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Joan Sales and *Incerta glòria*

The polyphonies of a roman-fleuve

In the wake of the Spanish Civil War, contemporary Catalan literature in general and the novel in particular broke radically with the existing narrative tradition. Then came an inevitable step back, which led writers to reappropriate mainly the realist and comedy of manners currents of the second half of the 19th century.

Over the long, slow and limited return to the novel, the subject of the Spanish Civil War was one of the last to be tackled by creators. A perfectly understandable silence about the conflict as a whole reigned: first of all, it could only be spoken of from the winners' point of view, and when they began to do so their novels were written in Spanish. And so, at least for the first fifteen years of the Franco dictatorship, death, the fighting on the front or in the trenches, the resistance, the jails, the concentration camps or the executions of the losers made very rare appearances in the novels published in Catalonia. The situation of the novelists in exile was different: they could reflect a world which had no voice inside Catalonia, a world which consequently could hardly be recognised, recreated and thus reappropriated and reinterpreted by Catalan society.

In 1956 the publication of the novel *Incerta glòria* (Uncertain Glory) by Joan Sales marked the beginning of the end of that long silence. It is now almost a commonplace to say that *Incerta glòria* is the first Catalan novel which presents the Civil War from the losers' point of view and, moreover, tries to convey to the reader the deep, inherent complexity of the suffering inflicted on its characters by three years of war. It is undoubtedly a novel about the Civil War which has high ambitions and is controversial at the same time. Sales describes the war in its full complexity, avoids any simplistic division into good and bad, all from a Catalan nationalist, Republican but also catholic perspective, and denounces both fascism and anarchism, both *blacks* and *reds*, with virulence.

That is no doubt why, when the novel was first published in Catalonia the

indifference or silent indignation of some and the rancour or open hostility of others met a decidedly awkward work with respectful silence.

When we examine the different options available to Catalan writers and intellectuals during the Civil War, we often forget to mention the delicate position the people who were both Republicans and Catalan nationalists must have found themselves in when they had to stand firm against Franco's troops. Not only that: while remaining catholics, they found themselves at the heart of a moral conflict of the greatest importance to their own personal, ideological and even aesthetic evolution.

We can only count a small number of active participants in the war who managed to extract a work, a definitive novel, from it immediately after it was over. That may have been because of the excessive closeness of their tragic experiences or their literary immaturity or, naturally, their radical and sometimes dogmatic party spirit.

The same does not hold for the foreign novelists "devoted to the last great cause". Most of them published their most important works during the war or shortly afterwards, mostly novels supporting the republican side: we may recall Georges Bernanos' *Les grands cimetières sous la lune*, which appeared in 1937, André Malraux's *L'Espoir* and George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* in 1938, or Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* in 1940.

However it turns out, a civil war leaves a wound which is so deep, so lacerating, that it certainly prevents those involved in it, at least for a time, from facing the difficulties inherent to any fictional or novelistic reaction. That is what the critic

and novelist Rafael Tasis stated so rightly in July 1938:

"A novel has to be thought and constructed with time and rest. The best novels about war, like the most sensational ones published about the 1914-1918 war, were written a few years later, once the embers of the combat had burned out. It was then that experience and maturity brought their magnificent harvest. It was then that we could have a true war literature".

The enormous symbolic potential

Incerta glòria is a catholic novel, although it has often been quoted as one of the ways Existentialism was introduced into contemporary Catalan literature. Through the lives of four characters (a Republican soldier on the Aragón front, a Barcelona anarchist converted to catholicism, a young priest obviously influenced by Sartre, and Juli Soleràs, eccentric and wild, one of the most fascinating characters in contemporary Catalan literature), the four parts (including *El vent de la nit*, *The Night Wind*) of this novel provide an exceptional testimony.

That testimony is endowed with enormous symbolic potential about the war and the moral evolution of the characters who, sunk in a deep moral crisis, face youth, loneliness and their destiny with tenacity. Moreover, the different threads of the narrative make up a great classical novel about love and war, with three men in love with the same woman, about youth and maturity, about war and revolution. Not forgetting one of the most intense *memento mori* in Catalan literature about the death of President Lluís Companys, arrested by the Gestapo in France, deported to Spain and executed by Franco's army at Montjuïc Castle in Barcelona.

The author, Joan Sales i Vallès, who was born in Barcelona in 1912 and died in

1983, belonged to one of the generations that lived the years of the Spanish Republic, and most of all the outbreak and progress of the Civil War, most intensely. He took an active part because of his age and ended up devoting his entire youth to it. Moreover, as a member of the losing side, like other authors of that generation he had to be constantly justifying himself to History.

Sales, who had a degree in law but never practised, started work at the age of 15 as editor of the newspaper *La Nau*. After working sporadically as corrector and typesetter he was one of the first Catalan teachers for the Republican Catalan government. While he was still very young, under the Primo de Rivera dictatorship, he was a member of the first and clandestine Catalan Communist Party, founded in 1928 by Jordi Arquer, which tried to combine communism and nationalism. After the outbreak of the war he ended up turning towards catholicism and quickly and definitively distanced himself from the communist and anarchist world.

We can place Sales' evolution parallel to, though distant from, that of the young intellectuals who were close to the catholic and independent Catalan newspaper *El Matí*, founded in 1929 by a group led by Josep M. Capdevila, who tried to confirm Christian positions in Catalonia intellectually. Incidentally, he never met them or worked with them. That group of writers, among whom we might mention Pau Romeva, Maurici Serrahima or Ramon Esquerra, much influenced by French catholicism, called into question the values of Christianity amid the ideological tensions of European

society between the wars, and tried to find a framework for its members' concerns about the metaphysical dimensions of existence.

Joan Sales was above all an independent man, an outsider of Catalan literature, certainly less self-taught than he pretended, a creator who never "married" anyone and whom we might define as an action writer who, since his youth, had manufactured his own image as an intellectual we might call a "militant". The militant writer, the soldier writer, placed himself at the service of a cause; he was the "combatant".

A militant of Catalan nationalism, Republicanism and catholicism, Sales always felt a need to explain everything, to explain himself and justify himself ceaselessly, whether in prologues, epilogues or footnotes, as if he wanted to preserve his long life experience from oblivion or confusion. A friend and editor of Màrius Torres¹, an associate of Joan Coromines², publisher of Llorenç Villalonga and Mercè Rodoreda, director of the publishing house El Club dels Novel·listes, Sales was first and foremost a great reader. He was first excited by Stendhal's work, and then definitively by the novels of Dostoyevsky (he translated *The Brothers Karamazov*), and the literature of the great French catholic writers and philosophers such as François Mauriac (he translated *Thérèse Desqueyroux*), Georges Bernanos, Emmanuel Mounier, Gabriel Marcel or Teilhard de Chardin.

■ ¹ Màrius Torres (1910-1942), poet.

² Joan Coromines (1905-1997), philologist, author of the dictionary known as the *Coromines*.

The fraught history of a novel

At the outbreak of the Civil War, Sales entered the Catalan government War School to acquire the necessary military training to take part in the fighting as an officer. At the end of 1936 he joined the Durruti column in Madrid and it was in Xàtiva where he continued his military training (April 1937). Later, he was on the Aragón front (May 1937-March 1938) and lastly on the Catalan front, in the Macià-Companys columns (April-June 1938). When the war ended, he was commander of the Republican army. He left Catalonia, defeated, via Coll d'Ares. A year later he stated:

“For me the war was the greatest experience of my life, the most interesting thing, what excited me most. I think a writer must become a witness to the truth.”

Between January and December 1939 he lived in exile in Paris until, after a trip to Haiti, he finally settled in Mexico, where he clung to hopes for an allied victory to drive Franco from power. Back in Barcelona in 1948, he had to earn a living. He was a corrector and typesetter and worked for publishing companies. His first publication, *Viatge d'un moribund* (*Journey of a Dying Man*, Barcelona, Ariel, 1952) is an impressive collection of poems clearly influenced by Baudelaire, which gives proof of a sound language training and an extraordinary mastery of form and metre.

In 1948 he began to write what would be his only published novel, *Incerta glòria*. He probably embarked on it in his last years in exile in Mexico. The title was naturally chosen in memory of that far-off 14th April 1931, the date of the proclamation of the Republic, “the happiest day of my life”, in his own words. He never ceased to repeat

that, while concealing the source: the title is taken from some verses at the end of Act I Scene 3 of Shakespeare's *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, which he had found quoted in chapter XVII of *Le rouge et le noir* by Stendhal:

“O, how this spring of love resembleth
The uncertain glory of an April day,
Which now shows all the beauty of the sun,
And by and by a cloud takes all away!”

Incerta glòria was published in 1956, despite difficulties of every kind and the suppressions inflicted by Franco's censors, who accused the novel of “religious immorality”. It was finally to appear after eight years of reflections and additions, of experiences and of disappointments. Sales even had to appeal to the archbishop of Barcelona to obtain the *nihil obstat* which was indispensable for publication. Indeed, it seems that he appealed to Abbot Escarré, who had his personal secretary, Father Maur Boix, brother of Josep M. Boix i Selva, read the novel. Although little taken with it, he found nothing contrary to dogma or morality. By way of an epitaph it had the phrase ‘Mentre che'l danno e la vergogna dura’, from a terrifying poem by Michelangelo referring to the power of the Medicis and which also closed his collection of poetry *Viatge d'un moribund*.

Owing to a fortuitous circumstance, Maison Gallimard showed an interest in a translation, which appeared in 1962 in the prestigious *Du monde entier* collection. Since 1956 Juan Goytisolo had been living in Paris and working as reader of originals at Gallimard thanks to the American hispanicist John B. Rust. Goytisolo's presence favoured the translation of most of the best Spanish



novels of the post-war (Ana María Matute, Camilo José Cela, Rafael Sánchez Ferlosio, Jesús Fernández Santos) and, on the rebound, some novels in Catalan, beginning with *Incerta glòria* and *La Plaça del Diamant* by Mercè Rodoreda.

The publication date for the novel was set for March 1958. Four years were to pass before it finally appeared. There was a great delay in the process, attributed to a delay by the translator due essentially to Sales' incessant rewritings and other important extraliterary reasons.

For example, Sales asked Michel Mohrt, director of Éditions Gallimard, for the company to intervene with the archbishop of Paris to obtain the *nihil obstat* in order to show up the existence of Spanish censorship. His request, completely out of order in the French publishing context, was received with stupefaction by the directors. Sales suffered agonies over the idea of possible political repercussions in Spain and most of all feared police reprisals. And so on 30th June 1960 he insisted and wrote to Gallimard, once again demanding religious consent for his book:

"For me it is a matter of self-esteem, if you like, but nevertheless rather humiliating, and that is why I insist. Gross insults have been heaped on me, 'heretic and immoral' is the least of the things said, and they even told the publisher when he insisted on publishing my novel that 'the author should think himself lucky he hasn't been shot'".

Finally, and in the face of Sales' insistence, Michel Mohrt passed on his demand to François Amiot, secretary of the Imprimatur and teacher at the Saint-Sulpice seminary in Paris. Nevertheless, and most surprisingly, not only was the archbishop's answer negative, but also the response was unexpected. And so *Incerta glòria*, which in 1956 had obtained the

nihil obstat from the Francoist church, had the same permission refused by the French church.

In a bitter letter dated 15th November 1960, François Amiot wrote:

"It did not seem to the examiner that this work could be in any way sanctioned by the religious authority. It contains far too much indecency and too many scabrous scenes concerning the Spanish Civil War; some men of the church and the Spanish bishopric are judged in a manner that is not even-handed. It is the work of a partisan; the author obviously has the right to express his opinions, but it is for him and him alone to bear the responsibility. The examiner wonders whether the *imprimatur* has really been given by a Spanish bishop, given the tenor of the book and the atmosphere in Spain. I do not consider it useful to submit this work to another examiner, the result would be the same..."

PS I would be grateful if you would send the usual fee to the censor, Canon Grimard..."

Moreover, thanks to the correspondence between Sales and Bernard Lesfargues, the translator, we can have access to a large amount of information about the genesis of the original edition and the work in progress. We must first point out that the first French translation does not correspond to the full or complete edition of the Catalan original, that is, to the addition of the censored parts of the book: in fact it is a new, far longer, novel which Sales must have rewritten somewhere between 1957 and 1959. The translator's great concern was to be able to calculate the final number of pages. The writer's only reply was to send new chapters.

Sales explains, for example, in a letter dated 8th July 1957, the first one he sent to his translator, that the censors have kept the first part of the novel almost intact and that the second and third parts are the ones that have been cut, so much so

that they have become incomprehensible to the reader.

And so the writer's work from the outset consisted of retrieving the censored parts to *rebuild* the story according to some narrative cohesion. But very soon, thanks to his correspondence, we discover that the novelist, excited by his tale, driven by the need to tell all, to forget nothing, has in fact begun to rewrite from beginning to end. And so Sales began to write fragments he had never thought of including in the first edition, making excess one of the cornerstones of his creative poetics.

Moreover, his fears were not in vain: after the appearance of the French translation of *Incerta glòria* the Spanish police confiscated his passport for a time and refused to allow him to leave Spain.

The volume contained four hundred pages. In May of the same year *Incerta glòria* and its author Joan Sales appeared with Juan Goytisolo, Camilo José Cela and Ana María Matute in the *Cahiers des librairies*, a free publication of the French booksellers' association. The reception by the French critics was, from the beginning, spectacular. Apart from the negative review in the catholic journal *Libre Belgique*, they were all positive, even enthusiastic in *La Croix*, *Le Monde*, *Combat*, the magazines *Esprit* and *La Nouvelle Critique*, linked to the French Communist Party.

A deliberate realism

There is no doubt that *Incerta glòria* is an excessive novel, but what is also true is that any good novel, any novel with pretensions to representing a whole world, is inevitably excessive. Sales constructs a kind of *roman-fleuve* which spreads out on every side. The textual scope is overwhelming. The work is long, fluid and

slow, but at the same time very fast and as intense as the current of water in an enormous river, powerful and sure of itself.

It is a novel overflowing with life, energy and talent. The quantity indeed turns out to be one of the qualities of Sales' novel insofar as this aspect allows him to give space to the dimension of time. The ambition to include time, historical duration, allows him to incorporate the post-war into the narrative flow. He even went so far as to add a second, shorter novel, *El vent de la nit*, which became an integral part of the work.

Incerta glòria is a polyphonic novel that interweaves a host of narrative voices in a deliberate realism with great symbolic potential. Sales conceived the novel as a dialectical game, made up of contradictions and shifting perspectives, with a will to exorcise and conjure his own ghosts, 'metaphysical ghosts' according to Joan Fuster, to paint a great historical fresco characterised by constant straying from the narrative, interruptions and digressions, anecdotes and different thematic threads. The polyphony and the variety of points of view produce a picture that offers a plural and realistic vision of a tale that would grow as time passed, parallel to its creator's own biography. The fifth version, published in June 1981, was the definitive edition.

The perpetual conflict the characters are in allows them to reach the ethical or moral dimensions of their own consciences and, most of all, allows the reader to reconstruct mentally the central messages of the novel. Each character is a subjective interpreter of the world around him and is not just a witness or observer of reality, since all of them fill the world with their personalities. And so Sales' skill prevents the ideological discourse lent by the narrator to his characters

from imprisoning the whole discourse of the novel; quite the opposite, it favours an unfinished, constantly interrupted discourse. But Sales rejects the exemplary novel or the thesis novel because he is well aware that the aesthetic quality of a novel ceases to be seen as such when it reads like a sermon. In a letter of 25th September 1975 to Bernard Lesfargues, for example, Sales cautioned:

“That is indeed the subject of my book. I wanted to lead it in such a way that the reader, without ever having the annoying feeling of a ‘thesis’ or, even worse, a ‘sermon’, would come of his own accord to the following conclusion: the thirst for glory is congenital to all men and yet it cannot be quenched by anything in the world; there is a mystery which can only be explained by another world, an essentially glorious one. But one must avoid philosophy in a novel, and there is my great difficulty. This thought must emerge as if it sprang from the reader, barely hinted at by the author.”

A novel that is at once unique and multiple, the novel of a generation who lived through the war in the flower of their youth with love and desire, *Incerta glòria* is an open work, no doubt owing to Sales’ excited reading of *Tirant lo Blanc*, the work of Cervantes and, most of all, the novels of Dostoyevsky. Thus four almost independent accounts follow on one another: that of Lluís de Broca, a bourgeois anarchist with a complex idealistic and egotistical personality, whose diary forms the first part of the novel; the letters sent by Trini Malmany, first mistress and then wife of Lluís de Broca, to Juli Soleràs, which make up the second part; and lastly the twofold autobiographical account of Cruells, a soldier in the Republican ranks and a definitely heterodox priest from the diocese of Barcelona in the post-war years. By using traditional narrative forms like the diary, the epistolary novel and the

autobiographical account, thus three different narrators, Sales manages to avoid the monotony of a single point of view. But in that way he resolves the creation of the characters who, far from being flat, are in full relief, endowed with a broad, complex spirit, a real moral density, with brio and a history of their own. They are involved in a war which is sometimes a simple backdrop, others a full element of their lives. Thanks to a perfect match between narrative form and content, Sales, with literary learning, uses three different narrative techniques which he does not mix, though he manages to make each of them fulfil its function in the development of the story. With the aim of conveying to the reader the full complexity of the war, he uses Lluís’s diary. The role of his wife’s letters from Barcelona is to portray the rearguard, from where the combatants receive sparse news. And when the novelist decides to make the war seem over and distant, he uses the memoirs, which enable him to stretch time in a duration that includes a view of the post-war in Barcelona twenty years later.

Sales built the novel around the enigmatic, eccentric and original figure of Juli Soleràs, who serves as a link. However, Juli Soleràs (note that the initials of his name and surname coincide with the novelist’s and also with those of Julien Sorel, the famous central character of *Le rouge et le noir*) is never in fact the hero of the novel, but rather the anti-hero. An intelligent, highly cultured, egocentric boy, particularly drawn by the forbidden and the unknown, he is one of the guiding threads of the story. By his sudden appearances and disappearances he creates an effect of surprise in the other characters, and the reader ends up having a global idea of what he is like

through the news, the experiences and the feelings he arouses in others.

When he is absent the other characters are sorry. Whoever has to do with him feels drawn to him, though he may also inspire repulsion. Sunk in permanent doubt, he is interested in sexual perversions and, for shock effect, he answers rudely. He has a quite particular taste for failure and a spirit of contradiction, which he practises with everyone; we feel him thirsty for glory and moved by his singular search for the absolute. Half philosopher, half cynic, locked in a struggle with himself, he is ceaselessly quoting Baudelaire, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard and Sartre.

Lively and contradictory, eccentric, a tireless traveller, he is a character who feels the absurd. His concern with nothingness consumes him. He is obsessed with “the obscene and the macabre”. A wild man, in search of an absolute destiny whose meaning he himself seems not to know, he wanders alone through the novel in a setting laden with symbolic intensity, the Aragón front. Suddenly he disappears without explanation until the moment when he abandons the Republican trenches and crosses over to his adversaries. At the end of the novel we learn that he had gone over to the other side but, realising that the Francoists had won, he returned to the Republicans and was killed. Soleràs is the only character in the novel to die young, and he could only die a loser, perhaps because the only glory seems to be the glory of youth. His end is dramatic, he renounces becoming a victor. His great lesson is to accept defeat and failure as essential components of human life.

There is an evident connection between Joan Sales and the work of great French catholic writers and intellectuals such

as Charles Péguy, François Mauriac or Georges Bernanos. Sales was a convert, or a “returnee”, to catholicism, a man who went through a long ideological and moral evolution which recalls the words he himself applied to the Kazantzakis he admired so much: a man who sought justice above all, who defended his sense of truth at every moment of his life with incorrigible spontaneity.

It is easy, though not very satisfactory, to include Sales’ work in what is called the *catholic novel* because, as is the case with every label, it forces us to establish an impoverishing reductionism. The catholic novel is not a coherent and uniform ideological, aesthetic or formal current, but it is true that it was a meeting point for the literary and religious interests of some authors who, mainly after the Second World War, on a collective quest for new human values, called Christianity into question, and for whom the novel proved to be an instrument that enabled them to have an influence on the moral conscience of contemporary society.

Joan Sales’ literature, with its vigorous style, is laden with metaphysical resonances and puts forward a global vision of the human adventure, so that the reader is plunged into thrilling world, charged with physical and intellectual energy. The authors of the epigraphs that introduce some of the chapters of *Incerta glòria* prove it: Pascal, Baudelaire, Bergson, Chesterton, Kierkegaard, Simone Weil, Albert Camus and a remarkable Dostoyevsky, who had already become a sometimes controversial reference point for the novel between the wars. Sales presented him as the finest example of a model of literature that penetrated deep into the human condition, with characters whose psychology cannot

be reduced to the rules of reason or conventional psychology.

However, what characterises the novel the most and most surprises the reader is its very particular realism, a realism that belongs to the spiritual meaning of existence, a realism impregnated with signs and dreams that melt into the very essence of things. It is the realism of transfiguration, of the revelatory power of a writing that may start from reality but which nevertheless feeds on faith and spirituality.

Sales is thus in tune with the defence of an individualism we might conceive of as the first step towards giving man the necessary instruments for the resolution of that very individualism. According to Sales, the evolution of society pushes man towards a common, collective destiny which may be either utopian or tragic. The novel then becomes an appeal to personal conscience and sacrifice. Christians must take part in a spiritual community in full evolution instead of devoting themselves to personal flowering for individual salvation.

And so Sales cleaves to a clear *personalism*, as reader and follower of the thought of both Emmanuel Mounier and Gabriel Marcel, with whom he kept up a correspondence for some time after the publication of the French translation.

Gabriel Marcel himself wrote to Bernard Lesfargues on 14th March 1962:

“Dear Sir. How grateful we must be to you for having revealed *Gloire incertaine*, which I am now reading. I find it altogether remarkable, and the translation is first class. If you have another Catalan novel of just comparable quality to suggest, do not hesitate.”

It is in that sense, the presentation of a tense moral conflict, that we must include Joan Sales among the novelists of the “torn conscience” and a subject matter of salvation, in other words the resolution of the inner conflict thanks to a growing awareness. From there too come the essentially subjective qualities of the novel. Its lyricism breaks the objective development of the story and the metaphysical perspective nourishes the subject of evil and its reasons (distress, hatred, violence, suicide) and the subject of salvation (grace, love, inner and outer combats).

“My youth was no more than a dark storm”: Joan Sales often repeated that line by Baudelaire (in ‘L’ennemi’, poem X of *Spleen et Idéal*), words that seem to confirm that the only glory is found in the time of being young, understood as being the only period of life shot through with love and death in the constant quest for the absolute. Shunning Manichaeism of any kind, with a grave and deep solemnity, endowed with supreme lucidity, the pages of *Incerta glòria* are a very human spiritual monologue that makes the novel a genuine lesson in tolerance in life and in literature ||