

Reviews

|| On the role of literature

Joaquim Molas

Margarida Casacuberta, Marina Gustà (eds.), *Narratives urbanes. La construcció literària de Barcelona* (Urban narratives. The literary construction of Barcelona). Arxiu Històric de la Ciutat, Fundació Antoni Tàpies, 2008, 298 pp.

All the signs are that literature is not now as important to people as it used to be or, at least, not as important as it has been since, say, the 18th century. And not only in exceptional cases like, for example, that of the French resistance to the Nazi occupation. Or in that of the Catalans to the Franco dictatorship. Of these signs, I would point out, firstly, the disappearance of specific journals, with all they mean for the training of operational groups, the proposal and defence of specific programmes and of direct links between writers and readers; secondly, the fact that literature has been barely present or has virtually disappeared from the written press and has been unable to find a stable place in the audiovisual media, and lastly, that it appears obliquely in the school syllabuses, half devoured by those of language, and that the number of university students has fallen, at times to rock bottom. Years ago, the editor, whose name I shall not reveal, of a leading Barcelona newspaper, whose name I shall not disclose either out of respect, told me that, according to the acting editor, writers only existed when they died. Or when they won first prize in the awards lottery.

Last year, if my memory serves me well, Flammarion in Paris published an impassioned essay by Todorov on *La littérature en péril* (Literature in Danger). And, for his reflection, full of autobiographical tremolos, he followed two avenues of analysis: the objectives and methods of teaching and the evolution of the theory of art, and, more specifically, of literature from classical times to the modern era of the avant-garde. And in both avenues he noticed the same phenomenon: man's gradual distancing from the reality that surrounds him and, indirectly, his gradual retreat. In general terms, I agree with Todorov's dissection, although while I am about it I would qualify a few points. For example, the one about the avant-garde. Or that of the abyss which, from a given moment, opens up "between mass literature, popular production in direct contact with the everyday lives of its readers, and elitist literature, read by the professionals —critics, teachers and writers— who are only interested in the technical intricacies of its creators" (in fact, there has always been a deep abyss between the two, between the readers of Góngora or the "accursed" Baudelaire and those of pamphlets and chivalresque novels, like *Palmerín de Oliva*, or of the sensationalist press and melodramatic novels, e.g. Paul Féval or Ponson du Terrail).

The book I am presenting here proves the role that literature plays, or could play, at least, in two ways: 1) as a simple historical or social document; 2) as the construction of an identifying image —in other words, a mythical image. In fact, the novel, as the theorists of the 19th century pointed out in their day, occupies in the modern world the place that, in

the ancient one, the epic poem occupied. Balzac and Dickens, in the 19th, or Joyce and Faulkner, in the 20th, are the Homers and Virgils of our time. I have said on more than one occasion that for cities to make their own mark on the map they have to be constructed intellectually. Indeed, like the men and women who fill them, they are a great amorphous mass of projects and deeds, often contradictory and by definition fragmentary, which follow on from one another. Or which simply coexist. And, moreover, of a series of small individual or collective exploits, very often verging on the irrelevant anecdote and which in any case are independent. Until the day comes when someone searches for the internal mechanisms that link the projects with the deeds, and these with exploits. And with the results obtained they “construct” the city. More to the point, they “construct” an image of the city. And if they invest the necessary moral and cultural wherewithal in the operation, they construct a myth that identifies it inside and beyond its boundaries that eventually becomes a stereotype. This is the case with Balzac’s Paris and Joyce’s Dublin. Or the case with Josep Pla’s Palafrugell, Gaziol’s Sant Feliu, Espriu’s Arenys de Mar, and Juan Arbó’s river Ebro countryside.

By definition, the different “images” of Barcelona studied in this volume complement each other. Some are merely simple historical or social documents. Others are authentic mythical constructs, at times, as in the case of Emili Vilanova, the result of a movement yearning for a lost world. Or like those of Santiago Rusiñol and Josep M. de Sagarra. Or as in that of Mercè Rodoreda, from the bottomless pits of exile, mixing yearning with dreams. And, conversely, the result, as in that of Narcís Oller, of its identification with a highly ambitious socio-political project. And even, as in that of Carles Soldevila, of a detailed cultural programme. All of them, though, both the documentary and the mythical, are interesting. And not just for their own consciousness of being, but also, and above all, for exportation. It is worth reading: it is a lesson. Priceless ||

|| A fresh Sartrean reading

Sílvia Gómez Soler

Mercè Rius, *Tres assaigs sobre Sartre i una conferència de més* (Three Essays About Sartre and a Lecture as Well), Traus/6, Lleonard Muntaner, Palma, 2008, 232 pp.

There are those who may think that Sartre is one of those writers that have gone out of fashion, that the existentialism of the European post-war period has become obsolete. Sartre’s philosophy may be, though, and indeed this is what Mercè Rius shows us, a good instrument of analysis and interpretation with regard to human behaviour. Without doubt, a Sartrean reading of our lives can be absolutely eye-opening. The excess of rationalisation and the difficulty we have supporting our own decisions lead us to deceive, to search for *excuses* that disguise freedom: we try to avoid the responsibility that comes with acting. Sartre is still valid and he attracts us because he reveals precisely that.

Tres assaigs sobre Sartre i una conferència de més is not a work aimed at laymen and -women but at those who have the terminology of existentialism fresh in their minds: the whole book is imbued with the purest existentialist universe. The author published a selection of texts from *L'Être et le néant* (Being and Nothingness) in Catalan in 1999, and in 2005 she published *Returning to Sartre*. Now, with these essays, she once again offers us interesting ideas and thoughts on Sartre's work, in this way contributing to increasing the number of writings in Catalan on philosophers that, due to their complexity, require complementary studies. We already know how important this is for our cultural normalisation.

The title of the book cannot go unnoticed: the first part begins by giving a possible response to the famous lecture by Sartre, originally expressed in interrogative form —the author reminds us— but published and disseminated without the genuine initial question mark. A lecture that Mercè Rius contextualises in Sartre's work as a whole in order not to lead us to misinterpret his discourse. Sartre, even though he warned the audience that existentialist doctrine was aimed exclusively at *specialists*, wanted to make himself understood... Mercè Rius gives us in detail the interpretations made of the pessimistic tone of the lecture and dissents from those who have seen in it an approach to traditional morality.

It is a book full of suggestions: the author suggests more than she passes judgement or sentences. And it has to be said that she chooses the extracts from Sartre's work very well: none of the quotes are gratuitous or sterile, nor do they lack aesthetic value. The voice of Sartre/Roquentin appears constantly in order not to lose sight of *the philosopher*. Mercè Rius is very familiar with the writer's entire opus: the novels and plays, the essays, the autobiography and the war diary, apart from having, equally, a thorough knowledge of his biography. The study does not lack philosophical rigour: it reviews Heidegger's criticisms of Sartre about permanence in subjectivism and the oblivion of the historical nature of being; she dissociates Sartre, boldly, with good arguments, from all possible adherence to modern formal ethics, because accepting values *a priori* or categorical imperatives in keeping with the criterion of universality may turn out to be a good *excuse* disguising a singular interested action, or a way of avoiding the responsibility that choice entails; she examines some of the stereotypes thrown at the philosophy of Sartre and on many occasions she brings Sartre close to Spinoza for us.

In "The Perpetual Disintegration of Being", the first of the three essays —also the densest— that follow the lecture, she develops the debate about a classic in the philosophy of the mind, Cartesian dualism, and she enters the trap of Sartre's *cogito*: "consciousness exists its body", says Sartre, and Mercè Rius explains to us the transitive nature that the author gives the verb in order to guess what the relationship between body and consciousness is.

In the second essay, "Fantasies of the Lonely...", the reflection centres on the relationship between Sartre, Kierkegaard and Rousseau, three authors in which loneliness performs a philosophical function. This essay, like the last one, maintains a more "literary" tone and is far more fluid than previous ones. Mercè Rius makes a study of it, making use at the beginning of some of the classical philosophers like Heraclitus, Parmenides and Plato, in order to show how loneliness has been the companion of the figure of the wise man, whenever he devoted himself to searching for the truth —to finding the essence of things— or simply, whenever he scorned certain human abstractions, social conventions. Issues like "public opinion", "the intellectual elite" or "the power of the rational will" are

treated with critical lucidity from different perspectives. Mercè Rius has the three authors appearing, talking about the subject of freedom, linked in Sartre to the concept of *non-reaction*, denial of the facts, of the social conditioners, of being-for-others. *La Nausée*, *The Private Diary*, *The Reveries of a Solitary Walker* and *Emile* are the texts referred to in this essay. The quotes, I say once again, are the result of a magnificent selection.

The last of the essays is an analysis of the autobiography of Sarah Kofman, written the same year that the writer committed suicide (1994). This philosopher had produced many of her works within the keys of deconstructionism and under the influence of the philosophy of Nietzsche and Freud. This circumstance, Mercè Rius warns us, may make the reader, familiar with Kofman's work, interpret the autobiography with the parameters of psychoanalysis. "A Sartrean Reading of Sarah Kofman" shows, however, that this autobiography wishes to be, in actual fact, the "exposition of a consciousness".

All in all, it is a reflection on the most basic reality of all: existence. *Nausea*, a way in. Sartre did not produce what is called the literature of ideas; he filled his literary works with philosophical reflections. Simone de Beauvoir said so and Mercè Rius reminds us of it in these four essays ||

|| Understanding the Basque conflict

Xavier Filella

Antoni Segura i Mas, *Euskadi. Crònica d'una desesperança* (Euskadi. A Chronicle of Despair)
L'Avenç, Barcelona, 2009, 320 pp.

The Spanish political Transition, exemplary in so many ways, left two issues outstanding that remain that way to this day. After three decades of democracy, the territorial organisation of the State and the violence of ETA have not been resolved. Not only has the Basque conflict, in particular, divided Basque society between Spanish and Basque nationalists, it has moreover split the democratic parties into two opposing sides all too often irreconcilable. At the same time, the violence of ETA has been the excuse to criminalise democratic Basque nationalism —and Catalan too— for those who, going by the name of constitutionalists, have tried to undermine any attempt to deepen the autonomous legal framework currently in force.

Antoni Segura, professor of Contemporary History and director of the Centre of International History Studies at the University of Barcelona, looks at this perspective in *Euskadi. Crònica d'una desesperança* (Euskadi. A Chronicle of Despair), an analysis of the Basque conflict that goes from the origins of ETA to shortly before the recent Basque autonomous elections. The author begins his account in the 1950s, when ETA emerged, and with the aid of exhaustive research he presents its ideological and organisational development. The multiple splits between the supporters of the armed struggle and of political participation, the break with the nationalism of the PNB, the successive terrorist

attacks and the grief of the victims, the dirty war when the anti-terrorist struggle overstepped the mark of the Rule of Law, and the different negotiation processes, often with international mediation, between ETA and the Spanish government are the questions that the exquisitely ordered account written by Antoni Segura focuses on.

Going beyond the bounds of a mere account, though, the work offers an excellent analysis of the Basque conflict that examines the different political initiatives that have determined Basque politics in recent years, from the Ajuria Enea Pact (1988) to the Lizarra Agreement (1998) and the Ibarretxe Plan (2004), defined by the author as a “road to nowhere”. Segura also reviews the different processes that have explored a negotiated end to the Basque conflict, especially the proposal by Miguel Herrero and Ernest Lluch based around the first additional stipulation of the Constitution and, more recently, the books published by Jesús Eguiguren, president of the Basque Socialist Party, who, despite recognising the difficulty of harmonising contrasting interests and feelings, has upheld the possibility of pragmatic compromises between both sides.

Indeed, Segura explains, the process for a negotiated end to the violence undertaken by the socialist government of Rodríguez Zapatero was a moment of hope that, however, after ETA’s return to the armed struggle, led to confusion, astonishment and disappointment. The Spanish government’s lack of determination, Batasuna’s inability to distance itself from the strategy of ETA and the terrorist gang’s difficulty with understanding the limits that the Constitution sets for the executive are the chief reasons that Segura mentions to explain the failure of the peace process. None the less, the author stresses, the absence of headway in the policy of moving prisoners closer to home, the inopportune judicial harassment of ETA and the pressure of the Spanish right wing and the victims’ associations controlled by the PP also contributed to hindering the dialogue. Finally, Antoni Segura rightly points out, the *abertzale* left did not understand that the Catalan *Estatut* (autonomous charter), despite Zapatero’s promise to accept a reform backed by 90% of the Catalan parliament, was modified in Congress “to unforeseen extremes”, even though in matters of finance it differed greatly from what was already envisaged in the Gernika Charter. The difficulties in the process to reform the Catalan Charter made the willingness of Zapatero’s government to lead any reform of the model of the State that might recognise its national plurality less credible.

The communiqué by ETA on June 5th 2007 announcing the end of the ceasefire put an end to the peace process. Probably, Segura says, the ideas of all sides were too different to reach an agreement. While the Spanish government was hoping for a negotiated end to the violence and the political normalisation of the *abertzale* left, ETA was banking on a process that would lead to the independence of Euskadi. Probably, the author concludes, Zapatero’s biggest mistake was to enter a negotiation process thinking that that he would not have to pay any political price. ETA, on the other hand, has been incapable of understanding that its armed actions are no threat to a clearly consolidated Spanish political system and it has most likely entered its final phase, that of implosion, now that it seems to have lost the ability to set the Basque and Spanish political agendas. The government, Antoni Segura stresses, must maintain the effectiveness of the struggle against the violence, but it should not forget either that beyond the violence there is a political issue outstanding ||

|| Thought capsules Sergi Rosell

Tobies Grimaltos, *Idees i paraules. Una filosofia de la vida quotidiana* (Ideas and Words. A Philosophy of Everyday Life), PUJ, Valencia 2008, 149 pp.

With *Idees i paraules. Una filosofia de la vida quotidiana*, Tobies Grimaltos places at the disposal of the reader a series of interesting thoughts of a philosophical, linguistic, social and political nature. It should be said that the title is perhaps a touch pretentious; the subtitle particularly, which suggests that the book contains a *philosophy* (even though it is of *everyday life*), when in actual fact it is formed of a series of thoughts or opinions (“thought capsules”) on a range of different subjects, which correspond, and the author stresses this in the introduction, to a “personal perspective” or constitute a “partial view” of the matter in question. The work’s goal, then, is not to preach, but to give the reader the possibility of thinking about or reconsidering important issues with lucid reasoning and natural linguistic expression. Despite everything, even though the book is presented as fragmentary, the texts composing it unquestionably share a *family air*, as a scholar of Wittgenstein would say, that will have to be explained.

The book is in four parts. The first is called “Primum vivere...” and in it we find texts that deal with ideas imprisoned in closed books; the olfactory memory; missed opportunities; life lived; egomania, the complementary nature of hobbies (*ora et labora*); reflection as opposed to passion; the need for social recognition, and the justification for writing. The second part, entitled “O tempora!”, includes thought capsules on “personal ethics” (for the author, a sort of oxymoron); the excessive mercantilisation of culture; linguistic, national, social and gender oppression; the complementary nature of ethical and dianoethical virtues; the wretchedness of attacking bookshops, and the farce of the caste of the *intellectuals*. In the third part, called “O mores!”, we find texts on the contemporary shortage of lexical creation; arrogant ideologies and the need for prudent scepticism; people’s attitudes towards their own ignorance; (intellectual) egocentricity; rationality in the distribution of time; the *rightness* of the group; the combination of intelligence and ethics, once again, or, finally, the headaches caused by the “but” in the expression “poor but honest”. Lastly, the fourth part, “... deinde philosophari”, includes a noteworthy story inspired by Borges; a critique of the concepts of Nietzsche’s language and texts on the (in)appropriateness of being inquisitive; the difficult relationship between quantity and quality; the pointlessness of arguing about words; the connotations of names, and also conceptual questions on the difference between lies and deceit and virtue and responsibility. The book ends with a list of original refrains by the author, representative of his standpoint on the various issues dealt with, and which he uses to show a good command of the art of thinking up proverbs.

For the great variety of the issues tackled, we might say that for the author, “nothing human is alien to him”. In any case, it is obvious that there are a few issues that concern him particularly. One of them is unquestionably the *national matter*: not for nothing do

we find various thoughts on the Catalan language and its mistreatment. I especially liked the opinion that “linguistic normalisation has to consist in the fact of speaking being normal, for those speaking and those listening, without embarrassment”. Nevertheless, the matter does not become omnipresent, fortunately, as tends to be so habitual in our literature of ideas; neither does the question of Catalan literary culture and intellectuality (if I may make use of a concept that the author scorns). Other matters that clearly concern Grimaltos are unthinking sectarianism, the lack of respect for others or personal conceit.

At this juncture, I would like to take some time to discuss the fundamental philosophical standpoint that exudes all through the book. I dare to call it *moralistic rationalism*: a combination of rationalism —moderately sceptic, but rationalism— and moralism —though enlightened, which I shall try to be more precise about.

Let’s begin with the *rationalist* aspect. The author points out the importance of what we may call the virtue of being prepared to change one’s mind, which in order to do correctly one has to lose the fear of acknowledging one’s own ignorance, and adopt a sceptical attitude towards one’s own ideology. Obviously, this is not the anti-dogmatic aspect of Grimaltos’s rationalism that I wish to discuss; nor is his banishment of obscure and petulant language (see “Deep Thought and Stupidity”). What worries me is the possibly narrow or limited nature of this rationalism. On the one hand, some of the texts in the book suggest that passions cannot constitute reasons, or at least that reason, through reflection, is and must be the guard dog of the passions. Specifically, in “Mediocre Passions” the author professes stoicism when stating, “Reflection: protection against extreme, inexpressible and unbearable passions”. On the other hand, Grimaltos seems to have an unfairly narrow idea of reasons. Thus, in “Why Do We Go to Cemeteries?” he comes out with, “It is difficult to find (*rational*) [objective?] reasons, but deep down, perhaps, it does not matter all that much. If we find it comforting to go there, we are right to look for a meaning, a reason in it”. But, is finding comfort in it not an (objective) reason? Just what kinds of reasons is Grimaltos thinking of? I can’t help commenting on something else in this text. The author says that those “who pray ought to know (and believe) that their loved ones are not there”. It’s not true, they are there. If they are anywhere, it is there, in our memories too, of course, but in another way. Perhaps the need to go there is a response to a materialistic instinct that the age-old social command of spiritualism has been unable to suppress.

The other part of the book’s fundamental philosophy was *moralism*, which, again, has aspects that cannot be waived. Apart from some elements that we have already found in the rationalism, and which might constitute an *ethics of knowledge*, we should also point out, along these lines, the defence of the unity of the ethical and intellectual virtues: “When the dianoethical (intellectual) virtues are not assessed the ethics cannot be assessed either”. And conversely: “I find it particularly sad that people who excel intellectually do not live up to their excellence morally”. Moreover, it is not clear whether for the author the complementary nature of both kinds of virtues is an ideal, an aspiration, or rather a necessity, i. e., whether through (truly) possessing some of them it is also necessary to possess the others, or not. I am inclined more to the first option. Otherwise, no matter how inevitable it seems in many cases that an author’s moral consideration should *contaminate* the understanding of the work, separation is often indispensable, against that, it is simply necessary to state

that this thesis ("It does not convince me; possibly because I don't want it to") seems rather thin, apart from the fact that the expression violates the doxastic involuntarism so beloved by the author (see page 36 and, in general, "You Ought to Believe").

I consider my disagreement with his interpretation of the recreation of the story of the painter Paul Gauguin, made by the philosopher Bernard Williams, more fundamental. I concur with Grimaltos that many great artists, thinkers and scientists have not morally lived up to their intellectual merits. Who could deny that? Moreover, nor does the achievement of these merits justify (as a certain romantic idea of genius would like to) anything they may have done or which was necessary for this achievement. In this respect, it is true that Williams appeals to the gratitude we feel for Gauguin and his work to justify his decision to leave the family. But this does not seem to me the crucial point of the argument. The question is, rather, that on the occasions that morality wishes to impose an excessive sacrifice on us, which would even make us renounce our vocation or life's work, we are justified in paying no heed to moral obligation. In other words, occasionally the moral aspect may find itself surpassed by another kind of aspect; and, according to Williams, this is what is appropriate in Gauguin's case. I believe the conclusion is right, although I do not know if the example actually demonstrates it (or does so clearly).

There are other themes in the book that should also be commented upon. I shall refer only to the one that, for many, is the great philosophical question: the meaning of life. A critic has said that the text entitled "The Best Jujube Climber" contains the exposition of the meaning of life. Put this way, it seems a little exaggerated, though the critic may have expressed it in a more qualified way. In any case, I would like to point out, in this same sense, the text "A Day Like Any Other". I have to say that from a literary point of view I found it a really beautiful story, as were "The Eighth Night" and "Writing and Riding a Bicycle". If "The Best Jujube Climber" demonstrates the meaning of life, or, more moderately, it describes for us the tranquil satisfaction of a life fulfilled, "A Day Like Any Other" shows the diversity of meanings of the different private lives and the contrast between the meaning and the absurdity of life.

When all is said and done, it is only fair to say that with *Ideas i paraules* Tobies Grimaltos has achieved a notable maturity as a writer of the literary essay. I must stress that the author has found his own style of writing, which goes perfectly well with the reasoned and reasonable lucidity of his standpoints. It is obvious that Grimaltos's prose has been greatly influenced by both the clear, direct style typical of analytical philosophy, and by the Fusterian essay-writing tradition, which, more or less, the great majority (if not all) of our authors are party to. Particularly noteworthy, reminiscent of the great man from Sueca, is his moderate and intelligent use of irony (see especially "Intellectuals"), but above all the pragmatism or common sense of his "thought capsules".

To sum up, this is a good book that is well worth reading, for the author's intriguing and well-reasoned ideas and his concise efficient prose ■

|| **When I compare,
then I see clearly**
Juan de Sola Llovet

Carrers de frontera. Passatges de la cultura alemanya a la cultura catalana (Frontier Streets. Passages from German Culture to Catalan Culture, vol. I). Edited by Arnau Pons and Simona Škrabec, Institut Ramon Llull, Barcelona, 2007, pp. 466

It is certainly surprising that, of the flood of new publications that the culture industry pours onto the desks of spirited booksellers every day, of the host of books, studies and more or less literary pieces that fill the arts pages of newspapers, blogs or other more volatile supports —like rumour or gossip, it's all the same: license becomes the norm— it is certainly surprising, I repeat, that it should be a so-called institutional book that provokes in readers that Nabokovian feeling of a shudder down their spine, an unequivocal bodily reflex that the book they are holding is an important book.

After reading this marvellous first volume of *Carrers de frontera*, edited by Arnau Pons and Simona Škrabec, from cover to cover, one is overcome by two feelings. On one hand, the impression of having witnessed the development of a culture and a literature, the Catalan, that quite justly and correctly demand that which before 17th July 1936 was theirs by right: insertion in the fabric (the context) of European literature after Goethe; on the other, one's memory recalls the reading of another book that, without the two curators perhaps being aware of its existence, could be the reflection or the initial seed of this biographical proposal.

Let's take it step by step. In 1940, with the Second World War under way and the foundations laid of a barbarity never before witnessed by humanity, Samuel Fischer's publishing house, at the time still based in Berlin, published an anthology of German literature in two volumes edited by Oskar Loerke: *Deutscher Geist. Ein Lesebuch aus zwei Jahrhunderten* (The German Spirit. An Anthology of Two Centuries), which included presentations and texts by, among others, Winckelmann, Lessing, Kant, Matthias Claudius, Hegel, Schiller, Goethe, Jean Paul, Schleiermacher, Novalis, Kleist, Runge, Eichendorff, Bismarck, Hebbel, Nietzsche, Max Weber and Paul Ernst. Although the times were not exactly kind to either the spirit or the letter, the book by Loerke, an expressionist poet and critic who like so many others earned his daily bread by publishing other people's work, was a spectacular success: just when civilization was being annihilated, people ran to the bookshops to buy a copy (it is quite true that literature remedies virtually all ills, apart from death). It goes without saying that the people's response was the result of word of mouth rather than glowing reviews, as in 1933 Loerke, like so many independent souls, *Einzelgänger* of culture, had been expelled from the Prussian Academy of the Arts for political reasons. After the Nazi regime prohibited his writings, Loerke withdrew to Frohnau, a neighbourhood north of Berlin, where he died in 1941 at the age of 56, one of the most conspicuous representatives of what was known as the "internal emigration".

Although the Ministry of Propaganda considered it a "book of opposition", the anthology produced by Loerke, whose first edition stretched to a total of 1,743 pages, was

republished in 1942, and in 1953 a young Peter Suhrkamp took it upon himself to extend the list of authors, added an epilogue and reached the landmark of 2,000 pages. Since then, the book has never been out of print, and in Germany there is not a single library belonging to a man or woman of letters that does not have it to hand in a prominent place.

But let us return to Catalonia. Although it is true that the initial idea of *Carrers de frontera* was another —“to show the various influences that German culture had on Catalan culture during the 19th and 20th centuries in all areas of literature”, Pons and Škrabec write at the beginning of the book— it is equally true that, by showing us how one culture is reflected or mirrored in the other, the paths that have marked the literature and the currents of thought in Catalonia since, to mention two dates, Maragall read and translated Goethe and Pi i Margall studied and disseminated the fundamental principles of Hegel’s philosophy, adapted to the necessities of the Catalan social reality, become (even more) visible.

Whatever the case —René Wellek said that dating, like the delimitation of literary movements, was purely an epistemological necessity— the first volume of *Carrers de frontera* (the second volume, more focused on the reception in Germany of Catalan-speaking authors and their culture, will see the light after summer) is a major publishing event. The list of contributors is overwhelming, as are also the reasons for the different texts: a complete, exhaustive X-ray of German-influenced Catalan culture in the last two centuries, from poetry to the novel, from drama to architecture, via science, music, the plastic arts, film and the union movements. It is hard to find a book of this kind, an encyclopaedia so complete and succinct, so well conceived and edited, moreover generously illustrated and balanced, with photographs from the time, book covers, press cuttings, graphic work and portraits of different figures; a book that is a joy to have in one’s hands, that encourages one to continue learning, reading, studying, and which —something rare, most unusual in works of this type— invites one to re-read it as if it were one of those complete pieces that, from time to time, literary criticism gives us.

(Were it not for the fact that the book is limited to the links —to the passages— between the German- and Catalan-speaking worlds through the most representative and emblematic figures, we might well claim, without fear of exaggeration, that it is the most modern, expansive and clear-sighted history of Catalan literature and culture to have been written in the last twenty years, which is no mean feat).

To pick out, from nearly four hundred and seventy pages, any contribution in particular would be an injustice, because it would mean not mentioning many inestimable essays and therefore falling into a sort of review of the review or, if you will, an anthology of the anthology, a fantastic exercise, without doubt, and also maieutic, but one that, taken to extremes, would end up dissipated in a reduction to the absurd. Let us rather go about it another way: if, not long ago, a German reviewer wrote of the novel by a Barcelona author that it was a “remarkable book, because rarely does one come across a book 395 pages long that is 395 pages too long”, we could say precisely the opposite about *Carrers de frontera*: that it is quite difficult to find a book 466 pages long that is not a comma too long.

What makes this book an enormously interesting proposition is the exercise of comparative literature and cultural criticism that it contains in each section. The approaches are very varied, all currents are represented in them: one moment there

are texts that tackle Catalan literature synchronically and others that do so diachronically, and the next we find an exercise in classical philology, or a reflection on the need for really, truly critical criticism: real criticism. Because here is, basically, the chief breath of air that seems to blow through this volume: the literary creation of a country can have its ups and downs —literary excellence through the centuries seems, from today’s perspective, exclusive only to France and the English-speaking countries; not even in Germany has every century been fruitful— but what a literature can never ever pretend is not to have rigorous, perceptive, knowledgeable and fair criticism: in short, criticism of the first order. (If we consider the quality of the contributions to this collective volume, we need not worry; Catalan criticism in the 21st century has an iron constitution, like Catalan literature in the 19th and 20th centuries.)

The second element that *Carrers de frontera* establishes is that, when you think about it, there is no such thing as national literature. When on January 31st 1827 Goethe told Eckermann, “I like taking a look at what foreign literature is doing, and I encourage everyone to do the same. These days the concept of national literature does not make much sense. The age of universal literature is upon us, and all of us must act to quicken its coming. But in our assessment of the foreign we must not make anything that seems strange to us the exclusive reason for our admiration and hold it up as a single model,” he meant not only that things had to change: deep down, perhaps in a not too conscious way, Goethe was touching one of the nerves of literary history. He was pointing out a fact that, no matter how much he might believe that it could be directed, and even though it was eclipsed by the boom in Romantically-rooted nationalism, was advancing *motu proprio* and coming from a long way back: literature was (and is) a self-governing entity made up of different elements, a sort of universe that expands and contracts according to the ages, which makes itself and which if it knows any bounds it is only to cross them, where the distance that separates ten centuries —or two cities like Hamburg and Barcelona— is at times smaller than the abyss between, let’s say, Gelida and Sanaüja.

That literary traditions are closely linked to one another, that the imbrication of a text in the general fabric of literature is not just the result of a theoretical and ambitious conception of the literary fact, but also a necessary condition for understanding and integrating this text in the whole that we call literature, is shown to us, for example, by the universal nature of the works of William of Aquitaine, Pero Meogo or Walther von der Vogelweide, or the dialectical relationship established between a poem by Guillem de Berguedà, some verses by Cavalcanti, a sonnet by Petrarch, the verses of Ausiàs March and the famous sonnets numbers xviii and cxxx by Shakespeare. Or, as this book shows us, between Goethe and Maragall. Or Hölderlin and Riba. Or Rilke and Vinyoli. Or Ferrater and Goethe and Hölderlin and Rilke and Kafka.

This relationship established between two different traditions or periods, this intercultural dialogue, would be completely impossible without translators, the people who, after all, pave the way for Goethe to be able to speak of a *Weltliteratur*. These men and women who strive —often in the shadows and almost in secret— to make the written word understandable in another language or another age are the true messengers of culture, the authentic paladins of universality, those who make the *Duino Elegies*, the *Divine Comedy* or the poems of Cavafy belong, today, also, in their own way, to Catalan literature. If in the beginning there was the word, later there must have been the translated word.

In the same way that Loerke's anthology, which I was talking about at the beginning, is an inescapable point of reference for the history of German literature and culture, this *Carrers de frontera* is destined to be a work of required reading and consultation for all those who are interested in Catalan letters. While we await the appearance of the second volume and the translation into German of this first one, we can only hope for one thing: that the Institut Ramon Llull is kind enough to do the same with the English-speaking, French and Italian (and even the Russian!) cultures, so that, by having to look at our literature through another's magnifying glass, we may for once conceive of the magnitude or, rather, the vastness of our literary tradition.

Today, when almost two years ago some were wondering from their ivory towers what the point was of so many efforts to promote Catalan language and culture at the Frankfurt Book Fair of 2007; when more than one pundit were tearing their hair out and asking impatiently what the results of it would be, it seems to be time to answer that, aside from the contracts for the translation of contemporary Catalan works and authors — which, when you think about it, is more of a mercantile than a strictly literary matter, more to do with the industry than with the canon— we have managed, in some ways, to put back on the map of Europe one of the most singular and universal cultures, and, indirectly, to make much of the planet aware of a literary tradition that, despite its crises and the centuries of darkness, has for the moment reached the last third of the 20th century in admirable spirits.

As Walter Benjamin said, “only dialectic images are truly historical images, that is, not archaic”. These *Frontier Streets* are a good example of this ||