

# Who's Who

CATALAN WRITING

## A SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY OF JOAN FRANCESC MIRA

1974 *El bou de foc* (The Fire Bull). Valencia, Tres i Quatre, [novel]

1975 *Els cucs de seda* (The Silkworms). Valencia, Tres i Quatre, [stories]

1981 *El desig dels dies* (The Desire of Days). Valencia, Tres i Quatre, [novel]

1983 *Viatge al final del fred* (Journey to the End of Cold). Barcelona: La Magrana, [revised and expanded edition, Alzira: Bromera, 1998]

1984 *Crítica de la nació pura* (Criticism of the Pure Nation). Valencia: Tres i Quatre, [Essay]

1987 *Punt de mira* (Sightline). Valencia: Tres i Quatre, [Essay]

1989 *Els treballs perduts* (The Lost Works). Valencia: Tres i Quatre, [Novel] ,

1997 *Els sorolls humans* (Human Sounds). [Essay] Alzira: Bromera.

1998 *Quatre qüestions d'amor* (Four Questions of Love). [Stories] Valencia: Tres i Quatre.

1999 *Borja Papa* (Pope Borja). [Novel] Valencia: Tres i Quatre, 1996; Barcelona: Proa. *Sobre ídols i tribus* (On Idols and Tribes). [Essay] Valencia: Tres i Quatre.

2003 *Purgatori* (Purgatory). [Novel] Barcelona: Proa.

2005 *Literatura, món, literatures i altres discursos sobre parlar i escriure* (Literature, World, Literatures and Other Discourses on Speaking and Writing). [Essay] Valencia. Publicacions de la Universitat de València.

2006 *Paradís, pestes, kalàixnikovs i altres temes i qüestions* (Paradise, Plagues, Kalashnikovs and Other Themes and Questions). [Essay] València. Tres i Quatr.

2008 *El professor d'història* (The History Professor). [Novel] Barcelona: Proa.

# Joan Francesc Mira

LITERARY HISTORIES tend to sort authors into a genre, based on one or two specific works. Only with difficulty could we label Joan Francesc Mira (Valencia, 1939) a novelist, anthropologist, essayist, or political and cultural activist, because he is above all a multi-faceted man in terms of his writings and, as he defines himself, an “active or contemplative anthropologist.”

Of all these things, his most literary angle—that of essayist and novelist—represents a milestone of quality in Catalan letters. This literary character revolves around a global conception of culture integral to both writing disciplines.

The more imaginative of the two, fiction, has played with the universe of symbols and myths since his early work. Thus *Els cucs de seda* (The Silkworms, 1975) includes a sense of discovering the world, of leaving the cocoon, and Daniel in *El bou de foc* (The Fire Bull, 1974) evokes Biblical references and turns the idea of the hero upside down, which fits with the contemporary antihero most in use. We also find a Hercules of Valencian postmodernity in *Els treballs perduts* (The Lost Work, 1989), a motorized Dante in Valencian purgatory (*Purgatori*, 2003) and a Faust who connects Goethian motifs to a vision of what revolves around him (*El professor d'història* [The History Professor], 2008).

Still there is the load of symbology on the structure—the value of twelve as a number related to the solar cycle, for example—and the names of his characters, the story that contemplates each corner of the city of Valencia, the Valencian land, or even the Rome of the Borjas (*Borja Papa* [Pope Borja], 1999). To read the novels of Joan Francesc Mira is to read the history of Europe, as the digressions of some narratives demonstrate. With *El professor d'història* (2008), we find a clear example, with an abundance of reflections on rationalism and the human condition.

Above all, the author is a specialist in the articulation of discourse, not a vacuous assertion if we attend to his skill in the text. If in cinematography we admire wisely administered camera technique, in Mira the novelist and storyteller we must admire his capacity to navigate between the discourse of the narrator and his characters. Changes of narrative voice flow without being forced because they play so skillfully at appearing in the most fitting moment. Reporting the thoughts of a subject through monologue, including free indirect style to maintain ambiguity of the voice, manifesting direct style as a way to evince ideological features of the characters: these are proof of the writer's agility.

All of this, of course, is accompanied by cultural reserves, filling the wisdom of his pages by the incorporation of historiography, anthropology, philosophy, politics, even the archive. To this is added the recourse of intertextuality, opportunely employed, as an incentive for reading.

This knowledge, which is shown more clearly in studies of an academic or historical style—see the works on Vicent Ferrer (2002), Blasco Ibáñez (2004) or the Borjas (2000)—becomes the foundation on which is constructed a good part of the arguments of his essays. Opinion, meditation on a transcendental question, or even the most apparently casual fact, is a question of craft, where we are shown the rational being, capable of writing about the essential authors and features of literature and applying the most pure sense of “logos” (*Literatura, món, literatures* [Literature, World, Literatures], 2005). In fact, the appearance of the word “rational” in all of Mira's essays is notable, and here history and the capacity for comparison come back to the surface.

Fundamentally, the logic of the essayist is soaked in a willingness to rethink things, to break clichés, to sift through ideas and pass them through the sieve of facts, in contrast to the superficiality of media pundits today. In this there is a very skeptical vision of the thought of the postmodern era and a taste for detail, for meticulousness, which does not lack a high dose of irony.

On postmodern thought and life (*Els sorolls humans* [Human Noises], 1997), we find reflections regarding relations between the individual and society. The analysis of the group plays an important role. This does not only refer to the tribal components of Catalonia, but also the way to worry (or not to worry) about national writers, the affability of North Americans mistreated by the most crushing prejudices (*Cap d'any a Houston, Texas* [New Year in Houston, Texas], 1998) or the analysis of news such as the dissolving of the Eastern bloc.

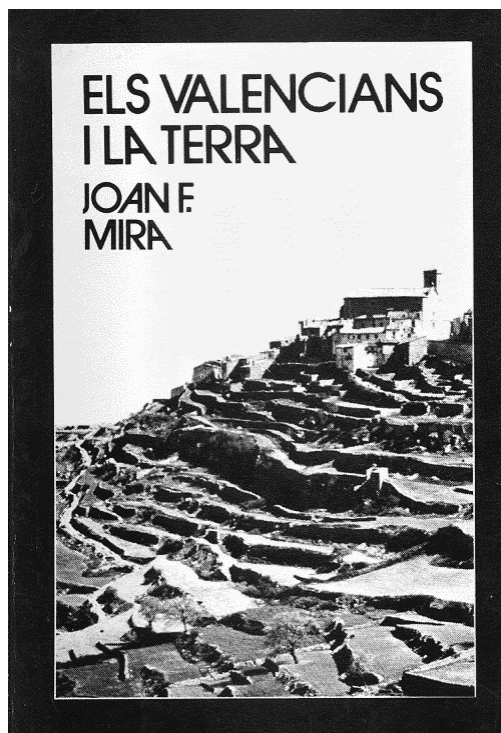
It all seems to be the fruit of the same thing, at once many things: the capacity to assimilate other texts, a solid humanistic education, and a devotion to reading—not just the classics of antiquity, but also contemporary classics. This is made manifest in some translations that show, more than the pure urge to exchange one language for another, the enjoyment of the original text and the desire to figure out the semantics of every word of origin. The versions of Dante's *Comedy* (2001), Tabucchi's *Nocturn a l'Índia* (Nocturne in India, 1997) or Francesca Duranti's *El germanista* (The Germanist, 1989), among others, are proof of his intention to put into Catalan that which goes beyond simple equivalencies of the dictionary.

Joan Francesc Mira skillfully assimilates those incombustible features of the history of literature and gives them shape, so that the avid reader may consume his wholly modern and vigorous writings.

Adolf Piquer



## Works reviewed



### ***Els valencians i la terra* (Valencians and the Land).**

Tres i Quatre,

*Els valencians i la terra* is one of Joan Francesc Mira's earliest anthropological works. Despite the years that have passed, it has become a key work of testimony to what the Valencians were like. At a time when the depopulation of rural areas indicated a society's future, Mira's careful fieldwork shows us, data in hand, what agrarian lifestyles were like until the 1970s, both in cultivated and uncultivated lands, often forgotten in the clichés about Valencian territory.

In other words, he presented an entire methodical study about ways of life that were at the time beginning a drastic change, adding an anthropological element that also turned historic because it became required reading in some universities, whether deliberately or not. Some of the testimonies, the personal experiences that paint a portrait of collective episodes of a society at a moment of metamorphosis, are priceless.

The great achievement of the book was knowing how to choose those who gave it voice. Although it would seem irrelevant in other cases, this is crucial for understanding the appearance of ethnological elements in the author's literary creation: from *El bou de foc* (The Fire Bull), through *Els cucs de seda* (The Silkworms), even *Viatge al final del fred* (Journey to the End of Cold) and *El desig dels dies* (The Desire of Days), all depend on this component, born from observation of the lands.

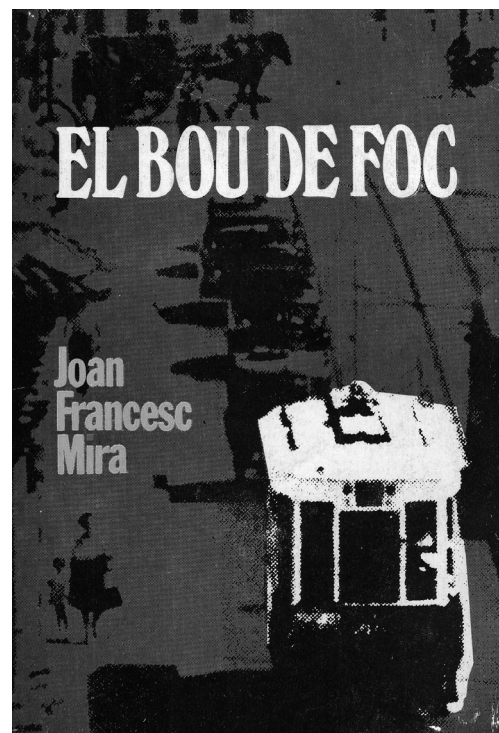
### ***El bou de foc* (The Fire Bull).**

Valencia, Tres i Quatre, 1974.

*El bou de foc* is, apart from the novel that began Joan Francesc Mira's venture into fiction, a historic-literary reference to the degree that it brought modernity into Catalan literature. He belongs to a generation of writers who reinvigorated Catalan letters after the long period of lethargy in which it was plunged after the Spanish Civil War.

The novel also deals with this theme, although in an oblique way. The silence of the people, who hide what they know out of the fear they experience in the post-war period, as they hide other truths that the main character must uncover, is one of the thematic motifs that ties into a feeling of a figure confronting hostile surroundings. Like the Biblical Daniel, the Daniel in *El bou de foc* falls prey to a trap designed by men in the service of established power.

The anti-hero of contemporary novels was introduced into Catalan letters following the benchmarks of writers in English and French. We might sense this when connecting Mira's writing to the work of Saul Bellow, and not just him, but also other North American writers who were practically unknown in Catalonia and Spain at the time.



### ***El desig dels dies* (The Desire of Days).**

Tres i Quatre, 1981.

Josep Iborra has already noted that *El desig dels dies* was the memoir of a generation. This novel traces a path through Valencian history of the sixties and early seventies. It is a novel that achieves the greatest degree of narrative experimentalism in Mira's writing career. Orality is shown clearly in the novel, starting from the fact that the narrator presents his entire discourse as a tape recording.

With the appearance of orality, then, the journey through years past is divided into chapters that testify to widely diverse themes. These vary from the appearance of a kind of ideological guide at the assembly hall of the University of Valencia—whose name is Arnau, like Maragall's count; in other words, he lives among the dead—to the apostolic activity of the leader's twelve followers, and finally to the chapters dedicated to episodes of love and death, like the cycle of life. The book takes this rounded form with two parts divided into twelve chapters, which recall the twenty-four hours of the day in which the narrator records his thoughts.

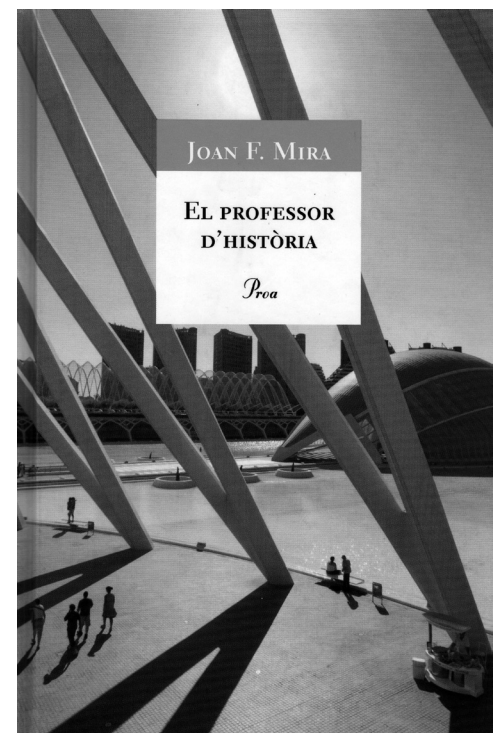
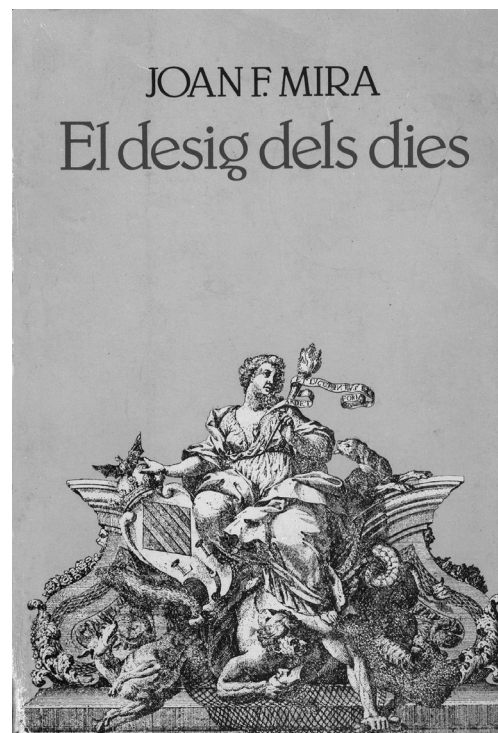
The abundance of digressions inserted into the pure narrative, thoughts dwelling on any narrative theme—from Brassen's discovery to a very Joycean reflection on language—together with contrapuntal games—including a very interesting fragment in which the characters dance rock and roll—and the interior monologues that often fuse with digressions, make the novel a complex narrative fabric that perhaps was found difficult to digest by a certain kind of reader. It is a challenge to read it even with the distance of time.

### ***Els treballs perduts* (The Lost Labors).**

Tres i Quatre, 1989

This is surely Joan Francesc Mira's most balanced novel, for its realization of a text that harmonizes the most contemporary literary resources with rather traditional narrative themes and a fictionalization based on very local elements in the city of Valencia.

The novel is organized around the twelve labors of Hercules, in which each labor has a corresponding action that defies the main character's surroundings. The individual, a quixotic type, becomes a character whom a good part of his family considers a child, save a nephew who rides a Harley and helps him in his efforts, and an old prostitute who lives in the palatial home of his grandfather.



### ***Els sorolls humans* (Human Sounds).**

Joan Francesc Mira's observational character is manifested as much in his fiction as in his essays. In the latter, he makes frequent recourse to the anecdote, which continues to take on new dimensions as the process of rationalizing the event goes forward. This occurs in *Els sorolls humans* when he starts from a momentary event, the narration of an occurrence, to open up a series of reflections on the human condition, on customs and other complex aspects of society's makeup. Explaining a change of address or the contemplation of a painting are elements sufficient enough for proceeding to reflect on construction in postmodernity, community, or some specific anthropological component.

Joan F. Mira's essays, like Joan Fuster's, often resort to these singular facts, seemingly insignificant, to open windows of thought, administering a dose of cultural awareness and situating us before rational reflection. Without a doubt, it is a discursive strategy designed with ease by the one who has the literary hook at his disposal and then winds the reel towards the most wide-ranging philosophical spheres.

### ***El professor d'història* (The History Professor).**

Proa, 2008

In *El professor d'història* we find the culmination of a creative process initiated by Mira with *Els treballs perduts* and continued with *Purgatori*. All three works, with a background of contemporary Valencia, rest on a mythic structure: Hercules, Dante's *Comedy*, and finally, Faustian myth.

As Goethe does with his restless professor to obtain absolute knowledge, Mira's Professor Salom posits the existence of everything surrounding him, contemplates the world from the heights, the depths and the oceans, or travels at the side of a Mephistopheles transmuted into a canine figure, even on a strange Walpurgis Night among the nocturnal prostitutes of modern illegal immigration.

In contrast to the German background, which has a dramatic form, the narrative voice is subjectivized by choosing the hero's perspective, although it is not technically a monologue. The book rests on reflections of a profundity very near to essay, often starting with an anecdote. These reflections, couched in sentences of a considerable length, help the reader to stay awake and alert for the opinion and description therein.

It is a work of contrasts: the professor, interested in knowledge in spite of tedious students; strong and rational thinking in spite of postmodernity; magnificent architecture with specific social functions in spite of contemporary banality; east and west; youth and age; our technological world and the so-called third world...