



MANEL OLLÉ

“Is there that much difference between Starbucks and the Guggenheim?”

AN INTERVIEW WITH QUIM MONZÓ

Do you keep track of the country’s literary novelties?

Not much, to tell the truth. If I had to keep track of everything that comes out each year, I wouldn’t have enough time, even if years had a thousand days.

Do you buy more books in bookshops or by the Internet?

I buy a lot in British and American virtual bookshops.

What genres do you read most?

Basically fiction, especially short stories. I really like short stories. I also read the press a lot. Too much, maybe, but I can’t kick the habit.

You’ve always been interested in literature from the United States.

What does it bring you and what do you see in it?

I have a reactive way of being. I can’t stand the herd. For many years, over all the decades when being progressive was the order of the day, people had an irrational hatred for anything coming out of the United States. This sort of inanity is not unusual among a lot of people who, in principle, would seem to be perfectly normal and informed. All these clichés going round about whether the Americans are very basic, or innocent, and that they don’t have any history... You can be more or less accepting of the government of a particular country, but believing that all the people in the country are imbeciles is a barefaced demonstration of xenophobia. Nobody would dare to say this about the inhabitants of any country of the world, except Americans.

With the Americans, no holds are barred and you can hold forth with as much twaddle as you want. I went to New York in 1982 with a scholarship to study contemporary American literature. I chose to study that literature because, at the time, the Americans were so bad, so depraved (those were the days when everyone was still a Trotskyite or a Maoist) that people were claiming with total impunity that they couldn't produce good literature. A few things were being translated, but the passion with which people were reading Latin American literature, for example, was lacking. These were the good guys: poor, exploited third-world countries. The Americans, however, couldn't possibly produce good literature if they were bad people. But you only have to read it without prejudice to see that, naturally, there was some really good stuff there. This is the kind of comment that you still find, even today, not only at the bar of a pub (or the sofa in a chill-out) but also in blogs and opinion pieces. Anything the Americans do can be shat upon even though, not many years later, they're doing the same thing here. Nobody remembers any more that the people who take a certain position mocked the same position a few years earlier, saying that such a thing would never happen here. Look what's happened with smoking. Remember when they used to look on here and say, "These Americans! They've got restaurants where they won't let you smoke".

***Benzina* (Benzine) is, among other things, a European novel about the United States.**

New York is the equivalent of what Paris must have been at the beginning of the 20th century. In New York, in the 80s, there were heaps of artists from half the planet and such an effervescence of art galleries that I thought it would make the ideal setting for my novel.

To what extent does your reading end up influencing your work?

Every writer makes his or her genealogy. You do it from the moment you find writers that you love reading. The ones I was reading when I was fourteen or fifteen were Julio Cortázar and García Márquez ... García Márquez's a case in point. Now it's very fashionable to badmouth him, and people who've never read him or who've only read the cover blurbs are doing it. Yet, thirty years ago, it was trendy to sing his praises, even if they hadn't read him or if they'd only read the cover blurbs. Shortly after he got the Nobel Prize, more or less, it didn't look cool to be reading him. That's how it goes... Anyway, as an adolescent, I was reading these authors, and Adolfo Bioy Casares, and Juan José Arreola, and Augusto Monterroso... I'd read Kafka when I was fourteen, in Gabriel Ferrater's translation of *The Trial*, and the version of *The Metamorphosis* that Alianza Editorial published. I discovered Robert Coover in the early 1980s. I fell in love with him because the kind of stories he wrote opened up new forms of narration. *The Magic Poker* is a key book of the 20th century. I was also bowled over by Donald Barthelme, not so much the early books as the later ones. *Amateurs*, for example, I think is splendid. I translated some of his stories for *Els marges*. It was also in the 1980s, but in the latter years, that I discovered Giorgio Manganelli in a book that Anagrama published, *Centuria: 100 Ouroboric Novels*. They are a hundred novels of only one page. It's a literary miracle. I can give you more of my favourites: Dino Buzzati, Italo Calvino, Manuel Puig, Samuel Beckett, Raymond Queneau, Boris Vian... Not one of these writers is without an altar.

Which of Italo Calvino's *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* would you choose?

If I had to choose any, I'd say quickness, lightness and exactitude. Above all exactitude: too much fancy footwork doesn't get you anywhere. Fancy footwork kills you. Getting caught up in the fancy footwork only lets you talk about fancy footwork, at the very best. A lot of convolution is only good for talking about convolution and the pretension it masks, and that's all. It's a way of announcing that what's being written in that story must be deemed "very important", and it is "very important" because it's been written in such a convoluted way. Bring on the trumpets.

Visibility would also seem to be a characteristic of your books. Even though there's always a lot of play in the narrator's voice. Do you think your books lend themselves to film adaptations?

I write to explain myself to myself without getting too caught up in it

When you're going to make a film out of a book, you've got to ransack it and drag the film out of it in order to turn it into images. It won't work if you only reproduce what it literally says. I think that *Davant el Rei de Suècia* (Before the King of Sweden) could well be made into a film but, if you wanted to get it on to the screen, you'd have to think hard about how to do it because it all happens in the head of the main character. The challenge is always trying to make sure that the film is not just a slavish adaptation of the novel, which is what often happens.

Some people have written that both you and some of the writers you admire produce meta-fiction, stories that, even while they're talking about the world, are also rubbing up against other fictions and projections of the contemporary collective imaginary...

I wouldn't know. All this theory is beyond me. What I try to do is write stories and that's all "I just paint and that's it", isn't that what someone once said?

Do you theorise about what you do as a writer? Do you know where you're going to end up when you start writing something?

If I theorised I couldn't write fiction. If I knew the mechanisms I'd lose the beat. I don't want to theorise. I don't have the means or desire to. If I went to a psychologist and ended up knowing too much about myself, it'd be terrible. I try to know just enough about myself to keep going without heart attacks (at least for the time being). I'm not driven by any need to explain myself to myself, or to understand my mental mechanisms. If I did, what would I talk about then in my stories, in my articles and in my novels? I write to explain myself to myself without getting too caught up in it.

Do you subscribe to the assertion that literature is a merciless way of saying and knowing things that can only be formulated through literature?

Totally. The ambiguity of literature —which is only a word— there's NOTHING to equal it.

Some people say that there's not much of that in your literature, that it's well-crafted and diverting but there's no real moral or intellectual substance. Others read you as an ingenious, amusing writer, but essentially banal.

There are some readers (or recipients) who can get what's evident and that's all: just the first layer. It happens with literature, journalism, the cinema, television and so on. If this first layer is very simple, they decide the whole thing is simple. But they can't see beyond that; they can't see layers, two, three, four, and so on. So it's their problem, not the book's, or the article's, or the film's... These are typical best-seller readers. They need the first layer —the obvious, evident one— to be loaded with pretension, with a certain kind of historical resourcefulness, and *prêt-à-porter* high culture. These readers or reviewers who get to layer one and go no further get a big thrill when they find all this packaging (which really is utterly banal) and they think what they've got is *haute literature*.

If this is the case, wouldn't it turn out in the end that this cultural conceit of wanting to stuff literature with ideas, data and intellectual weightiness is very close to the basic mechanisms of the best-seller that you're describing?

Of course! We can talk about a kind of best-seller that's a bit more pretentious, maybe, and more adroit. It's the kind of book that seems to be telling you lots of things, for example about Christianity in the 14th century. It's real spoon-fed pap because the reader finds everything there at face value and doesn't have to start a single neurone bouncing around the head. There was a time (in the 60s and 70s) when it was obligatory to produce literature that talked about class struggle, the national question, women's struggle, and the like. If the novel fulfilled all these requirements, it was thought to be a great book, even if it was utterly mediocre. That's all gone now —the mandarins are no longer the Marxists but conservatives or mythomaniacs— but new requisites have appeared. It's always a matter of turning out novels according to a recipe.

Do you see yourself writing a historical novel?

No, I don't. I don't know what I see myself doing. Well, doing a great parody of a historical novel would be really fun. Actually, I can see Robert Coover doing a "historical novel", coming at it from this standpoint of parody...

What is it about writers that interests people?

It makes me sick, this mystification of the literary life. So Miquel Bauçà dies, and he dies in the way he dies, and a lot of people who never took the trouble to read him when he was alive, suddenly glorify him and turn him into *the great writer*. Miquel Bauçà was a truly great writer when he was still alive, before he died in the way that he died. How he died has nothing to do with the quality of his literature. But you have to be pretty cretinous to go looking in literature for the nimbus that cloaks the writer and little more than that. In other words, the tubercular writer, in some attic in Paris, spitting blood... Oh, what a great writer he is! And if he kills himself, so much the better. Or at least let him get caught up in a civil war in Fuentevaqueros and get put up against a wall and shot by a firing squad. There are very few people who are interested

in literature *per se*, without all the ideological and mythologising trappings. What people are mainly interested in is all that stuff: the aura it's wrapped in.

Where would you situate literary fiction *vis-à-vis* other kinds of fiction?

There's no doubt any more that literature has been shunted off to the fringes of fiction. It was really clear twenty years ago and now it's even more so. Television is offering extraordinarily powerful works of fiction today. There was one very important point (in the early nineties?) when David Lynch did *Twin Peaks*. That series (and what that audacity signified) broke with everything television had been doing until then. And this led to the appearance of fifty thousand ground-breaking, well-differentiated models. Television's at a high point. I take my hat off to some of the American series, from *House* to *The Sopranos* to *Lost*. Every day I see how my son is downloading from the Internet chapters they've shown a couple of days earlier in the United States. Since I don't have time to watch television every day, what I do is to buy packs from time to time and get right into it: five seasons of *The Sopranos* in two weeks. We're talking about Fiction with a capital F. It makes you laugh to see the buffs still telling you that the 19th century novels are the examples to follow. The Balzacs and Stendhals of today are the people who are turning out this great fiction for television, American or otherwise. In literature, those of us who write stories (be they long or short) are at the periphery of all this centrality that isn't even in the hands of the cinema any more. Now it's television, and television (as we understand it today) won't be at the centre either before long because it'll all be done on the Internet. And we won't be able to see that they're two different things, and that will open up hitherto unsuspected paths. For the moment, it's a huge pleasure to keep writing, all by myself, at the fringe of all this hullabaloo, without having to answer to anything or anybody.

Do you use resources from audiovisual language to set up or frame your stories?

Before I had a computer, I often worked with a set-up that consisted in cutting the paragraphs of the first draft I'd written directly on to the page and then relocating them in a different order, as if it was a film montage. It's evident that storytelling by means of the word has changed since the cinema came along. Huxley's way of assembling a novel and, later, Vargas Llosa in some of his books, happened because of the existence of the cinema. And people who began to write having grown up with television work differently again. Ads and videoclips have their influence: it's speed versus five hundred pages. Sometimes there are novels of seven hundred pages when five hundred would have been plenty. Cutting is a first-rate literary exercise. When I'd written *Davant del Rei de Suècia*, I decided to cut out everything that wasn't strictly essential and it went from a hundred and eighty pages down to a hundred. That was exciting.

Are you planning to write more novels?

I never have plans. What would I know about what I'm going to do tomorrow? I've written three novels — apart from *L'udol del griso al caire de les clavegueres* (The Howl of the Cop on the Brink of the Sewers), which I've never had republished — and these are *Benzinga*, *La magnitud de la tragèdia* (The Magnitude of the Tragedy) and *Davant del Rei*

de Suècia. Now I write a lot for the press. I like this business of putting a twist on a bit of news and giving the structure of a story to an article. Or the opposite: writing stories with elements of an article. In my current folder of stories I've written there are lots of things that come from the press. Write a novel? Maybe, yes. I don't know. The pace of life has to be different. When I wrote *Benzina* I didn't have a phone at home and I lived out of town. That's why I had the draft done in a matter of two weeks. But the more things that interest you in life, the more complicated the situation gets. What's clear is

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that, once I've decided to publish these stories, the other idea I'm working on looks as if it's going to end up being something longer, a kind of non-fiction story with fiction, if that makes any sense.

The weekly commitment of the article isn't too compatible with the extreme and prolonged concentration required by a novel...

If you put your mind to article writing and you try not to engage in simple digression on politics, the time you give to it is time you don't devote to fiction writing. But if they put a gun at my head and forced me to choose between writing articles and writing fiction, I wouldn't know what to do. Fortunately no one's got a gun at my head and I can go between one thing and the other without any hurry.

Is this intense journalistic activity a question of vocation or about earning a living?

I started writing articles in *Tele/eXprés*, chronicles of a trip to Vietnam during the war. Then I wrote columns for *Ajoblanco*. I've always written articles and fiction. I was in love with Joan de Sagarra's articles in *Tele/eXprés*, and the reports of Tom Wolfe, and the articles of Vázquez Montalbán (also in *Tele/eXprés*) when they wouldn't let him write about politics and he had to write about the Costa Brava. I loved the articles of Juan Marsé in *Por favour*. Even today Sagarra's articles make my Sunday. Espinàs is also a great columnist. And I like Xavier Montanyà a lot. Now I read him on Vilaweb or in the *Cultura/s* supplement of *La Vanguardia*. He's really good. I've kept some articles of his from the time when he was writing for *El Noticiero Universal*. After reading Joan de Sagarra when I was a young lad, I then got interested in reading his father... And I was astonished. What language! Now, there's one fellow I like who's writing in *The Independent*, Miles Kingston, and there's another one who writes for *The Guardian* called Guy Browning. He's got a book of articles translated into Catalan. He's good, really good. And a long time ago, it was a great discovery to find that there was a columnist called Manganelli who was writing articles in the 1960s of terrific quality and totally politically incorrect. And now that I'm talking about Italy, there are also Fruttero & Lucentini. I should say "were" because one of them died. When Umberto Bossi was saying that he wanted to proclaim the independence of Padania, Fruttero & Lucentini went off there to write dispatches as if it really was a war of independence.

Would you like to write your articles in Catalan?

Bilingualism is a punishment. Josep Pla said so, or something very like it.

Do you think the social, institutional and political milieu acts as a brake that makes sure that Catalan literature isn't visible?

Baltasar Porcel has talked about this a lot in his articles. You go into a bookshop and the percentage of books in Catalan is ridiculously low. So you tell me.

What would make this milieu a little less unwelcoming and a little more habitable for Catalan literature?

To tell you the truth, I don't see any solution. When we were innocent, in the early 1980s, when Franco wasn't long dead, we thought that we just had to open out the base and get away from elitism: we needed humour magazines, disco songs, gossip magazines and pornography in Catalan... the whole thing of the pyramid of high culture and low culture. *Madame se meurt*, wrote Gabriel Ferrater. In her latest book, Patricia Gabancho says that the bottom layer, popular culture (really popular and not cliché stuff) didn't exist in Catalan. And that's death. That leads to fossilisation, to turning Catalan culture into something residual, minority, Occitanised, Irelandised... It's the ultimate disconnection.

In some of your articles you've talked about a hologram of a country, a diorama of symbols, fancy dress and cardboard cut-outs as substitutes for the country in which we live and suffer...

We are living a pure farce. There isn't a single political party that isn't putting on a show to please people who are supposed to keep voting for them. The Catalan language is given symbolic significance (less and less, take note), but the politicians (from all the parties without exception) disown it whenever it suits them. It's an old flag that they have to hide from time to time because a growing part of the population hates it and, when votes are at stake, it's better to keep your mouth shut.

Do you talk much about these issues in your works of fiction?

You could say that *Davant del Rei de Suècia* is an allegory of present-day Catalonia, an allegory of defeat. The building's filled up with people you don't know and it's you who has to adapt to their standards and their way of doing things, not them.

Bernado Atxaga has recently become a member of the Euskaltzaindia, the Royal Academy of the Basque Language. Shouldn't some of today's well-known writers be in the Philological Section of the Institute of Catalan Studies, or the Royal Academy of Letters of Barcelona?

In the Basque Country and in Spain, things are as you say. Here, these institutions are so out of touch with what's happening on the street that I don't know what they are or how they function. It's more than a decade since they brought out the first edition of the dictionary. Hallelujah! And now they've just brought out the second. Lovely.

Once I went to the Institute with Empar Moliner to do a radio programme. I'd never been there before. We poked around the nooks and crannies and, among several other things, we lifted the covers of the Institute's switchboard. The labelled instructions were all done —on Dymo tape, if I remember correctly— in Spanish. Not even inside the bubble is the dream possible.

Are you tempted by the possibility of going back to work in television?

I was only working in television for a year, in *Persones humanes* (Human People) with Miquel Calçada. It was fifty-two weeks and that was all. I enjoyed it because the idea was right. Then, for years I was complaining that there was no real corrosive humour but I can't say that any more because now there's this whole gang of Toni Soler and company who are doing *Polònia* (Poland) on TV3 and *Minoria absoluta* (Absolute Minority) on Rac1. I take my hat off to them. In a domain that seems to be as dicey as political and social parody they're making splendid programmes. *Minoria absoluta* is addictive. They're really good.

Some people say you don't try to reflect the country in your work, and that you don't give specific settings in a lot of your stories.

That's true. I've always had a phobia for this kind of twee decoration of local details. When I translated Hemingway (the book that's called *The Sun Also Rises*) I was shocked at all the overdone picturesque touches of Pamplona that he threw in, and the expressions in bad Spanish that he placed in the mouths of the people from Pamplona, just to satisfy his longing for a bestseller and that of his readers for *faux* high culture. I feel the same about a lot of French writers who fill their mouths (or whose mouths were filled) with references to the Rambla or the Barri Xino¹ to throw in a touch of exotic colour. I don't see why I should say that the action's happening in carrer Jovellanos, or in carrer Rocafort if there's no need to give this information. I tend to eliminate anything I think is non-essential. However, if I had to write articles about Barcelona as if I was here for seven days as a tourist in my own city, then I'd give all the details. But in stories, if they're not needed, why give them?

Do you write stories starting out from a plot or the characters?

More from the characters than from a plot or situation.

In your literature one always sees a certain degree of autobiographical projection. Have you ever thought about doing something purely along the lines of memoirs?

I think that, whatever I write, it will always go through the sieve of fiction. The stories I'm writing now take off from specific details in my life but hasn't it always been thus? The stories I've got in a folder waiting for me to decide to publish them, have come out of these last fifteen years, when I've gone through the final decline of my parents and

■ ¹ Chinatown: a name given in the 1920s to the old-city neighbourhood (which had no Chinese connections) by a local journalist after seeing a film about vice in San Francisco's Chinatown [translator's note].

there's no doubt that they're full of references I couldn't have published fifteen years ago. Fifteen years ago I wouldn't have been able to tell you much about the Hospital Clínic, or the Vall d'Hebron hospital... Now I can tell you about a lot of Barcelona hospitals, with all the details you care to have, because I've spent eight years in them.

Some of your stories have appeared with illustrations by Robert Llimós, Perico Pastor or Ramon Enrich, who are mainly figurative painters. You've also talked about art in *Benzina* and in a number of articles. Are you interested in the world of art nowadays?

I don't follow it with as much devotion as I used to. I go to exhibitions but not with the regularity of some decades ago. I studied at the Massana School of Art. And there's one detail of modern art that particularly interests me. After Impressionism, when reality started to be disfigured (or served up without the previous fidelity), the more art advances, the more it moves away from being mere realistic reproduction and the greater need the painter has to justify what he or she is doing. It amuses me mightily,

this need to justify. If they didn't do it, a lot of people would be left only with what we were talking about before, the façade or the first layer. And we've reached the point where a lot of painters have had to write books to defend themselves and to explain why they paint the way they paint, and why their paintings are so good. This is an aberration: the public will decide if they are so good! There's a great book by Tom Wolfe —from the time when he still wasn't writing novels— called *The Painted Word*. He talks in this about a future in which what will be hanging in the museums will be the theoretical texts of the critics. And next to them, in miniature, will be a reproduction of the work in question so that we know what the great creator is referring to, the great creator being the one who's able to explain the sense of the whole thing. When the book was published, people thought it was reactionary. Where do you see criticism of the dogmas of progressive art? But now we've seen that the whole thing is a more or less intelligent business. Art and sausages, ecology and culture consumption. Is there that much difference between Starbucks and the Guggenheim? Both of them keep opening up franchises so that cosmopolitan folk can have clean ghettos where they can go and have a coffee (in the former case) or see art that interests them (in the latter case).

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Does your training and experience as a graphic designer have any influence in your writing?

In my early books there's a lot of obsession with describing and detailing colours. I could almost have written, "The sun was rising in a Pantone 635 C sky". Something else that clearly comes from that background in art is my tendency to write advancing

rapidly without polishing anything and only starting to work on the nuances and polishing when the whole thing has come together. I write as it comes, without worrying too much about commas and accents until the story is well defined. I see a lot of similarity with the process of drawing. First you've got to bring together properly what you're drawing, whether it's a sofa or a face because, if you start finishing little detail after little detail, when you get to the other side of the sofa or the face, you might find that it's gone outside the picture, or that you haven't managed to establish the right relations among all the parts and, in short, it's all over the place.

What part has translating played in your work?

In the early 1980s I began to translate because I needed money. But publishers only pay a pittance. Literary translation is worse paid than technical translation. If literary translators are so badly paid, so much the worse for translation because the good ones will go and do something else. When I started to have the kind of income I needed from other kinds of work, I decided to translate only the writers I liked, such as Truman Capote. Recently I've been translating theatre —because friends have asked me to do it more than anything else. Besides, theatre is dialogue and I really enjoy translating dialogues and making people speak Catalan that is neither imposed nor putrid.

Has the model of literary Catalan changed much over the last decades?

Yes, especially after the 1980s when the mass media in Catalan appeared: radio, television and newspapers.

Have you ever thought about getting involved with the theatre again, with the kind of things you were doing in the mid-1980s like *El Tango de Don Joan* (Don Juan's Tango), which you wrote with Jérôme Savary?

To work with other people, in a team, you've got to have a really tough character, you've got to be something of a despot and not listen too much to others. If you're not, you end up giving ground and taking part in things in which you don't recognise yourself.

Do they still say you're the father of each new young short-story writer who publishes a book in Catalan?

In the 1980s and 1990s they said that almost all the young writers that appeared were my children. It was as if there were not a thousand writers in the world who were capable of influencing the hundred thousand writers there must be in this country II