

*reviews*



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JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY CULTURE // 2007

# Reviews

## || The tragedy of a land Adrià Chavarria

Joan B. Culla, 2004, *Israel, el somni i la tragèdia. Del sionisme al conflicte de Palestina* (Israel, the Dream and the Tragedy. From Zionism to the Conflict over Palestine), Barcelona, Edicions La Campana, 624 pp.

The relations between Israel and Palestine —between two peoples that share one geographic country— always look thorny if one wishes to inquire objectively into this conflict of territorial, social and political dimensions. Moreover, the discord is fuelled by all the international press, which analyses the situation in a biased fashion depending on the personal inclinations of the journalist or the media mouthpiece in question. Here in Catalonia, from the late 1970s onwards, the issue has taken a controversial slant. The Israelis are murderous tyrants and the Palestinians victims of a powerful army. To offer this view is to oversimplify matters. The historian Joan B. Culla has attempted in his book, the result of long research, to take this partiality into account and analyse the situation from the Israeli standpoint.

Culla recounts in journalistic style the story of Israel, from its birth with the early-twentieth-century immigration —*aliyah*— through to the month of August 2004, by which time the Likud party had become bogged down in its own policy of “separation” by means of the wall, and the opposition of orthodox groups to the West Bank withdrawal plan and the subsequent dismantling of a number of Jewish settlements.

The book discusses the different wars in which the state of Israel has been involved since its very beginnings. Everyone forgets that in 1947 the UN proposed the creation of two states in Palestinian territory, but the Resolution was rejected by the Palestinians and neighbouring Arab states, although it was supported by the Jews who had come with the *aliyah* and were now established in Israel. The conflict has been the cause of bloodshed ever since as the Israelis have defended themselves against their Arab neighbours and the Palestinians have tried to stop the illegal appropriation of part of their territory, not to mention the problems of refugees, bad distribution of water resources, all of this accompanied by a corrupt Palestinian administration.

Culla analyses the emergence of the Zionist idea since the 1880s. The Zionist project is the child of post-Enlightenment Europe, in the sense that its theorists were influenced by Enlightenment thinkers and then, as a spin-off, by the ideas of the emancipatory, socialist-leaning nationalist movements that, from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, were a powerful presence in some European countries. The question became clear. The Jewish people, who had been persecuted in the secular domain, still maintained very enduring traditions thanks to their religious practices, but they had no land to call their home. The wish expressed in the Jewish *tephila* (prayer) had to be granted. The Jews must return to Eretz Israel and re-establish a homeland there for the Diaspora Jews.

This was easier said than done since the British colonial interests and those of the surrounding Islamic populations did not lend themselves to the project. Nonetheless, the Jews began to arrive in small *aliyot* (the word in Hebrew means ascent to the Land of Israel). Among these early immigrant groups, four can be singled out as being particularly influential in the period before the State of Israel was created and they would eventually come to constitute the country's affluent class. They bought land, worked the land, became established and even founded cities like Tel Aviv. When it became possible for them to recover land they began to found a small state within the British colony, whose members began to fear, along with the Palestinian-Jordanian population, that they were starting to lose control of those territories.

The main *aliyah* thrust came after the Second World War when a third of Europe's Jewish population had been murdered by Germany's Nazi regime. It was then that some of the Jewish survivors and other members of the Sephardic Jewish world —the Jewish population of Arab states— decided to immigrate to Israel and begin life anew. Things were not easy for them either because conflict immediately arose between the Ashkenazi immigrants from Europe and the new arrivals from the Islamic Arab countries.

Israel's "courtship" with the United States (the country with the highest numbers of Jews after Israel, most of them immigrants after the pogroms of the 1870s and 1880s), which would bend over backwards with economic and military aid to the small state, was immediately frowned upon by members of the European left who, as the conflict became more intractable, began to speak out on behalf of Palestinian interests (which, on the other hand, were a necessary part of the equation). This went hand in hand with the birth of anti-Zionist politics, full of new anti-Semitic eruptions, especially in France, a country that has encouraged the biased propaganda against Israel.

Culla's study examines the fifty years of life of the State of Israel and suggests that the solution to its problems can be found only in dialogue and political concessions being made on both sides. What he does try to do, however, is to avoid being partisan in his consideration of this conflict where the good guys are seen as being on one side and the bad guys on the other. There are Amaleks on both sides and it is they who will have to disappear from the future political stage. Only the new generations will perhaps be able to resolve the problem they have inherited, some day in the future. The present does not look good for either side, not for Israel because it is being isolated internationally, or for the Palestinians because their future is slipping away through their fingers II

II **The geographies of  
*Mittleuropa***  
Manel Ollé

Simona Skrabec, 2005, *L'atzar de la lluita* (Of Chance and Strife), Catarroja, Afers, 272 pp.

«Central Europe» was just one of the curious notions to emerge from the continent's power struggles. The idea of *Mittleuropa* may seem a harmless and even quaint concept to us —especially in our post Berlin Wall world. However, the term *Mittleuropa*

(Central Europe) was used to embrace all kinds of territorial claims and serve a wide range of ideologies, political ambitions, and literary schools. Decades before the Third Reich, it was used to delimit Germany's territorial ambitions at a time when the country's opportunities for colonial expansion were frustrated by the other Great Powers.

The British saw Central Europe as a *cordon sanitaire* or strategic buffer zone for keeping Germany in check. Later, the term *Mittleuropa* was used to express a mythical, idyllic version of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In the 1980s, the notion of Central Europe was resurrected as a desirable alternative to Cold War division of the continent.

The Slovene writer and essayist Simona Skrabec, in her essay *L'atzar de la lluita*—written in Catalan—analyses the various notions of Central Europe that arose throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. In addition to political theorists on Central Europe, noteworthy writers on *Mittleuropa* have included Joseph Roth, Claudio Magris, Peter Handke, Franz Kafka, Danilo Kis, and Milan Kundera. Once she has identified the successive definitions of Central Europe and the paradoxes they enshrine, Skrabec puts forward the concept of *Mittleuropa* as a diverse, complex literary and cultural space. Though she does not deny the validity of the Nation State as a political and literary sphere, her notion of *Mittleuropa* opens up regional opportunities and perspectives for dialogue in a field that spans national and universal ambits.

The book discusses the various concepts of Central Europe, the political and national use made of literature, regional literary ambits, and the way in which certain works of fiction embrace all these issues. This is what makes Skrabec's book important to a wider circle that goes beyond specialists in German and Balkan cultures, comparative linguists, historians, and theorists of the Nation State. These kind of reflections are particularly relevant in Catalonia, where they raise new key issues.

### Solitary Souls

One should not have to say it but there are still those who see short stories as nothing more than a trivial form of artifice and an exercise in marketing. Simona Skrabec published a superb essay on a par with *L'atzar de la lluita*. The essay is *L'estirp de la solitud* (Solitary Souls, Barcelona: Institut d'Estudis Catalans, 2002), and again was written directly in Catalan. It provides new arguments for those who believe that short stories are a fertile genre for capturing the spirit of our age.

Ricardo Piglia, in one of his famous ten theses on short stories, spoke of the way the genre conducts a mysterious dialogue with hidden opposites. Simona Skrabec reveals short stories' ability to convey tragic sentiments without resorting to flowery eloquence, highlighting commonplace things that border on the absurd. Short stories reveal the slipperiness of things and words and the latent conflicts underlying our every deed and utterance. It is this unsettling quality that makes the genre worthwhile.

Skrabec's *L'estirp de la solitud* draws on four short stories by Central European authors (Arthur Schnitzler, Italo Svevo, Thomas Bernhard, and Drago Jankar). One of the merits of her essay is that she avoids the long-winded pedantic reasoning all too often adopted when discussing these authors and themes. A further strength is Skrabec's ability to shed light on the works through her comparisons, using narrative analysis and resorting to philosophers where necessary. In doing so, she takes the threads of highly specific cases

to weave a rich tapestry. Her arguments are both stimulating and weighty, full of delightful details, and advance in several directions at once.

With just these four short stories as a pretext, Simona Skrabec evokes the defining characteristics of a literary sphere covering lands that were once part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. She clearly portrays protagonists who share a yen for solitude and revindicates a self-sufficient form of literary fiction capable of bridging modern divides. Simona Skrabec deservedly won the 2002 Josep Carner Literary Theory Award for *L'estirp de la solitud*. Writers seldom tend to grapple with such themes, a further feather in Skrabec's cap, particularly given that she writes in a language that lends itself better to academic monographs than to literary essays.

### The Slovene Savannah

One of the four stories analysed by Skrabec in *L'estirp de la solitud* is included in the volume *La mirada de l'àngel* by Drago Jankar (Manresa: Angle, 2003), which she translated. It concerns a story that rewrites the adventures of the protagonist of Bulgakov's *The White Guard*, and of Somerset Maugham's *The Appointment in Samarra*, the latter relating how someone flees Death in Baghdad only to meet The Grim Reaper in Samarra. In Jankar's story, a White Russian flees from his past for decades only to find himself in the same place but back where his odyssey began —at the end of the Second World War.

Drago Jankar is the young Slovene author whose works are most translated abroad. His narrative work forms part of the most serious and abrasive post-modernist writings, which Jorge Luis Borges took as a landmark in modern Slovene literature. However, Jankar is not a weaver of sophisticated, well-polished tales but rather a narrator capable of confronting the Sphinx and its riddles. One of his stories is of a group of soldiers lost in the Slovene forests in 1945. They come across a village that epitomises the horror and madness of war. The houses have been burnt to the ground and all the villagers have had their throats slit. The story contains a distant echo of a passage from Heliodorus of Emesus' *Aethiopica*. The superimposition of ancient and new horrors is an aesthetic delight, perfectly intertwining story and time to convey the kind of foreboding and fear awakened by a recurring nightmare.

In *La mirada de l'àngel* (The Look of an Angel / Pogled angela), everything happens in an instant. A mother looks into the eyes of a sewer rat about to bite her child. Two species and two life stories are caught up in this fleeting moment. A man on a ship threatens to jump overboard as his wife lazes on a chaise longue on deck. The couple's hellish domestic life is evoked as she encourages her husband to jump. Meanwhile, an attractive coloured European businesswoman is reading on the underground, oblivious of the danger lying in wait for her. The sense of lingering threat pervades the whole tale.

With the odd exception of a couple of tales that resort to Mediaeval or urban legends (for example, a silly story of a ghostly highway in which car rear seats suddenly vanish), the book's stories are memorable in their own right. The narrators are actors in the tales rather than mere dispassionate observers. Take, for instance, the story of a girl travelling through deepest Slovenia on a coach. As she draws pictures of the savannah in her sketch book, she imagines how she saves herself from two lions looking for a mate. In doing so, she exhibits the effortless agility and naturalness of a gazelle leaping to escape a predator. These highly literary stories exhibit the same effortless grace and sense of brooding threat ■





## II Literatures

Susanna Rafart

Vicent Alonso, 2005, *Trajecte circular*  
(Round Trip), Alzira, Bromera, 344 pp.

After *Les paraules i els dies* (Of Words and Days, 2002), a compilation of newspaper articles, Vicent Alonso has presented a diary that could be introduced with the quotation Feliu Formosa used to preface his latest poetry anthology: “Observe? Remember? Find a point someone in between”. Writing involves a succession of moments that bring emotional and intellectual experiences into focus. It lies between annotation and lyrical text and renders words part of the real world. Without renouncing historical coincidence, political views, and cultural considerations, the work accepts that life is an endless circle and makes reflections for every season of the year. The book does not end in Summer but instead begins again with Winter in a journey without end. After all, a diary involves placing oneself before circumstances and accepting what happens. Writing poetry requires the same intermediate point. That is why it is interesting for readers to read the two books that Alonso wrote in parallel, the diary and his volume of prose poems: *Del clam de Jasó* (Jason’s Complaint). This approach sheds valuable light on the creative process. It is also interesting to note that texts such as *Un petit plaer* (A Trifling Pleasure) are to be found on a diary page and not in the anthology. Perhaps it is an attempt to establish a distance between the poet’s voice, self-confidence, language, and the text itself. For a poet, variation or versions of the same theme are not insubstantial repetitions but rather approaches to recall and hence facets that provide a broader understanding of the world, enriching the reading experience.

The subsequent pages follow this circular trajectory, creating a dialogue with both our daily worries and those of greater concern. Life’s cares make us forget these acts, gestures, and readings but the writer tries to salvage them in an attempt to stretch time and kindle desire. From another perspective, understanding reality requires time. However, this is hard because each event needs to be deconstructed to grasp its true nature. A diary allows this process. Vicent Alonso proposes some terms in his pages that are often discarded only to be taken up later in another context. Recalling Montaigne’s “*Je le prens en ce point, comme il est, en l’instant que je m’amuse à luy*” (I take it as it is at the instant I consider of it), the voice of *Trajecte circular* interposes itself between events and their representation without resorting to dissimulation. The writer allows the reader to see his imperfections and moods as he tries to surmount hurdles. In so doing, we are given an insight into the human condition: “When all is said and done, you are yourself to the extent that others give signs of life,” writes Alonso. Observation of the world leads us to the highest poetic experience, encompassing reflection on the usefulness of literature or being privy to the comings and goings of a poet who takes delight in the reek of wood smoke from the chimneys of his native village. They are subtle touches that grab the reader’s attention throughout the book. Some of the pages are master classes in the writer’s art: *Turons com elefants blancs*

(Hills Like White Elephants); *Els trucs de la intimitat* (Intimacy's Tricks) and *Efectes col·laterals* (Collateral Damage). Others reveal various shades of scepticism, whilst others are more personal. The thematic variation is linked to the whole. The fragmentation is intentional but very carefully crafted in order to measure each slight change in the broader themes: art as the route to knowledge; acceptance of the human soul for what it is; the value of reading. The pages defend everything from syllabic schemes to landscape because they serve to conceal the shortness of man's span. One of the texts that makes the greatest impact is *Vida i opinions de Tristram Shandy* (Tristram Shandy's Life and Views) because only digression based on memory and observation helps free us from the shackles of our own lives ||

## || State nationalisms Pau Viciano

Josep Fontana, 2005, *La construcció de la identitat. Reflexions sobre el passat i sobre el present* (The Construction of Identity. Reflections on Past and Present), Base, Barcelona, 142 pp.

Despite the author's reservations, republishing miscellaneous texts is far from being a pointless exercise. It may require justification in the case of academic articles, where the specialist has to determine the target audience precisely. However, this is not so with essays, even when they contain footnotes. In this case, much of the material stems from spoken public contributions that would otherwise not come to the notice of academics and a wider public. In this respect, Fontana's latest book will be appreciated by disciples and critics alike.

The role of history (namely, the production, interpretation, and dissemination of knowledge of the past) and the building of national identities have been recurrent themes over the last few years in all public spheres, ranging from academic research to essays and press articles. Fontana's first chapter questions the complacency of scholars and intellectuals who identify with the Nation State and who shamelessly accuse peripheral minority nationalists of falsifying the past. From Spain to Israel, all State nationalisms have hijacked history to build a national identity, which is all too often based on crude notions of ethnic or racial unity. The author notes that the search for one's own national identity is often a defensive reaction to the State's Blob-like urge to swallow up everyone who crosses its path. Here, the historian's task is not to lend support to alternative myths but rather to champion reason in the face of belief and prejudice. The following chapter tackles the links between the organisation of power and social progress, questioning the partisan identification of a centralist State with modernity, a vice nations often indulge in when commemorating historical events. Fontana notes the role played by society in modernisation and in demanding political representation. This trait can be traced back to the reform of Mediaeval institutions, which set bounds to the power of kings. This is a suggestive issue in the context of Catalan territories history and sheds light on the current political debate regarding the territorial organisation of the Spanish State.



The next three chapters concern the impact of globalisation at various levels. Here, Fontana ranges from an overview of the links between globalisation and development (or underdevelopment) to a defence of the Catalan peasantry (whose survival is threatened by international markets) and immigrants as victims of integration processes and economic conquest. The remarkable thing about Fontana's critical ideas is that most of them —unlike the visions dished up by sociologists and political scientists— are greatly enhanced by historical insight. Comparing immigration from the Third World with European emigration to America and Australia in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries puts the issue in a new light, as does the revelation that the biggest population movements are now within Asia and Africa. He looks at things with a historian's eagle eye. Thus he sets the foundation of a farmers union against the background of modern city-dwellers' almost Mediaeval contempt of countryfolk. Fontana puts such issues in the context of the root-and-branch liberalisation of world markets and questions both the benefits of globalisation and the need to ditch Europe's farm subsidies. This message is obviously not to the liking of liberal economists advocating the US brand of capitalism and who have even suggested that Catalan peasants would be better off seeking clerical work. Fontana's message will also displease patriots who want to build national myths in which King Jaume I and his bloodthirsty Arab mercenaries are given the kind of propaganda gloss one sees in Hollywood films of pioneers valiantly battling against Red Indians. Neither will the historian's message be to the taste of those who think but will not say that the West triumphed simply because it deserved to. Those who disagree with Fontana may quibble over the data and counter his arguments with their own. Unfortunately, the chances are that many will simply dismiss his ideas out of hand with the same kind of diatribe heard during the Cold War. Be that as it may, dwelling on the depressingly long list of those for whom Fontana's ideas are anathema may serve to uphold the role of history yet fail to do this book justice ||

## || Of women and literature

### Antònia Carré

Marta Pessarrodona, 2006, *Donasses. Protagonistes de la Catalunya moderna* (Great Women. Protagonists of the modern Catalonia), Barcelona, Destino, 296 pp.

No one can deny the merit of Marta Pessarrodona's long track record as a poet, translator, and a feminist. She missed out on the first wave of feminist writing when it was still a sub-culture (in the sense of being repressed as opposed to being second-rate). This was the wave labelled in 1977 by Elaine Showalter as "feminine" literature. Two of its traits were the copying of male literary models and the liberal use of virile pseudonyms. The second was the "feminist" stage, involving the development of self-awareness and a vindication of the rights of women and other groups, the stage during which Passarrodona joined the fray, taking an active part with other women in the struggle against the Franco dictatorship. This culminated in the 1<sup>st</sup> Workshops for Catalan Women in 1976.

The third stage, which Showalter labels “female”, covers the present state of affairs in which women write without hangups from a feminist perspective. In a 2005 essay published by the Lluís Carulla Foundation, Pessarrodona explained Showalter’s critical theory in greater detail, and made references to Northrop Frye.

So *Donasses* did not appear out of thin air. Behind the book is the idea of presenting twenty two women who helped shape late-19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Catalonia. The idea is to provide valid models for present and future generations of women. The translation and constant study of Virginia Woolf’s works, the various texts on women produced by the Catalan Institute for Women (illustrated with photos by Pilar Aymerich), and more recently, *Mercè Rodoreda i el seu temps* (pub. Rosa dels Vents, 2005), reveal Marta Pessarrodona’s gift for writing the biographies of women —artists, writers, ministers— as does the work reviewed here.

Another aspect of *Donasses* is a desire to tell the story of Catalonia by following the path first trodden by the first woman portrayed in the book —Dolors Monserdà (1845-1919). Monserdà is defined as the first novelist writing in Catalan and the first woman to publicly advocate feminist views. The book ends with Montserrat Roig (1946-1991), who played a key role at the time as both a novelist and feminist.

Since *Donasses* belongs to the “female” stage of women’s literature in Showalter’s scheme, the authoress does not shrink from taking her lead from a great male author —in this case, Josep Pla. In her brief preface, Marta Pessarrodona alludes to Pla’s *Homenots* (Great Men), although she states that she has no intention of imitating him. Even so, both *Homenots* and *Donasses* have at least two things in common. The first is that they seek to portray the people who shaped Catalonia over the last two centuries. The second is the moral authority with which both authors depict events and their subjects in the light of their own experience. Dante Alighieri’s words at the beginning of *Convivio* (I, II) can be applied to both *Donasses* and *Homenots* to the effect that there are only two reasons for talking about oneself. The first is to defend oneself from a grave accusation, which is evidently not the case here. The second is to extract some important lesson by so doing, or as Dante put it a “*grandissima utilidade ne segue altrui per via di dottrina*”. Marta Pessarrodona knows how to condense the personalities and works of each of her subjects into a few pages whilst capturing their natures and often contradictory traits. She is a poet rather than a novelist and this may explain her eloquent succinctness. Paulina Pi de la Serra, for example, emerges as a “delicate, smiling presence”, the phrase is lifted from one of Carner’s verses, which heads the chapter. Maria Aurelia Company’s blend of strongly voiced opinions and vulnerability clearly emerges. Hermínia Grau Aymà stands out for her intelligence and discrete seductiveness. By contrast, the authoress highlights Aurora Bertrana’s adventurous spirit.

The chief merit of *Donasses* is that the authoress’ very subjectiveness elicits a mental image of the women whose biographies appear in the book. Clearly, subjectiveness is debatable and a question of taste, however, awareness of one’s own “voice” is essential if one is to make the subjects interesting to readers. Marta Pessarrodona’s approach is vindicated by the numerous reprints of the book.

One can ask why *Donasses* portrays twenty two women and why these particular ones were chosen. Josep Pla in his preface to the second part of *Homenots*, fielding the same kind of question, said it was because the candle is short and the procession is long (an elegant and memorable allusion to the religious processions popular in his time).

*Donasses* also merits a sequel ■

## II Are good manners important?

Damià Pons

Salvador Cardús, 2003, *Ben educats. Una defensa útil de les convencions, el civisme i l'autoritat* (Good Manners. A Useful Defence of Conventions, Civil Responsibility and Authority), Barcelona, Edicions La Campana, 235 pp.

The sociologist Salvador Cardús (Terrassa, 1954) has once again shown a great sense of timing when it comes to choosing the issue that is to be the subject of his reflection. To put it another way, he knows how to intuit which issues generate the most doubt and uncertainty in society, or at least in a large part of it, at any given time. Thus, in the year 2000 his work *El desconcert de l'educació* (The Uncertainty of Education) was published, a lucid and unconventional discourse on education which, without doubt, encouraged consideration of the subject without resorting to platitudes or doctrinaire positions. It also avoided any kind of submission to what could be seen as political correctness. The fact that more than thirty thousand copies have been sold is the best proof that the work offered, in both its content and its uninhibited and lucid treatment of the issue, a formalisation of many of those ideas that a great number of people needed to feel, or even in certain cases already knew intuitively, or had just begun to piece together in their minds.

Now, Cardús has got it right once again. Over the last few years, in our Western world, which is both object and setting of a drastic break with tradition, of the implementation of social welfare, of the immersion of individuals in a lively media reality, of the social generalisation of the beginning of permissiveness and so on, there is a feeling that the reaction, however necessary, against both authoritarianism (the Franco years, the patriarchal society and *nacionalcatolicisme*<sup>1</sup> in our case) and excessively rigid inherited customs and practices, has produced a series of collateral effects which, at this moment in time, complicate co-existence and do not facilitate social cohesion.

According to Cardús, a few decades ago, from the 1960s and 70s onwards, the aim was to reject conventions and replace them with convictions. In my view, this was mainly due to countercultural and anti-system-based ideologies and attitudes of the youth of that period. Thirty years later, it can be said with hindsight that, although the reaction of the time was logical and justifiable overall, leading to multiple new situations that have doubtless helped to dignify the human condition, it also introduced the rejection or lack of consideration of specific behaviour which socially and personally is now, in another turnaround, seen to be rather positive (self-control, will power, the acceptance of a well-exercised authority, discipline as a framework for living together, etc.). As a result of this recent history, so dynamic and so changeable, in today's society we can perceive a lack of good manners, understood as an inability to co-exist successfully. "We are experiencing a crisis in ways of doing things, in practical conventions and, as a consequence, it is harder to live together," writes Cardús. The author faces up to this situation in the first part of his book, entitled *Elogi de les convencions* (In Praise of Conventions). In this

■ <sup>1</sup> Term given to the politico-religious situation under Franco, used to identify the condition of being Spanish and Catholic.

section we can read about a proposal for the reintroduction of an agreed set of practical social conventions in the interests of a well-organized co-existence. This would be a sense of civic responsibility, claimed to be useful in itself, beyond the fact of a possible link to specific convictions or moral qualities. Conventions, understood as useful criteria that have been established as a mutual agreement for living together, would become an essential instrument for the smooth running of society. “All social life is made possible thanks to the existence of conventions”. The second part of the book entitled *Siguem formals* (Let us Be Formal), starts off by demystifying the notion of spontaneity from a sociological point of view, to the point of actually denying its existence. He says, “Spontaneity, in the strictest sense of the word —behaviour that comes from an internal impulse without the intervention of an external stimulus— does not exist”. With this statement he is quite conscious that he has attacked a concept that, since a few decades ago, has had very positive connotations socially speaking; it is almost presented as a compulsory virtue, as a paradigm of fully exercised freedom. Despite all this, and with no safety net, Cardús dares to assert, “If true spontaneity did exist on a social level, it would lead to disorder and confusion”. His point of view is that, “social life is founded on order and sense, and its organization is based on routines which have a meaning which both those who practise and those who interpret them must be able to understand”. Faced with an apparent virginal spontaneity, he states that what actually happens is that there are multiple mechanisms that, in reality, lead us to the adoption of supposedly spontaneous behaviour. Young people are the principal victims of this. Fashion is based on a strategy that converts youngsters into passive consumers of what the all-powerful consumer industry is continually offering them, whilst making them believe that their decision is based on a freely made choice. Cardús goes so far as to assert that young people who have been taught, by parents and teachers, to employ motivation and seduction strategies, thus neglecting to prioritize the development of willpower, are weaker in the face of the blandishments of the consumer society. This is due to the fact that the latter is especially good at the mastery of the art of deceptive seduction. Thus, Cardús extols the existence of discipline —he tells us that “it is not a value in itself: it is simply a working condition that enables the discovery of necessary values such as dialogue”— and of transparent authority, which lets itself be seen and which is exercised without authoritarianism but also without complexes. Both discipline and authority are totally essential to well-organised co-existence in society. In *Ben educats* we can also find very lucid writing on multiculturalism, the welfare society, the prevailing moral uncertainty, the inability to communicate suffered by a good number of people, on the educational establishment, structural and institutional incivility and so on. Throughout the book, and always with an unquestionably progressive ideology, with a complex-free point of view untainted by any type of politically correct apriorism, the reader is given the opportunity to see the great capacity of the author to extract reflections from our daily reality that result in a quasi philosophical-moral thesis. A timely and intelligent book, dense and well-written. And very useful, especially for families and teachers ■

## II Dialectics of irony

Enric Sòria

Guillem Calaforra, 2006, *Dialèctica de la ironia. La crisi de la modernitat en l'assaig de Joan Fuster* (The Dialectics of Irony. The Crisis of Modernity and Joan Fuster's Essays), Valencia, Publicacions de la Universitat de València, 306 pp.

Reading *Dialèctica de la ironia. La crisi de la modernitat en l'assaig de Joan Fuster*, by Guillem Calaforra, one is immediately struck by its free expression, new ideas, rigour, tenacity, and the depth and quality of its analysis —features that are all too seldom found in Catalan publishing. It is no exaggeration to say that this book on the writer Joan Fuster sets a standard that future authors should aspire to. One of its main virtues lies in its analysis of Fuster's texts and the themes and contradictions of his work in order to throw light on a much wider panorama of ideas and dilemmas in modern thought.

The book is both an important and interesting work, which engages in a dialogue with the reader and gives scope for both agreement and dissent. It also provides fertile ground for fostering new ideas based upon those presented in the work.

The book seeks to discuss and enlighten. What then makes this tome so interesting? The author —with somewhat excessive modesty— admits in the foreword that the book's scope was originally much more limited. Calaforra's initial aim was to write about Joan Fuster's reading of Nietzsche. However, the author quickly realised that discussing Fuster's work required a broader canvas —in this case the quest for inner enlightenment based on reason and self-examination.

The author also says that while he found Fuster's writing aesthetically pleasing, he found it lacking from a philosophical standpoint. Calaforra suspected that Fuster was holding back on the sources of his intellectual inspiration and his judgement on them (a good polemicist, Fuster often showed little gratitude towards the writers who most interested him). This, and the way in which many writers generally defend Fuster's work while failing to shed new light on it, is what spurred Calaforra to write *Dialèctica de la ironia*.

In passing, it is worth noting the book's criticism of Fuster (not all of it justified) makes the work unusual. Many writings on Fuster border on hagiography and tend to harp on the same themes. However, the author himself recognises that there have been several valuable and novel contributions to literary criticism of Fuster's work over the last few years. These include books and essays by Joaquim Espinós, Ferran Archilés, Justo Serna, and Encarna Garcia Monerris. Calaforra also acknowledges his indebtedness to observations by Antoni Riera, Vicent Salvador, Enric Balaguer, and Josep Ballester, among others. Furthermore, one should not underestimate the educational value and pioneering nature of Josep Iborra's book *Fuster portàtil*, which pioneered many of the themes that were later taken up by others. Iborra's book also gives both a good overview and a lot of useful detail on Fuster's literary output. One should also note orthodox yet scholarly papers by Francesc Pérez Moragon, penetrating critiques by Vicent Raga, Manuel Ardit's somewhat over-interpretative approach, and Antoni Riera's work (which not only placed Fuster in the context of contemporary thought but also provided a useful reading guide, as does the book reviewed here).

To sum up, *Dialèctica de la ironia* creates a debate embracing Fuster's work, various leading thinkers ranging from the Enlightenment to today, and some of the key problems of modern thought. The first aim here is to clarify the links between Fuster's works and the whole current of thought "that examines the Enlightenment with the same cold scepticism that Fuster approached the world - in other words, the ideas that undermined the certainties of 17<sup>th</sup> century rationality but to which in several ways they remained faithful". The second aim is to discover how internally consistent and radical Fuster's thought was —that is to say, which questions he dared to ask and what answers he came up with.

In undertaking this task, Calaforra obviously had to choose which themes and (in particular) which authors to examine. Among the authors inspiring Fuster, he chose: Sade as a heterodox, radical representative of the Enlightenment; Nietzsche as the great philosophic questioner of enlightened reason, and some of his heirs (Max Weber, Michel Foucault, Emil Cioran, the members of The Frankfurt School and the so-called post-modern philosophers, Lyotard, Derrida, Vattimo, etc.). Calaforra also notes that he had to exclude some modern thinkers with whom Fuster can clearly be related. Thus, we do not find Gramsci or Russell, Hegel (a source of inspiration hidden by Fuster) or Marx. The reader will also find Freud absent. Fuster's works —which were often more open-ended than they seemed— also contained passing references to Heidegger's militantly anti-modern speculations. Above all, the reader will miss mention of Sartre. However, it is not Calaforra's intention to close the subject, it is simply that he has his work cut out just to explore the paths he has chosen. These he explores with great thoroughness and in doing so sets a challenge for those following in his footsteps. Calaforra's book is both thought-provoking and an intellectual delight. Anyone taking the paths not followed by the author will find Calaforra's book a hard act to follow.

Calaforra's exploration initially adopts a philological approach and, later, a philosophical one. The aim here is to discover which of the foregoing authors were read by Fuster and what lessons he learnt from them. The next step is to interpret the consequences of this reading, i.e. "what the essayist's response is to the challenges set by the critics of modernity". Lastly, there is the synthesis, dealing with the problems and ambiguities produced by this reading and the new questions to which they gave rise. I consider this is the most valuable part of the book because it is this section that makes readers think hardest.

*Dialèctica de la ironia* is not simply the fruit of the authors dissatisfaction with an aspect of Fuster's work but it also faces a seemingly insurmountable hurdle. The book's theme is inevitably philosophical yet Fuster was no philosopher. Indeed, Fuster could be brutally scathing on the subject: "*la filosofia és l'art d'agafar la vaca pels collons*" Philosophy is the art of grabbing a cow by the balls. Even so, Fuster allowed himself the pleasure of posturing as a philosopher and being read as such. Rather than a philosopher, Fuster was a thinker in the sense posited by Gadamer (for all men think). From the professional standpoint, Fuster was a writer, an essayist, and what is generally termed an intellectual. In his works, Fuster was a writer with ideas about ideas and made very few concessions to either narrative or mere description. Such a writer has to be aware of the ideas being discussed at the time, what they consisted of, and what put them in question. Fuster





undoubtedly showed this awareness. However, one might suspect that his disdainful comments concerning philosophy or his frequent calls for country commonsense were often simply an exasperating invitation to avoid deeper study when the going got tough. In other words, they were little more than ruses to hide the insecurity of an amateur dealing with a discipline that is very much a closed world. Even so, Fuster needed a certain familiarisation with philosophical ideas if he was to write in an incisive, convincing manner. This is precisely why a philosophical approach to Fuster's work is so revealing.

On the other hand, an essayist like Fuster is someone who makes his living by writing on current political, social, and cultural events where specific occasions provide the pretext for debating ideas. An essayist is someone who thinks about what he writes rather than someone who writes what he thinks. When it comes to thought, Fuster's works are thus necessarily fragmentary, wide-ranging, and often contradictor, making interpretation hard. However, Calaforra bears this in mind in his hunt for his elusive quarry. Calaforra's success in this quest can be attributed to the fact that he is both a philologist and a highly competent reader. *Dialèctica de la ironia* not only reveals significant parts of Fuster's thought, it also sheds light on the authors with whom he is compared (and who are anything but easy to read) and tells us something about what he thinks. The result is a plethora of ideas and a precise summary of several of the intellectual and moral dilemmas surrounding modern thought and its contradictions.

The philological section of the book is splendid. The core, as one might expect, is the imprint Nietzsche's thought left on Fuster. Although the Catalan author only referred to Nietzsche from time to time (and then with studied off-handedness), it is clear he grappled with the German philosopher's writings for decades. Fuster's radical criticism of language as the cage of thought is lifted from Nietzsche's famous observation: "Ich fürchte, wir werden Gott nicht los, weil wir noch an die Grammatik glauben" [I am afraid we are not rid of God because we still have faith in grammar.] Fuster's notion of "truth" also echoes Nietzsche, and his ironic remarks on the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum* are virtually a literal paraphrase of a well-known passage (Number 16) in the beginning of Nietzsche's *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* (Beyond Good and Evil). Apart from these quotations, there are also a large number of other similarities: perspectivism, the assumption of utility for life as a criterion underpinning values, an interest in strategies for wielding power, resentment, a taste for fragmentation, systematic suspicion, and so on.

However, these similarities clearly have limits. Fuster is not as radical as Nietzsche, does not renounce positivism, and does not follow him in questioning the scientific approach. He is also immune to one of the main forces driving Nietzsche's thought—the quest for power and the German philosopher's almost Dionysian vitality (which drives Nietzsche beyond mere nihilism and brings him to joyously celebrate life). Fuster eschews extremes; he is not a mountaineer, he is seldom excited and ecstasy is beyond him. Even so, I agree with Guillem Calaforra that Fuster has more in common with Nietzsche than with any other philosopher, despite Fuster's dislike for the German's grand rhetoric. "It would not be the first time that a leading intellectual ostentatiously distanced himself from those with whom he shares great affinities", writes Calaforra.

I think Calaforra also brilliantly identifies why Fuster found Sade fascinating. Fuster's interest lay not in Sade's libertine imagination but in his first and most radical formulations of enlightened materialism. Fuster was attracted by Sade's unwavering desire

to sweep away myths even though this meant undermining morality and confronting the sometimes brutal implications of logic. For Fuster, Sade's simple, brutal immorality stemmed from the Enlightenment's reason and represented a darker side of human nature.

Calaforra also dedicates several pages to authors whom he knows well, such as Weber and Foucault (the book sheds penetrating light on power relations—a key point of the latter's work—and provides an excellent introduction to this thinker). With regard to the Frankfurt School, Calaforra notes that the ideas and research subjects of this circle of philosophers would greatly have interested Fuster but that he only skimmed their work (if we exclude Marcuse, then the most published but also one of the least interesting members of the group). Clearly, Fuster's self-taught approach to philosophy had its drawbacks, while his lack of dialogue with the so-called post-modernist philosophers meant that many of Fuster's ideas were not developed and remained as little more than intuitions. As a youngster, Fuster avidly read *Revista de Occidente* and eagerly devoured anything bearing on the literary world. However, he never systematically read scholarly papers that attempted to raise and answer the questions that most interested him. His essays suffered as a result.

Within this group of authors of whom Fuster either read little or nothing, Calaforra's comparison of his subject with Cioran is particularly incisive. Fuster never cited Cioran and it is possible that he simply knew nothing about him. However, the styles of both writers are surprisingly similar. Cioran's aphorisms are denser and deeper than Fuster's and also more emphatic, and reveal an exhibitionist virtuosity in evoking utter desolation. Fuster, less histrionic and more down to earth than Cioran, has a more agile, biting wit. However, there is little to choose between them when it comes to conveying disenchantment and nihilism.

Calaforra argues that Fuster's most nihilist side is to be found in his caustic aphorisms. He considers that Fuster's writings are also tinged with disappointment, bitterness, and anxiety (a nuance that Justo Serna and Encarna Garcia have also perspicaciously noted in some of Fuster's verses). I believe this general disenchantment can be ascribed to Fuster's existentialism and his firm belief that man is doomed to die without any hope of a life hereafter. This existentialist insight left a deep mark on Fuster. However, he did not go along with Sartre's argument that existentialism is a philosophy of freedom and action, in which man gives meaning to his own life and the world through the exercise of free will. As with Nietzsche, we find that Fuster is highly susceptible to the negative, debunking message of his masters but is largely impervious to the positive side. This is something else that Fuster shares with Cioran.

*Dialèctica de la ironia* revolves around a series of major themes: reflection on knowledge, truth, and science; irony and scepticism as forms of distrust; the contradictions of a moral and ideological universe lacking foundations; the aspirations of an intellectual wishing to make an impact through reticence; and the discoveries and limitations of the dialogue between the essayist and the *mâîtres à penser* of his age. Calaforra uses these strands to analyse Fuster from various points of view and to highlight the sheer range of the writer's discourse. This spiral argument makes certain passages in the book too repetitive, especially in the second half. On the other hand, it does justice to the diverse implications of the ideas debated and their expression in Fuster's writings. After all, Fuster was a multi-faceted thinker who did not lay down hard-and-fast moral rules. It is likely that we

can only get to grips with him by examining his texts from myriad perspectives, given that his reasons for writing them were similarly diverse.

This kaleidoscopic approach is the one adopted by Calaforra in his analysis of Fuster's work and serves to highlight the paradoxical nature of the essayist's thought. For example, it has been said that Fuster predated post-modern ideas. It is a statement that needs to be carefully qualified and that is what Calaforra does with great skill. In addition, Fuster criticised all ideologies (and some great narratives) at one time or another. He questioned language, morality (as always serving certain interests), the notion of truth. Fuster was doggedly distrustful and ironic and his similes were usually denigrating (a trick he might have picked up from Nietzsche); there is little to choose between Fuster's definition of Unamuno as the Conchita Bautista of philosophy, and Nietzsche's characterisation of Seneca as one who took virtue by the horns. Fuster's thought is generally negative: it aims to unmask, debunk and immunise. Yet we find a Fuster who is an acolyte of the pure sciences and a believer in historic and biological materialism of such an elementary nature it is almost mechanical in conception. He was also clearly fascinated by strongly systematic schools of thought such as Marxism and Positivism. In contrast, there is Fuster the civic intellectual, the amiable humanist and advocate of dialogue, common sense, imbued with an almost Emile Coué optimism regarding progress, and civilisation. Put baldly, these facets are incongruent yet such was the man. It is hardly surprising then that the writer who lauded Erasmus' and Thomas Mann's humanism in the 1950s is the very same one who denounced the quasi-religious orthodoxy of the Soviet system. It was also Fuster who wrathfully lambasted heretics in a famous article written in *Serra d'Or* in 1968 to mark the end of the Prague Spring.

Calaforra portrays a Fuster who was the most orthodox kind of rationalist (positivist, materialist, etc.), a writer who was permanently tempted to unleash his devastating scepticism and exhibit the worst kind of nihilism. Although he occasionally succumbed to this temptation, he never went the whole hog. Perhaps this is because, as an intellectual, he felt that it was unfitting to wholly succumb to a comfortably schematic doctrine offering salvation at the price of banishing the least shadow of doubt. Furthermore, Fuster's increasingly anti-dogmatic stance from the 1960s onward helped deafen him to such siren songs.

In any event, the contradictions in his thought were often cruelly apparent. For example, in the field of knowledge, Fuster defended the pure sciences and dismissed the social ones as "pseudo-scientific tall-tales" and so much hot air. What is one to think then of Fuster's essays? How can such a writer argue that rhetoric, literature and the non-scientific disciplines are so much hokum? Likewise, how can one expose falsehoods and yet deny the existence of truths? How can one proposed humanism and civilisation yet cling to a purely biological explanation of life that reduces psychology to mere bio-chemistry and culture to a clash of interests? Fuster asked himself these questions but carefully avoided answering them.

A good example of Fuster's slipperiness concerns ethics. Fuster rejected any kind of religious or doctrinal basis for moral judgements yet he proposed no alternative. He removed any kind of foundation even though he was aware of the need for one: "If we do not base our indictments on ethics, on what shall we base them?" Fuster was unable to answer this question because he considered it inadmissible. For him, all ethics were based on a previously formulated political position and he considered that political convictions were merely the product of material interests. Ethics for Fuster were thus



no more than weapons in the struggle for social domination. Indeed, on one occasion Fuster argued that Man must aspire to Justice, Morality, and Good if life is to have any value but he then went on to say that such notions are lies and traps used by the powers that be to coerce us and to hide the truth. Culture and language, Fuster maintained, were simply tools serving the same evil ends. Yet he was also aware of the cruel paradox that such an argument produced. Hence the temptation to descend into nihilist or doctrinaire simplification, to throw caution to the winds and hide behind the smokescreen of pragmatic utility (for whom?). Since Fuster was not a philosopher, he could simply wash his hands of the mess made by taking his ideas to their logical conclusion. Instead, he concentrated on writing some of the best prose ever written in Catalan.

Reading Fuster in a philosophically disciplined way—or if you will “grabbing the cow by the balls”—which is what Guillem Calaforra dares to do, reveals both the penetration of Fuster’s essays but also the mass of contradictions they contain. I once wrote that Fuster “is a moralist who questions all ethics, a polemicist who asks what truth is, a preacher without a gospel, a teacher without a lesson”. These contradictions are unavoidable and they are precisely what Fuster debates with extraordinary energy and insight. Though Fuster delights the literary palate, he fails to sate the reader’s appetite for sound theory—which is why Calaforra decided to write this excellent book. On the one hand, the cumulative paradoxes in Fuster’s essays open up endless possibilities for the writer to twist and turn as he likes and deploy his caustic wit and rhetorical persuasion to best effect. On the other hand, the paths opened up as result lead only to perplexity. That is because Fuster’s works are essays, nothing more. As Guillem Calaforra reminds us, trying to turn them into something else is to change their nature.

At the end of the book, Calaforra dedicates several pages to analysing Fuster’s irony (which was both a character trait and a strategy) and also comments on his nationalism. A particularly incisive observation is that Fuster’s unusual collective projection of an existentialist concept of the individual led him to stress uniqueness and the right to be different. In this respect, the key for Fuster was authenticity: “We must be what we are”, proclaimed Fuster, a battle cry with almost Heideggerian overtones. Calaforra suggests that Fuster’s embrace of a Catalan identity was a way of offsetting his nihilism and an attempt to construct a community of meaning with others. It was a kind of nationalist response to Sartre. Fuster was entitled to his opinion here, regardless of what others may think. However, Calaforra is probably right in identifying its roots.

I think Calaforra’s concluding comments also show great insight. He reminds us that we are talking of a writer: “From my point of view, Fuster’s answers to certain issues regarding the “crisis of modernity” fall short. However, the strength of his essays does not lie in his ideas, which are often highly debatable, but rather in the perfect combination of language and intuition. [...] We should leave his reputation as a brilliant author intact yet exercise our right to read his works critically”. These precepts underlie Calaforra’s outstanding book. A great critic like Fuster could have asked for no greater homage II