



**p** ERJO  
LAGI

**C** ONVICCIÓ  
OVARIA

**p** EME DÉMENT  
ENSAMENT

**O** RDRE  
RGUPE  
**h** OME  
UMILIACIÓ

**d** INERS  
RFEOTE

**b** ELLESA  
ESTICA

**f** ER LAGER

**S** ILENCI  
EXE

**S** ENY  
UERRA



JORDI CERDÀ / JORDI SARSANEDAS / JULIÀ DE JÒDAR / MERCÈ IBARZ / JOSEP PEDRALS

# The “Elephant”<sup>1</sup> and Catalan literature

The round table arose from an editorial address published in *L’Avenç* magazine. It stated that Catalan society had become used to the ills and poor prospects of Catalan literature. In particular, the magazine argued that three main factors were to blame: (1) a ceiling on the number of Catalan readers; (2) failure by the media to foster Catalan literature; and (3) Catalan publishers are small in size and are increasingly small offshoots of large firms publishing in Spanish. As a result, Catalan literature has not attained its rightful status and has not lived up to the high expectations of a quarter century ago. One should also note that culture was next to last on the restored Catalan government’s list of priorities. To discuss these issues in greater depth, *L’Avenç* invited four established writers from four generations. The round table was chaired by Jordi Cerdà, Professor of Philology at the Autonomous University, and was held at the Ateneu Barcelonès at the end of October 2005.

**JORDI SARSANEDAS** (Barcelona 1924-2006), poet and novelist. He was chief editor of *Serra d’Or* (literary magazine) for over 30 years. Honour Prize, *Lletres Catalanes* (Catalan literary award). His latest publication is a volume of short stories, *Una discreta venjança* (Discrete Revenge) (pub. Edicions 62).

**JULIÀ DE JÒDAR** (Badalona, 1942) has studied history and done publishing work. From 1997 onwards he began to publish his trilogy *L’atzar i les ombres*.

**MERCÈ IBARZ** (Saidi, 1954) is a writer and journalist. She is a lecturer at Pompeu Fabra University (UPF) and collaborates with *La Vanguardia* newspaper. Ibarz has written essays on Rodoreda and Buñuel and just published a volume of stories, *Febre de carrer* (Street Fever) (pub. Quaderns Crema).

**JOSEP PEDRALS** (Barcelona 1979) is a poet and recites works. He ran a bookshop for a while and since 1997 has promoted spoken poetry, organising courses and recitals all over the country. Pedrals has just published his photo-poem *Eclisions* (pub. Labreu edicions).

■ <sup>1</sup> Translator’s note: The “Elephant” here refers to Spanish. The simile is explained further on in the text.

- **Jordi Cerdà:** Before beginning the debate, I should like to present the authors and ask each of them a question bearing on the current state of Catalan. We shall begin in order of seniority. Jordi Sarsanedas published *Mites* (Myths) in 1954, just over fifty years ago. It became an icon for later writers in Catalan. Were you ever tempted to change the literary language used in this work?

- **Jordi Sarsanedas:** No, I have never been tempted to revise a text. I wrote *Mites* as a young man and would have been happy to put my name to works by contemporary authors. By the same token, I would still publish what I wrote then. I believe in continuity. What I wrote then and the language I used have continuity in the present. The important thing for a writer is to be true to himself. I recognise the texts I wrote

**“We’ve lived with bilingualism for centuries now. But for Catalan to survive, we need to get Spanish speakers to show a profound and almost tender tolerance for our language”**

**JORDI SARSANEDAS**

I have grown with —the language and I have aged together. I know there are writers, for whom I have the greatest respect, who decide to change the tenses of all the verbs in a novel. But I really do not see the need for that. To be frank, I am pretty sceptical of the notion of writing in “today’s language” —spoken by whom?

then just as I recognise those I write now. They serve to both confirm what I wrote in the past and what I currently write. A book and the words it uses belong to a moment in one’s life and hence both reflect a point in time and the language in vogue. I know Catalan is not the same now —or more precisely, is not exactly the same. Even so, the language used in *Mites* was sincere and in keeping with the times. I am much older now and I write with the language

- **J. Cerdà:** At the end of the 1990s, the beginning of the trilogy *L’atzar i les ombres* (Chance and the Shadows) by Julià de Jòdar made a splash. Immigration has had a big impact on Spain but it has received comparatively little attention in Catalan literature. What made you tackle this theme?

- **Julià de Jòdar:** Catalonia has yet to fully re-establish Catalan. Proof of this is that we have to ask this question with regard to immigration. No one asks Juan Marsé why the youngsters in Gràcia speak Spanish. But is considered normal for goodness knows what reason to ask why one can’t use Catalan to speak of certain subjects. If this has become a habit, it means something is wrong. I have no idea whether it stems from ideological factors or social distance but the fact is that something impedes one from writing about such subjects in Catalan. In my case, I have discovered that people in central Badalona are simply not interested in this subject —they live in a world that is totally alien. Proof of this is the way Badalona’s traditional industries have vanished and along with them the Catalan working classes who guaranteed the continuation

of the language. It has happened in a place that once boasted the greatest range of industry of any city in Spain.

I say this because I am the child of incomers and my mother tongue was Spanish. I was taught until the age of 20 in Spanish —like everyone else in my generation. That forced me to craft a literary style— one which I wanted to be less refined and artificial. The problem is that when you use another language for literary ends it is never as fluent as your mother tongue. When the first part of my trilogy was published, a critic said that the ordinary people in the story spoke too poshly. There was something in that because my style was based on what I had read. My cultural education took place through reading Catalan literature —in particular Espriu and, with regard to theatre, Adrià Gual.

The critic's comment raised an interesting issue, namely whether the working classes should speak poshly in literature. This touches on the author's purpose. For example, if one wants to write like Paco Candel —who tries to reflect a working class that does not express itself in a literary fashion— that is fine. Here, it is as if those speaking in the novel are witnesses and there is no intermediary between them and the reader. However, that was not my purpose. What interested me was the vanished world of my childhood —the crushed world of Badalona. I wanted to capture the images that haunted me— the people who had died in the Spanish Civil War, the exiles, Camp de la Bota<sup>2</sup>. As a writer, I was not interested that the trilogy concerned an immigrant district. That is because while there were immigrants, there were also Catalans who had lived there their whole lives —like the shopkeepers in my neighbourhood. These people refused to renounce either their language or history. Though I was too young to understand that at the time, I drew upon the experience later on. You might say that I was imbued by the literary and historical spirit of a bygone age. That is what created my style and it was based on an earlier body of literature. That is because when I was growing up, Spanish literature had no real impact beyond the Nadal awards —which were simply an invention of *Destino* magazine. Entry to the cultural world of the time was in Catalan, not Spanish. That has changed greatly over the last few years.

**- J. Cerdà:** Mercè Ibarz, you were born in Saidí, in the Franja de Ponent and opened up new literary territory and Francesc Serés followed in your footsteps. Have you managed to find a language that is sufficiently flexible to reach all Catalan-speaking areas?

**- Mercè Ibarz:** The language I learnt is an unwritten one —it is only spoken but is a very rich one nonetheless. I began my career as a journalist writing in Catalan. That means my language is strongly rooted in rural Catalan and I had the chance to use it intensively from a young age. So I don't really see the problem in reaching all Catalans given that I have the whole language at my disposal. I should say in passing that it was considered modern to write Catalan back in the 1970s —unlike today, when it is often labelled provincial.

■ <sup>2</sup> Translator's note: Camp de la Bota used to be an artillery base. Political prisoners were executed there both during and after the Spanish Civil War (1936-39). A small memorial to the 1619 people shot as part

of the post-war Fascist repression stood on the site until 2004. The plaque (which bore part of a poem by Màrius Torres) was bulldozed during building work for Barcelona's Universal Forum of Cultures.

In 1992, after two books of essays, I decided to set myself a literary challenge. I wanted my work to be read so I decided to write about my village and the changes it had been through. One way of getting people to read your work is to write about your would-be readers. It’s that simple. The fact is, people found it difficult to understand what I had written. Schoolchildren proved the key —they had learnt better than their elders and read my books out loud to their parents<sup>3</sup>.

I hate to criticise schools because they get enough flak but the fact is they have not done enough to turn out new generations of readers.

I have written two books in which I tackled the issue of writing in dialect because I wanted to reflect the language I had grown up with and spoken. In *La terra retirada* it was pretty straightforward. That was also more or less true of my next novel —*La palmera de blat*. Maybe I would now write them differently but as Sarsanedes said, it was a historic moment. I read a lot of Pavese at the time and that proved a great help —I intentionally adapted the dialect for literary purposes. I think it worked because the translator had no difficulty in rendering the work in French. From then, I ditched dialect —neither *A la ciutat en obres* or *Febre de carrer* contain it.

**- J. Cerdà:** Josep Pedrals, you are the youngest author here. You were born in a Catalonia that had theoretically restored the position of Catalan. Is writing in Catalan still a problem for those of your generation?<sup>4</sup>

**- Josep Pedrals:** That is something of a trick question because it is generally accepted that Catalan has been restored to its rightful place. Unfortunately, nothing could be further from the truth - there are Catalan philology students who make spelling mistakes. I owe my mastery of Catalan to my father, who was highly educated. At home, we had a magnificent library. He used to recite Verdaguer to me when I was still in the cradle and that gave me a mental literary language. The school I went to in Gràcia also helped —Catalan classes always involved learning poems by heart each week.

Writing in Catalan is the same as writing in any other language —as I see it, there is no real problem. In fact, it’s pretty silly to see it as a problem at all. We are often given the idea that writing in Catalan is a political act. The first reason I write in Catalan is because I was brought up in the language. The second is because I can easily show literary creativity in Catalan. The third is because I can make it sound in a way that I cannot equal in any other language. Basically, writing in Catalan makes aesthetic sense to me and I can take full advantage of its dialect variants. That is what literature boils down to. “The Catalan spoken today” is a phrase often used but just where and by whom is it spoken? In any case, language is a living thing and changes over time. Foix dressed Catalan in “an old smock”, a Mediaeval touch if you will, but wonderful nonetheless.<sup>5</sup>

■ <sup>3</sup> Translator’s note: reading comprehension among adults in Spain (and to a lesser extent in Catalonia) is generally below the European average.

<sup>4</sup> Translator’s note: Under almost four decades of Franco dictatorship, Catalan was either forbidden or actively discouraged by the regime. Restoring Catalan to its former glory is proving a difficult task.

<sup>5</sup> The phrase comes from a poem by J.V. Foix (1894-1987), *Sol i de dol*. The term used is “vetusta gonella”.

<sup>6</sup> Translator’s note: Paul Henderson Scott, *Still in Bed with an Elephant* (pub. The Saltire Society). The book concerns Scotland’s political union with England and makes a case for Scottish independence. England represents the “elephant” here.



**- J. Cerdà:** Let us focus on one of the main planks in the debate. What do you think of the work done to restore Catalan to its former glory and what role does literature play? Do you think literature can help restore Catalan's position or is it a fringe activity?

**- J. Pedrals:** It can help restore the language insofar as it makes people aware that Catalan literature exists. A couple of years ago, I went with Albert Roig to a secondary school to give sessions on teaching poetry and you could see the kids really enjoyed literature. Unfortunately, that tends to be the exception.

**- J. de Jòdar:** I don't think Catalan has regained its place. A country that has its own history, language and culture needs to be sovereign if it is to protect its heritage. In modern times and as things currently stand, it is the State that sets the pace in the language through education, public broadcasting, legislation, and terminology. If we accept that the State plays a key cultural and educational role—as is the case in France and many other places—it is clear that the prospects for a language are poor without one's own State. However, literature is not the only instrument for restoring the language. All of us should learn to write in Catalan. Nevertheless, when a State plays the roles I just mentioned, literature provides continuity and a kind of lab in which to link reality and imagination.

I doubt whether English kings spoke as they did in Shakespeare but it is important that the country's modern monarchs learn to speak English by reading him. Literature also plays a role in ensuring continuity in the collective imagination. While it helps a language play its proper role in society, it is first and foremost a factor in creating the national imagination.

At the moment, market forces are robbing Catalan of this role. Everything that is published is branded as literature. This is why Catalan is losing readers. There is a feeling that our literature may not be up to the challenges posed by a complex society that has undergone big changes. The lack of cultural policies only compounds the problem.

**- J. Sarsanedas:** The truth of the matter is that we are not only uncertain whether we have restored the role of Catalan but also unclear about what such restoration consists of. I would like to hear someone define it. In any case, we have lived in a bilingual society for a long time now. We are now used to the contact—and possibly the clash—between two languages. It is a common situation because the consolidation of nation states in Europe has created many cases of bilingualism. What is the situation here

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**I would like to stress that to assume this lie is a sure way of dooming our literature to provincialism”**

**JULIÀ DE JÒDAR**

in Catalonia? A bilingual system is shifting and unstable by its very nature and may quickly sweep away the weaker of the two tongues. Even so, we have had a bilingual system for the last few centuries and Catalan has avoided succumbing to Spanish so far. That is something we can be proud of.

As a young man, I was struck by the story of a woman living at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century who was the last speaker of Cornish. How many times have we heard that anecdote? However, I also think of a book by a friend of mine —Paul Scott— titled *Still in Bed with an Elephant*<sup>6</sup>. Obviously both Scots and Catalans share an “elephant” problem even if the beastie is different in each case.

I believe that all languages are worth conserving and provide different ways of both perceiving and shaping the world. Indeed, I would happily argue that the

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**MERCÈ IBARZ**

proliferation of languages enriches our exploration of the world and the realms of what is possible. I would also argue the need to disseminate knowledge through the world’s great languages (English, Russian, Chinese, and Spanish). But it is important that bilingualism does not lead to the extinction of the weaker of the two tongues.

What should be done? I think the only way is to convince the elephant to be gentle in his ways. The stronger party must be infinitely tolerant towards the other and accept the latter’s right to exist. There is no point in taking on three hundred million Spanish speakers. We need to get them to show a deep, almost tender tolerance towards Catalan.

**- J. Pedrals:** The problem is the elephant is often unaware there is anyone in the bed with it. Many Spaniards are unaware that we write in Catalan.

**- M. Ibarz:** I would like to go back thirty five years or so. I disagree with Vázquez Montalbán’s comment that “we lived better when we were fighting Franco”. However, back then we were more generous when it came to linguistic issues. I read Galician, Basque in translation, and a great deal in Spanish. Whether Spanish writers did the same is another question. Unfortunately, that kind of generosity is past and we suffer from lack of conviction or even, as Joan Fuster put it, from self-loathing. That has led to the most awful provincialism in contemporary Catalan culture.

**- J. Pedrals:** When I give readings abroad, people often ask me why they are in Catalan. But in Belgium and Portugal they find it the most natural thing in the world.

**- M. Ibarz:** The trouble, is we lack the strength of our convictions.

**- J. de Jòdar:** The question is why we have not learnt how to hunt elephants. When the dictatorship came to an end, in theory we had a golden opportunity to spread Catalan. Forty years ago, you could go to Madrid and see theatre in Catalan

and get an invitation at the Residencia de Estudiantes to recite Espriu. You would see Gabriel Celaya there in solidarity with the Catalan contingent. That is no longer true. The “elephant” has not learned wisdom —it has just got bigger. Frustration has taken hold of Catalonia given that all the resistance that built up in the struggle against Franco has not translated into real political power. That is why good people resign and turn their backs on public life. When politics loses any connection with the real world, culture becomes dependent on official favour. That explains the rampant provincialism in contemporary Catalan culture. The problem stems not from self-hate but from frustration. We’ve hidden our heads in the sand for thirty years now and that carries a high price. Culture needs to tap people’s energy. That means creating links and drawing on Catalonia’s core beliefs and driving forces. Beyond that, culture is merely ornamental.

**- M. Ibarz:** As far as artists are concerned, the political use made of culture is inexcusable.

**- J. de Jòdar:** You cannot separate culture and politics. After all, you write for a given society and if it chooses to ignore reality, writers end up in an ivory tower where they build their own little worlds. The problem is that we are like little islands, cut off from the rest of society.

**- M. Ibarz:** The market has its own rules. Let’s not fool ourselves —we operate in a market like everyone else. The changes that are happening in Catalan literature can be found everywhere. They say books have lost importance yet ever more are published. Many things have changed and we need to face the fact. Lastly, why should one write in Catalan? I will give you two reasons taken from different points in time. The first is Mercè Rodoreda, who got a letter from her publisher in the 1960s saying that she could count on a readership of 2,500 families (and that is still more or less the case). Rodoreda replied that writing in Catalan is also an act of revolt. Thirty years later, in 1997, Maria Mercè Marçal, said shortly before she died, that if she recovered from her illness she would become a Slovene. The fact is, Slovene authors are doing very well. It is not only that some of the best Slovene authors happen to be in the government, they are also writing good books ranging from literature to philosophy.

**- J. de Jòdar:** The problem with the “elephant” is that it would have us believe that it doesn’t snore, that it has a velvety skin, brings us breakfast in bed, and that all the beasts in the jungle strew flowers in its path. We are told that modern Spanish literature is better than ours —something that is patently untrue. When we make comparisons of the literature written in Catalonia, Ruiz Zafón is not in Monzó’s league, nor Palol up to the standard of Porcel or Valentí Puig. The elephant may or may not write good literature but it is anything but beautiful. I would like to stress that kidding ourselves that the elephant is beautiful is a sure way of dooming our literature to provincialism. The fact is the elephant is taking up the whole bed and is a fat, ugly heffalump. We have tried our best to nimbly avoid being crushed by the elephant. We could be likened to an animal that is half humming bird, half ostrich. An elephant is an elephant whatever lies we are told about it having a soft skin and not snoring in



bed. We suffer from a provincial complex that is fostered by the media and —worse still— by our institutions.

- **M. Ibarz:** Rodoreda also said that no one here is willing to say the emperor has no clothes.

- **J. Cerdà:** Isn't there a tendency to idealise Catalonia? Couldn't that be the source of the frustration you mentioned?

- **J. de Jòdar:** The last national poet, Espriu, was not complacent about Catalonia —quite the contrary. The same went for Pere Quart, let alone Pla.

- **M. Ibarz:** Our books are not complacent either. However, I fear that on the whole, Catalan literature at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has shown little ability to tap the imaginary world that Julià spoke of. I think we idealise things.

- **J. de Jòdar:** But Monzó does not idealise things —quite the reverse. His portrait of urban life in the 1980s is a searing indictment. Its sheer pessimism leaves no chink of hope.

- **M. Ibarz:** That is also a kind of distortion —the studied grotesqueness of it all can also be considered a kind of idealisation.

- **J. de Jòdar:** I am not sure whether literature has lost its role in the modern world of binding individual imaginations within a greater whole. TV3<sup>7</sup> does much more to shape this imaginary world, albeit in ways that many dislike. *El cor de la ciutat*<sup>8</sup> does not exactly help one think of Catalonia as a country. The ways in which knowledge is passed on have probably changed. Young people today have many more tools —such as Internet— at their disposal and this has led to a greater fragmentation of knowledge that is far removed from a Humanities-based approach. If our knowledge becomes fragmented, so too does our view of the world. Literature now seems to reflect the functional nature of things rather than —as in the past— providing the basis of a general education. In the past, reading was all we had.

- **J. Pedrals:** Oral literature, poetry recitals and drama are all forms of literature and I think may help us. There is currently a lot going on in the poetry recital scene and the audiences are very young.

- **J. Sarsanedas:** We deserve a pat on the back, not brickbats. After all, we're still here despite all the odds.

- **M. Ibarz:** Anna Murià said that there had never been so much written in Catalan as now. We idealise the 1930s but, if we look at the present, more people than ever write in Catalan and, what is more, in many different registers.

■ 7 Translator's note: A mass TV station forming part of Catalonia's public broadcasting corporation.

8 Translator's note: An interminable TV3 soap opera set in Barcelona's down-at-heel *Sant Andreu* district.

- **J. de Jòdar:** That's true.

- **J. Cerdà:** You have all talked about providing continuity when our age focuses on the fleeting moment. The relationship with tradition has changed and with it the points of reference. Is that true of Catalan literature? In other words, ought one speak so much of continuity and remaining faithful to a literary tradition?

- **J. Sarsanedas:** Almost certainly not but our own circumstances make us feel that way. The important thing is to tackle the issue calmly.

- **M. Ibarz:** I must say it again —we're not provincial. The other day, an English writer —Martin Amis— was asking why no one read the poet Philip Larkin any more. Is this not also a matter of continuity? The obsession with the here and now is a hallmark of our age. It isn't just a problem in Catalonia. In other words, our reference points are neither solely Catalan nor wholly literary.

- **J. Pedrals:** Video games are a reference point for me, daft though it may sound. I have writer friends in Madrid who currently churn out scripts for video games because it pays better.

- **M. Ibarz:** There's the rub. The question is whether you can earn a living writing in Catalan and the simple answer is "no".

- **J. Cerdà:** Let's go back to the beginning of the debate —what does it mean to write in Catalan today?

- **M. Ibarz:** Are we talking about money?

- **J. Sarsanedas:** Well, there's not much money to be had and that's a fact. As far as I am concerned, I have always written in a way that suits me. Maybe it isn't the best way to go about earning a packet but it just happens to be the right thing to do. We may be a pretty odd bunch for sticking at writing but I don't think there is any good reason for giving it up. Josep M. Benet recently brought out a new play, *Salamandra*, in which he reflected on decline and death. There are those who say Catalan is doomed to disappear. The pessimism is almost metaphysical.

- **M. Ibarz:** I think that is going to far. Catalan is very useful in expressing suffering and heroic resistance to fortune's slings and arrows.

- **J. Sarsanedas:** I suppose he didn't mean that, he spoke of death pure and simple. Authors in any language always write with the fleeting nature of existence in mind.

**“Writing in Catalan is the same as writing in any other language —as I see it, there is no real problem. In fact, it's pretty silly to see it as a problem at all”**

**JOSEP PEDRALS**

- **J. de Jòdar:** Catalonia has good cause to feel badly treated by History —that much is clear. However, there are lots of reasons for believing in Catalonia. I believe I write in Catalan as an act of gratitude. But if you ask me what I write, that is another matter. I write because I feel out of kilter with the world. Why do I write in Catalan? Well, maybe it is both a burden we bear and our salvation. I just happen to have been born Catalan and that is it.

- **M. Ibarz:** In my case as an act of revolt and because I doubt whether I could learn Slovene.

- **J. Pedrals:** To round off, I'd like to give you the following quartet:

La importància de l'artista  
és si té força i valor  
per ficar-se a l'autopista  
anant amb ciclomotor<sup>9</sup> ||

■ <sup>9</sup> A rough translation conserving the humorous intent and approximate rhyme scheme of the original might be:

The artist's worth resides  
In braving Fortune fickle  
And daring on highway ride  
On a clapped out motorcycle

This dialogue appeared in the journal **L'Avenç 308** (December 2005). Translation by Andrew Spence.