

THE UNCERTAIN GLORY OF AN APRIL DAY: A LAVISH CATALAN NOVEL ON WAR AND EXILE

In the year 1939 Catalan culture is generally considered to have reached its lowest point. As a result of the forced exile of the leading writers and intellectuals, the prohibition of the Catalan language and of any public manifestation of Catalan culture (newspapers, magazines, publishing houses, radio programmes...), the ban on the use of Catalan in primary, secondary and university education and in short, the loss of all the democratic political institutions that had been achieved by the Spanish Republic of the nineteen-thirties, Catalan literature was left in a position of patent exclusion, ostracism and total estrangement from readers in Catalonia.

These circumstances inevitably gave rise to a deep rupture in the narrative tradition of contemporary Catalan literature and the withering of all the innovative and experimental tendencies that had been set in motion during the 1920s and 1930s. The resulting literary regression gave rise to a resurgence of late nineteenth century realism and depictions of local customs and manners. This silencing or stifling was particularly detrimental to the Catalan-language novel which was implacably crushed by the Franco censorship within Spain and cut off from potential readers in exile.¹ Due to the continued existence of underground magazines and readings in private houses, poetry continued to lead a precarious existence, albeit one that was limited to the private or to the oral sphere.²

In the long, gradual and constricted recovery of the Catalan novel, the subject of the Spanish Civil War was one of the last to be freely tackled by creative writers. The silence that shrouded the whole war period is quite understandable: in theory, the war could only be discussed from the winning point of view and when the winners began to write about their war, they did so in Spanish. Thus the losers' collective experiences of death, the fighting at the front and in the trenches, the resistance

¹-Joan Triadú, *La novel·la catalana de postguerra* (Barcelona, Edicions 62, 1982).

²-Joan Samsó, *La cultura catalana: entre la clandestinitat i la represa pública (1939-1951)* (Barcelona, Publicacions de l'Abadia de Montserrat, 1994-1995).

movement, the prisons, the concentration camps and the executions only make very rare appearances in the novels that were published in Catalonia during the first fifteen or more years of the Franco dictatorship. The situation was different, of course, for the exiled novelists living in France, Mexico or Argentina who were able to portray a world that had been silenced within Catalonia. This world, however, was difficult for Catalan society to recognise, recreate, reclaim and reinterpret for itself.

In 1956 the publication of the novel *Incerta Glòria* by Joan Sales marked the beginning of the end of that long period of silence. *Incerta Glòria* stands out as a lone monument among Catalan novels of the post-war period. It is almost a commonplace to state that it is the first Catalan novel that depicts the Spanish Civil War from the standpoint of the losing republican side and moreover one that seeks to convey the profound, inherent complexity that those three years of war inflicted on its characters.³ This long novel describes the life experiences of three characters (a republican soldier on the Aragon front, an anarchist girl from Barcelona who has been converted to Catholicism and a young Sartre-inspired seminary priest) and is divided into four parts, written in the successive modes of a private diary, an epistolary novel and an autobiographical tale. The novel offers an exceptional testimonial of the Spanish Civil War and chronicles the moral evolution of the characters who grimly confront solitude and their own youthfulness from the depth of the conflict that engulfs them. *Incerta Glòria* is a Catholic novel, described as “annoyingly Catholic” by the critic Joan Fuster,⁴ but it is also often remembered as one of the channels through which existentialism was introduced to contemporary Catalan literature.

Incerta Glòria is undoubtedly a novel about the Spanish Civil War but the author most likely harboured the loftier, more ambitious and more controversial aspiration of depicting war in all its complexity and of eschewing the simplistic, Manichean vision of events in terms of good and bad. One of the main points of interest of this novel lies in its portrayal of the war from a Catalan nationalist perspective which was republican and

³-Jordi Castellanos & Maria Campillo, "La novel·la catòlica", in Joaquim Molas (dir.), *Història de la literatura catalana*, Vol. 11 (Barcelona, Ariel, 1987), p. 71.

⁴-Joan Fuster, "Incerta glòria", in *Literatura catalana contemporània* (Barcelona, Curial, 1972), pp. 377-378

Catholic at the same time. This is a book that inveighs against fascism and anarchism with equal harshness, and deplors both the black and red sides of the conflict. This may explain the curious fact that the combination of Marxist indifference and pro-Franco resentment greeted the 1956 publication of Sales' novel in Catalonia with a respectful silence.

Among the different options that were open to Catalan writers and intellectuals during the 1936-1939 Spanish Civil War, it is easy to overlook the awkward position of republican Catalanists who fought steadfastly against Franco's troops but who, as Catholics, were caught up in a moral conflict with far-reaching implications for their personal, ideological and even aesthetic development. In this context, it should not be forgotten that the Catalan Christian Democrats, like their Basque counterparts, always remained faithful to democratic values. As opponents of fascism, they supported the legitimate governments of the Republic and of the Catalan Autonomous Government, the *Generalitat*, but as Catholics they observed, with increasing disgust and undeniable perplexity, the atrocities committed by violent groups of anarchists and communists who spent the first months of the war burning down churches and convents, executing priests and profaning cemeteries.

Let us begin by examining the author of this novel, then continue with a brief overview of its editorial history and finally give a detailed analysis of the narrative techniques and the main traits of the characters in the novel.

Joan Sales, the author of the novel, was born in Barcelona in 1912 and thus belongs to one of the generations of writers that bore the full brunt of the Republic and the Spanish Civil War periods. As young men they were called upon to take an active role and they ended up playing out their whole youth on the stage of the war. As members of the losing side, moreover, this generation of writers had to justify their position continuously in the eyes of history: Sales was later to claim that the great losers of the fratricidal war were the young people of both the winning and the losing sides. Sales, a Law graduate who never exercised his profession, had started to work at the age of fifteen as a newspaper copywriter and corrector. As a very young man he became a member of the first

underground Catalan Communist Party that tried to marry communism with Catalan nationalism, but as his thought evolved towards Catholicism he soon became estranged from the world of communism and anarchism. However, Joan Sales was above all an independent thinker, a self-taught man and a writer of action. From early on, he crafted an image of himself as a *militant* intellectual, as a militant writer, as a soldier-writer doing service to the cause, or to the different causes, as a tireless *combatant* who takes up any weapons to hand as he strives towards his unshakeable ideals. Sales was a militant Catalanist, republican and Catholic, a fervent admirer of Stendhal from an early age and later of Dostoevski (he was to translate *The Brothers Karamazov* into Catalan) and of the great Catholic French writers such as François Mauriac (he also translated *Thérèse Desqueyroux*), Georges Bernanos, Emmanuel Mounier and Gabriel Marcel.

At the outset of the Spanish Civil War, Sales joined the famous Durruti column in Madrid, serving later on the Aragon front and finally on the Catalonia front in the Macià-Companys columns. By the end of the war Sales had attained the rank of commandant in the republican army. When Catalonia was defeated he fled on foot into France over the Ares Pass in the Pyrenees. Some years later, Sales declared: “The war was the greatest, most intense and most interesting experience of my life.” From January to December of 1939 he lived in exile in Paris, and after spending some time in Haiti, he finally settled in Mexico. During the Second World war, he cherished the hope of an Allied victory that would oust Franco from power. However Sales and other Catalan exiles in Central and South America gradually came to realise that the demise of the Franco regime was still very far off. They became aware of the inherent non-viability of their political and cultural aspirations and soon understood that the only valid course of action open to them was to return to Catalonia and firmly oppose the Franco dictatorship from within.

Back in Barcelona by 1948, Sales started to write his one published novel, the extremely lengthy *Incerta Glòria*. The title was chosen to commemorate that far-off 14 April 1931, the date of the proclamation of the second Spanish Republic, “the happiest day of my life” in the heartfelt words of the author. The title of the novel echoes two lines from the end of

the third scene of the first act of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* by William Shakespeare, included in chapter XVII of Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le Noir*:

O, how this spring of love ressembleth
The uncertain glory of an April day,
Which now shows all the beauty of the sun,
And by and by a cloud takes all away!

Incerta Glòria was later to win a literary prize but its first publication in 1956 ran up against multiple adversities, purges and mutilations inflicted by the Franco censors, who accused the novel of “religious immoralism” and reduced the manuscript to a third of its total length of nearly seven hundred pages. The mutilated novel, abridged into a roughly autobiographical account of the author’s wartime experiences, was eventually published after eight years of reflections and annexations, experiences and disappointments. The final epigraph of the novel bore the terrible line from Michelangelo referring to the power of the Medici: “Mentre che’l danno e la vergogna dura”.

However, shortly after this, a happy circumstance brought the novel to the attention of Gallimard, the French publishing house, and a translation by Bernard Lesfargues was commissioned. In 1962 the complete text, which for political reasons had not appeared in Spain, was published for the first time by Gallimard in French. The young Juan Goytisolo had been living in Paris since 1956 where he worked as a manuscript reader for Gallimard. His arrival at the prestigious Paris publishing house facilitated the translation into French of many of the best Spanish post-war novels (Ana Maria Matute, Camilo José Cela, Rafael Sánchez Ferlosio, Fernández Santos) and in passing, a few Catalan language novels, starting with *Incerta Glòria* by Joan Sales and *La Plaça del Diamant* by Mercè Rodoreda. This point marks the beginning of the lengthy textual genesis, the work in progress or work in constant movement, that characterises Joan Sales’ novel. It should be noted that the French edition is not merely a translation of the full, unpurged text in Catalan, but rather of a new, longer novel that was rewritten by Sales between 1956 and 1962. The writer set himself a harder task than that of merely reconstructing the original, uncensored novel into a coherent narrative text. Inspired by a passionate

attachment to his tale and transported by the need to tell his whole story without omissions, Sales began to rewrite his novel from beginning to end and eventually included many brand-new passages that he had not dreamed of for the first edition. The translation started in July 1957 but due to constant interruptions and endless interpolations from Sales the French edition was not completed until two years later. This inveterate interventionism impelled Sales to tirelessly rework his novel and made him ever reluctant to let it finally go to press. Frequent arguments arose with his translator as he tried to add whole new passages written directly in French during the final proof-reading sessions. Between one thing and another, the French translation did not appear in print until February 1962 when it was published as *Gloire incertaine* and dedicated to Goytisolo: “À Juan Goytisolo, qui était un enfant”. The French edition ran to four hundred pages and was met with great acclaim from specialist critics.

From that moment on, the story was rewritten many times and the Spanish translation appeared in 1966. This new version had become a novel of nearly eight hundred pages and differed substantially from the previous French edition. The publication of the Spanish translation urged Sales on to write the supposedly definitive version in Catalan. The author meanwhile had founded an important publishing house in Barcelona called Club dels Novel·listes and the following year he published the complete edition of his novel. In April 1971, the fourth edition incorporated more textual modifications and a complete linguistic and stylistic revision which brought the novel up to over eight hundred pages! Sales was characterised by this endless need to intervene and add new material to his published text.

Incerta Glòria can be described as an immense, expansive *roman-fleuve* that overflows with life, energy and talent. It is a polyphonic (or plurivocal, to use the term coined by Bakhtin)⁵ novel that marshals a host of voices staged with great symbolic potential in a deliberately realistic setting. The novel contains four distinct, successive stories: the first part is narrated through the diary of Lluís de Broca, an idealistic, egoistic bourgeois anarchist of complex personality; the second part is told through

⁵-Mikhaïl Bakhtine, *Esthétique et théorie du roman* (Paris, Gallimard, 1978).

the letters sent to Juli Soleràs by Trini Milmany, first lover and then wife of Lluís de Broca; and the two final parts contain the autobiographical story of Cruells, a soldier on the republican side later to become an unconventional priest in the post-war diocese of Barcelona. These three young men are all in love with the same woman. Sales conceives his novel as a dialectic game, full of contradictions and shifts of standpoint, through which he resolves to invoke and exorcise the ghosts from his own past. His aim is to craft a huge historical frieze featuring constant narrative meanders, interruptions and digressions, anecdotes and different subject matters that gradually unfold as the novel progresses. His range and variety of voices and perspective paint a full picture that tells a composite, convincing tale.

Sales manages to avoid the monotony of the single perspective by creating three different narrators and combining the diary, the epistolary and the autobiographical narrative forms.⁶ His characters are resolved in a satisfactory manner: they are three-dimensional creations, the product of their own personal histories, characters overflowing with life and humanity, with true moral depth and a rich and complex inner world. The war in which the characters are presented varies from being a mere backdrop to being the main event in their lives. Sales uses all three narrative techniques with mastery but employs each one separately to perform its own function in the development of the story, thereby weaving a tight mesh between form and content. In order to convey the huge complexity of war, Sales uses Lluís de Broca's diary; the letters from Lluís' wife in Barcelona are used to describe the situation at the rearguard, about which little is known by the front line soldiers; when the novelist wishes to depict the war as a thing of the past, he uses the memoir technique which enables him to extend the time-span of the novel to include a vision of post-war Barcelona.

Sales constructs the novel around his eccentric, enigmatic and highly original character, Juli Soleràs, who serves as the pivot between three different versions of the same series of events. But despite the fascination that Soleràs exerts over the rest of the characters, he is not really the

⁶ -José Luis S. Ponce de León, *La novela española de la guerra civil (1936-1939)* (Madrid, Ínsula, 1971), p. 182.

protagonist of the novel. He is portrayed as an educated, intelligent, egocentric young man who feels a special attraction for danger and the forbidden things of life. Soleràs is one of the connecting threads that runs through the novel, highlighted by his constant repetition of the phrase “We are going from the obscene to the macabre”. His sudden appearances and disappearances have a surprise effect on the other characters and the reader gains fuller insight into his complex personality from the manner in which he is reported and from the reactions and feelings that Soleràs inspires in others. When Soleràs is not present, he is either missed or he evokes a feeling of loss. Those who know Soleràs feel variously attracted to and repulsed by his personality. He is a man who is constantly prey to doubt, who takes an interest in sexual perversion and who astounds his companions with preposterous remarks such as “War is a harlot that poisons your blood for ever”, “When a man and a woman kiss, their digestive tubes meet at the top” and “One day we shall feel ashamed of having been seventeen years old. It is an idiotic age. Just think! We are the men of the future! Pure non-existence! We are nothing and yet we have already betrayed ourselves a thousand times”. Soleràs has a taste for failure and for defending the opposite point of view to everybody else. He is a philosopher-cum-cynic, struggling against his own self as he quotes Baudelaire, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard and Sartre. Soleràs is portrayed as an indefatigable traveller, a lively, eccentric character, racked by contradictions, aware of the absurd and preoccupied by the void. He is obsessed by the search for an absolute destiny, the significance of which not even he himself seems to understand, and he wanders lonely through the novel, making an appearance against the intensely symbolic backdrop of the Aragón front, then suddenly disappearing with no further explanation. At the end of the novel we learn that he left the republican trenches to join the enemy, but on the victory of the Franco troops he returned to the republican side where he is presumed to have died. Soleràs is the only character of the novel who dies young. His death is inevitably that of a loser. This dramatic end, this refusal of victory, provide the key to understanding the lesson of Soleràs: the acceptance of defeat and failure as essential components of human life. For Sales, glory only seems to be possible in youth, a period of life criss-crossed by love and death.

The literature of Joan Sales is constructed in a vigorous style, full of metaphysical echoes, that presents us with a wide vision of the human adventure that immerses the reader in an exalted world of physical and intellectual energy. However the most noteworthy feature of the novel is its realism. Sales uses his own particular brand of realism, a realism that embraces the spiritual meaning of existence, a realism impregnated with signs and dreams that merge into the very stuff of life. It is the realism of transfiguration, of the revelatory power of a writing based in reality but sustained by faith and spirituality. Sales upholds an individualism conceived as the first step towards giving man the means by which he can transcend that very individualism. The evolution of society thrusts man towards a common, collective destiny, which may turn out to be either utopian or tragic. The novel is thus an appeal for personal awareness and sacrifice to this end. Sales conforms here to a clear-cut *personalism* as reader and follower of the philosophy of Emmanuel Mounier and that of Gabriel Marcel, with whom he corresponded after the publication of the French translation of the novel. His philosophy seeks the revolution of the human spirit, a philosophy in which the world is perceived as mysterious and full of risks. The fact that this world is forever incomplete explains the importance of the ellipsis in Sales' work. Personalism is as much a perspective from which to view the world as a method by which to describe it, as an orientation, and ultimately as a style that confers on Sales a certain methodological unity. Style is achieved, it is a state at which one arrives, a self awareness which has to be gained. Sales distrusted the abstract metaphysical tradition and grounded his thought in human action in order to define a world in movement. This inner experience springs curiously from the same founts as existentialism and does not exclude Marxism, but refuses to think of man outside the metaphysical framework of Christianity. This is in opposition to the systematic thought characterised by the Christian novel which starts with Pascal and continues through Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger and probably the young Sartre.

In his presentation of tense moral conflict, Joan Sales must be included among the "conscience déchirée"⁷ novelists who deal with the theme of salvation brought about by an act of awareness that resolves an

⁷-Michel Raimond, *Le signe des temps. (Le roman contemporain: Proust, Gide, Bernanos, Mauriac, Céline, Malraux, Aragon)* (Paris, SEDES, 1976).

inner conflict. Herein lies the essentially subjective nature of the novel. The lyricism contrasts with the objective unfolding of the story- line and this metaphysical perspective approaches the subject of evil and the reasons for its existence (despair, hatred, violence, suicide) and the theme of salvation (grace, love, inner and outer struggles). Far from Manicheism, far from presenting a cast of good and bad players, the pages of *Incerta Glòria* teach us a true lesson of tolerance in life and in literature.

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