

Readings in
Catalan Fiction
Catalan Literature:
A Survival Kit
Llorenç Villalonga
Mercè Rodoreda
Baltasar Porcel



Housing Works Bookshop
126 Crosby Street
New York City
February 9, 2006

**Readings in
Catalan fiction**

Catalan Literature:
A Survival Kit

Llorenç Villalonga

Mercè Rodoreda

Baltasar Porcel

Llorenç Villalonga (1897-1980)

From *The Dolls' Room* (*Bearn o la sala de les nines*, 1956)

They spent ten years apart, although not far from each other. Dona Maria Antònia lived in the village, at the old Bearn townhouse, which she had inherited from her mother's side of the family; as I have already mentioned, she and Don Toni were first cousins. He never left the estate, and was always surrounded with books. At that time I was studying at the Seminary and spent all my vacations here. Bearn seemed to me like a great, mysterious palace. I had never known anything better; I thought it was the best on earth. The archives, decorated with old swords, recorded in their parchments the family's glorious deeds. But what were those deeds? What I most longed to explore was that mysterious 'doll's room', which was always locked and which no one even dared to mention. More than once, since I know how to open the door to the secret staircase, I had walked upstairs to that room, only to reach another locked door. Peering through the keyhole was useless; the curtains in the room were drawn and you could not see a thing. After asking many questions and getting my fair share of slaps across the face, I managed to deduce from Madò Francina's words that one of the Senyors' ancestors had gone mad and died in that room. I was also intrigued when I heard that my benefactor paid for the schooling of certain children without my having any notion why.

In the autumn of 1866 the Senyor introduced me to Jaume, and said I was to treat him like a brother. I had just turned fifteen.

'He's always been at school,' I was told. 'He may be as educated as you, but he's never played ball; he's never handled a gun or caught thrushes in a net. Now that the hunting season has begun, you ought to show him the woods. He needs to run around in the fresh air...'

Jaume was two or three years younger than I. He looked like a boy. I was already a man. Even though I always strictly followed the Senyor's advice, I took on the child with a certain hostility. He was blond; he was intelligent and sensitive. He was afraid of the mules and even of the sheep. He did not know how to swim or throw stones. In the world of Bearn, which he found terrifying, I was his only refuge, and he did not leave my side for a single moment. I could not say exactly why I disliked him. There was something prissy about him; his manners seemed at odds with his masculinity. Youth is intolerant, as the Senyor would say, and

exceedingly proud. 'The years enlighten us, Joanet, but not without making us corrupt and cynical.' Aside from my manly pride, impatient with ambiguities, I undoubtedly harboured the jealousy a person of my condition always feels towards an intruder. Jaume threatened to take my place in the Senyor's heart. My position in the house was precarious, and depended on my master's whim. There may also have been another more complicated motive, an instinct of self-defence against unknown dangers which made me react harshly to his need for tenderness. And that poor child certainly needed to be loved. Following the instructions I had been given, I attempted to strengthen his sensitive nature and teach him to be brave. He learned not to fear gunfire and to swim in the reservoir. His admiration for me grew. A few weeks later, he looked like a different person, and the Senyor congratulated me. 'I wonder, when will you be as strong as Joan?' he asked the child.

'Didn't you say you wanted to be an artilleryman?'

Those words fired the boy with excitement and all he could think of was exercising and running and climbing trees. Because he was weak, he never wanted to be left behind. The sun and the wind had brought out the colour in his cheeks, ridding him of his city pallor. However, the transformation was only skin-deep. When he climbed a mountain, he would run out of breath and have to sit down. I still thought he was faking. To this day I could not say whether I made an effort to think otherwise; I have already said the reasons for my ill will were unclear. Yet although my contempt continued, with time I could not help but admire that child who had studied abroad, spoke French better than I, wrote alexandrines and knew the history of Rome. I was taken aback by his being so fair and so bright. He tried to compete with me in our games, and I, in turn, wished I had the intellectual qualities which, thanks to him, I was beginning to appreciate for the first time. They say emulation leads to progress. In this case it led to death. Even after all these years I am unable to distinguish the conscious from the involuntary aspect of the incident. The truth is that despite the good colour he had from the sun, Jaume was becoming more frail, and I knew it. He spent his last days in an electrified state, burning up the last bit of life left in him and willing to follow me on any absurd adventure. As his strength ran out his unwill-

ingness to surrender only increased. It was particularly painful to him when I beat him right away in our fights, so I would prolong the games like a cat with a mouse; although it flattered him, I also drew him closer to his death. Our matches usually took place on the threshing floor, a vast, poetic arena surrounded by oaks. On the day I once told you about, the game went on longer than usual. I suddenly realized that Jaume's body was yielding, and his face was sheet-white. He said he was sleepy, and dozed off on the hay. Half an hour later, when we called him to supper, we found him dead. The Senyor kept his composure despite my being distressed to a suspicious degree. That affair, which he was never to mention again, was far more obvious to him than it was to me. The doctor diagnosed a heart attack. ('What would he know...' I heard Don Toni murmur.) I was desperate. I could not turn to the comfort of confession because I did not know exactly what I had done wrong. Anyone who had listened to me would undoubtedly have absolved me: we were playing. He got tired. He had a heart attack. At fifteen, I was unable to examine my conscience the way I can now, I was aware of my degree of responsibility. My relationship with that child was very strange indeed. There is a cruel, arrogant tendency in me which under normal circumstances is dormant. The games I used to think of as harmless have an evil side to them, and there are few who have not felt sadistic instincts awakening within them when they fight. That is why I have never since wanted to practice those essentially pagan exercises, too close to sensuality, which I believe to be at odds with the spirit of Christianity. Jaume's pride was as strong as mine. One of the first days after we met, I had confronted him with a verb that was an offence to the dignity of a twelve-year-old: *minauder*. I always felt I had to win at our games, which was not much to my credit. He, on the other hand, taught me the moral lesson of how to die like a hero. I may not have killed him with my hands, but I did with a verb. His French was better than mine.

From *The Dolls' Room* (*Bearn o la sala de les nines*). London: André Deutsch, 1988.

Translated by Deborah Bonner

Mercè Rodoreda (1908-1983)

From *The Time of the Doves* (*La plaça del Diamant*, 1962)

Julieta came by the pastry shop just to tell me that, before they raffled off the basket of fruit and candy, they'd raffle some coffeepots. She'd already seen them: lovely white ones with oranges painted on them. The oranges were cut in half so you could see the seeds. I didn't feel like dancing or even going out because I'd spent the day selling pastries and my fingertips hurt from tying so many gold ribbons and making so many bows and handles. And because I knew Julieta. She felt fine after three hour's sleep and didn't care if she slept at all. But she made me come even though I didn't want to, because that's how I was. It was hard for me to say no if someone asked me to do something. I was dressed all in white, my dress and petticoats white enamel, three hoop bracelets that matched the earrings, and a white purse Julieta said was made of vinyl with a snap shaped like a gold shellfish.

When we got to the square, the musicians were already playing. The roof was covered with colored flowers and paper chains: a chain of paper, a chain of flowers. There were flowers with lights inside them and the whole roof was like an umbrella turned inside out, because the ends of the chains were tied much higher up than the middle where they all came together. My petticoat had a rubber waistband I'd had a lot of trouble putting on with a crochet hook that could barely squeeze through. It was fastened with a little button and a loop of string and it dug into my skin. I probably already had a red mark around my waist, but as soon as I started breathing harder I began to feel like I was being martyred. There were asparagus plants around the bandstand to keep the crowd away, and the plants were decorated with flowers tied together with tiny wires. And the musicians with their jackets off, sweating. My mother had been dead for years and couldn't give me advice and my father had remarried. My father remarried and me without my mother whose only joy in life had been to fuss over. And my father remarried and me a young woman all alone in the Plaça del Diamant waiting for the coffeepot raffle and Julieta shouting to be heard above the music "Stop! You'll get our clothes all wrinkled!" and before my eyes the flower-covered lights and the chains pasted on them and everybody happy and while I was gazing a voice said right by my ear, "Would you like to dance?"

Without hardly realizing, I answered that I didn't know how, and then I turned around to look. I bumped into a face so close to mine that I could hardly see what it looked like, but it was a young man's face. "Don't worry," he said. "I'm good at it. I'll show you how." I thought about poor Pere, who at that moment was shut up in the basement of the Hotel Colón cooking in a white apron, and I was dumb enough to say:

"What if my fiancé finds out?"

He brought his face even closer and said, laughing, "So young and you're already engaged?" And when he laughed his lips stretched and I saw all his teeth. He had little eyes like a monkey and was wearing a white shirt with thin blue stripes, soaked with sweat around the armpits and open at the neck. And suddenly he turned his back to me and stood on tiptoe and leaned one way and then the other and turned back to me and said, "Excuse me", and started shouting, "Hey, has anyone seen my jacket? It was next to the bandstand! On a chair! Hey..." And he told me they'd taken his jacket and he'd be right back and would I be good enough to wait for him. He began shouting, "Cintet... Cintet!"

Julieta, who was wearing a canary-yellow dress with green embroidery on it, came up from I don't know where and said, "Cover me. I've got to take off my shoes... I can't stand it anymore." I told her I couldn't move because a boy who was looking for his jacket and was determined to dance with me had told me to wait for him. And Julieta said, "Then dance, dance..." And it was hot. Kids were setting off firecrackers and rockets in the street. There were watermelon seeds on the ground and near the buildings watermelon rinds and empty beer bottles and they were setting off rockets on the rooftops too and from balconies. I saw faces shining with sweat and young men wiping their faces with handkerchiefs. The musicians happily playing away. Everything like a decoration. And the two-step. I found myself dancing back and forth and, like it was coming from far away though really it was up close, I heard his voice: "Well, so she *does* know how to dance!" And I smelled the strong sweat and faded cologne. And those gleaming monkey's eyes right next to mine and those ears like little medallions. That rubber waistband digging into my waist and my dead mother couldn't advise me,

because I told him my fiancé was a cook at the Colón and he laughed and said he felt sorry for him because by New Year's I'd be his wife and his queen and we'd be dancing in the Plaça del Diamant.

"My queen," he said.

And he said by the end of the year I'd be his wife and I hadn't even looked at him yet and I looked him over and then he said, "Don't look at me like that or they'll have to pick me up off the ground," and when I told him he had eyes like a monkey he started laughing. The waistband was like a knife in my skin and the musicians "Tararirarai!" And I couldn't see Julieta anywhere. She'd disappeared. And me with those eyes in front of me that wouldn't go away, as if the whole world had become those eyes and there was no way to escape them. And the night moving forward with its chariot of stars and the festival going on and the fruitbasket and the grill with the fruitbasket, all in blue, whirling around... My mother in Saint Gervasi Cemetery and me in the Plaça del Diamant... "You sell sweet things? Honey and jam..." And the musicians, tired, putting things in their cases and taking them out again because someone had tipped them to play a waltz and everyone spinning around like tops. When the waltz ended people started to leave. I said I'd lost Julieta and he said he'd lost Cintet and that when we were alone and everyone shut up in their houses and the streets empty we'd dance a waltz on tiptoe in the Plaça del Diamant... round and round... He called me Colometa, his little dove. I looked at him very annoyed and said my name was Natalia and when I said my name was Natalia he kept laughing and said I could have only one name: Colometa. That was when I started running with him behind me: "Don't get scared... listen, you can't walk through the streets all alone, you'll get robbed..." and he grabbed my arm and stopped me. "Don't you see you'll get robbed, Colometa?" And my mother dead and me caught in my tracks and that waistband pinching, pinching, like I was tied with a wire to a bunch of asparagus.

And I started running again. With him behind me. The stores shut with their blinds down and the windows full of silent things like inkwells and blotters and postcards and dolls and clothing on display and aluminium pots and needlepoint

patterns... And we came out on the Carrer Gran and me running up the street and him behind me and both of us running and years later he'd still talk about it sometimes. "The day I met Colometa in the Plaça del Diamant she suddenly started running and right in front of the streetcar stop, blam! Her petticoat fell down."

The loop broke and my petticoat ended up on the ground. I jumped over it, almost tripping, and then I started running again like all the devils in hell were after me. I got home and threw myself on the bed in the dark, my girl's brass bed, like I was throwing a stone onto it. I felt embarrassed. When I got tired of feeling embarrassed, I kicked off my shoes and untied my hair. And Quimet, years later, still talked about it as if it had just happened: "Her waistband broke and she ran like the wind..."

From *The Time of the Doves* (*La plaça del Diamant*). London: Arrow Books Limited, 1986. Translated by David H. Rosenthal.

Baltasar Porcel (1937-)

From *Olympia at Midnight*, [*Olympia a mitjanit*, 2004]

Town Planning in Cavorques

So it was that some nights that came to be frequent, in the silent, empty, Italianate mansion, the centuries of distances, and where, especially in winter, the loneliness seemed to turn into a pit that went down to the deepest centre of the earth, Bonaventura de Bonmatí left his sweet-talked father in front of the television, the old man huddled in an armchair, a bag of disjointed bones, ferret face and rheumy eyes absorbed by the screen.

By irascible and indolent tigers in Asian jungle, by insidious boas in the mud of great African rivers, by whales riding heavy over the crested waves of oceans, by flashy toucans set in juicy Amazon foliage. The treacherous hunt, profusion of blood and guts of beasts in famished mutual surveillance and assaults. And this when, in his active years, Don Alejandro could never bear to see even a cat suffering. Not even the canary they'd had in the mansion, bought by Marika when she married, the little chap now dead.

As the old man went into physical and moral decline, Bonaventura continued apprehensively to examine in him the now irreversibly dramatic advances made by old age, later to engage in troubled contemplation of himself in the bathroom mirror, after which he would shuffle off to sit alone and lost in thought in his room.

Not a single sign of life, or flower, or sigh. The room was built on innate bareness. After a while, Bonaventura didn't know where to look, felt that everything was looking at him and it bothered him: the shutters, the bed-head, the picture of Christ Crucified with a jar of cloth begonias below, a wall, the chamber pot that he still used sometimes if he woke up in the night needing to piss, the small whiff of something that filled the room, like the perfume of pear jam turned bittersweet...

And the feeling of discomfort made him uneasy beyond words although, as always and instinctively, he would try not to know why. Just as he didn't wonder about why he plugged in the television with the animal programmes for his father, and why Don Alejandro took it. But, to enquire into this, Bonaventura would have had to appeal to instincts as the ultimate possible

reasoning for the human being, to come together viscerally with his father as he had been genetically in the creator sperm.

But the notary Bonmatí remained obdurate, denying himself everything that might cross these thresholds; whenever he'd been half tempted he'd come out of it scorched. So Bonaventura dozed off all alone, between nervous twitches and defensive mumblings.

Until he surprised himself capturing through hidden senses, again not knowing why or how, and perhaps asleep though his eyes were wide open, the sounds of the still-living dead who were already condemned to the grave, and those of the dead who had died in such great affliction, all of them brushing by him or his shrinking heart, spectres tip-toeing over the lucid and indiscernible threshold between darkness and darkness.

And when the parade of these particular, unappealably deceased started to move around Bonaventura, it was as if a kind of smoke or stench from the monster that he was incubating within and that prowled around him in his dreams, had become the most patent reality.

The first of the dead, a cadaver that the notary Bonmatí divined or perhaps scented when its bearer was still a physical and mobile presence, turned out to be none other than the dog-loving marquis and notary of Llorito.

He too had aged dramatically but, in particular, had spiritually taken the definitive step towards the Other Side after the unimaginable uproar that had led to the undoing of his two daughters and all the jeering.

Then, Don Príam Mateu used to walk dejectedly down the street, not answering if greeted, but if he suddenly spotted or smelt a dog, he became alert, bent over, threw himself to the ground on to his knees, and approached the animal on all fours, howling. The dog would jump back alarmed, bark at him and if not grabbed in time, could fly at the aristocrat and bite him, without this bothering him as he pensively kept following the animal.

“Well, I'd say that he even enjoys it when the dog bites him...”, the bemused wife would report, after caulking up the wounded man, who remained placid in his absent spirit.

And who might finally murmur, “At least if the dog bites me, I feel it, little brother as it is. But the link between us is gone; I've lost the knack...”

It would seem that the Knights of the Holy Sepulchre agreed to get the marquis discreetly off their books. Even Filo Margarida, the wife, now defeated by all the upsets, eventually had to get Fortuny i Cucurella locked up in the Cavorques Municipal Asylum, the man's body covered with bite wounds, full of anti-rabies jabs and so dyed with Mercurochrome that he looked just like a Red Indian decked out for war. And Don Príam Mateu persisting in barking instead of talking.

The marquis, in his seclusion, wordlessly and obsessively wasted away, often with his ear glued to a window through which he only heard cars and more cars that had taken the ring route.

The road had just been built and Palma was, as usual nowadays, dislocated in the midst of the din of public works, car parks and new estates, with everyone rushing around, whether on wheels or by foot. The new road went past the asylum after having levelled hills of carob trees and demolished a property the colour of toasted bread, with a vigorous dark hackberry tree in front and two greyhounds tied to the trunk. The road, in turn, had given rise to the planning of the Cavorques estate, a spectacular and widely-striding urban planning achievement, edifices upon edifices set out in ample grids, one of the most frequently displayed features of the Town Hall's advertising campaign to demonstrate the progress being made in Mallorca.

The city of Palma was therefore stranded between this motorway to the north and the seafront esplanade to the south, and between a couple of kilometres-long, intricate tourist zones that were taking shape to the east of the Palma beach—a labyrinthine, human and cement-clad space-taker—and, to the west, the shore that led to Camp de Mar—mounds of noisy constructions.

Moreover, shopping malls dotted every estate, though they were called industrial zones because, in its shamelessness, the island virtually limited itself to selling in its territory what it bought on the mainland and imported, producing hardly anything.

The brand-new ring route and the Cavorques estate

abolished as a result—and this really was a conjuring act—the Provincial Asylum where the Marquis of Barberova was interned. To be more precise, what was wiped out was not so much the building itself as the formidable and hair-raising myth of the madhouse.

Once, the enormous quadrangular factory, formerly the Benedictine convent, its walls now husks and its windows barred, surrounded by very tall cypresses and splayed wide, had banefully reigned over the suburban area of Cavorques. And it reigned even more powerfully in the spirits of people: there was the madhouse, it was the madhouse. People looked at it out of the corner of their eyes, walking faster when they went past it. And, thinking about it, had trouble swallowing their saliva.

And floating in Heaven above the huge old manor—though nobody had seen it, everyone knew it was there—was a mountain of decayed, sharpened teeth, an execrable, stinking and more than immense mouth, and teeth that could sink into, and unexpectedly sank into the brain of any person, grinding it to bits and gulping it down: that was when one was already gone and was then going to end up in the madhouse. It was worse than death: it was shame, defencelessness, monstrousness.

“The tragedy of madness”, the notary Bonmatí had indifferently and understandingly remarked in his club, the *Círcol Mallorquí*.

It was at one of the placid gatherings that he and other dignitaries regularly attended, along with Professor Torrado and the lawyer Cortès, the day they’d been animatedly discussing the urban changes that were starting to happen with the Cavorques estate.

And the professor, suddenly transformed by indignation, had thrown his usual caution to the winds and let fly with an irate speech. “That’s not tragedy, Bonmatí, like if someone was struck by lightning, but it’s degradation, ridiculousness, folly, to the highest degree, which here we think make their appearance through the dementia that can befall the human brain! I mean madness constitutes a total lack of good form in a society like ours for which truth represents, above anything else, formality and this, in turn, only consists of conventionality! And if the abolition or transgression of formalism in a person is due

to a defect, or some despicable act, or chance, there’s no doubt that for others it’s reprehensible but, when all’s said and done, the possibility of reformation or some trick that might permit the restoration of the damned or the scoundrel, is still intact. It all depends on his power in society!

“My friend...” ventured Bonmatí, without much interest, although Cortès was listening mesmerised.

“Not my friend or any other bloody thing!” bawled Torrado, who had never before come up with anything like this. “But when we’re talking about madness-madness, not even a crumb of any possible remedy is there: it’s the impossibility of the poor wretch’s having any say in the matter when, purely and simply, he should be deemed innocent and therefore be absolved, or swaddled in fraternal pity, yet he’s precisely the one that gets the definitive stab in the back. We’re carrion eaters, no more than hyenas! I’m a hyena, you’re hyenas, Pep Maria and Bonaventura!”

“My God...” The notary was finally alarmed, although undecided about whether or not he should consider himself a hyena.

Josep Maria Cortès, however, pondered a moment, critically scrutinising Torrado until he finally raised a finger and exclaimed, “Goddammit, now I see: you’re on those Human Rights boards, and Protection of Animals and UNESCO and all the rest of these things that keep turning up! You want universal redemption, my dear Torrado!”

Àngel Torrado really did look like the angel bearing the flaming sword. “That’s what I am and that’s what I’m about! So what?”

“Nothing, my friend, calm down now...” The lawyer covered for himself, half mocking and half apprehensive.

“We all have our little quirks and it’s best to take things calmly”. Bonmatí decided to try distraction, but he wasn’t at all calm and was thinking that Torrado wasn’t really to be trusted. He wasn’t a republican’s son for nothing. “You pay for everything in this world”, Bonmatí said to himself.

And Àngel Torrado, garnet-red like a pomegranate and very upset, leapt from his chair and headed for the door, where he turned around and shouted, “This society of ours drives out any-

thing that isn't play-acting or a fiction of itself as a way of getting what it ultimately wants! A madman in Mallorca is paradoxically guilty because there's nothing to blame him for." All at once he seemed to deflate and, charging with a lurch at the door, he murmured faintly before leaving, "In a hypothetical trial there could be no more disastrous sentence. Saint-Just condemned Louis the 16th not for his acts but for his royal being."

And the lawyer Cortès, certain now that Professor Torrado wouldn't reply, exclaimed, "That's just what we need, that we should invite them to cream cake just because they're madmen. To the garrotte with all loonies!"

Bonaventura settled for logic and benevolence. "There's no need to get carried away either. Haven't you taken me to task at times, Pep Maria, about how we've persecuted you descendents of converted Jews when you weren't guilty of the slightest thing?"

But the descendent of converted Jews was recklessly set on a course of historical fatality, spurred on by the scent of blood. "If we copped it, then let everyone cop it!" And, even though he'd now suddenly buried the hatchet, "As long as it seems the matter isn't going to turn awkward, you understand."

Nonetheless, this supreme rejection of madness in essence had always gone hand-in-hand with another problem that was also supreme, but because of being inescapable: the physical existence of the Provincial Asylum, right there before everyone's eyes, as significant and colossal as the Cathedral, the Cavalry Barracks, the Almudaina Palace and Bellver Castle. A force of ancestral dimensions, especially the volume of the stone, it had become emblematic of the highest governance. A construction is a throne; without a temple there is no god.

But with the new exultant motorway and with the industrial premises of concrete blocks, aluminium sheeting, glassy surfaces and asbestos roofing being built on the bright and shiny Cavorques estate, the madhouse manor remained encircled, besieged, diminished, spent and, in the end, hardly visible at all.

And with its minimising in the midst of modernity or progress, awareness disappeared of the mad being there next to the sane, as their perennial—and, perchance, paradoxically

angelical—warning according to which, despite all the theatres constructed by important little men, a feeling of out-and-out brotherhood took shape in the final horror of that huge imagined mouth in the air with its pale fangs and satanically putrid breath.

Another sign of identity, another pillar of society, another intimate truth being lightly passed over, then, with the diluted lunatic asylum? Bonaventura didn't formulate it explicitly but after Àngel Torrado's prattling he could see it and it was disheartening. "I'd never have believed I'd miss loonies..."

Olympia from Iceland, evidently very civilised and newly arrived in Mallorca, after having contemplated its extraordinary tourist dimensions and listened to all the praise, had asked the Bonmatís as they lunched in the Italianate house, "It's magnificent, but what about the social services?"

Marika had blankly stammered, "Social?"

The notary had understood and was hence more prudent. "There are problems, of course... But the President of the Autonomous Region assures us that Madrid will send more police... These people from the Maghreb, Romania and Colombia have an instinct for robbery and pimping, so we'll need to..."

Olympia cut him short coldly, "I mean AIDS patients, the mentally ill, cripples, battered women, undernourished children, old people who are left alone..."

Bonmatí broke out in a sweat—he was again being attacked by those horrendous galley slaves in the cellar!—but he also picked up an ambiguously friendly little noise and felt he'd been saved. "As you'll see, these complex, dynamic societies like Mallorca segregate, even as a statistical result, some components that don't fit in. At the same time, things unexpectedly fall back into place. You've mentioned mad people: a good example. Well, I'm sure they don't exist any more here, you won't even hear people talking about them and even the asylum's become a vague memory of the past..."

Olympia turned enquiringly to Marika, who opened her arms and her eyes even more, showing the whites. "I'm a woman and these things..."

The Marquis of Barberova had not imagined, either, the solitude awaiting him in the asylum that had been absorbed by

the new town-planning situation. When they'd taken him there, though he'd been acting crazy, he was secretly content: he very well remembered the suburban area of Cavorques, the devastated countryside with a horde of dogs that ran around, poking around in the heaps of rubbish that had been dumped there. "At least I'll have them near me, my little dears, and won't have to go looking for them in the street with those people who only get on one's nerves and a wife who cries her eyes out!" he thought hopefully.

But with the new buildings it was all cement and asphalt, so the few dogs that dared to approach the estate slunk around disoriented, their tails between their legs, not finding as much as a bone to gnaw on until they were flattened by the big trucks and multitude of cars that energetically flowed around the local roads and motorway.

"There are no dogs left in Mallorca, Lord, something that never happened before in this world...", mumbled Fortuny i Cucurella behind the grille of his madhouse window, all hope now gone.

Bonaventura had at first felt sorry as he listened to the depressing news about the mentor of his youth, when the latter was disturbing everyone in the streets as he went after the dogs. But soon he refused to know any more about it because it ruffled him; the abyss was only a glimpse away.

And if at a meeting he heard the name of Don Príam Mateu, he hurried out, went into the first bar he found and had a coca-cola, or two, panting in his disconcertment.

This was Bonaventura's struggle against moral mirrors, his implacable lucidity, unlike Marika who found a window of illusions in physical mirrors. Because, couldn't the repulsive sensorial waves coming from the marquis be constituted in a mirror, in the toothy mountain? Which would then be projected before Bonmatí if he looked without precautions into the mirror, so that he'd be annihilated for once and for all.

The notary had, then, almost come to believe, although without objectivising it, in the auras of mystery that so enchanted Marika.

"Behind my beloved Mallorca there is looming a darkness that is more than abominable." Bonaventura, pounded by the

inexorable adversary, was yielding, all alone in his room with the chamber pot and the piss he'd been too lazy to empty out, the stench of which was starting to disturb him, truly a holy unction. "But this story about Torrado's father, whom they burned alive in the oven, heavens above... Or our flawless Engràcia decapitated... And the converted Jews, what a mess..."

Quite late one evening, when Bonaventura de Bonmatí was cornered like this, he received a visit at the Italianate mansion from the once much-loved Marchioness of Barberova, Filo Margarida, who was perhaps a widow or perhaps not, and nor was it worth finding out with Don Príam Mateu so far gone. But the illustrious dame was also someone else now, since she'd turned into a kind of pathetic phantom, all bunches of skin with a skeleton dancing within, a mouth that on speaking emitted gusts of sugary-sour breath.

Bonaventura looked at her and longed, somewhat shaken, for the lustre of her fatness and her old jolliness but he heard her out, sitting rigid and suspicious in a friar's chair while Filo Margarida, half lying on the sofa, moaned and recalled the poignant tragedy of her daughters and of her husband, who had once been people that were loved and just as good as can be.

The second time the lady came to see him, Bonaventura attended her nervously, cut her off before she was through and, without really knowing what he was doing, presented her with a prayer book that had belonged to his Extremaduran mother, and then dispatched her, burbling excuses to the afflicted woman who resisted leaving.

And the third time the marchioness turned up, Bonmatí didn't let her through the door, which he didn't even fully open, syncopating excuses about the most bizarre commitments to get rid of the woman.

Then one evening, when Bonaventura de Bonmatí came back from the notary's office and was penetrating the semi-darkness of the mansion's entrance, the deranged pirouette of the Marchioness Filo Margarida flung itself upon him, as she sobbed her heart out and exclaimed, "Oh, don't reject me like this, oh my Bonny. I only come here because you're the only person alive who lived with us at Llorito, so you were the witness of the happiness that we enjoyed. Without you, I'm alone and

blind and my whole life seems to have always been a time in Hell!”

Bonaventura protested: he loved her, there could be no doubt about that, even though he was chained to his desk, the excess of work, and the lack of time and, notwithstanding all that, his arms were open to her and...

But, from the next day onwards, he came home early to the mansion, to avoid meeting her. And, on arriving, he installed himself behind one of the shutters and avidly watched the street.

Then, one evening, Filo Margarida, a tottering black scarecrow, once again rounded the cathedral corner and started to climb the narrow street towards the Italianate mansion.

And Bonaventura bellowed his pleasure, promptly opened the window and set about throwing stones at the old lady as he rebuked her, taking his ammunition from a basket he had to hand, which he had expressly filled at the site where a modernist building had been demolished on the Rambla and where they were now constructing the radiant shell of some magnificent department stores.

With the stoning, the Marchioness of Barberova let out a few shrill bleats and her head started to bleed. And she fled limping and reeling down the street. Fleeing, never to return.

After the decline of the Fortuny i Cucurella family, the lowering of the shadows now came to be the lot of Bonaventura's own father, in whom the degenerative process has been getting worse as the weight fell off him and he didn't even look at the television any more, until finally he got down to about thirty kilos. And with the little verbal coherence that had remained also gone, his hump had meanwhile optimised in an incredible fashion so that he had become a pile of flesh that drooped tenderly down. Don Alejandro de Bonmatí looked like the silhouette of the sandman with his sack that hung from the clear face of the moon.

“Or you could also think that father looks like some sort of adolescent camel”, Bonmatí junior brooded, trying to give precision to the phenomenon that was so grotesque that it seemed childish.

Don Alejandro also came to have the form of an upside-down letter “v”, or of a grasshopper with the skeletal zigzag of

giant legs. “There were swarms of grasshoppers in the stubble fields at Llorito”, Bonaventura continued to brood compulsively.

Again, there were times when his father looked like a model of one of the construction cranes that, great and grotesque, had been installed along the Mallorcan coast line, once sinuous with deserted coves and cliffs, but now transformed into broken, rectilinear profiles in the cemented and asphalted concrete frenzy.

“Is tourism reshaping the body and soul of us Mallorcans, like it does with our geography?” the notary wondered in order not to confirm it, while he mentally meandered with heavy heart through these metaphorical caricaturisations of his progenitor and of the island land where he'd been born. “I don't feel I'm the son of anything or anyone. And anyone who hasn't got a father, who's been born to bastardy, is a son of a bitch...”, and he went on with his annihilating.

This is how Bonaventura contemplated Don Alejandro and he kept appalling himself as he mentally applied, unable to avoid it, the delirious scrawls that the figure of the old man suggested.

Until he could no longer bear to look at him: he then had him locked up in the ground floor of the mansion, which had once housed the mule stable and where, full of cobwebs, covered with the droppings of small creatures and rotting away were the ancient Bonmatí family carriages, of lacklustre splendour, the most antique of which had borne the Bourbon Engràcia to her execution.

The gaunt and angular old man dragged himself painfully around this chimerical junk, assailing with incoherent moans or screeches and gropings the maid who brought his food on an aluminium plate. The woman soon scared, and without a glance at the former Director of the Treasury, left him the plate as she dumped it on a dilapidated rush-bottomed chair where the frailly bony, inanimate form had to fight fiercely for the miserable pickings with the great inflamed eyes of rats and quick black cockroaches.

Was he dead, Don Alejandro, when they buried him? They didn't manage to clarify it since it was a case of a shapeless mass that had become inert. But a relative, the well-known sci-

entist, doctor Francesc Fàbregues, signed the necessary death certificate, indispensable legal requisite, accurately describing the case, "...with body and psyche destroyed, the patient has ceased to be so, while at the same time to exist in his consciousness".

The burial was carried out furtively and, instead a coffin, they had to fit out a small, almost rectangular box, the deceased resembling an abstract sculpture, which they bore away by tricycle while Bonaventura in his house trembled like a poplar leaf and compulsively downed coca-colas.

It was then, as he was being dragged along by the unbearably obituary torrent, that Bonmatí finally decided to marry Marika. The order, or *raison d'être*, of the tribe had failed and the result was cosmic panic: Bonaventura then sought solace in biological warmth. Like the marquis with the dogs. So the notary took Marika to himself, to curl up together in the ancestral cave of hairy beasts in mutual soul-warming.

From *Olympia a mitjanit (Olympia at Midnight)*. Barcelona: Planeta, 2004.
Translated by Julie Wark.

Llorenç Villalonga (1897-1980) was a multifaceted man of letters. During his lifetime he wrote 15 novels, five short story books, five volumes of drama and more than 500 journalistic articles. As a psychiatrist, a profession he practised all his life in the island of Mallorca, he was capable of capturing the moods, the moments and the reasons of the human soul in a unique way. *The Dolls' Room*, his masterpiece, is without doubt one of the great twentieth-century works of Catalan literature.

Mercè Rodoreda (Barcelona, 1908 - Girona, 1983) is the most important Catalan post-war novelist for the density and lyricism of her work. She is the author of the most acclaimed ever Catalan novel, *La Plaça del Diamant (The Time of the Doves)* (1962), which may be read in more than twenty languages. She began her career writing stories for magazines, and these were followed by four novels, among which *Aloma* (1938). In the early days of the Spanish civil war, she worked in the Propaganda Commissariat of the Catalan government. She went into exile, living in different parts of France, and then, in Geneva, she broke her twenty years' silence with *Vint-i-dos contes (Twenty-two Stories)* (1958) for which she obtained the Víctor Català prize. In the mid-1960s, she returned to Catalonia.

Baltasar Porcel (Andratx, Mallorca, 1938) is one of the Catalan writers that has received the most international attention and is an essential reference in contemporary Catalan literature. Translated into a dozen languages, his works have been awarded prizes in Italy (The Boccaccio Prize), France, (The Méditerranée Prize) and the United States (Critics Choice). His creative output includes theater, non-fiction and journalism. For many years he has contributed a daily article to the newspaper *La Vanguardia*, which has become one of the most widely-read columns in the country.

Design and layout: Eumogràfic

First published: February 2006

© the authors, for the texts

© Deborah Bonner, David H. Rosenthal and Julie Wark, for the translation

Institut Ramon Llull

Diputació, 279

E-08007 Barcelona

www.llull.com

irl@llull.com

Impressió: Copysset