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## **VI. Pere Calders and his Mexican Exile**

### ***Mexico in the Fiction of Pere Calders*** **Joan Melcion**

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# MEXICO IN THE FICTION OF PERE CALDERS

JOAN MELCION

1939. France right before the Nazi occupation, the country where hundreds of thousands of men from the Spanish Republic have sought refuge after the fascist victory south of the Pyrenees. One of them is a twenty-six year old writer, still unknown. His name is Pere Calders, and he does not share the trust of the French in the Maginot Line. Like many other Catalans in exile, he senses that he has a grim future in store for him given the prospect of a German invasion, and decides to head across the Atlantic to the port of Veracruz, in Mexico. He arrives in July of the same year, with fourteen francs in his pocket, the clothes on his back, two letters of recommendation and a few unpublished manuscripts in a folder. An entire life brought to a halt at the other side of the ocean and a new one beginning in a country quite different from his own. Calders returned to Catalonia at the age of fifty; he had spent over twenty-three years in Mexico. This experience was bound to leave its mark on the author's work.

## THE AUTHOR'S LITERARY BACKGROUND

The young man who took off down the road of exile had already produced an interesting body of work: he had published a collection of short stories, *El primer arlequí* (1936), a novel, *La Glòria del doctor Larén* (1937), and a few war chronicles, *Unitats de xoc* (1938). In addition, he had completed the manuscripts of two novels, *Gaeli i l'home déu* and *La cèl·lula*: the former was finally published fifty years later, in 1986, and the latter was lost and never recovered. But more importantly, Calders had succeeded in producing a consolidated, mature body of work, based on solid, deeply rooted literary principles. That was probably the most valuable luggage Calders took with him on his voyage to Mexico.

Mexico was a different world, with an entirely different society from that which Calders had learned to live with, a foreign culture; it brought about the longing for all he had left behind and the process of learning to live in a new environment that was often hard to understand—in other words, the sense of having been banished. In this context, Calders decided to continue being a writer, a Catalan writer in the Catalan language, even though he knew that whatever he wrote was doomed to either be read by a handful of friends and companions in exile, or to lurk in the silence of a desk drawer. He was bound and

determined to remain faithful not only to his language but also to a certain way of understanding the function of literature.

Calders had developed as a writer at a time when the role of literature (and of art in general) had been questioned from several different angles. Fiction –and, more specifically, the novel– had gradually been stripped of the denotative purpose that it had acquired since 19th-century realism, moving towards a connotative function. The need to explain reality –be it from a naturalistic, objective perspective, or from the angle of psychological subjectivism– was replaced by the need to understand another reality that revealed itself as far more complex and undecipherable, a reality where the world of the subconscious, the mysterious and the absurd could also be explored. This implied questioning the basic premises of the entire literary code as a system for interpreting and representing reality. Therefore, beginning in the twenties and especially during the thirties, a central theme appeared in literary thought: if reality could not be portrayed in all its complexity and all that could be done was suggest an interpretation of a complex, fragmentary system of codes, what path should literature follow as an arbitrary code for representing reality? One consequence of this question was that the code of literary fiction previously conceived as a formal system for representing reality ended up becoming the object of constant attention in literature itself.

Pere Calders' first novel, *La Glòria del doctor Larén*, is a fine example of the degree to which the author was sensitive to these new concepts. In this novel, reality –or rather the representation of reality (the story of Doctor Larén and his wife) and the doctor's set of values– is clearly subject to the narrators' point of view; these narrators can interpret them based on different moral standards –and different narrative codes, as well. Thus, what appears as a pure and innocent love story through one narrator's eyes is presented by the other as an outrageous episode full of overstated reactions that lead to an absolutely ridiculous final outcome. Above these fictional narrators is the real narrator, the writer, who keeps a distance from the other two and plays with the reader showing him that it is all fiction, allowing him to make out the deformed outline of reality, with all its incongruities and contradictions. This is, briefly told, the central theme of all his early short stories: the tension between a more or less cliché representation of reality and the possibility of perceiving it from different and unusual angles that can include fantasy, dreams, absurdity, irony, and even poetry. The purpose is to use these tools to reveal the magical face of reality. A similar venture undertaken by other writers –particularly in Latin America– has been referred to as "magic realism," and it is hardly



surprising that the writer with whom Calders had the strongest relationship in Mexico and whom he admired the most was Juan Rulfo, considered among the main representatives of "magic realism" in the Spanish language.

For a writer whose basic tenets were these, twenty-three years living in foreign surroundings where the daily experiences through which he related to the world had been replaced by alien rules of behavior—in other words, the experience of having been banished—were bound to be transformed into first-rate literary material. Calders shaped his experience into several short stories, one novella and a novel. The five stories about Mexico (*Fortuna lleu*, *La vetlla de donya Xabela*, *Primera part d'Andrade Maciel*, *La verge de les vies*, and *La batalla del cinc de maig*) and the novella *Aquí descansa Nevares*, were published at different times, yet form a body of work with an identity of its own whose basic narrative theme is centered on Mexican Indians and their behavior. Another work set in Mexico is *L'ombra de l'atzavara*, a longer, conventional novel that uses a testimonial tone to tell the story of Catalans in exile in Mexico. The two focuses are quite different; yet in both the writer reflects and makes us reflect upon the central theme of his entire body of work: the juxtaposition of different codes of behavior and therefore the interpretation of different realities. This reflection is clearest in *L'ombra de l'atzavara*, but it is implicit in his short stories as well. The story published here as a sample, *La revolta del terrat*, also takes place in Mexico and belongs to what could be referred to as "urban irony."

#### SHORT STORIES SET IN MEXICO

The first four of the five short stories mentioned above had been published in the collection *Gent de l'alta vall* (1957) and in several Catalan magazines in Mexico; the fifth, *La batalla del cinc de maig*, was not published until 21 years later in the collection *Invasió subtil i altres contes*. *Aquí descansa Nevares* was supposed to have been included in *Gent de l'alta vall*, but it was considered too long for the collection and was published in 1967. A more recent edition, *Aquí descansa Nevares i altres narracions mexicanes* (1980) includes them all in one volume.

There is a common, recurrent theme throughout all these stories: the juxtaposition of the Indian concept of life, based on its own set of values, its deeply-rooted customs, and an environment that follows the rules of the Western world, imposing its civilization upon them over the centuries. The central characters in these stories (Trinidad Romero, Mrs. Xabela's family, Andrade Maciel, Xebo Canabal) appear as

passive, contemplative individuals who only follow their impulses, not quite managing to grasp the mesh of social rules or values prevailing in the world around them, yet attempting to work them into their own code for interpreting the world. This attempt to interpret a code of behavior based on a different set of values is the centerpoint of the narrative tension; the contrast produces the absurdity and incongruity underlying all that appears as perfectly organized and coded; and at the same time, there are sparks of tender sympathy elicited by actions that are difficult to grasp for a European frame of mind.

Therefore, a character killing a friend who disturbed the long hours he spent dozing away, the wake of a dead body ending up in a ghastly fire, a chalk drawing on a stoplight at a railway crossing becoming an object of religious cult and pilgrimage, or the celebration of a historical event becoming a living battleground, all apparently absurd and outrageous, are seen by the narrator from an ironic distance yet with a touch of compassion and tenderness. Ultimately, he seems to be saying that these situations are no more absurd or outrageous than killing in the name of civilization, imposing a burial rite, worshipping a religious icon or commemorating far more violent acts of war.

*Aquí descansa Nevares* may be the work where this ironic point of view most forcefully exposes the contradictions underlying all that is considered normal and the logic behind actions that could appear as aberrant—for example, an entire Indian community moving into a cemetery and turning it into a city. Calders builds this magnificent story on a paradox drawn from direct observation: in Mexico City there are beautiful cemeteries with gardens and monumental mausoleums only a few yards away from neighborhoods of makeshift shacks whose inhabitants have a hard time surviving the floods. Why couldn't it happen that the Indian community would take over the cemetery and turn it into a far more comfortable residence? This is the starting point for the story. But the most interesting event is not the takeover itself but what comes in its wake: the inhabitants of the cemetery, which reproduces the social ladder of the living for the dead, end up adapting their primitive social order to the class differences reflected in the cemetery's architecture. In other words, the representation of reality (the mausoleums assigned to each family) replaces reality itself, in a reverse process from the cemetery's function of reproducing the reality of the living. Just as the people who Xebo Canabal draws in *La verge de les vies* are the ones who adapt to the drawing, Calders seems to be telling us that what we consider reality is often nothing but that which adapts to our representation of it.

*L'ombra de l'atzavara.* In these short stories, the tension



between two different views of reality is basically established between the subject matter and the distant, ironic view of the narrator—and thus of the reader, whereas in the novel *L'ombra de l'atzavara* (1964), written when Calders had already returned to Catalonia, the tension is explicit to such an extent that it actually becomes the central theme of the story. Joan Deltell, the protagonist, like Pere Calders, travels to Mexico in exile and is confronted with a world that he often fails to comprehend, although he acknowledges that the rules it follows are not necessarily worse than the ones that prevailed among Europeans. They just happen to be different. His observation of the elements that mark the difference produces a broader, deeper, richer and more complex perception of the world, albeit full of unanswered questions. When Don Lupe, a native Mexican, complains to the Catalan character—a representative of the Western world—about his determination to impose a lifestyle that supposedly will make him happier, “*we have to run around like chickens with their heads cut off, he says, to have what you consider security, what you refer to as comfort. We have to make sure we have bank accounts, houses full of gadgets, an altar with gods and ideals you made to fit your needs. Are you sure, Señor Joan, that this will redeem us all ‘in our way’?*,” Joan Deltell realizes that his way of interpreting life is no better than the values of the Indians whom he tends to consider lazy, passive, irresponsible and haunted by strange superstitions.

“No, Mr. Joan Deltell, a white man from Barcelona lost in American lands was not sure that all of that could save the Indian. Furthermore, he doubted whether it was all intended to save the man in the first place; he was politely willing to leave him just as he had found him. Down deep, he realized that Don Lupe was right and he felt rather sorry that fate had appointed him to stand for a race that forced the rest to pursue happiness running around like chickens without heads. He did not feel prepared to export the happiness he had never found for himself.”

In this novel, the most realistic of Calders' works, the entire interplay of tensions between different interpretations of reality is represented quite explicitly, because the world that is represented already contains considerable touches of absurdity and incongruity, two basic ingredients in the prose of Pere Calders. However, one must not forget that the experience of being uprooted had a deep impact on other works that are not set in Mexico, yet continue to explore the subject of the relationship between reality and all the codes that are used by human beings with enthusiasm or dejection in their attempts to grasp it to some extent. *Ronda naval sota la boira*, the novel in which Calders explores this subject in greatest depth, is also his most

ambitious work, written between 1954 and 1955, during the same period in which he wrote the stories set in Mexico, when the author was torn between the need to recover what he had left behind and the urge to settle down in his own new world.

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