

## ■ reviews

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osep Ferrater Mora,  
*Les formes de la vida catalana*  
[*The Character of Catalan Life*]  
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The centenary of the birth of Josep Ferrater Mora, one of the foremost Catalan philosophers of the XXth. century, has been marked by the reissue of one of his most interesting books: *Les formes de la vida catalana* [*The Character of Catalan Life*]. The first edition of the book came out in 1944 in Chile, where Ferrater Mora had gone into exile. At the time, he was in the company of a number of other Catalan intellectuals, such as writer Xavier Benguerel and poet Joan Oliver (who published under the pseudonym “Pere Quart”), and it was their encouragement that pushed him to write and publish this book on Catalonia and the Catalan people.

From an intellectual perspective, the Catalonia of the first two decades of the XXth. century was a place in ferment. There was the cut and thrust of Modernisme and its authors, the Noucentisme movement was emerging at the hands of Eugeni d’Ors, and it was a new breeding ground for writers of an anarchist, free-thinking or bohemian bent. Fresh ideas, fresh projects and fresh institutions furnished an abundance of new things, especially an enormous enthusiasm. And this cultural revival arrived together with the firm establishment of political Catalan nationalism. Throughout this process, though, there was a problem. Joan Estelrich spotted it in 1925. The problem was a lack of cohesion and continuity and an excess of Messianism and cults of personality. Soon, though, came the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) and the situation changed radically, Catalan intellectuals went into exile and any hint of political or cultural sovereignty was quashed.

Ferrater Mora follows the guidelines advanced by Eugeni d’Ors, but writes his work after the war, from exile (when Catalonia has been left without print media or cultural and political institutions, and its language has been banned; when Spain is a monolithic dictatorship imposing uniformity, and republican and democratic ideals have been scattered to the four winds). This is the

context that defines the aims of a book written so that the Catalan people are not led by their sorrows into the pridefulness of a blind nationalism or toward the resentment that “crushes the roots of existence and dries up the sap of life”.

In the first third of the XXth. century and then again in the second half of the century, Catalonia and the Catalans were a constant focus of consideration, much more so than in other cultures. At times, the topic provided an outlet for anarchic exuberance. At other times, the aim was resistance to an adverse context. *Les formes*, which straddles the two time periods in question, offers a highly personal vision of the country and its character. Ferrater Mora, as one of the best and brightest Catalan intellectuals of the time, imbibes deeply from the work of Eugeni d’Ors. This is his starting point. (He quotes d’Ors often and takes from him the sardana — a popular Catalan dance — as a symbol of the Catalan character.) Ultimately, he produced a work of thought that might be viewed as philosophical anthropology, but is rather an exercise more closely in keeping with the philosophy of language. It clarifies concepts. And it is a work that was keen to be revisited in the future. In fact, it is one of the few books that Ferrater Mora wrote in Catalan, and a text that, in some sense, opened the way for other books, such as *España y Europa* [*Spain and Europe*] (1942) and its companion volume *Tres mundos: Cataluña, España, Europa* [*Three Worlds: Catalonia, Spain, Europe*] (1963). In addition, a number of the reflections in *Les formes* are drafted into service again in later texts, such as “Catalanització de Catalunya” [“Catalanisation of Catalonia”] (1960), which were included in various editions of Ferrater’s work.

In *Les formes*, Ferrater succumbs to an overly pure analysis of the Catalan people’s mode of being, much like the one offered up by Eugeni d’Ors in 1911 in his volume *La ben plantada* [*The Elegant Woman*] and its synthesis of the Noucentisme movement. Because of this, *Les formes* provoked a brilliant and emphatic critique in 1968 from Rodolf Llorens i Jordana, in exile in Caracas. This is the same Rodolf Llorens who had already, back in 1936, turned the work of Eugeni d’Ors completely on its head, directly taking on *La ben plantada* with his own book, *La ben nascuda* [*The High-Born Woman*] (reissued in 2005), which was a subversion of Noucentisme conceived by Llorens in a cell of Barcelona’s Model Prison, where he had been incarcerated for his involvement in the events of 4 October 1934, that is, after he had come to see (and live at first hand) how the philosophy of Eugeni d’Ors was of little use in grasping the political and social reality of Catalonia at the time.

Llorens’s response to Ferrater’s *Les formes* is the book *Com hem estat i com som els catalans* [*The Way We Catalans Have Been and the Way We Are*], which was originally published by Ariel, in Barcelona, and reissued in 2009. In it, Llorens dismantles what Ferrater Mora had raised up as the four central pillars of the Catalan people: continuity, good sense, measure and irony. And together with Jaume Vicens Vives’s *Notícia de Catalunya* [*News from Catalonia*] and Joan Fuster’s *Nosaltres, els valencians* [*We, the Valencians*], it is a crucial work for grasping contemporary Catalan culture.

When asked about Rodolf Llorens's objections, Ferrater said that they were spot-on, just as it was spot-on to say that his book, thanks to such a reaction, had opened up a fruitful dialogue; that, as you all know, dialogue is thought in motion, and that is always good. From dialogue comes "seny", or good sense. This is the just measure that springs from the clash of opposing views. As Ferrater Mora liked to say: "if the just measure consists of stopping in the middle of the road between extremes that are more or less mechanically combined, it deserves the low esteem in which it is held. But if the just measure is the result of hewing to a reality or a situation as closely as possible after an in-depth exploration of the extremes that have failed to represent it, then perspectives shift." The issue is to reject absorbing "common sense" into "good sense" (as Eugeni d'Ors was keen to observe). To understand the notion better, we can play back Ferrater's own words: "Colleagues who have called me out for my excessive idealisation are more than justified (...). But does that mean that the ideal-typical method put to use at that time was entirely fruitless? I think not: it has served its function as a starting point for discussion".

*Les formes de la vida catalana* also offers a highly personal, largely under-documented take on the character of the Catalan people. The view is very subjective and somewhat elitist in tone. As with many of Ferrater's essays, it suffers from the author's over-enthusiasm when setting out his options and ideas but then, just when we get to the final pages, the text seems to retract everything said up to that point and, before anybody can take issue with Ferrater's arguments, he acknowledges that "Catalan life is, like all human existence, ultimately irreducible. For this reason, an analysis of the sort I have endeavoured to do here aims only to describe it, not to go so far as to truly comprehend it". That Ferrater's caution is excessive points as well to a certain haste in the initial preparation of the book, a haste arising more out of the political context than out of the strength of the author's intention.

Today's reader, therefore, needs to take into account, first, that when Ferrater wrote *Les formes*, he was among a cohort of determined and quite fervent peers living in exile; second, that he was a person whose sense of irony bordered on the sceptical; and, third, that his thinking was to evolve with the passing of the years as his style, too, gained in refinement. One of his prime concerns was always to match form to content. Why do I say this? To grasp better what we are reading and because in texts written after 1944 (which have gradually been incorporated into later editions of *Les formes*), Ferrater says fascinating things for his time as well as for the present circumstances in which Catalan culture finds itself, for example, his observation of the difference between the rhythms of Catalonia and those of the rest of Spain. Take two examples: "History is not simply the realisation of a possibility, but rather reality itself" and "a people cannot spend its life in relentless renewal. If such a never-ending rebirth brings out its vitality, it also brings out something essentially incomplete and lacking".

For this reason, *Les formes* is a book of historic value and its reissue makes sense in order to better think about the present day and reflect on the vast number of works written in the twentieth century on the Catalan people and Catalonia as a symptom not only of discontent or of enthusiasm, but also of an inadequacy of successful good sense, vitality and continuity. I think he sums it up perfectly himself, where we read in this book: “that the Catalan is someone for whom Catalonia is like a white-hot iron, but an iron out of which must be forged a handsome escritoire, rather than being left miserably to cool or handled wildly, frantically, to draw forth a few fleeting sparks”. All told, it must be said that by this point Ferrater has departed considerably from his original intention in writing about the “character” of the Catalans. While the initial aim of the text was to reach readers who were not Catalan, the interlocutor gradually changes until Ferrater winds up addressing himself entirely to the Catalans (who had lost the war and the country). And the book bristles and chafes at this switch of interlocutors (or, as Ferrater himself defines it at the beginning of the essay, this “change of destiny”).

In any case, and in relation to essays written by earlier authors on the subject, *Les formes* has the ability to open up a space for reflection in which the aim is not to glorify the Catalans, but rather to invite them to live as fully as possible. And to do so, it is necessary to have clear ideas and to know that the greatest degree of independence also entails the greatest degree of dialogue, that life is a constant movement by which one opens oneself up to reality. From exile, Ferrater does not describe (as he claims to do) a “Catalan attitude” toward life, an attitude far removed from resentment or nostalgia, but rather sets the “rules of the game” needed to achieve such an attitude.

In his essay, Ferrater points to four essential features — or, more precisely, two pairs of features — to describe the “character” of Catalan life: continuity and measure, on the one hand, and good sense and irony, on the other. He sees the first pair as formal, the second pair as material. However, they form a tightly-knit fabric, because continuity and good sense relate to the group, and measure and irony concern the individual. In addition, the formal features embrace all of life, while the material features give life content. Together, they endow life with meaning and enhance our awareness. The most important is continuity, whereas the one that seems to us most fully worked out and adopted is irony. Good sense is heir to the *sophrosyne* and *sapientia* of the Classical World, and measure is the ability to advance arguments that proceed within the bounds of experience and reason.

Ferrater studied these four features of the Catalan character in search of their limits and possibilities, and proposed a model for living based on them. Of these four features in his book, the one that he best embodies as an author is irony. Ultimately, what he brought to the table was his unwavering desire for clarity so that Catalan life should grow in self-awareness and become more cultured, civilised and creative (as he lets us glimpse in a handful of lines in which he paraphrases d’Ors).