

A SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY OF MARIA BARBAL

Narrative work in Catalan, translations, awards, and honors

- 1985 *Pedra de tartera* (Mountain Scree). Prizes: Joaquim Ruyra (1984), Joan Crexells (1985), Children's Literature prize of the Generalitat de Catalunya (1985). Translations: Bable (1992), Spanish (1995), Portuguese (2000), Romanian (2000), French (2004), German (2007), Slovenian (2008), Italian (2009), Dutch (2009)
- 1986 *La mort de Teresa* (The Death of Teresa)
- 1990 *Mel i metzines* (Honey and Poisons)
- 1991 *Pampallugues* (Flickering)
Pedra de tartera—theatrical version (with Joaquim Vila i Folch)
- 1992 *Càmfora* (Camphor). Prizes: National Literature Prize (1993), Critics' Prize 'Serra d'Or' (1993), Literary Critics' Prize for Catalan Fiction (1993). Translations: Portuguese (1997), Spanish (1998)
Des de la gàbia (From the Cage)
- 1994 *Ulleres de sol* (Sunglasses)
- 1995 *Espagueti Miu* (Miu Spaghetti)
- 1996 *Escrivia cartes al cel* (Writing Letters to the Sky)
- 1998 *Bari* (Barium)
- 1999 *Carrer Bolívia* (Bolivia Street). Cavall Verd Prize (2000). Translation: Spanish (2001)
- 2001 *Camins de quietud* (Peaceful Paths)
L'helicòpter (The Helicopter)
- 2003 *Bella edat* (Beautiful Age). Translation: Spanish (2003)
- 2005 *País íntim* (Intimate Country). Prudenci Bertrana Prize 2005. Translations: Spanish (2007), German (2008)
- 2008 *Emma*. Translation: German (2009) Jaume Fuster Prize



Maria Barbal

Maria Barbal: When the Human Landscape Becomes Literary Material

Carme Arenas

Almost twenty-five years testify to the career of one of the most important novelists of contemporary Catalan literature. Without a doubt she has been most successful in creating a faithful and wide reading public, which in the last few years has crossed borders and burst into the field of European literature, especially in France and Germany.

This career began in 1985 with a novel that, although it was her first, has become the author's essential work of reference. That novel was *Pedra de tartera* (Mountain Scree), a short novel that surprised critics as much as the reading public for its immense beauty, its implicit poetry and its prevailing forceful style, altogether an intelligent exercise of good literature. Situated in Pallars (Catalan Pyrenees), from whence Barbal herself hails, the novel tells the story of a woman, Conxa, who tells us the story of her life in hindsight at three specific ages: childhood, youth and old age. With the background of the historical events of the Republic, later Civil War and Franco era, Conxa comes to know love and hope but also loneliness, uprootedness, injustice and pain. Strong, and capable of bringing her family forward on her own, socioeconomic events cause her to lose her roots and see her planning to go live in Barcelona at the end of her life, carried off like mountain scree, in a completely anonymous manner. The simile serves the author as a way to portray a type of character who, albeit with certain differences, she will continue to depict throughout her oeuvre: strong on the inside, but never recognized by a history that is always written by the winners. These main characters are history's silenced, those who suffer the consequences of that which they have not chosen. Maria Barbal adds the elements of Conxa's double silencing—the fact of being a woman, and furthermore, from a humble background.

Pedra de tartera was followed by a collection of stories, *La mort de Teresa* (The death of Teresa, 1986), and two novels: *Mel i metzines* (Honey and Poisons, 1990) and *Càmfora* (Camphor, 1992). These titles will form part of the *Cicle del Pallars* (Pallars Cycle), so named because they are set in the author's region of origin, but they already indicate another orientation, that of Barcelona, the place where the author has resided for some time. In fact, these two geographic spaces serve Barbal as a basis for reflection about the abandoned towns of the Pyrenees, which will later become explicit in the book *Camins de quietud* (Peaceful Paths, 2001), a reflective book of great beauty that travels, via the 53 prose tales it contains, through many of these towns. The author recovers them for us through her gaze, and returns to them the voices and fullness of life that they had known.

From here, like a tree profoundly rooted in its origins, a great crown of branches can unfold. The later works of Maria Barbal have made use of short narrative (*Ulleres de sol*, Sunglasses, 1994) and the novel, to portray very different worlds and diverse

settings, but always with a constant digging, through her characters, into the very foundations of the human soul. She uses materials furnished by her own surroundings or distant realities, but always with a point of view located in the great problems of contemporary society. On two occasions, Barbal employed real events to develop the plot and describe a situation of injustice. This is the case for *Escrivia cartes al cel* (Writing Letters to the Sky, 1996) and her latest novel, *Emma* (2008). In the case of *Escrivia cartes al cel*, Barbal started from the news of a kidnapping in a preschool on the outskirts of Paris, which occurred in 1993. Writing in the hand of the main character, the author makes use of various narrative devices (personal letters, letters to the editor, interviews and personal ads) to serve as different lenses for describing a whole series of questions about the role of important elements of society, such as justice or the media, the importance of emotion and education, and the devastating effects of despair. In the case of *Emma*, Barbal's latest novel, the point of departure is an event that occurred in Barcelona, the burning of a homeless man in a bank teller machine booth. Barbal uses this piece of news to construct, in contrast, the character of Emma, the wife of a notable person in politics, who falls into poverty through love and deception. The contrast is the opulence of high society and the poverty in which it results. Besides this, social contradictions and injustice flourish again in this novel, specifically in order to denounce the subject of real estate speculation and to praise personal relationships and solidarity among the weakest.

Between these novels are many in which the author uses different settings to infuse life into her characters and construct their stories: in *Carrer Bolívia* (Bolivia Street, 1999), she returns to the subject of rootlessness, telling in choral style the story of Lina, an Andalusian girl who settles on Bolivia Street in Barcelona. Through her we travel the immigration boom, the era of workers' struggles, and anti-Franquist confrontations, not to mention generational conflict, human passions, and solidarity. In *Bella edat* (Beautiful Age, 2003) two elements inherent in the human condition are presented in a special manner: beauty and the passing of time. Starting from here, through the hand of the writer Fidel Sala, or Simoneta, his companion, the novel brings us face to face with beauty and ugliness, sickness and death, youth and age, and invites us to reflect on how our society treats these subjects. In *País íntim* (Intimate Country, 2005), Barbal returns to and advances the narrative thread begun in *Pedra de tartera*, a kind of continuity but with a generational leap. By making the conflictive relationship between the protagonist, Rita Albera and her mother explicit, Barbal shows us how injustice makes emotional development impossible. In a quite poetic way she causes us to realize the necessity of recovering historical memory, of compensating victims and closing wounds in order to construct a healthy society. It is at once a mother-daughter love song and a denunciation of wars and injustice. Once more, Barbal makes use of historical backgrounds in order to show the profound humanity of her characters. Whether they are masculine or feminine voices, they fight for their own dignity, despite having gone through events that often force them to experience situations of conflict. A forceful, essential style infuses Barbal's prose with a grand poetic tone, underwritten by a rigorous language that is always at the service of verisimilitude.

Pedra de tartera (Mountain Scree), Ed. Laia 1985

"A compact, rhythmic, complete work that ends just at the right moment, without dragging on more than is necessary (...) *Pedra de tartera* can be recommended on many accounts, the most important of which may be its style. It is one of the few books published in Catalan in quite some time that reminds us of what literature is really about, what an intelligent, thoughtful and beautiful exercise the act of writing can be."

Pilar Rahola, *El món*, April 26, 1986

"This book is one of tranquility, of a moving force and beauty. It has been a long time since I have read something like it. It teaches us how short life is and what is truly most important—basically to love, to be loved, to stay upright and to retain a sense of beauty. This book has something that only a few books have. You read it and it gives you strength. It is sad, but never sorrowful. Yes, any other book after this one has a hard act to follow."

Elke Heidenreich, *Lesen!*

"The great, great achievement of this novel is that it dynamites the cement of forgetting and frees the clear memories of life."

Martin Zähringer, *Frankfurter Rundschau*

"It has been a long time since I have read a book that throws such a long shadow over so many other fascinating books. A tender love story, a social portrait, a political novel and still so much more: despite the scarcely 100 pages of simple language, the book is a piece of universal literature!"

Christine Hunziker, *Comedia-Magazin*

La mort de Teresa (The Death of Teresa), Ed. Empúries 1986

"The stories as a whole produce an effect superior to the isolated value of some of them, because the accumulation of perspectives achieves that complexity we mentioned earlier. In the collection of stories, there are some that are worthy of an anthology and this I would seek to affirm even from a very demanding level and given the quality of the fiction produced in this country. "La mort de Teresa," "Excursió als estanys" (Hike to the Lakes), "Ninou," "Un dia diferent" (A Different Day), "Carta des de l'internat" (Letter from Boarding School), and "Minyoneta" (Little Maid) are small masterworks. Maria Barbal's style is exceptional and exceptionally recurrent in regards to her humane and sensible narrative tone."

Ramon Pla i Arxé, *Avui*, July 30, 1986

Les ales esteses (The Spread Wings), Ed. La Magrana 1993

"There is a poetic force underneath the apparent simplicity of these stories."

Carles Duarte, *Lletra de Canvi* no. 37, 1994

Mel i metzines (Honey and Poisons), Ed. La Magrana, 1990

"The art of Maria Barbal is the elegant artifice of bas-relief."

El País, March 29, 1990

"Maria Barbal reconciles the reader to reading."

Anna Ma Gil, *Diari de Barcelona*, March 31, 1990

"Maria Barbal has produced a winner: *Mel i metzines* is a good book, filled with inner drama and yet pleasing tender; tense with rash actions and suddenly softened by a dash of melancholy. As the title indicates, *Mel i metzines* is a blend of tenderness and tragedy, honey and poison, moments of sadness and joy, and that, quite simply, is life."

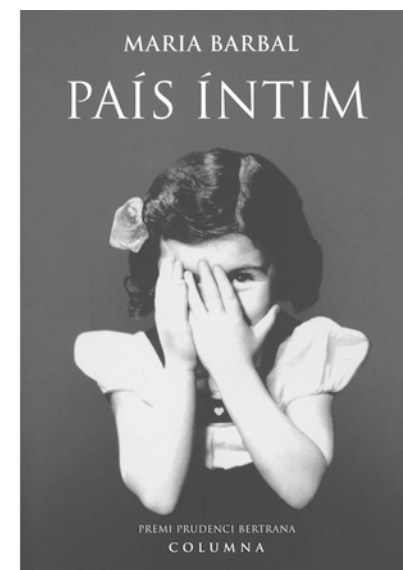
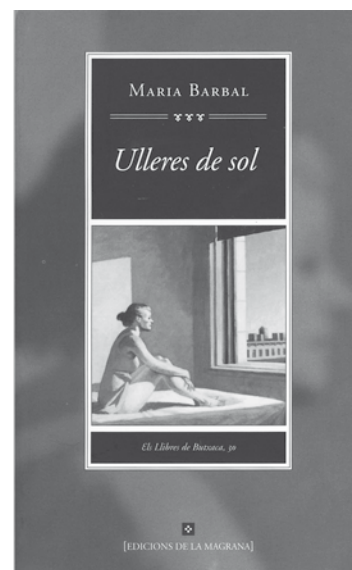
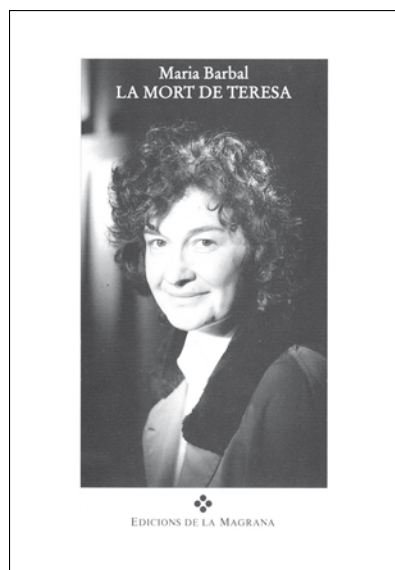
Isidor Cònsol, *Catalan Writing* no. 6, 1991

Càmfora (Camphor), Ed. La Magrana 1992

"Like the author's previous books, *Càmfora* is a story of losers, of rootless characters, of resignation and nostalgia, submission and small, never successful, revolts by characters bowed under the weight of the unwritten laws of traditions."

J.J. Isern, *Catalan Writing* no. 9, 1992

"Exile, solitude, nostalgia, love and indifference, incomprehension: all are faced by the characters in



Càmfora as experiences not—or not only—conditioned by their biographic wanderings but rather by the fact of existence. Here is where Maria Barbal's talent becomes dazzlingly apparent; in the restraint with which she expresses the emotional universe of her characters, in her apparently simple style of narrating the dramatic depths of some ostensibly obscure lives, in the small pain that startles us upon closing the book."

"Las riendas de la vida." Ana María Moix, *ABC Cultural*, May 13, 1999

Ulleres de sol (Sunglasses), Ed. La Magrana 1994

"Maria Barbal's second collection of short fiction is completely unlike its predecessor. Only her style remains the same: clean and concise, simultaneously sensitive and strong, emotionally contained but expressive. The five novellas that make up the book share yet another common feature: though the main characters in all five works are very different they are all women and each story is presented from a very particular point of view. Like the works of Chekov, Barbal's novellas capture the profound drama of human lives."

Joan Triadú, *Catalan Writing* no. 12, 1994

Escrivia cartes al cel (Writing Letters to the Sky), Ed. La Magrana 1996

"Despite the apparent simplicity of its reading, *Escrivia cartes al cel* is a book of rich complexity, each piece fitting perfectly, and nothing written in it could be considered superfluous. The reader will enjoy discovering the threads plotted by Maria Barbal. And the he or she will be thankful for having access to one of the few books where each new reading reveals details that had previously passed by unnoticed."

"Un complex artifici literari." Joan Josep Isern, *Avui*, 1996

"She could have overplayed the event, accumulating notes of drama padded with sentimentality, or could have let herself be carried away by suspense, overloading it with shades of intrigue. But that is not what she did; she knew how to play with settings and characters in a personal way, adding features and circumstances to give the facts a vision, with many poetic elements and knowledge of the human heart."

Cristóbal Sàrrias, *Catalunya Cristiana, Cultura*, March 28, 1996

Carrer Bolívia (Bolivia Street), Ed.62 1999

"*Carrer Bolívia* is at once a complex novel, by subject and structure, and of a vitality (...) that follows the characters' paths through surroundings that, while clarifying in one place, obscure in another, like dawn and dusk. From them comes the beginning and end of their struggles, up to the last chapter, titled "Great Expectations," but from Maria Barbal comes the inimitable embroidery of each sentence and adjective, and the inimitable poetic vision that penetrates us via the novel."

Joan Triadú, *Avui*, 1999

"The very complexity and richness of the resulting style: each sentence seems to have been achieved after a rigorous task of purification and the elimination of anything that

could be superfluous; a perfect narrative economy, then, that does not seek to explain everything (...) A narrative discourse, furthermore, that the completely feminine sensibility of the author impregnates with images, comparisons and metaphors, in which is accomplished the miracle of true literature and true poetry: to make us feel as inherent and necessary that which never ceases to be purely arbitrary. *Carrer Bolívia* is one of the best contemporary novels."

Jordi Malé, *Revista de Catalunya*

Bella Edat (Beautiful Age), Ed. 62 2003

"There are vital attitudes that must be achieved: the doubtful (the project of failed love), the search for one's own past (and painful discovery). Or reflections about people's charm, beauty and loyalty, as well as the very incarnation of these considerations in a main character who is slave to her own image. To conclude, one must mention..., Barbal's beautiful, beautiful prose."

Estanislau Vidal-Folch, *El Periódico*, April 11, 2003

"*Bella edat* is a book of many characters, both present and absent. But it is, more than anything, a book that asks a great question, one we all ask, whatever the time given for us to live in: to what extent are we free? Liberty is one of the great subjects I was referring to, maybe the most important, of which there is much to be said."

Neus Canyelles, *Última hora*, May 4, 2003

País íntim (Intimate Country), Ed. Columna 2005

"This is a beautiful story, a denunciation of shame, a recuperation and recreation of historical memory (...) Despite being called a novel it is clearly based on true events, which shape the climaxes of the narrative and nourish a plot that moves as if throbbing, like a flowing river."

"Mater dolorosa." Estanislau Vidal-Folch, *El Periódico*, January 19, 2006

"We are faced with, then, one of Maria Barbal's great novels and, doubtless, with one that demonstrates the peak of her maturity as a writer. We find in the novel a narrative choice—dialogue in one voice—(...) which, furthermore, comes to a point in the final, emotional and memorable section, and which brings us, by way of a further element, the delight of a language and vocabulary of great expressive beauty. I am running out of space, but pay attention: go buy a ticket for a trip to this magnificent *País íntim*."

"Mapa d'un país íntim." Joan Josep Isern, *Avui*, November 16, 2005

Emma, Ed. Columna 2008

"Emma is my favorite Maria Barbal novel to date. The story and her way of expressing it are cum laude. The ending, unexpected and open, is extraordinary. And modern, daring, different. But the entire course of the book, with all its meanderings, is an approach, and an approach through a story, or a character, that truly gets under your skin."

Josep Maria Benet i Jornet (playwright)