

TOWNS AND CITIES OF CATALONIA IN FOREIGN WRITINGS

LITERATURE AND CITIES HAVE GONE HAND IN HAND FOR OVER A CENTURY, THEY ARE FRIENDS THAT GO TOGETHER AND HAVE LEARNED THE ART OF TOLERANCE THAT MAKES THEM COMPLEMENTARY.

ISIDOR CÒNSUL AUTHOR

The relationship between cities and writing only became established well into the nineteenth century, as a result of three overlapping factors: the loss of the attachment for nature which had been an inseparable element of romantic literature; the consolidation of the bourgeoisie, which encouraged the growth of cities and made them the setting for modern lifestyles, and thirdly, the boom in realist literature, held up as a mirror to society, which helped to fix the growth and transformation of European cities.

The flourishing bourgeoisie forced cities to break out of the old nucleuses –very often medieval cities– which corseted them and absorb neighbouring towns and grow towards more spacious horizons. The bourgeoisie stood out for their enterprising spirit, and it was this that stimulated the development and transformation of the cities. It was then that literature, in step with the aesthetics of realism, became fundamentally urban in character. The writer of the nineteenth century has something of the notary public about him and in particular he stands out as a great observer. Urban landscapes invaded the world of novels and Balzac, Flaubert, Zola and others became the chroniclers of nineteenth-century Paris, as Charles Dickens was for London, Narcís Oller for Barcelona and Galdós for Madrid, to give just a few examples.



LA RAMBLA, BARCELONA

The trend that began in the middle of the last century has increased in our own and it's difficult to find a city of any standing that has not been reflected in the mirrors of literature. Changing, fragmentary mirrors, though, because cities evolve and authors only capture incomplete, fleeting portraits: the image

of an age, valid for a few years but condemned to become the yellowing photograph of a past lost for ever. In this way we can follow the twists and turns of a modern city through the literature that has reflected it. The New York of recent years, for example, has its emblematic novel in Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of Vanities*, though we must not forget other authors such as Paul Auster (*The City of Glass*) or Didier Decoin (*Abraham de Brooklyn* and *John l'infèrn*), or the scripts Woodey Allen has made into a cinema feast. In all this writing the New York profile stands out very differently from the one sketched by John dos Passos in *Manhattan Transfer* (1925) or Henry James in *Washington Square* (1880).

Similarly, cities follow different fortunes in the literary hand-out. Some have been lucky from a quantitative point of view, others have enjoyed the benefit of quality. Dublin, for example, will always be the legendary city of Joyce's *Ulysses*, Prague seems inseparable from Kafka, and Elias Cannetti, Thomas Bernhard, Robert Musil and Joseph Roth, amongst others, have set their work in Vienna, the musical capital of European culture.

All this can also be applied to Barcelona, insofar as it only began to be reflected in literature with any frequency in the last century. Its debut coincided with the first burst of political Catala-



ANTONI GAUDÍ. LA PEDRERA. BARCELONA



ANTONI GAUDÍ. PARC GÜELL. BARCELONA

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nism and the rapid growth of the city, which culminated in the Universal Exhibition of 1888. Before that, though, illustrious visitors such as Giacomo G. Casanova, Stendhal, Washington Irving, Prosper Mérimée and Hans Christian Andersen had left written accounts and impressions of the qualities, comforts and character of the city. No-one, though, has praised it as highly as Miguel de Cervantes, centuries earlier, in the pages of *Don Quijote de la Mancha*: "Barcelona, paragon of courtesy, refuge of foreigners, hospice of the poor, land of the brave, revenger of the offended and cheering correspondent of firm friendships, and in setting and scenery, unrivalled."

Barcelona: the war, the red-light district and the Rambla

The scenes most often recurring in foreign writing on Barcelona can be grouped under these three headings, although we should also add the striking architecture of Gaudí and Catalan Modernism and the two vantage points offering unique views over the city: Tibidabo and Montjuïc. The critic Alex Broch, in "La mirada estrangera" (published in *Barcelona en la Literatura "Barcelona Metròpolis Mediterrànea"*. No.20), analyses the most consistent bulk of this writing, proposes alternatives for reflection and establishes parameters for distribution under four

headings: Civil War Novels, Ethics and Aesthetics of Evil, The City as a Determinant of Fate and The City as a Place of Encounter and Reunion.

Before turning to Barcelona during the war and revolution, we could take a look at the agitation of October 1934, a period of revolt all over Spain when President Lluís Companys, on 6 October, proclaimed the Catalan State within the Spanish Federal Republic. It was in the whirlpool of these days that Joseph Kessel set his novel *Une balle perdue* (1964). However, 6 October was no more than a prelude to the tragedy that began in the summer of 1936. George Orwell, in *Homage to Catalonia* (1938), described the tragic events of May 1937, a complex episode of revolution within revolution, also reflected in Claude Simon's novel *El Palace* (1962). On the other hand, the enthusiasm of the revolt of the previous year can be felt in the relevant chapter of André Malraux's *L'espoir* (1937). It just so happens that the three novelists (Kessel, Malraux and Simon) all write from the point of view of the Hotel Colón in the Plaça de Catalunya but with a different chronology. Kessel lives the events of 6 October 1934 there, Malraux describes the battle to occupy the hotel on 19 July 1936 and Claude Simon describes the events of May 1937, with the slaughter of Trotskyists at the hand of Stalinist orthodoxy.

Other references to and descriptions of Barcelona at war can be found in Stephen Spender's memoirs *World Within World* (1951), and more briefly in Aldous Huxley's *After Many a Summer* (1939), in a few pages by Alejo Carpentier and in sketches by André Gide, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, Ernest Hemingway and François Mauriac, amongst others.

Another literary legend for the foreign eye is the physical and human geography of the red-light district, possibly the part of the city most written about in the whole of the twentieth century. This is the ideal setting for thrillers, and to foreign writers it appears as a tangled amalgam combining past scenarios of workers' struggles, the setting for espionage during World War I and where it is also accepted that the district is never neutral. This means that making it the setting for a novel implies a penchant for the underworld and for marginal atmospheres. Paul Bowles makes this quite clear in *Memories of a Nomad*, when he points out that Barcelona's red-light district was said to be the most depraved of all. After visiting it as a tourist, the author says he is fully satisfied with the depravation he has found there.

The list of books and authors to lead us into this supposed labyrinth of depravity could start with Pierre Mac Orlan, *La bandera* (1931) and *Rues secrètes*



(1934), go on with the experiences of an American saxophonist in William Irish's *A Night in Barcelona* (1947) and then unashamedly take on the most blatant works in the series: Jean Genêt's *Journal du voleur* (1949), Georges Bataille's *Le bleu du ciel* (1957) and André Pieyre de Mandiargues's *La marge* (1967). These three books, especially the first two, are sprinkled with a metaphysics of evil which is fully assumed by Genêt's and Bataille's characters. In spite of being a stone's throw from the red-light district, La Rambla, in contrast, is idyllic, a unique avenue of unequalled beauty and perhaps the most highly praised spot in Barcelona by foreign pens. For a large part of foreign authors, La Rambla (which they generally pluralize and turn into Les Rambles) is associated with a blend of four complementary ideas: it's a promenade, a proletarian space, a flower market and a geography of popular agitation. The people of Barcelona therefore go there to while away the time, to stroll, buy flowers, look at the girls and plan the revolution. This, with minor variations, is the picture painted by the great Rubén Darío, the English writer Evelyn Waugh, the Czech novelist Karel Capek, the journalist Ilya Eremburg, the French academic Louis Bertrand, the illustrious Jean-Paul Sartre—in his quick glance at Barcelona in *La nausée*

(1938)—, and also by Gertrude Stein, André Maurois, Henry Miller, Georges Simenon and Eugenio Montale, amongst others.

Barcelona, then, appears as a young girl courted left, right and centre by the literati and especially fortunate in this respect amongst foreign admirers. And fortune smiles on her both in the number of writers who have sung her praises and in the quality and the vigour of their pens. And there are still more foreign writers and books that have made eyes at the city, in the broadest sense: René Bizet, *Avez-vous vu dans Barcelone?* (1926); Francis Carco, *Printemps d'Espagne* (1929); Henry de Montherlant, *La petite infante de Castille* (1929); Henry-François Rey, *Les pianos mécaniques* (1962); Rossana Rossanda, *Un viatge inútil* (1981); Italo Calvino, *Palomar* (1983); Vassilis Alexakis, *Talgo* (1983), and Gabriel García Márquez, *Doce cuentos peregrinos* (1992). Apart from this, we have to remember the comments and shorter writings by Boris Vian, Tomasso Marinetti, Francis Picabia and many others.

The other cities of the principality

The other cities of Catalonia have not been so much in demand and are far less marked by the cosmopolitanism that characterizes Barcelona and that Barcelona gives off. Even so there are



various references to be gleaned, such as the novel set in Lleida by the Austrian writer Alexander Giese, *Lérida oder Der lange Schatten* (1983) and the collection of poems by the Italian Antoni Arca, a poet from Alguer, who plays with the name of the city in the book *Isabelleida* (1991). There are also a few plays by the Fleming Paul Koeck which have touches borrowed from the Camp de Tarragona and a book by the Peruvian Federico Mould Távora with a mention of republican Girona.

While on the track of further references to cities as seen through the eyes of foreign writers it's worth mentioning Stendahl's curious experience in Mataró on his way through in September 1837, on a flying visit from Perpinyà to Barcelona. He stopped overnight in Mataró, found the city agreeable and well laid out, but remarks that he was served a poor meal, overabundant in meat and tasting of rancid oil. The famous French writer was unable to explain that he wanted eggs, and it wasn't until he got to Barcelona, at the Quatre Nacions hostel, that he managed, as he says, to eat with a little decorum.

Nevertheless, Hans Christian Andersen found himself in greater difficulties in the Girona countryside with the Fluvià, in spite after heavy rains in the autumn of 1862 and with no bridge by which to

cross safely. This happened in Bàscara, at a point where not long before a stage-coach had been washed away and two passengers drowned. In these more general chronicles and accounts of journeys different parts of rural and urban Catalonia appear from time to time. Other examples could be Giacomo G. Casanova's journey from Valencia to Barcelona or the memoirs of the Russian writer Issac Iakovlevitx Pavloski, who visited Catalonia in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Literature and cities have gone hand in hand for over a century; they are friends that go together and have learned the art of tolerance that makes them complementary. Literature has reflected their palpitations and the changes taking place there, but as always, in their own way, the images of literature are multiple, versatile and often filled with ambiguity. They can go from the dithyramb to criticism, from the portrait to the symbolic vision and from an ennobling effort to something almost frightening. For the same reason and depending on the author's viewpoint, cities are sometimes loved and praised, sometimes missed and, when necessary, criticized. But these are fleeting images, changing mirrors and old collections of yellowing photographs which speak of an age belonging to the past. ■

