

Francesc Serés

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In the preface to *La peau de chagrin* (1831) Balzac said the narrators are really philosophers who are subjected to an extraordinary moral phenomenon: they possess "a kind of second sight" that allows them to "discern the truth in every possible situation". Therefore they have the power, ultimately, "to invent the true". If indeed the greatest virtue of a writer is that the product of his fable presents the unequivocal truth, we can say that Francesc Serés (Saidí, Baix Cinca, 1972) is a solid ambitious storyteller and one of maximum interest in this respect.

In the same way that Stefan Zweig could say of the author of *La Comédie humaine* that he was capable of ascribing "to the will an especially potent ability to pass from the realm of the spiritual into that of the material" - because that enormous fictional world has as its driving force the desire of its characters to follow their respective interests - one could say of Serés' stories that work, and more specifically effort, has been made the real backbone of their narrative structure. Effort of those who know that luck does not give anything away easily and that it is only possible to survive with sheer tenacity and intelligence. His explosion onto the Catalan literary scene in 2000 with *Els ventres de la Terra* (The Earth's Belly), which looked at the hardships of life at war, with a naturalness equally distant from the gruesomeness of modernism seen a century ago as from the mystification of much later narratives, announced the emergence of a new voice. A voice for which the rural world was no less an apt setting than the urban one in which to create a fresco of the social transformation of our country, with all its yearnings and wretchedness. The timely and pertinent publication over the next two years of *L'arbre sense tronc* (The Tree Without a Trunk) (2001) and *Una llengua de plom* (A Lead Language) (2002) completed a trilogy of absolute originality, the generic title of which, given by the author a year later, was *De fems i de marbres* (On Manure and Marble) (2003). This was enough to underline, metaphorically, the two powerful reasons for its literary excellence: lucid and uncompromising realism contrasted with a sophisticated style of expression. And to mellow these two qualities, a third, which will have come to dominate the entire author's work to date: the essential truth. The appearance that everything we read comes from an experience, has maybe even been personally lived through, or (thanks to effective documentation) is recreated with exquisite literary devices - such as that of the "invention" so pondered in Balzac's quote.

We would be wrong, however, if we rushed to identify Serés' narrative with any kind of journalistic or documental naturalism. Significantly, if his first book sets off with a reflection on how a photograph can be misleading and incomplete, it is because the author is well aware that in order for any description to be complete, as realistic as it may be, it hides as much as it reveals. Here we need to understand that the sophisticated repertoire of literary devices which he displayed in his

début trilogy (flash-forwards and flashbacks, changes of narrator and point of view, the blurring of allegories to situations and places) was not just that but a document through which to overcome, metaphorically, that which neither chronicle nor report could achieve: the complete vision of a time and a place with all moral sense removed. There must be few writers today who are clearer than Serés that, as W.H. Auden said in his famous "For The Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio", "In the meantime. There are bills to be paid, machines to keep in repair, Irregular verbs to learn, the Time Being to redeem. From insignificance".

Against the background of a narrative that had been rendered archetypal by the postmodernist years, Serés' novels immediately stood out for being strongly committed to a return to the modern way of telling stories. "Where someone could preach lightness, frivolity could be interpreted, in the same way that visibility could mean exhibitionism or that speed could mean haste" the author has written, regarding Italo Calvino's *Sei Proposte*. So, after so much volatile fiction which lacked any sense of reality, so many simplified stories with unbelievable and inconsistent characters, or theories shoehorned into them, someone began to trust again in credibility and the need to build a moral world. A world similar to the one in which, like it or not, it's only possible to advance through sheer exhaustion and making decisions of which we are not always certain. Serés published two new pieces in this spirit, examples of how to intertwine life and literature in an artistically successful way: *La força de la gravetat* (The Force of Gravity) (2006) and *La matèria primera* (Raw material) (2007). With a predominance of narrative distortion in the first whilst the second was of a much more documental nature - due to the various testimonies of hardworking people - they combined to create a powerful mosaic of a country on the brink of the financial crash. With unusual stylistic agility - mainly due to a new use of dialogue which had not been employed in his trilogy - each account was able to immerse its characters in a specific setting, each with a specific outcome. But once again the attentive reader would discover that what they were reading was in no way simply a factual report. The recourse to symbolism, implied literary allusions (to Kafka, Chekhov...) and reticence and ambiguity in having more than one open ending, gave away that underneath there beat the pulse of an undeniable narrative ambition. The paradox began to reveal itself: Serés was a narrator who deliberately wanted to overcome post-modernism but without losing its most valuable merits - irony in particular.

His next book confirmed to what extent this belief was well founded and how, from this point forward, the overarching objective to talk about reality could grow within his style along with a new virtuosity, in order that it be executed in the most imaginative way possible. The excellent *Contes russos* (Russian Stories) (2009) continues to be a reflection on the dignity of both an individual and a nation and the difficulty of preserving it against exposure to history and the fate of personal relationships. However, its originality comes from the fact that the book's stories are set in Russia in the gap between the still feudal world of the 19th century and the present day, in a country perplexed by the inequalities caused by the collapse of Communism. Be where it may, what stands out in this literary compilation of the first order is the refined set of heteronyms that he has created. Serés opens the work by giving voice to Anastasia Maximova, assumed anthologist and translator of the work, who appears later 'in person' to narrate a (fictional) trip to Minsk and remind us that the humanity of stories is "interchangeable". She makes way for five Russian narrators from different eras of the century who, in reverse chronological order, present a splendid range of twenty-one stories (twenty-six, of course, if we include the authors' biographies). From satire to the folk tale; from the psychological thriller to historical fantasy: the collection exhibits a prose as diverse as the list of its authors, and the jumps between its muzhiks, astronauts, bureaucrats, dissidents, chess players and kolkhoz farmers goes beyond stereotypes to infuse each of the stories with real vitality. Through intertextuality they also, incidentally, pay homage to the essential greats of the genre such as Maupassant and Salinger but especially, of course, to the tradition that was developed between Gogol and Bulgakov.

Possibly this stylistic security, of which *Contes russos* is such a good example, is what has pushed Serés to try his luck in other genres such as theatre. The three works that make up the trilogy *Caure amunt* (Falling Upwards) (2008) recreate several episodes from the lives of the writers Ramon Muntaner, Ramon Llull and Jaume Roig (marked respectively by their conflicts with power, the church or people of another religious conviction). The historic fabric of these pieces is the opportunity for the author to project his contemporary concerns onto a medieval background: the certainty being that a history is required upon which to rest any identity; that "things are only true because they have been said and written" or that "it's much more complicated than letters, than life." As yet unpublished, but put on stage successfully in 2010, the comedy *No som res* (We Are Nothing) has proven Serés is competent even in a field as complicated as dark humour. No less commendable is his, as yet only, incursion into the field of young adult fiction, *El llarg viatge d'A* (A's Long Journey) (2010). This takes the game of chess, its pieces and rules and uses them beyond their apparent innocence as a perfect pretext to illustrate complex notions such as those of identity and xenophobia.

We owe his increasing presence in the press to his latest collection of stories, *Mossegar la poma* (Biting the Apple) (2012). With articles published in *Time Out Barcelona* which presented the challenge of not exceeding 950 words – an obstacle which Serés overcame with flying colours by taking the psychological element to its extreme and muting his social commentary of all types of situations, observed with his characteristic accuracy. However, it has also given us an opportunity to see many of the author's opinions enunciated in a more discursive and argumentative manner – as a columnist for Spanish newspaper *El País* and Catalan newspaper *Ara*. Here, we must remember that this is an author from la Franja who writes in Catalan and who has no doubt that "between Albelda, Serós and Morella there is no linguistic separation whatsoever" and who is proud "to admit that there are Aragonese and Catalans who share a grammar, and by grammar, we also mean outlook on the world".

I began by talking about effort as the nerve center of Serés' literature, and I will finish by referring to one of the other convictions that runs through all of his work. In fact, these statements about the linguistic unity of Catalan are by no means dissonant. One of the most memorable stories of *Contes Russos* is "La guerra contra els voromians" (The War Against the Voromians), the chronicle of how a remote Soviet region is subjected to a program of extermination under the guise of scientific research. The excuse is that the land in question presents an unusual physical phenomena: extraordinary gravity. Much higher than that found in any other region it makes everything heavier and more difficult. Discovering a certain resemblance between Voromians and Catalans is within the grasp of any reader (however unaware they may be) and that Serés' roots are in this place, so loved yet so unfortunate, is beyond doubt. The deep and sometimes painful feeling of belonging to a country is, I think, one of the inherent qualities of his work, reinforced by the fact that rural areas have been the protagonist of many of them. Nature in Serés is never "a quiet place to go mountain biking and relax in the greenery and views of the mountains" but rather the place where the farmer, – and here I take the words of Marta Rojals in the novel *Primavera, estiu, etcètera* (Spring, Summer, etc.) (2011), expressed with exceptional similarity to the author's own dialect – believes "*aixó és lo menjar de casa seua, és lo plat a taula*" ("this is the food of our home, it's the meals we put on the table").

In this sense, perhaps it is worth bearing in mind that one of his latest publications was a beautiful large format book, *La Garrotxa*, produced in collaboration with the photographer Jordi Puig, about a region Serés knows inside out. On the gatherings held in churches and chapels the author writes that on that day, the day of the festival, people from neighboring villages "cover great distances, mountain peaks and valleys, all to get to the same place, to occupy it, to remember it, so that it's not forgotten." The idea of a powerful bond with the land, renewed thanks to culture, is absolutely

inseparable from Serés' literature. His work commands an awareness of the need to retell the story of Catalonia and its identity over and over again, exactly as is done to keep traditions alive: with the same sense of responsibility of someone who knows they must record everything "so it is not lost."

Translated by Katherine Reynolds