



Quim Monzó

- 1952 Born Barcelona
- 1966 Attends Massana Art School and starts working in a studio: L'Estudi Publicitari Industrial
- 1970 Works as a war correspondent and travels to Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Mozambique, Kenya, Tanzania, Northern Ireland
- 1976 The grison's howl from the sewers wins the Prudenci Bertrana Prize for the novel
- 1977 Self Service (with Biel Mesquida)
- 1978 Uf, he said
- 1981 Olivetti, Moulinex, Chaffoteaux and Maury (1980) wins the Critica Serra d'Or prize.
- 1983 Co-scriptwriter of the film Angel's bread.
- 1983 Petrol.
- 1984 The Day of the Lord.
- 1986 Maians Island (1985) wins the Critica Serra d'Or prize.
- 1987 Zzzzzzzz.
- 1989 The extent of the tragedy wins the El Temps prize.
- 1990 The Turkish suitcase.
- 1991 Hotel intercontinental.
- 1993 The reason for everything (1993) wins the City of Barcelona prize.
- 1994 The reason for everything (1993) wins the Critica Serra d'Or prize.
- 1994 I won't plant any trees.
- 1997 Guadalajara (1996) wins the Critica Serra d'Or prize.
- 1998 Utterly defenceless before hostile alien empires.
- 2000 Eighty six stories (1999) wins the National Prize for Literature and the Lletra d'Or prize.
- 2000 It's all lies.
- 2001 The best of worlds.
- 2002 Awarded Catalan Writers' prize.
- 2003 The subject of the subject.
- 2003 Three Christmases (illustrations by Ramon Enrich).



From utopia to shock and amazement

Julià Guillamon

I can still remember the impact caused in 1980 by the publication of "Olivetti, Moulinex, Chaffoteaux and Maury". Quim Monzó's first books (including "Uf, he said") formed part of the rhetoric of the counterculture. They contained psychedelic references (blue fields, green and bright orange skies), false crime stories similar to those of Handke or Godard and surrealistic solutions (women with transparent breasts and men who ate printed letters). "Olivetti..." moved in a different direction. In contrast to the way the counterculture defended and praised its own life style, Monzó observed human behaviour and described it in great detail. His stories were basically urban. In the 70s the same locations (the Ramblas and Escudillers Street) formed the background to two radically different visions of the city: festive, liberated territory ("Rambles" by Sisa) and the setting for contemporary neurosis ("Bilbao" by Bigas Luna). Monzó's vision showed more contrasts. In his stories, we were shown a Barcelona which was full of familiar places (bars and restaurants open till dawn) and which promised wonderful things (freedom from routine and couple swapping) but also, in equal measure, alienating routines and confusing mix ups.

There are two key stories in "Olivetti" which help us understand the change from the 70s to the 80s. The first "Cacofonia" describes the journey taken by the main character, very early in the morning, as he goes from Tibidabo to the Ramblas and then meets a girl in the Baviera bar. She tells him that their generation's imaginary world has fallen apart. Each person is now interested in something different (one wants to be the person with most money, another wants to seduce a different girl each day, another to eat a lot, work all the time and take more amphetamines than anyone else). They get in a car and drive up Balmes Street in the wrong direction, against the traffic, something which loses dramatic effect as there's hardly any traffic around at that time of day. The main character of "The vegetable kingdom" reconstructs the story of his life from the period of Les Enfants Terribles, when he spent his time in bars with prostitutes and US marines, until his eventual disenchantment, (Monzó's ideas are like those of Pau Malvido in the famous series "We are the damned" in the magazine "Star"), and ends with a funny vegetarian recipe applied to sexual relations. The ideals have gone, but nobody complains and the main character has become a libertine. Now he is only interested in proselytizing and winning over as many girls as possible with his idea.

Since "Olivetti", Monzó's work has continued along the same lines: "Maian's Island" shows the dissatisfaction, alienation and voyeurism of bourgeois life. "The reason for everything" illustrates the human farce of love and the rituals of sex. "Guadalajara" describes the repetition and weariness of the individual in a modern city (a city which has gradually lost its reference points and become a space with no names). Monzó develops short series of stories which reappear in several different books. At the start, he used cinematic images as a metaphor for the frailty of conscience, desire and memory ("Un cinema", "Nines russes/Russian dolls"). Or he based scenes on typical situations from pornography: romantic seduction "Historia d'amor/Love Story", a meeting in a train ("La dama salmó/The salmon woman", "Ferrocarril"/"Railway") or the piano lesson ("Filantropia del mobiliari/The Philanthropy of the furniture"). Some of the stories contain numerous references to the obsession with tidiness and its opposite, the gratuitous act ("El nord del sud"/"The north of the south", "To Choose"). The last books highlight the anguish of the professional writer ("El segrest"/"The highjack", "La literatura"/"Literature") and include superb parodies of short stories and literary classics: Sleeping Beauty ("La bella dorment"), Cinderella ("La monarquia/The monarchy") or Kafka's Metamorphosis ("Gregor").

One of the keys to Monzó's success is that his work can be interpreted in a variety of ways. He has often been considered as the writer responsible for reviving modern literary Catalan. Some traditional Catalan philologists compare him to Carner and even, I read the other day, to Martí de Riquer because of his intensity and discipline. European critics, however, link his work to that of Kafka, Borges and Rabelais. It is interesting to note how the strategies of cultural legitimisation have worked in his case. I believe that Monzó has created his own aura of success. For me, he is a curious enthusiast and a great individualist. The description of a character in one of his most recent stories fits him perfectly (he never manages to finish reading a book because, as he sees it, nothing is better than the sense of potential and freedom implicit in the first pages, when you don't know how the story is going to continue). Throughout his career Monzó has had many models, including Cabrera Infante, Frank Zappa, Grupo Pánico, Wolinski, Trabal, Handke and Donald Bartheleme. Recently he has also discovered affinities with writers such as Robert Coover or Slawomir Mrozek. While not committing himself to any of these in particular, he has managed to integrate and ensure the continuity of their influence in a personal interpretation of the literary tradition which stretches from the vibrant literary utopia of the 70s to the shock and amazement caused by living in current times.

Works reviewed

The grison's howl from the sewers Barcelona: Edicions 62, 1976

"The techniques of representational literature, which are basically descriptive and mainly and even more so in this case, narrative, have been diluted. (Unfortunately not totally). Or if you prefer it the opposite way round, they have been ignored or even positively despised. However this has happened as a result of the techniques being taken to one of their possible extremes (i.e. not disobeying but exacerbating them). Carles H. Mor, *Galaxia Cutemberg*

Self-service Barcelona: Iniciatives Editoriales SA, 1977

Short story collection written with Biel Mesquida, "which is separate from Quim Monzó's subsequent work and reminds us of the coordinated aesthetics of the work of some of his fellow authors of the so-called '70's generation' (Oriol Pi de Cabanyes; Lluís Fernàndez, Jordi Coca, Biel Mesquida...), clearly influenced by the French magazine: *Tel quel*, by Julia Kristeva". *Lletra* (www.uoc.edu)

Uf, he said. Barcelona: Quaderns Crema, 1978

The author wants to avoid the deadly maze of dry, perfect prose and to identify the suicidal beauty of genuine desire. Maybe we really do need to take both reality and day to day living to their final and most startling consequences. Quim Monzó has embarked on an arduous route, working with materials finely tuned to each situation and combined with the best imaginative resources. Joaquín Arnáiz, *Diario 16* (Madrid)

Olivetti, Moulinex, Chaffoteaux and Maury. Barcelona: Quaderns Crema, 1980

"All the stories deal with day to day events and all are horrific, but these are horrors which occur in an almost trivial manner, as a result of a missed appointment, a broken heater, anonymous phone calls or sometimes, a whim as innocent as wanting to go against the status quo." Anna Diatkine, *Libération* (Paris)

Mr. Monzó continues the rich tradition of Spanish surrealism, both with his deliberately paranoid sense of the danger to be found in apparently normal things: a typewriter that explodes and an electric razor that grows fangs, and the visionary and sometimes lyrical quality of his writing." Oliver Conant, *The New York Times*

Petrol. Barcelona: Quaderns Crema, 1983

Monzó is a writer who skilfully mixes two registers: one might be called realistic and lyrical; the other: fantastic and grotesque. Like Nabokov, he possesses the supreme art of being able to juggle desperately with words while at the same time showing the cutting nature of the pain which penetrates the mask of their most striking features." Pierre Lepape, *Le Monde*, (Paris)

The Day of the Lord. Barcelona: Quaderns Crema, 1984

"The *Day of the Lord* illustrates several of Monzó's most subtly expressive skills. For example, his desire, based on a fact he considers to be ridiculous, absurd or simply surrealistic, to construct other possible or equivalent facts, and to present them as questions or potential statements of fact." *El Correo Catalán* (Barcelona)

Maïans Island. Barcelona: Quaderns Crema, 1985

"Monzó has learnt to play with his readers; he knows how to control his material and to ensure that we participate and become totally involved in the story. And then, once he's got us completely fooled, he turns the situation on its head by opening his supremely intelligent box of surprises.

"It's useless trying to introduce his characters. They are like us: small, mean, jealous, revengeful, imitative, incapable of attributing to another a mental function of their own, they love observing their clone and they seem friendly and have an unquestioned sense of logic." Anne Diatkine, *Libération* (Paris)

Zzzzzzzzzzz. Barcelona: Quaderns Crema, 1987

"Critical reflections of an intelligent writer with a balanced view of humanity, who shows no compromise regarding either commitment or political events. The articles were good on their own. Now published together, the writer's skills and the effect of these on the reader are highlighted even further." Isidor Consul, *Serra d'Or* (Barcelona)

"Monzó does something which I'd call 'playful opposition'. What's that? For me, it's a kind of opposition that is systematic, biting and enjoyable; an opposition which, without a vast amount of information and great technical skill, would be unbearably vulgar" Miquel Martí i Pol, *Avui* (Barcelona)

The extent of the tragedy Barcelona: Quaderns Crema, 1989

After an ethylic night of fornication, the main character of this novel finds he has a permanent erection. This unexpected metamorphosis leads to a period of rampant sexual activity which lasts as far as Chapter 8, when he is forced to confront the tragic side of his bizarre anatomical transformation: he only has a few more weeks to live. From then on, the novel's original festive, erotic tone changes and it becomes a dark, painful thriller, its bitter mood now shown to be the reverse side of the coin originally representing lust for pleasure and life. The characters continuously have to face their immediate future in a story which is a striking satire on sentimentality and superficiality, an unpolished jewel written from a lucidly pessimistic and utterly non masochistic viewpoint.

The Turkish suitcase Barcelona: Quaderns Crema, 1990

There are no sociological X-rays or philosophical reflections and there is no political analysis in the more than 50 articles published in this collection. Monzó isn't interested in any of these. He has chosen a more cunning alternative: His aim is to expose specific facts which form part of the confusion of day to day living; to highlight specific aspects and to distort them a little or a lot so that they speak for themselves and become clear examples of those acquired habits which constitute the large area in Catalan society occupied by cretinism." Josep M. Lloró, *El Temps* (València)

Hotel Intercontinental. Barcelona: Quaderns Crema, 1991

"Monzó is a connoisseur in the art of searching out wounds, looking at them in amazement and then, in his writing, jabbing at them, disgorging their innards and shaking up the reader." Antoni Mateu, *Avui* (Barcelona)

"Despite the brevity of the genre, at times almost like a short story, Quim Monzó offers us his version of the reality of our society at the end of the century, using a sense of humour which is often satirical, a radically critical viewpoint that is sharp but never bitter, and a prose style worthy of his narrative alter-ego." Josep Bargalló Valls, *Avui* (Barcelona)

The reason for everything. Barcelona: Quaderns Crema, 1993

"His short stories are sensitive pirouettes, fascinating examples of literary art which, with their philosophical base, are captivating and enjoyable." Tanja Rauch, *Elle* (Munich)

I won't plant any trees. Barcelona: Quaderns Crema, 1994

In this book "there is an ever-present critical attitude, channelled via a fierce irony and a constant appeal for common sense, with a non-conformist viewpoint highlighted in statements such as: "But I am sickened by the mean, the cheap inquisitors, those weak-spirited people who try to redeem a whole life of mediocrity by annoying others". Quim Monzó directs his criticism and his most potent sarcasm at these individuals and many others like them." *Serra d'Or* (Barcelona)

Guadalajara. Barcelona: Quaderns Crema, 1996

Rather than stories, these are parodies of daily life: strange stories about a man unable to leave his house because a magic force keeps him inside or about children born with six fingers". Pietro Cheli, *Glamour* (Milan)

"Quim Monzó examines all the ways in which human beings fail to communicate with each other and all the ways in which he can describe this failure. His characters live alone or with families where they are unable to communicate the ideas they so desperately want to share. Their isolation is not caused by any psychological defect or trauma but rather by the very nature of human existence." Mark Juditz, *World Literature Today* (Oklahoma)

Utterly defenceless before hostile alien empires Barcelona: Quaderns Crema, 1998

"Monzó's articles are like a superbly accurate, fantastic machine which travels to a difficult place or subject, applies a generous dose of common sense, adds a necessary but unexpected dose of sincerity and continues on its way, cleaning and ordering the material being inspected while the amazed spectators observe the ray of light gradually sorting out what hitherto was confused and neglected." Ponç Puigdevall, *El Punt* (Girona)

Eighty six stories (Uf, he said; Olivetti, Muolinex, Chaffoteaux and Maury, Maïans Island, The reason for everything and Guadalajara) Barcelona: Quaderns Crema, 1999

"The most important aspect of this collection is, without doubt, the fact that it enables us to see a wide selection of work by an extremely successful writer of Catalan literature, at the close of the twentieth century. Quim Monzó has been a controversial writer from the start, mainly because of his desire to break with certain creative stereotypes. He has been an innovator, always determined to produce work which is far from being 'transcendental' but nonetheless full of a meaning that, while repeating familiar models, is usually hidden behind a somewhat formal, austere setting." Vicent Alonso, "Els vuitanta-sis de Monzó", *Caracters*, no 8.

It's all a lie. Barcelona: Quaderns Crema, 2000

"This is quality journalism without any showing off. Quim Monzó paints an extraordinary portrait of Catalan society using simple language, a modest rhetoric, insinuating rather than exhibiting ideas, and presenting opinions on apparently banal subjects." *El Periódico* (Barcelona)

"The opening lines confirm that we are reading literature and that the laconically seductive power of the text is the work of a true writer, whose origins as a journalist are not, in this case, incompatible with what is the essence of literature: a rigorous verbal network." Ponç Puigdevall, *Presència*

The best of worlds Barcelona: Quaderns Crema, 2001

"Quim Monzó's world, emerging from the rich Spanish surrealistic tradition but also inherited from a close reading of Kafka, submerges us in a universe which is deliberately paranoid and perverse. Lyrical brilliance, macabre outbursts, and a cruel imagination: these are the strengths of a narrative which is always constructed with an serious intelligence made even more ferocious by the omnipresent sense of logic." Gérard de Cortanze, *Le Figaro* (Paris)

The subject of the subject Barcelona: Quaderns Crema, 2003

"The language is enlightening, the theme gripping. The journalistic style, brilliant and varied, adapts and transcends the flux of contemporary life: from the false letter which ridicules its recipient to the mini-story about someone who loses his telephone connection (like others before him lost their shadow)". Julià Guillaumon, *Culturas, La Vanguardia* (Barcelona)

"With originality, humour and a controlled indignation Monzó uses his wide range of rhetorical skills to denounce the gregarious instinct towards collective living, the lexical wheeling and dealing of the classes in power and the fossilization of rituals." Ponç Puigdevall, *El País* (Barcelona)

Three Christmases Barcelona: Quaderns Crema, 2003 Includes 'White Christmas' from 'Utterly defenceless before hostile alien empires', 'The match seller' from 'The best of worlds' and 'The commission'.

"The three stories in this collection have a similar objective: the deconstruction of cultural clichés and specifically the way in which Christmas has become the most common of these, even affecting those with the least demanding palates." José María Pozuelo Yvancos, *ABC* (Madrid)

"In one of the stories in *The best of worlds*, a young boy calls one of his classmates a "son of a bitch" and the latter takes the expression literally, not as an insult. A more or less believable situation such as this would no doubt be used by a different writer simply in order to describe a ridiculous scene. Monzó sticks to his initially coherent viewpoint but takes it to the extreme so that the fact that the boy takes the insult literally finally leads to a family tragedy." Carles Miró. *Caràcters* 26.

Fourteen cities including Brooklyn. Barcelona: Quaderns Crema, 2004

Monzó has travelled to different places involved in conflicts for *El Periódico* and *La Vanguardia* (he was in New York the week of 11th September 2001 and in Israel in Spring 2002). His work as a foreign correspondent began in 1989 when the *Diari de Barcelona* asked him to write a series of reports on the fall of the Communist regimes in Czechoslovakia and Rumania. He has also written reports of this type with marked surrealistic overtones: as a tourist in Barcelona or travelling around Europe from one airport to another without setting foot in any cities. The result is 'Fourteen cities including Brooklyn'.

GUIOMAR COLL

