

# MODERNIST LITERATURE



AT A TIME WHEN LITERATURE HAD ONCE AGAIN ACHIEVED A HIGH QUALITY, THE AESTHETICS AND THE IDEOLOGIES THAT DOMINATED THE EUROPEAN CULTURAL SCENE IN THE LAST THIRD OF THE CENTURY WERE INTRODUCED.

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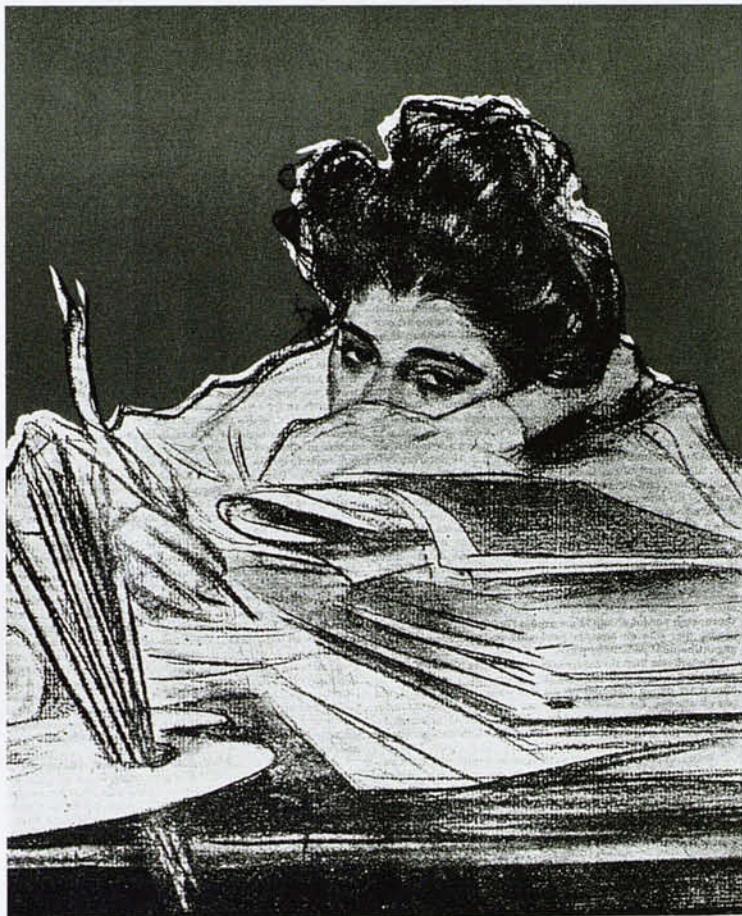


**T**here is no doubt that Catalan Modernism is best known abroad for its architecture. Its literature, less evident and with problems for its diffusion which are made worse by the inexistence or weakness of the political institutions that ought to promote it, is much less widely known, in spite of its quality. The Modernist movement appeared in the *Països Catalans* as a reaction against the excessive traditionalism of the Catalan culture of the time and with the intention of making it more progressive and up to date. It is in its literature that we can most clearly follow its complex, rich and often contradictory composition. From the last decade of the nineteenth century, at a time when literature had once again achieved a high quality, the

aesthetics and the ideologies that dominated the European cultural scene in the last third of the century were introduced through cultural events such as the *Festes modernistes de Sitges* and the publication of magazines like *L'Avenç*, *Pèl & Ploma* and *Joventut*. In this way, a literature which still contained a fair dose of conservative historicist Romanticism alongside a moderate naturalism in its fiction and a prosaic Post-Romantic positivist poetry came to be strongly influenced by Parnassian, English Pre-Raphaelite, Symbolist, Naturist and Neoclassical aesthetics as well as by the work of people like Nietzsche, Ibsen, Hauptmann and D'Annunzio. Decadent literature, the most familiar medium of the time, disputed with vitalism the spiritual mas-

tery of a literature whose writers took upon themselves the European artists' opposition to the bourgeoisie and an individualism which was often messianic.

In poetry, over and above the work of Parnassians such as Miquel dels Sants Oliver, Gabriel Alomar or Jeroni Zanné or of Symbolists such as Miquel de Palol, stands the work of Joan Maragall, a poet who, starting with a Romantic concept of poetry he called "theory of the living word", went beyond stylistic restraints and produced profoundly personal poetry of the highest quality based on the value of humanity above any kind of transcendentalism. Thus, his *Cant espiritual* is a pantheist exaltation and the figures he borrows from popular Catalan legends, as in one of his greatest poems,



*El Comte Arnau*, are personifications of the nation's spirit, brought to life by the individualistic, transgressive nature of the ideas of Friedrich Nietzsche. Two of the period's greatest poets, Joan Alcover and Miquel Costa i Llovera, can only be partly counted amongst the Modernists because of certain aspects of their work. Santiago Rusiñol, a painter and writer, introduced the prose poem in the book *Oracions*.

Adrià Gual, founder and director of the *Teatre íntim*, was the complete dramatist needed by the new concepts in theatre, and a beer-hall, *Els Quatre Gats*, was the cradle for the reconsideration of the so-called minority genres: puppets, pantomime, etc. Santiago Rusiñol's first plays, *L'alegria que passa* and *El jardí abandonat*, are two of the best examples of the decadent theatre. The theatre of ideas —inherited, largely, from Ibsen—, regenerationist or revolutionary, is best represented by Joan Puig i Ferreter and Ignasi Iglésias.

The fiction, which often resembles realist, naturalist or genre fiction, normally needs to be taken symbolically. It shows the discredit of the eighteenth century narrative model and a fragmentation of the short story in consonance with the general crisis in European fiction which was searching for formulas to substitute those provided by realism. The concern for intensity as opposed to length had a successful early reply in the novel *Els sots feréstecs*, by Raimon Casellas, who was also the author of the collection of stories *Les multituds*, and its maximum exponent in *Solitud*, by Caterina Albert under the pseudonym "Víctor Català". *Solitud* was a brilliant novel of the time and one of the best works of contemporary fiction of any language. Using rich, precise language, it traces the symbolic journey through life of a woman who manages to free herself from her social conditioning and use the strength of her own personality. Her great literary output reached a peak with the series of sto-

ries she started with the publication of *Drames rurals*. Modernist fiction has a very wide range: Juli Vallmitjana's novel of the low life in the cities, Josep Maria Folch i Torres's reflection on social conflicts in *Aigua Avall*, Santiago Rusiñol's genre novel on the conflict between the bourgeois artist and his class in *L'auca del senyor Esteve*, Prudenci Bertrana's exaltation of the strength of individual will in *La vida i la mort d'en Jordi Fraginals*, his naturalist pantheism in *Proses bárbares*, the decadence of his *Josafat* or Miquel de Palol's *Camí de Llum*, or the historical novel of Alfons Maseras. Some of Joaquim Ruyra's well-balanced stories can also be included in the Modernist movement.

This situation was considerably restricted when *Noucentisme*, whose criteria were ideological more than aesthetic, substituted Modernism. Catalan literature, however, had definitively incorporated itself into the modern world. ■