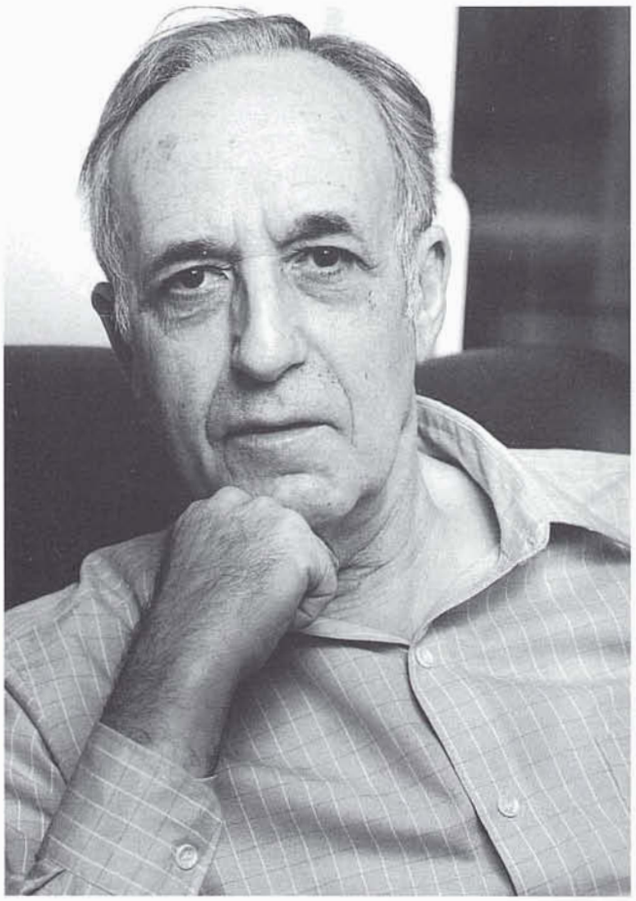
JOSEP FERRATER MORA



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JOSEP FERRATER MORA IS A MAN WITH AN ENDLESS CAPACITY FOR HARD WORK. HE HIMSELF HAS DEFINED HIS PHILOSOPHY AS INTEGRATIONIST. IT IS AS THOUGH HE WANTED TO RECONCILE IN HIS THINKING EVERYTHING WHICH IS REMOTELY RECONCILABLE.

ASSUMPCIÓ MARESMA JOURNALIST

Josep Ferrater Mora was born in Barcelona's carrer Princesa in the year 1912. By the age of three he had taught himself to read unaided. He very soon spoke French, thanks to some neighbours who spoke the language. Soon afterwards, as an adolescent, he had mastered five languages.

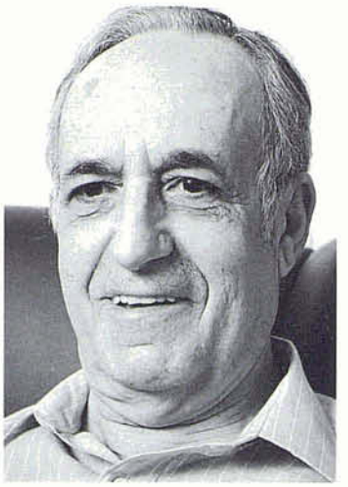
His was not an age of child prodigies, neither was he born into a family of particularly prodigious learning. The closest thing to learning that fate had to offer him as a youth was "El Cullell", a religious school of which he remembers the chillblains produced by the dreadful cold, the five times he went to church every day and the memory training, so out of favour today, but which may have been of some use to him. Later on he worked in an office and did translations to pay for his university education. He graduated in Philosophy.

Ferrater Mora belongs to a generation marked by war and exile, a war which should be banished to the history books once and for all, a war in which the work assigned to him actually taught him something: he was in the Information Service of the Advanced Headquarters of the Republican Army of the East, translating the war reports of the foreign press.

He was one of those who never came back from exile. He doesn't want to make anything of it. He found work, he managed to make a decent living. He followed the Paris-Cuba-Chile-United States route. His work record went from the inevitable translations to the inevitable lessons. His Guggenheim scholarship made life a bit easier for him. He taught at Bryn Mawr College (Pennsylvania), in full Main Line –the "old money" region of America– maybe the first opportunity life gave him. Wisely, he took advantage of it. A man with an endless capacity for hard work, he devoted hours and hours to his monumental *Diccionari de Filosofia,* which he has never tired of revising and amending throughout its six editions. He has spent years revising, polishing, tidying and perfecting his work.

From his permanent position at Bryn Mawr College, he has lectured at the universities of Princeton, Kansas, Hopkins and Temple.

His irony almost forms part of his visiting card, which could read "Josep Ferrater i Mora. Philosopher. Ironic by Nature". But after speaking with him for a



while it becomes obvious that his particular brand of irony is remote; there's no confusing it with sarcasm. Like all irony, it's wicked, but it has no capacity to provoke. It's irony for fun, the irony of the inevitable.

His irony is almost certainly part of the way he is (conciliatory in appearance but with a clear insight into reality). He himself has defined his philosophy as integrationist. It is as though he wanted to reconcile in his thinking everything which is remotely reconcilable.

His bibliography, apart from the *Diccionari de Filosofia,* starts in 1935 with *Cóctel de verdad,* and is enormous. Some of his outstanding works include *Les formes de vida catalana, De la materia a la razón, El ser y la muerte: bosquejo de una filosofía integracionista, La filosofia actual, Etica aplicada. Del aborto a la violencia.* All this without counting his literary production, which started with the publication of *Claudia, mi Claudia,* and of which the latest work, presented at the end of 1989, is *Retorno al infierno.*

Once free of the work of the dictionary, Ferrater Mora has turned to literary creation, but this creative tendency goes back a long way in him, and he first expressed it years ago in the cinema. Over a relatively short period of time he made more than 16 films, which came in three series: Stories, Impressions and Obsessions. He admits to a passion for the cinema as something almost historical and circumstantial: the cinema is the art of the age he lives in. Respected almost everywhere, he makes no attempt to hide the disappointment he feels at the fact that in his own country he's thought of only as a philosopher.

–The 9th November 1989 is a historic day for Europe and probably for the world. As a philosopher concerned with the present, and who even has a book of articles called *Finestra a l'actualitat,* (A Window on the Present), could you give us your opinion on the fall of the Berlin wall?

–In these cases, people generally tend to react before reflecting, one way or another. They generally react collectively rather than individually, according to what the papers say. So that if the papers say, "great rejoicing in the two Germanies", people rejoice in the two Germanies. People's reactions are often the reactions of the media.

–But what do you think?

–I think what's happened in Berlin is a very good thing. I think any move towards democratization is a good thing. Whatever anyone says, no political system can improve on democracy, in spite of all its deficiencies. A democratic system can modify itself from within; it doesn't need any kind of upheaval from outside, or any violence.

Germany causes a certain amount of anxiety, because it's such an enormous power. The only way to overcome this is for the two Germanies to form part of the European Community. And for the European Community to neutralize any desire for excessive power. If the two Germanies are re-united, their economic power will be much higher than any other country in Europe. It will be the third most powerful country in the world. But I suppose the Germans of today aren't the same as fifty years ago, people change. Until well into this century the other countries of Europe were terrified of the French, because of the Napoleonic wars. That didn't last, so maybe the same will happen with this fear of the Germans.

–But people are still afraid.

–Yes, they're still afraid. It's like the 19th century fear of the French, which was the result of wars that took place 70 years earlier. It's understandable. The French have changed in that respect; let's hope the Germans have too.

–Is the world heading for universalization?

–There are two factors involved in the changes taking place in the world. One is the tribal spirit, to use a term which can be applied to anything –the spirit of

a nation, of a state, a region, a tribe–, the other is the tendency towards proper intercommunication, towards external circumstances. Both are operative factors. You can't say the world is becoming unified as though everything were being done the same. What you can say, on the other hand, is that there's a meeting between a unifying tendency and a tendency towards what we could call tribalization.

–Like two substrata, one above the other?

–But with a dialogue. A dialogue which could get violent one day –I hope it doesn't–, but with a dialogue. They're different, but they're in communication, they're not superimposed, or anything like that.

–So the tendency is to confront unification and tribalization?

–Exactly. But what happens is that in some things there's a tendency towards almost inevitable unification. In certain aspects unification is inevitable and desirable: technical standards have to be the same everywhere, so do communications systems; but this can go alongside respect for cultural diversity.

Cultural diversity works rather like biological diversity. The impoverishment of species is at the same time an impoverishment of the whole, so that, culturally speaking, the unification of culture is a bad thing. Cultures ought to work in the same way as the different species work within an ecosystem.

–What surprises me is that in all you say you never bring in the subject of power. I say that because in Catalonia, when Catalan culture is threatened...

–It's unrealistic to think there'll ever be complete understanding. There'll always be conflicts. This is one of the conditions of human existence, of coexistence, that there are conflicts. There's nothing you can do about it. These conflicts don't always find a solution.

To my mind, the main thing is for them not to become poisoned. There's an expression in Catalan which has a bearing on this, a very simple and very effective one that people use when there's a problem. They say, "parlem-ne" *(let's talk this out). What does this expression mean? That we mustn't rush things. While people are talking, things settle down. There are conflicts but we talk about them, there's always give and take, it's a cultural tug-of-war. A great part of human existence is play.*

Culture A plays with culture B, and culture B tries to play a higher card than culture A. Culture A looks at its hand and plays something else. I don't think the culture conflict will ever be definitively resolved.

Each culture has subcultures which are in conflict. Subcultures of an economic, or social type, generational subcultures, this is all perfectly natural, acceptable, and right, even. Otherwise it would be death.

–But it's often argued that Catalan culture is closed to the outside, when it's simply defending itself from an act of aggression.

–That's what happens. I've written something about it in an appendix to my book Les formes de vida catalana, *called "No és perillós abocar-se a l'exterior" (It's not dangerous to lean out), using the expression that used to appear in trains... This is a very old topic, from the twenties. No-one invents these things. This controversy existed then as well, and people spoke of Catalonia outwards, Catalonia inwards. I remember a discussion between Cambó and Bofill, who was then director of the newspaper* La Publicitat.

–Which are the main subjects for reflection as we approach the end of the century? Are the ethics of ecology a predominant question?

–Predominant isn't quite the right word, but it's certainly a problem that didn't exist last century and didn't start to exist until the twenties. This is a new subject and an important one. It may even be the most important one, one that affects everybody.

–How would you explain ecological ethics?

–Until relatively recently, no-one saw the environment as a problem, perhaps because there weren't enough people in the world. The world wasn't full. The time has come when the world has closed. As someone said in a famous metaphore that's been used a lot, the world is like a spaceship; now it's got to look at itself, we've got to see what's happening.

Ecological ethics has different origins: it's the extension in this new situation of the ethical problems which had been considered earlier on other levels, in other terms, for example, in behaviour, social relations, justice, the economy.

Ecological ethics is an extension of these ethics, except that, while a lot of them affected specific societies, the ethics of ecology affect the whole world. They affect it politically and socially in strange, interesting and deplorable ways.

–What do you mean?

–Let's take the question of pollution. Obviously, from the global point of view, something should be done if there's still time. Although maybe there isn't. But it's also the case that the so-called Third World countries could say, "You've polluted the world and now you want us to make a sacrifice to preserve the ecological balance. You're the ones to blame." They'd be right.

The industrialized world must impose heavy limitations so as to solve the problem of the environment. If this ever happens, the economic situation will obviously be much worse for everyone; this could make the political situation worse, it could mean the return of the dictatorships... it could lead to a very different world situation from the one we know now. It's about time one of these big communities took steps to prevent pollution.

In the long run things could be a lot worse. There's no question about it, this happens in the East and the West, people talk a lot about freedom but people consume all over the world. People's consumer aspirations should be taken into account.

–Do you think the consumer urge might prevail above all else?

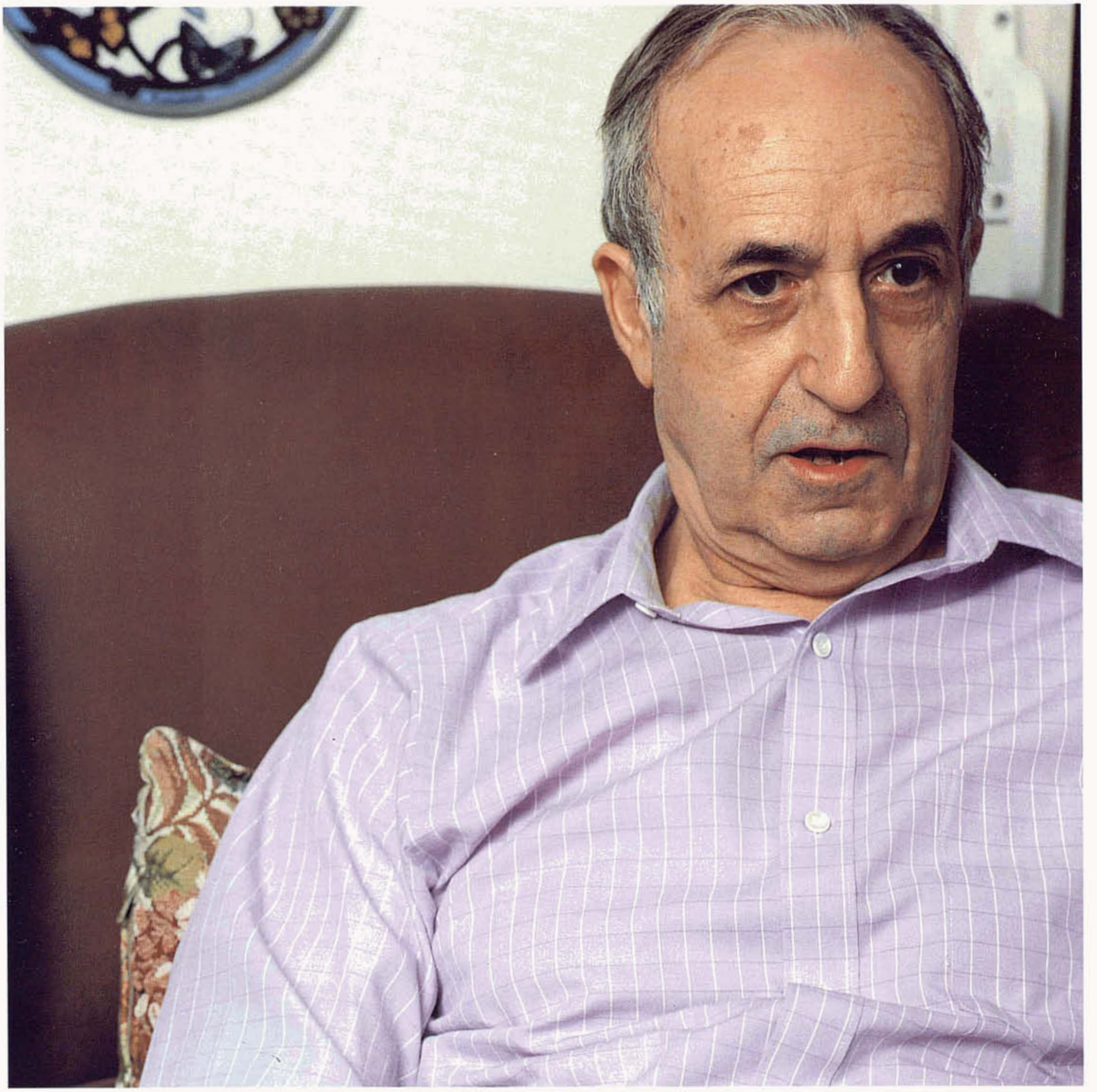
–It's very important if we're referring to the average man in the street. I have the feeling –I may be wrong– that when an oppressive regime lasts a long time it's because there's a certain complacency amongst the general public, for whom freedom doesn't mean a great deal.

–You've written a book called *Etica Aplicada*. Do you intend to carry on applying ethics to today's topics?

–Yes. For the time-being, I do.

–Are you more interested in this sort of work than in the sort of thing you've dealt with in other books, like *El Ser i la mort* or *De la matèria a la raó*?

–I feel better in books like El Ser i la mort, *especially the last edition, which is the only one I'd accept, and in other books, like* Fonaments de Filosofia, *which deals with my central subjects in logic, ontology and semantics, or* De la matèria a la raó, *which is what you might call a more modern book, which quotes very few philosophers and a lot of men and women of science. I feel*



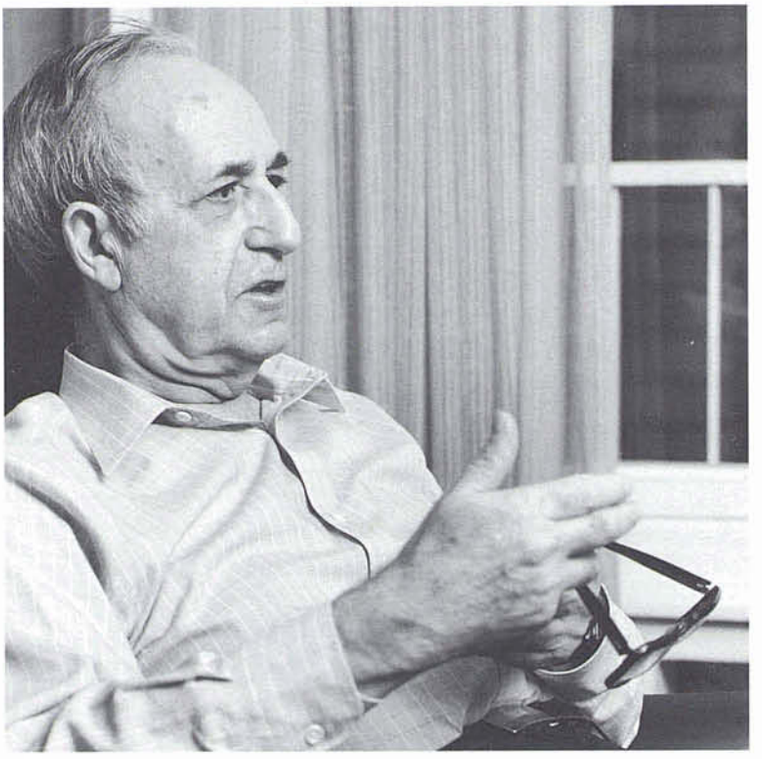
better because I know them better, I've got more to say on these problems. But it's also true that when I reflect on questions of ethics I find them very interesting. I put forward the subject of applied ethics myself. A lot of people talk about ethics in a general sense, I suggested we speak about specific ethics.

–It seems that most people think you should write a work on aesthetics. Do you feel the same way?

–Yes. The thing is that since 1979 I've been writing fiction. And I felt that, rather than writing about aesthetics, I was writing aesthetics. What I'm saying is a justification of the fact that I've spent a lot of time writing novels. I've got four that are finished and I'm working on two more. This means I haven't got time to write a book on aesthetics. I've written parts of it. But I've realised that while confronting the philosophy of language and of science presented no difficulties for me, I'm not too sure about aesthetics, I don't know enough about it.

I appreciate and respect certain aspects of art, but I don't know enough about painting, for example. Of course, a work on aesthetics doesn't mean knowing about particular aspects. The fact is that I haven't written it yet and that I've always said I would. Maybe, if I live long enough, I'll do that too.

–You've devoted yourself to creative work simply because you enjoy it...



–Yes, I have. That's right.

–It sometimes seems as if your dictionary was the result of obstinacy borne with resignation.

–The dictionary was the result of chance.

–Was it commissioned?

–It was commissioned. I had no money. The first years of exile were hard –at least for me–, especially financially. The first four years I had a very bad time. I had to accept any work I was given. It just so happened that I had translated a small dictionary of philosophy from German. It wasn't very good, and I added a few things. This was for the Labor publishers. Then they suggested I do the dictionary. Although there were a lot of problems, because I was in Cuba, with very few books, it was a job I had to take. I wrote a small dictionary, which had a certain amount of success. Then, once the thing was started, if you go on I think you should do it as well as possible. In this respect I agree with the supposedly Catalan principle –I don't know if it's still the same– of doing things as well as possible.

I would have preferred to do other things, but as I'd taken it on, and what's more, financially it wasn't bad, I had to do the best I could. I couldn't do it now, the work's big enough. If it was continued, someone else would have to do it. The last edition was in 1979, since then it's just been reprinted.

You've always turned down the idea of doing the dictionary with a team.

If I were to devote myself exclusively to that, I'd do another, six-volume edition. I once used a metaphor in which I compared the dictionary with a building, a building in which I know the passages, the kitchen, the toilet, the bathroom... There may be all sorts of defects but they're compensated by the unity of the work. Works involving a lot of people mean that some go one way and others go another. Of course, it's also true that a time comes when you have no choice but to work in a team.

–When you left the dictionary, did you feel you'd been released?

–Yes, I did. I can forget about it now.

–Is the cinema your American work?

–Maybe. I've written three books in English on philosophy. Of course, maybe it's true that in the films the atmosphere, the characters, the stories, are American.

–One of your first books was an analysis of the Catalan way of life, *Les formes de vida catalana*. Why have you never gone back to the subject?

–I've gone back to it, occasionally, in articles or essays which I've gradually added to later editions of the book.

–In your book you talk about the Catalan's *seny* (common sense) a lot.

–There's seny and there's also rauxa *(impulsiveness). I think it was Vicens Vives who made that comment. We agreed that Vicens Vives, myself, and I think it was Joan Fuster, would each present a different view and that all three of them would be equally valid. I mean that my book has to be seen in conjunction with* Noticia de Catalunya *and* Nosaltres els valencians, *which belong to the same period, and each of which sets out to contribute a little bit to an overall view.*

In a letter to your friend Joan Oliver you said, "If anyone asks after me –which I doubt– tell them I'm a great success."

–At the time, the sentence was yet another example of your ironic wit, but now, after all these years, you have finally reached success.

–Not at all.

–Socially you have.

–I think I've done some things that have gone unnoticed.

–For example?

–My fiction has gone unnoticed and I must say that I think it's better than the work done by most of the country's writers today. Most of then are unreadable. Any time you've seen an anthology of fiction, mine's never been in it. I look after it very carefully, my fiction.●