

2008-2021: A Personal View

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE: Raül Garrigasait is a writer and Hellenist. In 2013 he earned his doctorate from the University of Barcelona with a thesis on the reception of Greek tragedy in Germany and Catalonia. He has published the novel *Els estranys* (2017) and the essays *El gos cosmopolita i dos espècimens més* (2012), *Els fundadors* (2020) and *País barroc* (2020), among others.

English translation, Neil CHARLTON

Abstract

The author proposes a personal view of the period 2008-2021, focused on the changes that took place in the publishing sector, the cultural effects of what has been called the Catalan independence 'procés', the re-readings of tradition, and the changes in the literary award system.

Keywords: publishing sector, normalisation, literary prestige, awards, autobiography

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When Enric Gallén asked me to give a lecture to open this symposium on dramatic literature in times of crisis, my first comment was that I didn't know much about the theatre of recent years. He said it didn't matter: I didn't have to talk about theatre but rather about my personal experience. And here I am: opening a symposium on dramatic literature without saying anything about theatre and speaking immodestly about myself.

One day in September 2007 I was walking up Carrer Muntaner in Barcelona. It's a street I knew well, or so I thought, as in fact I only knew the lower end, close to the Gran Via. Actually, it hadn't even occurred to me that the street went that high. I had to go to number 462. I crossed Carrer d'Aragó and Diagonal, and then Via Augusta, and I still wasn't there. Then came Carrer Descartes, Carrer Plató, Carrer Copèrnic and Plaça d'Adrià. And then, yes: I reached the very top of Barcelona, at the headquarters of the publishing house Quaderns Crema.

I was going to see the editor Jaume Vallcorba. Not long before, I'd sent him my translation of Rilke's essay on August Rodin. I was twenty-seven years old and I expected Mr. Vallcorba to tell me that Rilke was wonderful, that the translation was fantastic, and that he would publish it at once.

I was shown to his office. I remember a room over ten metres in length, with a large ornamented carpet. At the back, I saw a wide table and, behind it, Jaume Vallcorba, presiding over the space. I walked over to him and, as I crossed the room, I had time to realise that I had nothing prepared and didn't know what to say. He asked me to sit down and told me that the translation was quite good, but that Rilke was an author who mostly appealed to women and teenagers. He spoke confidently, passionately, and I just smiled. Nervously, I asked him if he would publish the translation and he gave me one of those placating yeses. Then he asked me if I also worked in Spanish. I lied and told him I did. When I realised that I was being offered something akin to a job, I imagined that I was going to work for Quaderns Crema. In fact, I found myself working as a contributor to publishing house Acantilado,

revising translations from German to Spanish done mainly by Catalan translators. I held out for a couple of months.

Perhaps, if there are young people in the audience, they are not aware of what Quaderns Crema meant to someone who had developed as a reader during the 1990s. Vallcorba had managed to create the myth of an austere and refined literary publishing house which could release books with great popular success and classics of high European culture. There was even a legend that Vallcorba always put literary quality before money, a story that was spiced up with all kinds of more or less invented anecdotes. Being published by Quaderns Crema, even if it was a translation, for me meant entering through the front door. I arrived there quite fascinated by the myth.

In that meeting, prestige, seduction, half lies or outright lies were all used not for the benefit of Quaderns Crema but of Acantilado. If I had been a little more malleable, I would have worked on Spanish editing and perhaps I would never have left. This is how cultural substitutions work.

My life took another turn. A few months later, I spent half of my working day on the eighth floor of number 30, Via Laietana. I moved around lonely offices, amidst books from before the war. Mrs. Helena Cambó lived above me and my boss was Francesc Guardans: Francesc Cambó's daughter and grandson, respectively. Although I never went up there, I knew that at the top there was also a garden full of classicist features, with impressive views over Barcelona. My job was to edit the Bernat Metge Greek and Latin classics collection so that they would reach the subscribers' homes on time. Someone had been doing that same job, in those same offices, for more than eighty years. Sometimes I was tempted to think I had found a place outside time. After all, when the word *classic* was first used in a literary sense, almost two millennia ago, one of the basic connotations of the term was timelessness. But this feeling was illusory. In fact, that peculiar place that I occupied was well within history, within a very dense history. The Bernat Metge collection existed thanks to the cultural modernisation of a hundred years ago, thanks to the myth of a Greek Catalonia that the members of the Noucentisme movement had wanted to create, thanks to the fortune made by Francesc Cambó and to the drive and intelligence of people like Joan Estelrich and Carles Riba. When I was working at 30, Via Laietana, all these people were very much in my mind. Perhaps the link with this past gave me an eccentric position. All the typical postures of the cultural world of the last few decades – the rejection of tradition, the cult of marginality, countercultural kitsch, pop culture –, all this was absent from my everyday activity. Instead, the principle that governed my work was continuity.

In some way, it did seem like something of a sanctuary. I lived on Greek and Latin practically outside the market: I find this incredible now. So when the 2008 crisis came, I hardly noticed it. While outside the speculators and workers were being ruined, I earned my living thanks to the millions Cambó had made speculating in a Europe devastated by the Great War.

In that comfortable position, I was able to look on, dream and make plans. I remember one phenomenon that for me was a sign of the times: the boom

of independent publishing houses. In 2004 Labreu Edicions and Arcàdia had already appeared, in 2005 the not very well-known Obrador Edendum, in 2007 Adesiara, Fragmenta, L'Avenç and Comanegra were founded, in 2008, Acontravent, and then came Edicions Poncianes, Edicions de la Ela Gemina, Raig Verd, Periscopi, Males Herbes, L'Altra Editorial, and many more, which joined established houses such as Club Editor and Edicions de 1984. Most were very small, almost one-person concerns, the opposite of the concentration that had been forged around Grup62.

This all coincided with the rise of literary blogs and the sense of freedom they conveyed. The possibilities seemed endless. That's when I started being published. The Rilke that I had sent to Quaderns Crema was released by Obrador Edendum. Almost at the same time, my translation of Plato's *Letters* came out in the Bernat Metge collection and the novel *L'assassina*, by Greek writer Alèxandros Papadiamandis was published by Adesiara. In 2012, my first essay, *El gos cosmopolita i dos espècimens més*, was published by Acontravent, just before the editor, Quim Torra, began his meteoric political career.

For me, at that time — and I recognise that this was probably highly subjective — not only was the publishing landscape transformed but also the Catalan literary system. The literary prestige that I had found in the myth of Quaderns Crema, the cultural capital focused on Vallcorba's majestic office, on the authority of the editor who received you like a king granting an audience, all shattered into dozens of small publishers, driven by enthusiasts who probably worked in small rooms that they swept themselves.

It can already be seen that this was an ambiguous state of affairs. Literary enthusiasm, in general, did not go hand in hand with money. The emancipatory impulse, the desire to follow free and personal paths, was often accompanied by the epic of precariousness, even self-exploitation. The expression “independent publishers” became a byword of the time. But, as an independent publisher told me, “the most independent person in this country is José Manuel Lara”. Be that as it may, the fact is that many of the publishing houses that emerged from that boom are now well established. They may seem like a kind of scattered guerrilla group, but what they do is not peripheral and often occupies the centre of the literary world.

At that time, the kind of intensification of the national conflict that we have called the 'procés' also began. A unionist friend of mine once defined it as “a postmodern war”. The expression captures part of the reality. In a war there are sides, you have to discipline and position yourself, there is an unusual burst of energy, and certain things are sacrificed in the name of victory. But in this postmodern version, it doesn't seem as if the leaders of one of the sides ever thought about the possibility of a victory: such a concrete idea as building an independent state ended up becoming a vague, murky image. What effect has all this had in the field of culture? Is there any relationship between the boom of independent publishers and the new political phase?

I would just like to mention a couple of things here. The first is that the “procés” brought to an end what Josep-Anton Fernández had called the culture of normalisation. For decades, the majority discourse of Catalan politics

was based on the idea that, within the Spanish constitutional framework, by avoiding the root conflict, we could advance towards a “normality” — a normality often phantasmagorical but always invoked. Now, however, conflict had been unleashed; public discussions were focused on political breakup and the supposed future sovereignty. In the meantime, language and culture disappeared from political discourse.

Paradoxically, despite the inclusion of everyone in the “postmodern war”, although many weaknesses became more evident than ever, I have the feeling that in the specific field of literature the ‘procés’ had a liberating effect. For one reason: literature shirked the duty of gradually building a “normal” culture. Literature no longer had to be a model for anything, no longer had to represent the country, because that, in theory, was the domain of politics and activism in the street. A basic idea of the era of normalisation was that of “full culture”: we had to have everything that the hegemonic cultures have; the value of each artistic work was often measured by its contribution to cultural “fullness” understood in this sense. At the root of the idea of normalisation there was perhaps an anxiety of representation: the culture had to simulate that future normality because the material and political reality was not yet up to the idea.

Thus, when the culture of normalisation collapses, the literary language has a weight lifted from its shoulders. The explosion of styles and voices of the last ten or fifteen years — think, for example, about everything that emerged around the publishing houses Labreu Edicions and Males Herbes — is a literature crossed by all the conflicts, certainly, but which is not justified by the fact of being a piece in the harmonious construction of normality. It is justified by the works themselves: the tension, the strength, the grace, the brilliance, the depth, whatever makes them admirable.

Naturally, once the ‘procés’ is concluded, the weaknesses are exposed. The environment is saturated with fatalistic discourses that can be more destructive than any domination. In a hostile state, with autonomic institutions that have not done the job for which they were created, Catalan is vulnerable. This is why discourses about language are now reformulated and strengthened. Terms are circulating that we hadn’t heard much before: linguistic rights, global linguistic emergency. The old principles of ecolinguistics seem more relevant today than ever. However, I would say that we have something more solid than abstract discourses: we have the specific strength of language and its sensuous existence, we have the vibration of words that connect directly to all the conflicts we drag behind us, and to all the places, with all the nation’s potential. For me, it is not accurate to talk about saving the language, as if we were our own NGO: it is the centuries-old conversation within Catalan that makes us strong and gives us a unique and irreplaceable point of view.

Perhaps it is also an effect of the end of the culture of normalisation that these years have been fertile in re-readings of tradition. Víctor Català has returned to the bestseller lists and has nourished many of today’s voices. Mercè Rodoreda has maintained her position at the top of the novelistic canon. Jacint Verdaguer, Josep Pla, Llorenç Villalonga, Joan Sales, Pere

Calders, Gabriel Ferrater, Joan Fuster, Blai Bonet: the names we had learned in school spoke again and were read in different ways. Eduard Girbal Jaume, a bit of Santiago Rusiñol and Francesc Pujols, as well as Cèlia Suñol have reappeared. What is more interesting is that these reappearances have not only been academic revivals but have taken place in the public sphere. We read these authors with a mix of pleasure, perplexity and a desire to draw new energy from them. This is how it makes sense to understand tradition: not as a passive reception or as a mere accumulation but as an operation we carry out to lend meaning to the past, present and future. We humans are beings of continuity and, in the case of our linguistic community, continuity is also a way of defending the space from all the forces that wanted to crush it.

Back to me. In 2017 I published the novel *Els estranys* in Edicions de 1984. For me it was the most defining moment of the last few years: the reviews were mostly positive, the book gradually found its readers, then the Llibreter award came along, followed later by the Òmnium and El Setè Cel awards. There are so many good novels that don't get any awards that it's worth asking what happened.

The book appeared at a time of change. We came from a literary system in which awards for unpublished novels dominated the rhythms of cultural marketing. They were awards with prizes that had been inflated and there were so many that we readers no longer knew which ones to take seriously. Some awards paid cheques with so many zeros that, to ensure they would recoup their investment, publishers had to look for authors who were known outside of literature, which in those days meant people who appeared on television. To borrow, once again, Josep-Anton Fernández's concept, there was evidently a crisis in quality.

Moreover, awards for unpublished work have, for me, two intrinsic problems, at least in the case of the novel. First, we never know which novels didn't win. If we don't like the winning novel, we can suppose it was the best of those submitted or we can imagine a mafia-like process behind the selection. Second, these kinds of awards erode the relationship between author and publisher. In the best case scenario, if the award is above board, publishers have before them a novel they have not selected and on which they cannot spend much time because they have to benefit from the announcement of the winner to immediately release the book. Also, if an author only goes in search of awards for unpublished books, their work will be scattered across multiple publishing houses and no publisher will see them as a key piece in their catalogue.

During those years, other types of awards gained more traction: those that recognise a book that has already been published. Unlike the previous ones, awards for published work can give all publishers a chance and the choice is made in full view of everyone. Given that we know perfectly well which books have not won, they promote literary debate. The Crexells, Llibreter, El Setè Cel, Òmnium and Finestres awards, among others: together they paint a different and, at least potentially, more open picture.

So *Els estranys* was lucky to come out at a time when the awards system was in transformation. But there was something else. In 2017, when the novel was published, I was thirty-seven years old. I'm sure some of my ancestors were already grandparents at that age. However, I stood out at various times as the "new young writer", I suppose because there was no one else suited to fill that position. I suspect that it is at least in part because of this idea of the emerging new voice that the book won three awards.

There is a global dynamic linked to this phenomenon: we only need to think of the generational marketing that has surrounded Sally Rooney, "the first millennial writer". I wonder if this fascination with youth and generations has anything to do with global uniformity. To detach people from their local context, there is nothing better than making the generational principle the basic criterion for dividing up humanity. In literature, "young" is the easiest and laziest label. Sometimes it seems that the publishing industry is a business of old people who are desperate for young blood so they can sell the essence of youth. Naturally, generational renewal is healthy and necessary, but I wonder: will the books that Irene Solà, Juana Dolores Romero, Pol Guasch or Núria Bendicho write ten years from now have the same resonance when they are no longer the youth of the moment?

Although these questions come to mind, I think we would do well to act as if none of this were so. We don't write for the marketing of the present, but for all humanity of the present and future and also, in a way, the humanity of the past. Two and a half millennia ago, one of the first Greek prose writers, Heraclitus, wrote: "You will not discover the limits of the soul by travelling, even if you wander over every conceivable path, so deep is its story". The phrase tells us that what we are is not immediately accessible, that there are unknown paths to follow, and this implies continuity and the possibility of moving forwards and backwards. The metaphor for all this is depth: we are not a directly accessible surface; we are not a screen that shines instantly, but a depth that cannot be seen at first. A cave, perhaps, with many interconnected labyrinthine galleries. Heraclitus also wrote: "The soul is a self-increasing logos". Growth, maturation, is the opposite of immediate satisfaction. These are all dusty old metaphors, if you like, but we'd do well to dust them off. In this age that idolises immediacy and youth, the ideas of continuity and maturation are more necessary than ever.

I wouldn't want to end without saying something about this last eighteen months marked by the pandemic. There was a time, around May or April of last year, during the strictest lockdown, that we could imagine a future without bookstores or theatres. Touch and physical proximity seemed abolished for a long time, perhaps forever. But the fact is that bookstores and theatres have returned, and they have returned with a sense of urgency that testifies to the importance of what we had lost.

However, the world is no longer the same. And not only because it has become clear that we do not control nature and that states can do almost anything they want with us. On 1 April last year, when most of us were still in shock, the philosopher John Gray published an article in *The New Statesman*

entitled: “Why this crisis is a turning point in history”. After predicting that we had already left behind the era of hyperglobalisation, he argued: “The task ahead is to build economies and societies that are more durable, and more humanly habitable, than those that were exposed to the anarchy of the global market”. After eighteen months, he still seems to be more right than ever. As I speak, global supply chains have gone bankrupt. The price of raw materials and transport containers is skyrocketing. All over the world there are factories at a standstill due to lack of components. Many British petrol stations have run out of fuel. Printing presses, with more demand than ever, are collapsing in the United States and may soon collapse here. Who knows if all of this points to a new era: an era of deglobalisation.

For decades, intellectual rhetoric has taught us to scorn basic facts of life such as sedentary lifestyles, farming, local democracy, the family, and the community. If deglobalisation takes hold, perhaps these kinds of things will be at the centre of the world to come and will be shown to be what they always have been: necessary strategies of survival. I don’t imagine it as a romantic return, as the recovery of a longed for idyllic past, no; returns from the past always bring things that are different and unforeseen.

I have no doubt that books and theatre will have a place in the world to come. But what place exactly? If I had to make a bet, I’d say that some post-modern flirtations will lose their power of seduction and a harder and more rooted way of looking at things will come about. Maybe this is just my own fantasy, a spectral vision created by the vibrations of the moment I write. Either way, I don’t think it’s a bad idea to work with this intuition in mind. As the beings of continuity that we are, and in the face of the approaching energy and climate crises, we will do well to concentrate on basic and lasting realities: on those realities that give meaning to our time on the planet because they link us to the voices of the dead and with the lives of those yet to be born.

