# Reviews

## II The matter that life is made of

**Joaquim Espinós**

Anna Esteve Guillén, *El dietarisme català entre dos segles (1970-2000)*
(Catalan Diaries, 1970-2000)
IIFV-Publicacions de l'Abadia de Montserrat,
Alacant/Barcelona 2010, 298 pp.

**One of the most interesting phenomena** on the recent Catalan literary scene has been the growth of so-called "me literature". Memoirs, autobiographies, biographies, correspondence and diaries have been carving out a niche for themselves in bookshops, and have brought Catalan letters a little closer to that normality which, according to Josep Pla, necessarily requires the existence of reliable non-fictional prose. Each type of autobiographical literature has specific characteristics that make generalisation difficult. However, there is a certain agreement among commentators when they state that the profusion of works of this kind might be the result of an overdose of fiction, inevitable in the audio-visual world we live in. The cinema, television, comics and video games already supply us with more than enough imaginative stories, and demanding readers might find in the different strands of memoir writing a proposal that would provide them with an intensification of values as important as truth and authenticity.

Within "me literature", diaries are perhaps the genre that has experienced a most spectacular boom, seeing as younger-generation authors have unabashedly embarked upon writing them, and have added their names to those of the masters of the genre (Pla, Fuster, Manent, Gaziel, Puig i Ferreter...). All this recent writing has formed a compact and growing corpus, which was crying out for a study that would approach it from the theoretical point of view and separate the wheat from the chaff. And this is what the book that we are reviewing here, by Anna Esteve, has done, with excellent results. *El dietarisme català entre dos segles (1970-2000)* is in fact the first academic study to deal with this subject monographically. Although we already had valuable partial studies of Catalan authors –with the patriarchs Pla and Fuster leading the way– we lacked an overview, and one cannot deny that this book is a pioneer in this sense. It is also, and I must stress this, the mature result of the work of the research group that has been studying "me literature" for years at Alacant University. The six symposia held, with the corresponding publications, bear witness to this.

Introductions, contextualisations and conclusions aside, the book is divided into two quite different parts, one theoretical and the other practical. The former is devoted to the difficult task of defining the poetics of the diary. Entitled, significantly, "Towards Impossible Poetics", it thoroughly reviews the chief characteristics of the genre: writing from the present –with the resulting foolish hope of capturing the instant, which relates it to poetry, insofar as both deal with the volatile matter that life is made of– the importance of the dating, the fragmentation intrinsic to its format, the accumulative and repetitive structure, the appraisal of examining one's conscience, the diary writer's specular reflection on his condition... In this section, the typology tested by the author is especially interesting; following the pictorial model of the self-portrait, she observes four kinds of diary writers: those who assert themselves ostentatiously in the text, those who camouflage themselves in it, those who represent themselves writing in it, and those who do so overtime.

She also distinguishes between the different spheres of the ego that are shown: the intimate, the private and the public. In the case of Catalan diary writing, predominantly intellectual and literary, the intimate dimension is the one most criticised by the authors. Another aspect stressed by Anna Esteve in her dissection is the great importance that the observation of reality attains –diary writers are great Peeping Toms, as Àlex Susanna so aptly puts it– along with the construction of a personal geography, often packed with journeys. She also devotes an important section to dealing with the discursive specificity of diaries, especially their hybrid and frontier nature: on the borderline between non-fiction, fiction, the chronicle, the travel book, dialogue, lyrical expression, their place is always the gaps in between. This introductory part ends with a description of the functions that converge in it: testing ground, documentary, the shaping of a personality, and so on. Along the way, we are offered a neat synthesis of the essential bibliography of the subject, overwhelmingly French, very cleverly woven into the author's reflections.

The second part of the book is devoted to the study of seven diaries that, according to the author, stand out for their quality and representative nature. Each of them constitutes, then, a specific type of diary writing. The authors chosen are Pere Gimferrer, Valentí Puig, Feliu Formosa, Josep Piera, Rafa Gomar, Enric Sòria and Miquel Pairolí. We could almost certainly add a few more names to the list, and maybe question or at least qualify some of those in it, but the choice is undoubtedly reasonable, and it is definitely a sensible proposal for a canon of Catalan diary writing in the late 20th century. The authors who have not been included are compensated with mentions in the theoretical part, which also acts as an anthology.

I believe this to be a necessary study, which helps importantly to reinforce the appraisal of diary writing, often looked down upon by the literary establishment as a poor relation of the major genres. A study, moreover, readable and pleasant, with something of the essay about it, imbued perhaps with the sensitive and ductile prose that is so frequent in the subject of her study ||

## Integration and the cosmopolitan idea

**Xavier Filella**

Norbert Bilbeny, *Què vol dir integració? Nouvinguts i establerts a les nacions europees* (What is integration? Newcomers and established in the European nations), La Magrana, Barcelona 2010, 176 pp.

**Economic globalisation** has been accompanied by growing migratory movements that have gradually transformed the host societies, turning them into veritable multicultural societies. This new multi-ethnic reality has highlighted the central nature of identity and cultural peculiarities in Western societies at the beginning of the 21st century. As things stand, integration has become an essential goal of the state to help social cohesion, especially at a time when class solidarity, the value of education, the stability of the economy and the solidity of the nation have been called into question. In light of this Norbert Bilbeny, Professor of Ethics at Barcelona University, gives us an opportunity for reflection in *Què vol dir integració?* (What Does Integration Mean?). The author, who defines emigration as the most important social movement of our time, compares the fear of the established residents, often suspicious of difference, with the fear felt equally by the new arrivals who have to deal with starting a new life full of difficulties, ranging from job and legal insecurity to adapting to the new social reality that surrounds them.

The perspective of this fear, shared by established residents and newcomers alike, accompanies the arguments that Norbert Bilbeny puts forward throughout this essay. The work examines the different policies of integration, from assimilation, which the author challenges for both its principles and its results, to the pluralist integration that helps minorities to fit into society, without presupposing, however, the predominance of one cultural view over the rest. The ideal upheld by Bilbeny is that of a community with its differences that avoids both the uniformity of the assimilationist route and the disintegration of multi-cultural pluralism. Therefore, says the author, we should be promoting a common public culture that has to be able to make room for the different ethno-cultural peculiarities. The core of this model is defined by respect for the law, civic-mindedness and a minimum of common intercultural morality, while respect for the particular ways of life of the various minorities is based on the right to be different.

Bilbeny's theses are based both on the paradigm of interculturality, insofar as it promotes contact and dialogue between cultures and stimulates exchange, and on the perception of a gradual dilution of the national framework in the post-national dimension theorised years ago by the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas. Bilbeny, in favour of a cosmopolitan ideal, argues that in modern poly-ethnic societies the national identity cannot be cultural –it must be political. We cannot go back, he warns, to the confusion between citizenship and nationality. Integration means creating citizens: in no way does it mean culturisation. From here on, he explains, it will be impossible to carry on identifying the nation exclusively with one ethnic group or one culture, no matter how dominant it is in a society.

Bilbeny's proposal provides for a slight asymmetry in its formulation that includes obeying the laws of the host society and respect for its native language and traditional culture, but it is characterised fundamentally by a marked egalitarianism. Thus, in the first place, he defends the new immigrants' access to the rights and opportunities that society as a whole enjoys. He then defines integration as a process shared mutually by established citizens and newcomers. Of course, the host society, the author says, has the right to establish the limits and conditions of the people entering its country, but it also has the duty to respect the dignity and the legitimate aspirations of its new fellow citizens. Integration, Bilbeny concludes, is after all a process of mutual adaptation between established citizens and newcomers that involves a reciprocal projection between the cultures in contact and, in the final analysis, it requires them to be able to share the power and the blood II

## II A metaphor of culture

**Jacobo Muñoz**

Mercè Rius, *El Pont de la Girada. Reflexions vora mar*
(The Zirada Bridge. Reflections by the sea),
Lleonard Muntaner Editor,
Palma de Mallorca 2010, 234 pp.

**As we well know,** no genre exists in which philosophy, at some time or another in its centuries-old existence, has not tried to express itself. The rigour of the *summa* or the treatise and the brilliant sparkle of the aphorism, the dialogue in which every thought is developed gradually and the synthetic vigour of the poem, the enigmatic gnomic sentence and the austere commentary; all of these and more, including the personal diary, the parenetic discourse and the pamphlet, have been used by philosophy (made, ultimately, of words) to assert and realise itself.

In any case, the aphorism has already more than proved its philosophical potential, especially when what has been at stake –as in this case– is many-faceted thought. Here, thanks to Mercè Rius, it demonstrates this once more. She has chosen, following in the footsteps of two of her most renowned masters, a variation on the aphoristic that on one hand recalls the dense brilliance of the micro-essays of Adorno's *Minima Moralia*, and on the other revives the agile and brilliant pyrotechnics of D'Ors' glosses.

Taking travel writing to the heights of intellectual condensation, Mercè Rius has offered her readers the results of a quite extraordinary experience of a mythical city: Venice. A city elevated at one and the same time to the condition of inexhaustible cultural landscape and a mood dominated by the most powerful of drives: that of the spirit eager for self-realisation and development. Venice, in short, as a metaphor of culture, the reason why the expression of this can only be what it is in Mercè Rius: a socio-historical construct. A construct made with materials very diverse yet all indebted to the *ethos* of our age, an age that can now only be understood as "the time of delay". A time in actual fact without time, of pure excess, whose end is shrouded in the most absolute silence.

However, *El Pont de la Girada* could also be read as a diary of two interwoven journeys: one internal and the other external. One, made by this embodiment of mature reflexivity that is Mercè Rius. The other, by the insoluble dialectic opened after the scorching irruption of some particularly striking areas of the philosophical and literary culture of the last century that the author deciphers in the light and on the sea shore of Venice: Nietzsche, Adorno, Sartre, Wittgenstein, D'Ors, Carl Schmitt or Massimo Cacciari, to whom she talks subtly throughout her book, but also Mallarmé, Trakl, Beckett and, above all, Thomas Mann. In actual fact, Aschenbach is the true guide of Mercè Rius on her particular journey to the hell of our split, exhausted culture.

It will not be necessary to insist on the wealth and variety of Mercè Rius' incursions in the tradition that she completely lucidly assumes as her own. Speaking for example of the Venetian sea is Ausiàs March, who questions us without his name ever being mentioned: "the sea will boil like the pot in the oven". At other times the voice that can be heard comes from the bowels of the *Llibre d'Amic e Amat*. Or it tumbles from the heights of the *Commedia*. Or are these merely nods to an already devoted reader? Whatever the case, *El Pont de la Girada* can also be read as an invitation –neither naïve nor simply nostalgic– to the *return*. In Mercè Rius' thinking this is undoubtedly experienced as a longing for fusion between separation and union, between the sense of unease that time pushes us towards and the no less human urge to "arrive where we started and know it for the first time", as Eliot once wrote.

The fact that a Catalan woman possessed from the start by the need to recognise herself in her *own* tradition elevates the sea of Venice, epitome of the Mediterranean, to the status of the origin, is doubtlessly part of the logic of things. Especially when what is at stake is a mythical origin that, on these pages where time and again the redemption of creatures through communion in eternal beauty is appealed to, transmutes inevitably into the point of arrival.

Throughout this spiralling journey Mercè Rius looks at the contemporary work of art, decisionism, the twilight of the gods, *Bildung*, friendship, the mythical Musilian incest between the twins Agathe and Ulrich, Frankenstein's monster, the links between democracy and *philia* and many other things.

But always Venice: its streets and squares, its canals, churches and basilicas, its *palazzi* and its bridges, among which stands, powerful, yes, but immune to postmodern monumentality, the Girada, capable of "beautifying the space around it". And that is saying a lot, in Venice.

And as a result of all this, the admirable meta-cultural proposal that receives with singular synthetic force the most *appropriate* and most Orsian of her apothegms: "All that which is not insemination is plagiary" II

# II War in paradise

**Vicenç Pagès Jordà**

Nancy Johnstone, *Un hotel a la costa (Tossa de Mar, 1934-1939).* (Hotel in Flight). Introduction, edition and translation by Miquel Berga, Tusquets, Barcelona 2011, 416 pp.

**In the early nineteen thirties,** Archie and Nancy Johnstone decided to move to the Costa Brava from London. After a few inspection visits, they eventually had a family hotel built in Tossa de Mar and opened it in 1935. Throughout this process, Nancy Johnstone wrote a diary, which she kept with British aloofness. The Johnstones were not upper class, nor did they have any experience of the hotel trade (he was editor-in-chief of the *News Chronicle*); they did not even speak Catalan, so the transcription of the wide range of administrative, financial, work-related, architectural and idiosyncratic problems they ran into seems deliberately funny. No problem would seem to be too great to upset the author's good mood. After all, everything is cheap, the people are friendly, the water is clean and the sun shines all day. For a couple from London full of hopes and dreams, Tossa was a little bit of paradise.

The overriding tone of these first few pages is humorous: "We were not familiar with the old Catalan custom of putting the building up first and then virtually knocking it down again to add small details like the pipes." The worst of all seem to be the train journeys and the national sport called the siesta. As readers, however, we know that in this country the nineteen thirties did not end well, and the optimism transmitted by the book contrasts with our concern for the future. In October 1934, when they had not yet opened the hotel, President Lluís Companys proclaimed the Catalan State. Neither the demonstrations nor the general strike, not even the repression in Asturias, seem to bother the author too much. In actual fact, for her the revolutionary atmosphere adds a picturesque touch, which might even be a draw for the clients of this hotel, as unusual as the owners.

**State of war.** Little by little, Casa Johnstone is made ready, the first guests arrive, and Nancy is overjoyed. From time to time threatening events take place, but she doesn't attach too much importance to them: "There's a constant state of war, because before one war has ended, they've already started another." The tension between this view of the author's and the reader's knowledge of what was about to happen creates a very particular tension, dramatic and at the same time comic –a comicality that freezes the reader's smile. It is a dramatic effect similar to the one in the film *La vita è bella* (Life is Beautiful) by Roberto Benigni, so highly praised by Imre Kertész, in which a father tries hard to make his son laugh when they are in the Nazi concentration camp.

It is 1936. When the Popular Front wins the general election in February, the British press gets jumpy, but Nancy continues to assure her correspondents and future clients that there is nothing to worry about. 18th July arrives and even though it does not seem as though a long bloody war is beginning, and despite the fact that the FAI militiamen become a common sight in Tossa, the author does not seem too worried, although we detect a rising causticity: "We were shocked to learn that we were trapped between ferocious Bolsheviks who did not cease to howl around our houses baying for fresh blood, while the rebels (very tactfully called 'insurgents' in *The Times*) were doing everything in their power to get here in time to save us from a fate worse than death."

The first book ends at the close of 1936. In the second, Nancy Johnstone has to perform a major balancing act to maintain the initial tone: "Absurdly, we wanted to believe that in Spain murder

and armed conflicts aren't as horrific as in other places." Throughout the volume, in any case, the Catalans are presented in an ideal way, divorced from experience. "Catalans don't steal," "Catalans never get nervous or lose their tempers."

The prolonged fighting and the frequent bombings, however, get them down in the end. "After a while the war didn't seem so funny." Meanwhile, the Johnstones have refused the offers of the British authorities to repatriate them and agree to turn the hotel into a home for refugee children. The last pages of the book are horrifying. The Johnstones flee with the children. They pass through Llagostera, Cassà, Quart and reach Figueres, then a city full of refugees, hunger and cold. The bombings are frequent: "Figueres seemed to us to be the very image of Hell." From there they go to France.

In the epilogue, the author tells of the refugees' conditions in the French concentration camps. France's role in the affair is not exactly noble, but it is far better than the United Kingdom's. "A delegation of respectable English gentlemen dressed in plus-fours appeared with the job of killing all the Spanish mules that were lying around starving to death in the concentration camps to put them out of their suffering. It crossed my mind that perhaps, while they were at it, they could have killed the Spanish exiles who were dying of hunger in the concentration camps to put them out of *their* suffering." Thus ends the second book: in five years, Nancy Johnstone has gone from setting up home in paradise to fleeing from it; at the same time, her irony has turned into sarcasm.

**Johnstone and Orwell.** The two books now brought together in *Un hotel a la costa –Hotel in Spain* and *Hotel in Flight*– were published by Faber & Faber in 1937 and 1939 respectively. George Orwell's review of them was published in *The Adelphi* in 1939, after he had returned from the Aragon Front. Both of them, George Orwell and Nancy Johnstone, experienced the Spanish Civil War, the former after enlisting to fight for the Republic and the latter in a more gradual and above all involuntary way. It is no coincidence that the translator and editor of *Un hotel a la costa* should be Miquel Berga, lecturer in English Literature at Pompeu Fabra University and one of the most respected experts on George Orwell.

Orwell and Nancy Johnstone both arouse complex feelings in us: we find them well-meaning, but not very reliable in their descriptions of a situation that partially escapes them. And yet their view, that of the outside observer, is a first-rate historical document. They have their English prejudices, naturally, but they are immune to Spanish and Catalan prejudices. In this respect, their view, although soft-focus, is direct and above all honest. Their books, moreover, have indisputable literary value. Many of Nancy Johnstone's descriptions reveal a remarkable power of observation: "The musicians in the *cobla* seem more like a group of Methodist pastors. They sit on stiff wooden chairs placed on boards. They wear black jackets and black hats. They look solemn. It seems as if a *cobla* musician never relaxes, not even at home." From the socio-linguistic point of view, her testimony is revealing: "In Tossa everyone spoke Catalan, although most people could also speak a sort of Spanish."

Miquel Berga's translation (the first into Catalan) brings us closer to the author; though him she speaks in a colloquial tone –at times even dialectal– insofar as he includes expressions like *perdre la xaveta* (go bonkers) or *anar a pastar fang* (get lost! buzz off!). In the introduction, Berga tells us that the book belongs to the Home Abroad subgenre, which always adds a touch of humour: humour that in the case of *Un hotel a la costa* inevitably darkens

# II A great European novel

**Julià Guillamon**

Jaume Cabré, *Jo confesso* (I Confess),
Proa, Barcelona, 2011, 1008 pp.

**The last hundred years of Catalonia's history** are marked by great nostalgia for Europe: by not having been able to be part of its economic development or the more recent outcomes of its cultural history. In this regard, I recommend the exhibition *La febre d'or* (Gold Fever), which is being shown in the different venues of the La Caixa Foundation. While Europe was embroiled in the Franco-Prussian War, Catalan winemakers were getting rich thanks to the phylloxera plague, a speculative bubble expanded, great fortunes were made and many works of art were commissioned, among them paintings and sculptures of great quality by Ramon Casas or Eusebi Arnau, but also a large number of portraits of members of the bourgeoisie, soulless and devoid of beauty, by Francesc Miralles or the Masriera brothers.

Could somebody like Adrià Ardèvol, the main character of Jaume Cabré's *Jo confesso* have come out of this milieu of holidays in Camprodon and lady friends in a box at the Liceu? Adrià devotes his whole life to knowledge: he's a violinist, a humanist, a collector of manuscripts and he studies in Tübingen with the linguist Eugen Coseriu. As an adult, he teaches aesthetics at the university and writes books that are published to great international acclaim: *The Aesthetic Will*, *History of European Thought*, and *Llull, Vico and Berlin, Three Organisers of Ideas*. Adrià Ardèvol is not the ripe fruit of a bourgeoisie in decadence heading for the great tragedies of the 20th century. He's a belated graft, a hothouse plant, as was Robert Saladrigas' character Claudi M. Broch twenty-five years before him.

In brief, the story is as follows. In the second decade of the 20th century, Fèlix Ardèvol, who was destined for a career in the church, studied in the Vatican and left a girl pregnant in Rome. He washed his hands of the matter, gave up his studies and, having returned to Barcelona, made the most of his knowledge and contacts in different walks of life to acquire a great private collection. He also opened an antique shop in carrer de la Palla and had a son, Adrià, who, he determined, would become a champion of humanism. Even as a small child Adrià was fluent in seven or eight languages and his father kept insisting that he had to learn Aramaic as well. On this matter he clashed with the boy's mother, daughter of a famous palaeographer, who wanted her son to be a violinist. Music (Cabré is incredibly knowledgeable!) and palaeography are constant references throughout the novel. The crux of the conflict goes back to the forties and fifties, after the Second World War. In those years a number of Nazi heavyweights were circulating in Barcelona under the protection of the Franco regime. The main element of the plot is an object that Fèlix Ardèvol fraudulently acquired from one of these fugitives: a violin dating from 1764, the first produced by Lorenzo Storioni in Cremona. It is one of these exceptional instruments that, in the history of music, come to be given their own name, in this case Vial, after Guillaume-François Vial, one of its first middlemen and one of the first to spatter it with blood.

Cabré introduces shifts in space and time, between the chronological thread of the story –the life of Adrià Ardèvol, from childhood through to the last years of his life in a subsidised nursing home afflicted by Alzheimer's disease– and the different subplots. Every time Adrià or his father read a manuscript or touch one of the precious objects related with the violin, a leap in time takes the reader back, to the 14th century for example, after the death of Josep de Sant Bartolemeu,

prior of the Sant Pere de Burgal monastery, when the last remaining monk, Julià de Sau, leaves its grounds with the founding documents and the box of relics. Or to the Birkenau concentration camp where the doctors Aribert Voigt and Konrad Budden carry out their experiments on young children, cutting the patellar tendon and applying Baum ointment to see if any regenerative process takes place without the aid of sutures. These frameless flashes interrupting the novel make it possible to reconstruct the history of horror underlying the urge to possess beauty. Death, destruction and perfidy run throughout the Vial's history. A forest fire in Paneveggio, near Cremona, ruins the wood merchants of the Mureda family. The youngest son, Jachiam, sets out in quest of adventure and ends up finding death. In Sant Pere de Burgal, the body of Julià de Sau lies under the roots of a maple tree and one of the seeds he was carrying in his pocket grows into the tree from which Storioni makes the violin. The death of the musical instruments merchant La Guitte. The death of Amani, accused of having stolen the medal belonging to Jachiam Mureda. The death of Amelia Alperts, first violin with the Philharmonic Orchestra of Antwerp, who arrived at Birkenau with the Vial. The death of Fèlix Ardèvol, who bought it from a Nazi fugitive.

Cabré constructs three novels around the story of the violin. The first is a tale of initiation, of the early childhood and youth of Adrià Ardèvol, his passion for music, his relationship with his teachers and with his friend Bernat Plensa. A childhood marked by the trauma of having parents who push him to be nothing less than the best, always and in everything, and by his feelings of guilt over his unwitting partial responsibility for his father's death. The second is a novel of ideas. Adrià becomes an intellectual who inquires into beauty and evil, truth and guilt. The third is a love story. He goes to Paris to give a concert and meets a girl whose father is Catalan and mother Jewish, Sara Voltes-Epstein. The three novels intercept and complete each other. Sara's uncle and several other close relatives have perished in the death camps. The book deals with the theme of restitution for pain. In two of its high points, Cabré addresses the validity of such reparation. A mercenary locates one of the old Birkenau doctors in a Congo hospital. He has given the last years of his life to the ailing, to atone for all the evil he did. They start talking and Budden tells him about the work he does at the hospital, the mercenary listens and then shoots him. Encouraged by Sara, Adrià also wants to right the wrong done by his father when he illicitly acquired the Vial. In this case, too, the solution leads to a paradox.

In a protective atmosphere such as that which cocoons Adrià Ardèvol with figures that are so unrepresentative of any world or social class, one is grateful for details that give a human touch to the character. A set of three trading cards featuring Fangio's Ferrari desperately sought by the boys. Or the little figures of Sheriff Carson and Black Eagle, which give Adrià psychological support (until he is quite big). The interaction between the direct view and objectivised experience is very well accomplished thanks to Cabré's gliding from first to third person which, as in the case of his chronological transitions, is done very naturally, almost seamlessly. By contrast, the whole of the central part, which we might call the novel of ideas, is something of a prop. With names like Vico, Coseriu or Isaiah Berlin –and one is not sure what they are doing here because Cabré does not dwell on the big philosophical questions– he describes Adrià's academic career without elaborating on the ideas he subscribes to. The best moment of the slightly cool love story is when Sara falls ill. Adrià is not given to great flights of emotion. He is more thrilled by a manuscript of Nietzsche than by sex, a pleasant lunch or a good bottle of wine. A situation that is dramatic in itself is required in order to achieve the dramatic tone.

The binding together of the three stories brings the central theme of the work into the foreground: the desire to participate in Europe's history and traumas. First of all, through the fiction of Adrià's being a member of one of those moneyed families which, in the final stages of its evolution or its decadence, produces an artistic child. Later, by way of the notions of guilt

and restitution. Adrià comes to conclude that refinement is stained with blood, that without the wheeling and dealing of his father (who stole money that Franco's military men sent to Switzerland, using it to buy works of art belonging to murdered or fugitive Jews) he could never have been a humanist. He seeks to redress the evil that has been done by means of his work. But is it enough to write a book? And beyond this first question, what can morality do before a story that blurs the bounds between truth and lie, that twists the facts and justifies abuse?

In constructing his earlier novel *Les veus del Pamano*,[1] Cabré used a technique akin to that of the TV serial, with uniform flat characters and action that advances through dramatic moves. *Jo confesso* is no mere evolution from the method of that book but, rather, a thoroughgoing reappraisal that takes as its model the great 20th-century novel, especially the works of Thomas Mann with their interweaving of history, art and thought. Ever since *Fra Junoy o l'agonia dels sons* (Fra Junoy or the Agony of Sounds) Jaume Cabré's books have spoken of beauty and passion. In *Jo confesso*, too, these themes appear quite forcefully, in particular in the context of Adrià's friendship with Bernat Plensa. They meet as children when they are both studying violin at the Conservatory, and end up as soul mates. Bernat is a professional violinist with the City of Barcelona Orchestra but he wants to produce work of his own and thus writes short stories and novels. Adrià doesn't like his friend's books at all and doesn't shrink from telling him so. There is no *élan*, no magic spark to bring the characters to life on the pages and make the emotions convincing.

This issue is always in the background of any novel by Cabré. The craft of the novelist is indisputably there. But the magic spark? In *Jo confesso* the construction is so awe-inspiring, its timing and rhythms are so well paced, its musical and historical references are so well fitted into the story, and its interplay between truth and fiction, without any oversimplification or ingenuity, is so revealing that the question is less perceptible than in his other works.

Catalan literature has enjoyed great international success with writers like Jaume Cabré and Albert Sánchez Piñol. However, this is the first time that a book like *Jo confesso* has been produced, with both Catalan and German readers in mind, and with this vocation of being a great European novel II

[1] Generally referred to in English as *Voices from the River* [translator].