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,
one 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. Domènec 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.

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