

Joan Francesc Mira

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by Pau Sanchis

Joan Francesc Mira i Casterà (Valencia, 1939) is a writer, anthropologist and lecturer in Greek. These three professions – as well as that of translator – influence the way in which this intellectual views the world. Beyond his strictly anthropological work, his writing is filtered through a profound knowledge of society and of Western literature from Ancient Greece to the present day. With this cultural baggage, he has produced an œuvre that has received acclaim from both readers and critics and has been awarded numerous prizes and distinctions, such as the Premi d'Honor de les Lletres Catalanes in 2004.

1974 saw the publication of his first novel, *El bou de foc*, as well as *Un estudi d'antropologia social al País Valencià: Vallalta i Miralcamp*. The novel was followed by a book of short stories, *Els cucs de seda* (1975), which won the Andròmica prize for prose, and by two more works of fiction, *El desig dels dies* (1981) and *Viatge al final del fred* (1983). These early works were fictionalised accounts of the recent history of the region of Valencia. The critics have also highlighted the strong biographical component of the books. The post-war years, the maquis, the universities in the last years of the Franco regime, and rural life are some of the subjects covered. Mira's first essays, such as *Els valencians i la terra* (1978), describe rural life and the changes undergone there, using the tools of the anthropologist to supplement those of the writer.

His knowledge of the world and of history have served to question wider issues and to reflect in depth on the individual's relationship with society and the environment. Other essays, such as *Crítica de la nació pura* (1984), which received the Joan Fuster essay prize, the Serra d'Or and the Lletra d'Or awards, and *Sobre la nació dels valencians* (1997), are reflections on nationalism that present some very interesting ideas on subjects such as the distinction between cultural nation and political nation. These are the themes with which Mira has been most concerned in his essays, but among his collection of articles and lectures we also find writings on literature, translation, politics, travel and art.

Without abandoning this genre, Mira has also written about the life and work of a number of universal Valencians: St. Vincent Ferrer, Vicente Blasco Ibáñez and the Borjas. He approaches each person with honesty and critical lucidity, unaffected by any black or white legends and the myths that surround them. These works have been published in Catalan and Spanish, in large formats in which the text is accompanied by numerous illustrations. Using the same format, and with photographs by Francesc Jarque, he has also written a guidebook, *València, per a veïns i visitants* (1999), which was chosen as Best Book of the Year in Valencian and has also been published in Spanish and English translations. In it the author describes the city that has been the setting for

much of his writing.

With *Els treballs perduts* (1989), Mira began on what was probably to be his most ambitious project and also the most successful: a trilogy set in the city of Valencia in which, starting from a universal myth, he dissects the current vanity fair. So far he has written two parts: *Els treballs perduts*, based on the legend of the twelve labours of Hercules, and *Purgatori* (2003) (Sant Jordi prize and the Critics award), which is based on the Purgatory of the *Divine Comedy*. This novel has established Mira as one of the leading Catalan writers of the turn of the century. As observed by the critic Joan Josep Isern, both books have another source of inspiration - and most probably the third will too - namely James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Mira has done for Valencia what Joyce did for Dublin: he has turned it into specific, living world that is the metaphor and symbol of human behaviour. As Mira himself has said: "When a city, in a novel, is transformed into a world, it necessarily enters the field of allegory, of metaphor, of emblematic figuration, and then each thing, each street, each house will not only be something that is physically describable but will form part of another order of realities." Salvador Donat, the principal character in *Purgatori*, resembles Joyce as he quotes from Pessoa's *Livro do dessassogego*, another book in which a city - this time Lisbon - is both a character and a symbol.

Between these two novels, Mira published *Quatre qüestions d'amor* (1998), four novellas in which he reflects on love at different moments in history; and *Borja Papa* (1996 - the Crexells prize, the Critics prize for Valencian Writers and the Premio Nacional de la Crítica), a novel in which Roderic Borja, who became Pope Alexander VI, describes his life in the first person. This work, which has been translated into Spanish and Romanian, is a splendid reconstruction of the life of this Borja Pope and of the historical changes he witnessed and to a large part promoted.

Joan Francesc Mira is a writer able to use well-documented, specific facts as the basis for tackling the universal themes of literature, accompanied by a rich, precise prose that sits as comfortably in erudite essays, lectures and newspaper articles as in stories of cities and people.

His intellectual achievements cannot be fully acknowledged without referring to his work as a translator. In particular we should mention two books that are at the very roots of our culture: his translations of the gospels, *Evangelis de Marc, Mateu, Lluc i Joan*; and of Dante's masterpiece, *Divina Comèdia*, which won him the Premio Nacional de Traducción and the Medaglia d'Oro of the city of Florence.

Translated by Joanna Martinez