

Carles Torner

A tribute to storytellers and translators

In his essay *The Storyteller*, Walter Benjamin describes the loss of storytelling skills as an irreparable loss of memory. “Every morning brings us the news of the globe, and yet we are poor in noteworthy stories”. Poor in collective memories.

Benjamin situates the revelation of the crisis around what came back with the First World War —the comeback of the trenches— when, “A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn tram now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a force field of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body”. Then, what had been experienced became evident. “Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent —not richer, but poorer in communicable experience?”

Since the crisis of storytelling has been described as a crisis of the possibility of sharing experiences, the ethical challenge that wars and the great crimes of the 20th century have raised for us would, at first sight, seem insurmountable. This is because the ethical implication does not arise from the subject material of the story but from the possibility of sharing it. These and other debates have been forcefully raised with the different challenges that have emerged from the collective memory of the Spanish Civil War, the crimes of the Franco regime and even the collective amnesia about those crimes that was part and parcel of the transition to democracy. This monographic issue of **Transfer** addresses, from several points of view, the vicissitudes of history and collective memory in a country that has had to wait until thirty years after the dictator’s death to start opening up the mass graves of the murders he committed.

How is it possible to construct memory when the traces of the crime are absent? How can personal history become visible when the references for telling it have been erased from collective stories? These are questions that have been addressed by many Catalan writers and artists in recent decades. On 13th March 2008, an anthological exhibition of the work of one of the pioneers in this terrain, Francesc Abad, was opened in Berlin. Over the past four decades this artist has been guided

■ ¹ Translated into English by David H. Rosenthal and published by the American Institute for Catalan Studies, Houston, 2002.

² Translated into English by Anthony Bonner in *Selected Works of Ramon Llull (1232-1316)*, Princeton University Press, 1985.

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in his artistic production by Walter Benjamin's theses. "It has always been one of the most essential functions of art to engender a demand for which the hour of full satisfaction is yet to come". True to this avowal of Walter Benjamin, the work of Francesc Abad appears as a singular phenomenon in the Catalan and Spanish art scene because it is an incitement to new questions. His aesthetic investigations create an art form in memory of the victims of Franco's repression.

In 2007 the work of the best fiction writers who have given shape to the story of the Civil War and the crimes of the Franco regime were translated and attentively read by the toughest foreign critics. These works included both the classics of the 20th century (with the translation of Mercè Rodoreda's *Quanta, quanta guerra* [So Much War...] into German and of Joan Sales' *Incerta Glòria* [Uncertain Glory],¹ into French) and books by today's writers (with the striking success in Germany, both critical and in terms of sales, of Maria Barbal's *Pedra de tartera* [Mountain Scree] and Jaume Cabré's *Les veus del Pamano* [Voices from the River]). The year 2007 also saw the publication of an extraordinary book called *Carrers de frontera* (Frontier Streets). This volume of almost five hundred pages written by a hundred specialists reflects upon two centuries of exchange between Catalan and German letters. Since these literary traditions are so closely intertwined, Catalan

writers cannot be understood without thinking about them in a general context that links, for example, Maragall and Goethe, Riba and Hölderlin, Vinyoli and Rilke, and Ferrater and Kafka. These are classics of Catalan literature but they are also classics of the art of translation.

Following in their wake, Catalan culture was guest of honour at the Frankfurt Book Fair 2007, which became a festival of translation. The best account of the Catalan presence in Germany is condensed in the string of titles of Catalan literature translated into German in 2007: Ramon Llull's *Llibre de les meravelles* (*Book of Wonders*),² the three volumes of *Tirant lo Blanc* (*Tirant lo Blanc*),³ the three volumes of Salvador Espriu's complete poetic works, Víctor Català's *Solitud* (*Solitude*),⁴ Josep Pla's *El quadern gris* (*The Grey Notebook*)... through to Quim Monzó's *100 contes* (*100 Stories*), Albert Sánchez Piñol's *Pandora al Congo* (*Pandora in the Congo*),⁵ the anthologies of poetry by Pere Gimferrer and Joan Margarit... and up to fifty-three titles. Many Germans have now discovered a European literature that many of them were perhaps unaware of, but the most important thing is that they have discovered it not only through news about the books or discussions in the press but also as readers. Once again, **Transfer** can only open its pages by paying tribute to the task of the translator **||**

³ Translated into English with the same title by David H. Rosenthal, MacMillan, 1984.

⁴ Translated into English by David H. Rosenthal, Hishion House, 1992.

⁵ Translated into English by Mara Faye Lethem, Canongate Books, 2008.

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