

BLASCO IBAÑEZ AND SOROLLA, LEGENDS OF VALENCIA

AS WELL AS BEING UNQUESTIONABLY THE GREATEST VALENCIAN CREATORS OF THEIR AGE, BLASCO IBAÑEZ AND SOROLLA WERE ALSO RESPONSIBLE FOR THE IMAGES THAT MADE THE LANDSCAPE AND THE CUSTOMS OF VALENCIA FAMOUS. BOTH SUCCEEDED IN RECORDING THE GENTLE STRENGTH OF THIS WAY OF BEING, FEELING AND LIVING, SO FULLY EXPRESSED IN THE MEDITERRANEAN.



SOROLLA, *EL RETORN DE LA PESCA* (RETURNING FROM FISHING), 1894

JOSEP PIERA AUTHOR

SOROLLA, COSINT LA VELA (REPAIRING THE SAIL), 1904



It was a September morning in Taormina. The night before, it had rained, and the sky and the sea, both of them a limpid blue, held within them all the light of the summer, the sweet summer of September, the golden month of grapes and of the perfumed touch of the quince. Far away, filling the last slopes of Etna, I could see the rich green shine of the orange trees, as in a magic springtime that brought me closer to my legendary landscape, the landscape of Valencia, the landscape of home. I went down to the sea to swim. The beach, which was still deserted, showed traces of damp from the rain of the day before. Bougainvillea and jasmin overhung the walls of the seaside gardens of the houses, reminding me of the clear light of the Impressionists.

Only the day before, at Aci Trezza, as I wrote some notes on Giovanni Verga, the author of *I Malavoglia*, I had been reminded of some of Blasco Ibañez's Valencian novels, and now they came to me again, as I went down towards the beach, after a walk "amongst orange groves". "Certainly," I said to myself at the time, "the typical image of the Valencian landscape and character, from an international point of view, was created by Blasco Ibañez's novels at the turn of the century. And now, as the century draws to a close, it still remains intact in the public's mind, in spite of all the changes Valencia has suffered in this period." And so I got to thinking about those early works by the Valencian novelist (*La barraca*, *Arroz i tartana*, *Entre naranjos*, etc.) and the international success they enjoyed, and

about the man, the writer and politician, so representative of the histrionic and passionate character of the Valencians, and also, inevitably, I thought what a great pity it was that the greatest Valencian novelist of the period should have abandoned his early Catalan writing and continued his work in Castilian, leaving the literary use of the Catalan language in the *Pais Valencià* to Teodor Llorente and poetry.

After a while, my chain of thought was interrupted by the sound of charming laughter. I turned, and all at once I saw before me a scene like a beautiful, spontaneous dance: a group of young children running in and out of the water amongst the waves. This scene, which on the one hand made me forget the epic period pieces, half tragic, half truculent, of Blasco Ibañez's Valencian novels (a primitive, rural naturalism, which, made into a melodrama by Hollywood, struck at the planet's souls from the cinema screen), on the other hand suddenly brought to my mind some of the best paintings by Sorolla, the other great Valencian artist of the period. But the scene also had the charm, half innocent, half perverse, of the moment when Tadzio, in Visconti's film rather than Mann's novel, plays with his friend on the beach, watched with elegant discretion by Von Aschenbach.

As well as being unquestionably the greatest Valencian creators of their age, Blasco Ibañez and Sorolla were also responsible for the images that made the landscape and the customs of Valencia famous. While Blasco Ibañez created

the legends of the Valencian plantations, of the marine twilights of l'Albufera, the splendid orange groves, Sorolla painted the light of Valencia, the idyllic first dips in the sea, the work of the fishermen, the women and gardens of the land. The master Serrano, with his music, Benlliure, with his sculpture, and Llorente, with his poetry, completed the artistic legend of the rural paradise of Valencia.

After the brief scene on the beach had faded like a mirage created by the Mediterranean summer light, I could still see it and its simple beauty. The picture of those children playing on the beach was no longer just the game of a group of children. To me it was a spontaneous image in which chance, or this sea's ancient gods, had wanted to represent, before my eyes, a way of life, the everlasting wish for joy, peace, and freedom of the Mediterranean world, of a cultural tradition which, inherited from Greece, via Sicily, extended as far as the sea of Valencia itself.

Would Sorolla, whose only wish, as he himself said, was to "create a style which would openly interpret nature as she really was", agree with this view of himself as part of this Mediterranean tradition? And Blasco Ibañez? I think so. Because if Sorolla, with all the wisdom and intuition of his paint brushes, painted the sea and the light of Valencia, he also went further, like Blasco Ibañez. Both recorded the gentle strength, the intense sensuality, at times joyful, at times dramatic, of this way of being, feeling and living, which is so perfectly summed up in the name Mediterranean. ●