

## Maria Barbal

Visat núm. 7

(abril 2009)

by Carme Arenas

Almost twenty-five years of experience act as proof of the trajectory of one of the most prominent novelists in contemporary Catalan literature. Maria Barbal is, undoubtedly, one of the writers who has most successfully retained her wide readership over recent years and has penetrated the core of European literature, especially French and German literatures.

Said trajectory began in 1985 with a novel that, despite being early, has become one of the author's key works of reference. It is called *Pedra de tartera* (Stone in a Landslide), a short novel which surprised both the critics and the public for its immense beauty and for the implicit poetry and style which governs its content. All in all, it is an intelligent exercise of good literature. Located in Pallars in the Catalan Pyrenees, also Barbal's hometown, it recounts the tale of a woman called *Conxa* who, using the benefit of hindsight, recounts three specific points in her life: childhood, adolescence and old age. The Civil War, the Republic and Franco period provide us with a backdrop of historical facts. Conxa will learn about love and illusions, but also solitude, injustice, rootlessness and pain. Strong and capable enough to maintain the family all by herself, her new socioeconomic situation then loses its strength and she is pushed to move to Barcelona at the end of her life, carrying herself there like a totally unimportant stone in a landslide. The analogy works in a way which allows the author to expose a type of character that, all differences included, is never left out of her work. She is strong on the inside, but this is never acknowledged in a story which always seems to have been written by the winners. The main characters play a silent role which is a consequence of the choices they have made. Maria Barbal adds the component that Concha's silence is twofold: a) because she's a woman, and b) more so because of her humble condition.

Following on from *Stone in a Landslide* is *La mort de Teresa* (The Death of Teresa) in 1986 and more two novels: *Mel i metzines* (Honey and Poisons, 1990) and *Camfora* (Camphor, 1992). These works made up part of the "Pallars Cycle", as they were set in Pallars— the author's hometown— but we are also shown another atmosphere: that of Barcelona, a place where the author resided for many years. In fact, the juxtaposition of the two places allows the author to reflect the phenomenon of the abandoned towns in the Pyrenees. This phenomenon was further explored later on in *Camins de quietud* (2001), a beautiful and thought-provoking book whose fifty three proses speak about these abandoned towns. Using her narrative the author brings them to life again.

From there, just like a tree deeply rooted in its origins, you can start to see her large branches expanding upwards and outwards. The later work of Maria Barbal makes use of the short story (*Ulleres de sol*, 1994) and the novel to show the contrast between very different worlds and different atmospheres, but always with the same constant digging through the characters to the foundations of the human soul, making use of material provided by the surroundings itself or far-off realities, but

constantly bringing the important problems of contemporary society to the forefront. On two occasions, Barbal uses real facts to shell a plot and plant a situation of injustice. Such a case can be found in *Escrivia cartes al cel* (Writing Letters to the Sky, 1996) and her last novel *Emma* (2008). Barbal's *Writing Letters to the Sky* starts with the news of a kidnapping in a nursery school in the outskirts of Paris in 1993. Using the main character the author feeds the reader with different narrative discourses (private letters, letters to the editor of newspapers, interviews and personal news) which offer different viewpoints and make the reader question how key elements of society, like justice or the press, function. The importance of affection and education and devastating effects of despair also feature. In the case of *Emma*, which was Barbal's last novel, the reason for the departure is the burning of a beggar at a bank ATM. Barbal uses this event to construct the character of Emma, the wife of an important man in the political sphere, who falls into a trap of love and deception. The contrast is highlighted by wealth of society during that time and its destitution: they are ultimately doomed. Apart from this, social contradictions and injustice surface again in this novel, especially to denounce the subject of speculation and strengthen personal relationships and solidarity amongst the weakest.

In many of her novels the author infuses life into the characters of her novels and endeavours to build up a life for them. In *Carrer Bolívia* (Bolivia Street, 1999), we come back to the theme of rootlessness. It is explained to us in a choral manner through the story of Lina, an Andalusian girl, who moves to *Carrer Bolívia* in Barcelona. The reader travels with her through the problems of immigration, the workers' struggle and the anti-Franco protests, not leaving aside the generational conflict, human passion and solidarity. In *Bella Edat* (Beautiful Age, 2003), two special elements inherent to the human condition are treated: beauty and the passage of time. From here onward, through the hand of her companion Fidel Sala, also known as La Simoneta, the novels brings us face to face with beauty and ugliness, disease and death, youth and old age, and it somehow invites us to reflect on how society treats these issues.

*País íntim* (Intimate County, 2005) returns to and makes the narrative thread, started in *Stone in a Landslide*, advance even further as a kind of continuity but with a leap in generations. Through her explanation of the conflictive relation between the protagonist, Rita Albera, and her mother, Barbal exposes just how pain caused by injustice impedes emotional development and the very poetic way it makes us realise the need to recover historical memory, compensate victims and close over old wounds in order to build a healthy society. The work is an ode to mother-child love and giving up war and injustice. Once more, Barbal uses a historical background to display the deep humanity of her characters. Whether they are male or female, the characters always fight for their own dignity, despite having to go through a handful of events that bring about conflict. The content and style of the work supported by a rigorous language of verisimilitude shows us how Barbal excels from prose to poetry.

Translated by Christina McGown