpetually modern, presented as a screen actor, appealing to women, with multiple lovers, a kind of Humphrey Bogart, who with his classic trench coat and cigarette has become one of the icons of the twentieth century. The main character’s mother also comes close to this category. [...]

(Fernando Valls, Els anys de la bestia (The Years of the Beast), El Mundo, 16 March 1996).

Cap al cel obert (To the Open Sky, 2000)

Cap al cel obert is one of those novels that seduce, full of episodes belonging to the family scheme and Cuban society: personal envy, political betrayals and public repressions, no holds barred in the quest for financial power that converts the island into a bargaining chip, and a tempting mosaic for the detailed narrative, for the description of atmospheres, landscapes, and character portraits. Riera moves with the wisdom belonging to the great novelist that she is, with continuous allusions and tributes to the novelistic tradition of the nineteenth and twentieth century. The use of ellipsis stands out, which advances the action and the ironic characteristic of current narrative, whether via clever character names (like that of the so-called Dorothy Parker) or with hidden references to the narrator’s position. Identity, mask, and imposture make a braided that destiny insists on dismantling for each character, again and again.

(Lluís Jullà, Serra d’Or, 494, 2001).

La metat de l’ânim (Half the soul, 2004)

This novel is about a voyage, a complex search, that is translated, in terms of plot, into intrigue, a kind of thriller, with that dose of mystery and suspense that so attract readers, seducing them into continued reading. This double voyage is essential in La metat de l’ânim. But there are other thematic and structural aspects characteristic of her work that are also present: letters, which is to say the importance of the epistolary novel, championed by the author, letters that presuppose a receiver who must be attracted—something very clear in Cap al cel obert—and, in this work, these are the letters of the main character’s mother to her lover. In fact, seduction is one of the other important themes for Carme Riera, fleshed out in Jo de miralls as the figure of a greatly appealing fictitious writer, Corbalán, and in La metat de l’ânim as Albert Cansus, a pivotal writer for Riera’s generation, whose thought is perfectly modern, presented as a screen actor, appealing to women, with multiple lovers, a kind of Humphrey Bogart, who with his classic trench coat and cigarette has become one of the icons of the twentieth century. The main character’s mother also comes close to this category. [...]

(Teresa Merino, L’art de la mena: un sègle literàric (L’art de la mena: A Labyrinthine Century), AVUI, 17 June 2004).