

Joan Navarro

Visat núm. 14
(octubre 2012)
by Jordi Marrugat

Joan Navarro (Oliva, 1951) has one of the most extensive and solid poetic careers in current Catalan literature. A leader of the literary revival that took place in Valencia and the Catalan Countries during the 1970's, he has published several volumes of poetry as well as the narrative prose *Drumcondra*.

He has also translated into Catalan *Amado mio* and *Atti impuri* (1986) by Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Ossi de seppia* by Eugenio Montale (1988, in collaboration with O. Monsonís) and an anthology of the Brazilian poet Orides Fontela entitled *Esfera* (2010). Since 1999 he has also been running the online magazine *serieAlfa.art i literatura*, which is published three times a year and dedicated to editing poetry from around the world translated into Catalan and other languages.

He studied philosophy at the University of Valencia and published his first poems - part of two collections which were to remain unedited, *Éssers dins d'una botella verda de coca-cola* (Beings in a green bottle of Coke) and *Espant al pit* (Fear at Heart) - in 1974 in the anthology of Valencian poets *Carn fresca* (Fresh Meat). Through cultural pastiche and the image of a surrealist inheritance they mainly poeticised the loss of individual identity, characteristic of postmodernism. In the same year his personal debut was released, *Grills esmolen ganivets a trenc de por* (Cogs sharpen knives broken by fear), preceded by a poetic piece which showed how the theories of the new French critics, especially Roland Barthes, had influenced him. In contrast to the traditional poem, the piece was set out as an open text which required the reader's active collaboration in order to construct possible meanings. "Until now the reader has interpreted the poem. What is necessary is to participate in it" he wrote, bringing a new conception of Barthes' poetry, derived from theories about death of the author, to the eleventh thesis on Feuerbach de Marx. In addition, the poems' connotations directed criticism at other aspects of society and modern literature. For example, right from the title Navarro announced his revolt against the will of modern civilization to dominate the unknown with fear. His poetry emerged from the invocation of this idea and the terrible illusions it causes: evils which rationalist thought had tried to exorcise. In this way he constructed a poetry associated with crime, madness, dreams, irrationality, destruction and death; poetry related to the dark side of life, far away from the enlightened images created by modern rationalism. It is this darkness that was emphasized in Navarro's second publication, *L'ou de la gallina fosca* (The Dark Hen's Egg) (1975). In this case he introduced the issues of love and sex: bonds in which rationality is unattainable.

Following this recovery of aspects cast aside by modern rationalism in 1979 he released *Vaixell de folls* (Ship of Fools), a book of poetic prose inspired by the revaluation of postmodern madness, with its origins mainly in Michel Foucault's *Folie et Deraison. Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*. Another work by the same French philosopher, *L'archéologie du savoir*, inspired *Arqueologia del saber* (The Archeology of Knowledge) (1981): a set of prose published in parallel to *Coltell al cap*

(Knife in the head) (1981). With these publications in the late seventies and early eighties, Navarro laid out the formula for poetic prose that characterizes all his work, turning it into a poetic archeology of knowledge. His books established a metaphorical and metacultural language which sets up complex relationships between images, quotations and expressions in order to analyze what defines the human condition whilst remaining distinct from strictly rationalist discourse – whether scientific, historical or philosophical. Through this metalinguistic reflection and the eyes of what has been marginalised by modernity – terror, madness, dreams, darkness, the Dionysian – the story of the human condition is reconstructed in terms which are neither rational nor historical and are therefore unstable and have many meanings. He analyses documents and speeches of the past – language, literature, philosophy, film, music ... – and the human condition which, in itself, rewrites history in poetic terms without being bound to the history of ideas.

The first full work characterized by this type of writing was *Bardissa de foc* (Bush Fire) (1981) which, through a perfectly smooth-flowing structure, raised several questions about the limits of language, love, the temporality of human existence, the problem of identity and the possibility of a life beyond the one we perceive. The two books that followed it, *La paúra dels crancs* (The Fear of Crabs) (1986) and *Tria personal (1973-1987)* (Personal Choice (1973 – 1987)) (1992), were collections of miscellaneous pieces of diverse origins which Navarro managed to bring together and to which he gave a firm structural unity. In the first case the title clearly shows this, while *Tria personal* is made coherent as a collection through the addition of an originally unpublished piece of prose. This acts as a prologue and relates particularly to the last piece in the collection, *!Salvatge!* (!Wild!). Both poetically analyze where use of language places the human condition in relation to the material world.

A large number of the themes, symbols and motifs of these poems were taken up again in fictional prose in 1991 in *Drumcondra*. It is the almost diary-like narrative of a man on a trip to the residential area of Dublin from which the book takes its name. He spends a few days there, meets people and, once his trip is over, returns to Valencia. This plot line serves to link a real, daily – even banal – occurrence with the reflections that the author's poetic prose is seemingly based upon breaking with.

After years of not publishing any poems, with the arrival of the twenty-first century Navarro's work took on new impetus. He published several well-worked, well-matured and consolidated pieces in which his full control of the poetic prose genre, as he himself conceived it, became apparent. *Magrana* (Pomegranate) (2004) created a language all of its own, akin to seeing the creation of the world from a new perspective and in a new light. Beginning in darkness with *L'enfonsament del Titànic* (The Sinking of the Titanic) – the title of the first piece of prose in the first part of the book – *Magrana* follows this up with the illumination of *Díptic* (Diptych), 'where the light burns', and *Com un llamp* (Like Lightning), the second and third parts of the collection. This flows into *Càntir de llum* (Pitcher of Light), the fourth part of the book, to which a fifth, *Dispersa* (Dispersed), was added as an epilogue. After *Magrana* Navarro published two books, *Atlas (correspondència 2005-2007)* (Atlas (correspondence 2005-2007)) (2009) and *Grafies - Incisions* (Writings- Incisions) (2010), both accompanied by paintings by the artist Pedro Salinas. In the second, the poems were written from pre-existing paintings, whilst the method of composition for those in the first was the collaboration between the two artists. Navarro wrote a poem based on a painting by Salinas who then made a painting based on this poem by Navarro, who responded to this new piece with a new poem until they had 46 paintings and poems which together form an inseparable unit. Finally, in the same year, Navarro released *A deslloc* (To Nowhere), a new collection with very close ties to previous three and with *Magrana* in particular.

Translated by Katherine Reynolds