

**Julià Guillamon**

# The Catalan immigration novel

**Following the publication in the magazine “Mirador” of a series of reports by Carles Sentís entitled “Múrcia, exportadora d’homes” (Murcia, Exporter of Men, October 1932-January 1933), the Barcelona press opened up a debate on the pros and cons of regulating the arrival of new immigrants. Carles Soldevila referred to the debate in an article in “La Rambla”, “L’indígena i el foraster” (The Native and the Foreigner, 6 March 1933), in which he offered an imaginary dialogue between a Catalan and an immigrant. The immigrant defended his right to work and residence.**

The Catalan demanded that energetic measures be taken to put an end to hunger, dirt and poverty. “What do we have to gain from seeing the civilising nucleus of our land, its artistic instinct, its love of hygiene, its spiritual concerns, and even its feeling for refinement being submerged by a seeing expansion of ignorance, unbridled nonconformity and blinding trachoma?”.

On 10 August 1933, Josep Maria de Sagarra returned to the issue raised in the *Mirador* article with a piece entitled “Poesia murciana” (Murcian Poetry). That year, in the literary competition the Jocs Florals of Badalona, a writer from Murcia had presented a poem. “We have now seen how complicated the question of immigration has become, how there are neighbourhoods in Barcelona that are completely Murcian or Almerian, from head to toe, and how they refer to the poor natives who live there as “*los catalanes*” in the same tone of contempt as that used by an American when he points at a Negro”. Sagarra sarcastically asks if the Murcians are going to take over the Jocs Florals as well. He finishes the piece with a provocative and derisive twist: “The day the Murcians become *mestres en Gai Saber*<sup>1</sup>, sing *Els segadors*<sup>2</sup>, dance sardanas, kill turkeys and take

up kite flying, we shall have no alternative but to start producing explosives and eating nice fresh humble pie on Sundays”.

For Sagarra, immigration represented much more than a key demographic and social problem. It was a threat to the work of cultural reconstruction that had been initiated with the *Renaixença*<sup>3</sup>. When this menace began to move into literary circles, the Jocs Florals became the focus of a debate that pitted the generation of the founders against that of younger poets, and that was finally settled with a compromise solution. Would it be necessary to come to the same kind of pact with the Murcians? The matter was closed with a final absurdity, a conundrum rather like the camel and the eye of the needle: the day the Murcians become Catalans, the Catalans will become FAI anarchists.

The views of Carles Soldevila and Josep Maria de Sagarra put paid to any possible Catalan immigration novel. If the conflict between locals and foreigners had reached this point of mutual rejection, it was most unlikely that they could share the space of a novel. In his studies on low-life literature, Jordi Castellanos has noted the anomaly of a Barcelona exposed to a persistent double cliché —the “beautiful ivory city” confronted with the “other” belligerent city of low-born culture. In *Fanny* (1929) and *Eva* (1931), Carles Soldevila never moves from these two worlds: the fine house in the good neighbourhood of Sarrià and the Equestrian Circle, and the Casa de Caritat poorhouse or the Catalanised Paral·lel Avenue with all its music halls where, in a strange act of expiation a girl from a good family can end up as a chorus girl. In *Vida privada* (Private Life, 1932), Josep Maria de Sagarra depicts the mixture of new money and rancid aristocracy, Catalanism and the Castilianised bourgeoisie that plays along with the Primo de Rivera dictatorship. One of the central and most burlesque episodes is the outing of Hortènsia Portell and her friends to District Five. Sagarra takes them through the Cid Street and Perecamps Street, conveying something between real terror, indifference and the reminiscence of reading Dostoyevsky. The Murcian territories of la Torrassa, el Ninot, Poble-sec, el Camp de Galvany and Pubilla Casas that appear in his column “L’aperitiu” will have no place in novels until much later.

## A COMMON SPACE?

When Francesc Candel published his *Els altres catalans* (The Other Catalans) in 1964, this feeling of mutual rejection was still very much alive. Candel recalls the poster that appeared in la Torassa during the Civil War “Cataluña termina aquí. Aquí comienza Murcia” (Catalonia ends here. Here begins Murcia). The whole book is an attempt to break through the frontier and to present a common space in which the Catalan world and the world of the immigrant can coexist. But Candel’s literary work —with the exception of some stories in *Trenta mil pessetes per un home* (Thirty Thousand Pesetas for a Man)— contradicts his own theory. In *Donde la ciudad cambia su nombre* (Where the City Changes its Name), the Casas Baratas housing project is described as a closed world in which the only Catalan presence is that of the priest, monsignor Lloveras.

■ <sup>1</sup> Translator’s note: an honorary title bestowed in the Jocs Florals.

<sup>2</sup> Translator’s note: “The Reapers”, the national hymn of Catalonia.

<sup>3</sup> Translator’s note: the 19<sup>th</sup> century “Renaissance” movement to restore Catalan language and culture.

In contrast are the Catalan writers who tend to describe the world of artisans in which locals predominate. This is the feeling of the Poblenou workshops described by Xavier Benguerel in *Gorra de plat* (Peaked Cap, 1967), of the smugglers and truck drivers in Josep Maria Espinàs' *Com ganivets o flames* (Like Knives or Flames, 1954) and his *Combat de nit* (Combat at Night, 1959). The few times that the immigrant milieu appears, as in the case of *El carrer de les Camèlies* (Camellia Street) by Mercè Rodoreda, it is presented as a dead end.

In Spanish-language literature written in Barcelona, the fascination for the “other” city of Jaime Gil de Biedma endures in the novels of the Goytisolo brothers, and the works of Eduardo Mendoza and Félix de Azua that were published at the end of the 1970s. “Barcelona is Good No More, or my Solitary Stroll in Spring”, the poem by Gil

“The immigrants appear as part of a network of complex and shifting relations”

de Biedma (included in the collection *Moralidades* [Moralities, 1966]) is the clearest example of this. The poet evokes the bourgeois world of his childhood, contrasting this with the life of the kids in the street and Murcian immigrants. He goes up to the shacks on Montjuïc, in the Miramar gardens, where his parents had been photographed in 1929 with a

yellow Chrysler. He walks around the now unfashionable places where statues in artificial stone have lipstick marks and where people go to make furtive love. “Feeling oneself being watched”, he says, meaning that he feels strange vis-à-vis the others and estranged from his own awareness. His pleasure in seeing the world of his parents destroyed has him attacking factory bosses and shop assistants who represent the Catalan identity. *Contra la nit d'Oboixangó* (Against the Night of Oboixangó, 1953) by Jordi Sarsanedas is somehow the reverse. His hero travels to the imaginary archipelago of the Tago-Fago islands in order to get to have a closer acquaintance with black people. To gain entry into their world, he turns to the typical ways in which “young gentlemen” relate with members of the lower orders: going out on the tiles, and the maid. One night, he crosses the demarcation line and enters the forbidden city, which Sarsanedas describes as a slum neighbourhood with ragged children, where people live in constructions made from planks and lit with oil lamps. When the revolt breaks out some days later, he forgets his passion for black people and takes the side of the provincial and bourgeois Fort-à-Pantin colony.

Among Barcelona's Spanish-language writers, Juan Marsé occupies a position similar to that of Candel among the *Serra d'Or* Catalan nationalists. His description of the neighbourhood of Carmel in *Últimas tardes con Teresa* (Last Afternoons with Teresa, 1965) reveals a new sensibility towards the suburb. Carmel is not the amphitheatre of bourgeois nostalgia, as in Gil de Biedma's poem, but an island on the top of a bare mountain, besieged by the burgeoning waves of the city's growth. Marsé presents it alternately as a place of childlike happiness, with kites and streets that seem to be something out of Toyland, and as a huge, painful and suppurating carbuncle. Pijoaparte's fascination for the wrought iron fence of the house where Cardenal has established his business of stolen motorbikes, his discovery in the bed of Maruja, the Serrat's maid, of

a fine sensibility (like a whetting stone in Marsé's words), bring out, from under the indolent crust the dream that his parents had brought with them from Murcia, and this takes hold of him, driving him down the mountain. On the other side of the imaginary fence, Teresa Serrat projects onto the local boy the penchant for adventure of the members of her class, a vague social ideology and the underlying stratum of a Catholic upbringing. The love story comes to nought because of Teresa's frivolity and fickleness, but also because of the intolerant response of Cardenal and his niece "la Jeringa", who do not want Pijoaparte to leave Carmel.

Another positive reading appears in the early post-war years, on the pages of the journal *Quaderns de l'exili*, and crystallises in the novel *Miralls tèrbols* (Murky Mirrors, 1966) by Lluís Ferran de Pol. In September 1946, *Quaderns de l'exili* devoted its editorial note to the presence of Castilian-speakers in Catalonia. It reconstructs the story of the immigration, from the displacement of Murcian workers for the construction of big public works projects through to people who were uprooted by the Civil War and the first waves of immigration under the Franco dictatorship. This immigration is not a phenomenon that can be cast aside or ignored. Beyond the "humbug" of universal fraternity, which has been demolished by war and exile, it will help to define where competition and conflicts of interests lie, and stimulate the Catalan identity in reaction.

*Miralls tèrbols* is the story of a parvenu family (the grandfather was a road worker and street sweeper) that moves into construction. The new port of Mareny brings all the social agents into play, from the opportunistic politician, the obtuse bureaucrat, constructors, quarry owners and Murcian workers. The immigrants appear as part of a network of complex and shifting relations. The novel describes the conflicts that occur after an accident in the quarry causing the death of one of the immigrant workers, while depicting Murcian circles with a realism that is the offspring of 1930s reporting. Ferran de Pol portrays the politically-aware worker Hemeterio, contrasting him with the Catalan worker, Camps. He describes the formation of two gangs and the appearance of gunmen, the relationship between the bosses and the Civil Guard, and that between the immigrants and Senyora Pasqual, who has taken refuge in Mareny because of her husband's addiction to gambling, and who visits the farm where the Murcian workers live, showering them with gifts. In the midst of all the tensions that progressively situate the story of Mareny in the context of the Catalonia of the Primo de Rivera dictatorship, Enric, the constructor's son, comes of age. He has seduced the Galician nurse and has gone to live at the rubbish tip, nostalgic for ways of life and social relations that have been destroyed by the modern world. The adventure will return him to take up his place at his father's side.

## THE END OF THE TABOO

If we compare the novels that came in the period after the Civil War and those that have dealt with the subject of immigration since the mid-1990s, we might say that *Miralls tèrbols* set the precedent for the novels of Julià de Jòdar, that *Trenta mil pessetes per un home* influenced Maria Barbal's *Carrer Bolívia* (Bolivia Street) and that *Contra la nit d'Oboixangó* anticipates some aspects of Quim Monzó's story, "Davant del rei de Suècia" (Before the King of Sweden). Also noteworthy is the fact that one of Marsé's direct heirs,





**Puny (Fist)**, Artur Heras (2003)  
pencil, ink and collage on paper  
23 x 35 cm

Francisco Casavella, should describe in his *El Día del Watusi* (Watusi's Day, 2002-2003) a Barcelona without Catalans.

*L'àngel de la segona mort* (The Angel of the Second Death, 1998) and *El trànsit de les fades* (The Movement of Fairies, 2001), the first two novels of the trilogy *L'atzar i les ombres* (Chance and Shadows), describe the upbringing of a boy in an immigrant neighbourhood

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in the 1950s. The author, Julià de Jòdar, is the offspring of those Badalona Murcians who tried to wreck the Jocs Florals. Jòdar works the plot of his novels around two bloody events that stir up the oblivion and renunciations of the post-war period, bringing to light the mutual mistrust between the true-blue Catalans and the Murcian community, between those who have held fast to the memory of old ideals and those who embrace the privileges that are held out by collaboration with the Franco regime. Far from the clichés of “literature of the suburbs”, and steering clear of the flattest realism (the

plot includes dreams, visions and apparitions), Jòdar constructs his trilogy within the framework of ritualised space and time, transforming the neighbourhood into a stage in a theatre where several different performances are occurring at the same time. In contrast with the abstract fears and desires of the generation that had lived through the war, the younger characters cling to any chance they can get to keep afloat, live their lives and get out of the neighbourhood. The characters are developed throughout the story in a cycle of love affairs, betrayals, fantasies and revenge. One of the most innovative elements of the trilogy is the protagonist himself, “the lad who took over from Aunt Eulogia”, as Jòdar calls him more than once. He is a boy, the of immigrants from Murcia, who interprets the world of his parents in Catalan. The choice of this character represents a landmark in Catalan immigration literature. Catalan has ceased to be the expression of a way of understanding the world that is naturally linked to a territory, to become a construction of culture. From this new awareness, Jòdar offers a highly critical account of post-Olympic Catalonia.

Maria Barbal's *Carrer Bolívia* (1999) links the world of *Els altres catalans* with modern audiovisual fictions that use history to create “identifying” images that, in Marc Augé's words, have become a substitute for former “edifying” images. Lina Vilches arrives in Catalonia from Jaén with a positive view of Catalans because she had been friendly with a family from Valls in Linares. She speaks Catalan with her neighbour Sierrita. “She'd understood that the people who lived in that fortunate land where there was work and where you could live your life weren't indifferent if you spoke Catalan”. The conflict is not presented as one between Catalan and Spanish speakers but as one of two ways of understanding the social question. While Lina becomes involved in literacy campaigns in the Social Centre, her husband, Néstor Gentil reads *Capital*, gets involved in clandestine political activity and ends up in exile in France. This duality leads to the break-up of the

family and will bring out a second focus of the conflict that contrasts the public image of a heroic leader with the poverty of his personal relations. Integration is inevitable. “Now, in the train to Barcelona, she misses Linares but she was sure that her home was there, where she was returning, in Bolivia Street. Lina Vilches had just discovered that space between two worlds that makes you a stranger in the land where you are born and possessor of where you live, and vice-versa. She would never again be from one place alone.” Through the ritual device of the novel, Maria Barbal tries to identify a collective, establish a particular image of it, make a myth of it and set it into history. It is with the same aim that TV3 has produced the series *La Mari*.

The metaphorical device that Sarsanedas used in his novel *Contra la nit d'Oboixangó* has a direct echo in the work of Quim Monzó, “Davant del rei de Suècia”, a novella that was published as part of the short-story collection *El millor dels mons* (The Best of All Worlds, 2001). In the guise of an extravagant fable about a poet who is a would-be Nobel Prize winner, Monzó tells a story of many readings. The poet Amargós has to move house because he can't afford to go on living where he is. His new neighbours, who are called Gómez, admonish him because he wants to change the height of the sinks. This is the first step in an indefatigable and disturbing quest. Amargós passes out after a party and finds on coming to that he is thirty-four centimetres shorter. The confirmed fact that Monzó was thinking of calling this story “Catalunya”, along with the surname he has given the neighbours (Gómez is also the surname of Monzó's mother) make it possible to read the text as an allegory of the relationships between the Catalans and people who have come from elsewhere in Spain. It is worth recalling, in relation with the matter of surnames, an article that Monzó published in *El dia del senyor* (The Lord's Day, 1984), called “Xarnegos” (They Speak Spanish). Monzó complained about people like Felipe González and Joan Manuel Serrat who went around saying “Jo també sóc xarnego” (I'm a Spanish speaker too). And he lists names such as Francesc Bellmunt i Moreno, Francesc Parcerisas i Vázquez, Max Cahner i Garcia. “Finally the veil has dropped from my eyes”, Monzó wrote. “All those years I've been living like just one more Catalan and now I find I've been a traitor for having adapted to this country. Because, the way things are, being normal means living *in saecula saeculorum* estranged from the place where you live, being a troublemaker and a whiner, and throwing around accusations of oppression. Maybe it's true that it's the natives who have to adapt to the wiles and ways of the newcomers.” Twenty-five years later, these people with names like Gómez, Moreno, Vázquez and Garcia are still the symbol of the defeat of Catalan and of the imposition of the mentality and ways of life of people from other places.

The main lines of the story finish here. In recent years, immigration and the relations between Spanish and Catalan speakers have ceased to be taboo subjects in Catalan literature. However, the diversity of readings that is fruit of different perceptions of the transition to democracy, of the process of integration of the immigrants who came in the 1960s, and doubts about the present and future of new waves of immigration, make one think that we need to open up a painstaking debate that, besides economic, social and political factors, should also take into account the history of culture ■