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At the bottom of the pond

*Josep M. de Sagarra's
Vida Privada (Private Life) is
the work of a great portraitist*

Like Balzac, Josep Maria de Sagarra (1894-1961) is a force of nature. He is particularly well known as a poet and playwright, while his prose work consists of a considerable number of journalistic pieces, memoirs and three novels: *Paulina Buxareu* (1919), *All i salobre* (Garlic and Salt, 1928) and *Vida privada* (1932).

Together, these three works form a small Sagarra-style human comedy: the first depicts the summer daydream of the petit-bourgeoisie of Barcelona, the second the moral squalor of life at sea, and the third the decadence of the aristocracy and upper class.

Vida privada is, from its opening pages, the book of a great portraitist. The work begins with Frederic de Lloberola waking up in the room of his former lover after having met up with her again the previous night. The reader is immediately

treated to the first of a long series of dazzling descriptions:

The four chairs were overflowing with her things; the small dressing table was wilting under its burden of little flasks, powders, tweezers and scissors, while the open wardrobe was a sort of booth of lugubrious pomp with the dresses and coats on their hangers, vivid in colours and appliqués, looking like scrawny princesses from some fairground stall, all of them decapitated and with hooks stuck into their tracheas. On top of the wardrobe, empty, dust-caked hat boxes slumbered in the company of a stuffed dog. The dog had ended up in the hands of a

ham-fisted taxidermist, who had done a deplorable job with the stuffing, leaving all the stitches of his suturing visible among the belly pelt, which had been visited by moths. Its mistress had bedecked its neck with a bit of an old-fashioned garter on which three tiny satin roses, like three drops of blood, strove to keep body and soul together.

Sagarra then proceeds to describe the smell in the room. Next come Frederic's thoughts about the scene where he runs into his old lover again, laced with descriptions of his friends, acquaintances and manners and mores. Twenty pages on, Frederic de Lloberola is still stretched out on the bed, in the thick of an irresolvable moral conflict. Now, he takes the reader through his reflections and feelings until linking up with the family. The narrator then goes on to introduce the reader into a complicated mesh of historical, religious and economic issues. Frederic's brother, Guillem, moves to the foreground of the following scene, an erotic encounter adjusted to the going rate, and the book revolves around this.

Immobilised scenes

The 19th century realist novel is based on a succession of scenes with a counterpoint of summaries that make them comprehensible and perhaps necessary. In this type of novel, the descriptions of places and characters, along with biographical syntheses, have the function of furnishing the minimal information that gets the scenes underway, which is the author's concern and, in particular, it is these scenes that beguile the reader. Josep Maria de Sagarra, however, does the opposite.

The few scenes he offers wind down until, once immobilised, they are submitted to painstaking dissection. One can see that where Sagarra most enjoys himself is in description and *précis*. Throughout the

book, new characters keep appearing, presented very much at his leisure and very often having no function in the plot. More than a succession of characters in fluid interaction, *Vida privada*, consists of a string of personalities squeezed into impermeable compartments that are moved *en masse* while the remaining characters are held in suspense.

The reader leaves the book with the sensation that the individuals are not as important as the portrait of society and, in particular, the transformations to which the Barcelona elite is subjected between the First World War and the proclamation of the Republic. More precisely, the main theme of the book might well be the abyss that yawns between private vices and public virtues, in the extraordinary verbal pyrotechnics that contrast with the invisible detritus doggedly accumulating in the bottom of the pond.

At the end of this edition, Xavier Pla gives an account of the reactions to the book when it was first published. He notes, on the one hand, the moral reproaches, which now seem ridiculous and, on the other, the attribution of intentions that also seems out of place today. In all, the more literary reviews have aged better. Domènech Gansé was not far off the track when he wrote that the book had no unity, and neither was Guillem Díaz-Plaja when he noted that "there is more light-handed charm than architecture". In fact, Sagarra himself had warned that there was no coherence of plot in the book and that it was a hybrid product, somewhere between a novel and a report.

Digressions and pontification

All this is to say that *Vida privada* is a good book but not a good novel. Rather

than following in the wake of Stendhal or Dickens, it evokes Enlightenment experiments, those books of Diderot or Sterne, so full of more-or-less ironic disquisitions, excursions and pontificating, which are more concerned with establishing complicity between author and reader than with any arduous construction of a credible world. Rather than being an artisan who yields to the tyranny of verisimilitude, Sagarra is swept away by his own creative passion. As if he lacked faith in his abilities as a novelist, Sagarra concocts a plot that is the quintessential scandal: here one finds the *ménage à trois*, a murder in a brothel, blackmail, suicide, abortion, interracial and class-crossing love affairs, prostitutes, transvestites and anything that might bother the society of the nineteen thirties, with the additional twist of the *roman à clé*. Seventy-five years on, however, these elements are not as convincing as the power of the style, and Sagarra's ability to fashion sentences that entrance and move the reader. Yet the characters move in fits and starts, like automata. Apart from Bobby, Sagarra presents them condescendingly, with cold, surgical cruelty. Most of them are hypocrites, self-centred and inept. Rarely do they cross the threshold of pamphleteering caricatures. In this vein, here is one memorable description:

There was a tall man, with thinning white hair, high-coloured, worn-looking, vulgar, a cross between a police inspector and a seven-and-a-half player, with something of the clergyman and the tiger-tamer. This man was general Primo de Rivera.

Besides his pen-portraits, Sagarra excels in his description of places, from the drawing rooms of aristocrats at the top end of town, to modest little flats in the Eixample neighbourhood through to cabarets and the sordid bars in the low-life Raval district. We might do well to close this account of the book with another vintage quote:

The stairwell reeked of chicken wings, cheap cigars and rubbish bins, this special stench of some houses in Barcelona's Eixample area that everyone puts up with and no one knows where it's coming from, which the tenants note five or six times a day, while the concierge complains to the administrator, but nothing is ever done. To the natural stink on the stairs is added the smell of grievance, ill-humour, rancour and aimless protest. Sometimes the rankness comes from the washing trough; sometimes it's the piss of that German who sells drugs and special belts, so the smell of the German's piss mingles with the squalid salt cod that they're boiling up at the concierge's; then the stairwell produces a chemical reaction that makes one think of the beards of knights going off to the Holy Land, or the nightdress of the concubine of some old king of Castile. Sometimes the stench wafts from the souls of the ladies in the first-floor flat, completely dead and giving off the gamey reek of a dead animal that not even the crows want to know about ||