

**Juan Pedro Quiñonero**

# Baltasar Porcel and Catalonia's *spiritual architecture*

Juan Ramón Jiménez coined the term *spiritual architecture* to describe what had been lost or was missing from the nation's life. He argued that these elements were needed if the nation was to awaken. Jiménez felt that Spain led a sleepwalking existence characterised by an unhealthy obsession with political, economic, diplomatic and military matters to the exclusion of everything else.

I used Jiménez's concept to structure my essay *–De la inexistència d'Espanya (2008)*<sup>1</sup>– in which I put forward a theory of my own, namely that Spain may have fallen from high principles into the meanest villainy, since the triumph of the ethics and aesthetics of the *picaresca*. The spiritual malady festered away over the centuries, sapping the soul of the Castilian nobility, whose fratricidal strife and cunning was so brilliantly portrayed by Quevedo and Baltasar Gracián, two writers who radically disagreed on what Spain's true nature was.

This canker had many dramatic symptoms. The veiled clash between Quevedo and Gracián concerning Catalonia went much further than a mere difference of opinion. It reflected the extent to which the historic and political damage wrought by the affliction of the spirit had begun to gnaw away at the social fabric and the very foundations of society.

Quevedo's vision of Catalonia was a perverse one: "Catalans are three-handed thieves. To rob the Church, they fall on their knees. They clasp their hands as if

■ <sup>1</sup> Book first published in 1998 in Spanish: *De la inexistència de Espanya*. Subsequent Catalan translation by Jaume Pomar.

in prayer yet the left hand holds another fashioned from wood thus freeing their right hands to steal with [...] The Catalans are a monstrous political abortion”<sup>2</sup>.

Quevedo's purpose went much further than merely insulting Catalans: it was to besmirch and undermine Catalonia itself and all that she was and had ever been.

By contrast, faced with the endless warring between Castilians and Catalans, Gracián speaks again and again of the nations of Spain: “A man of good judgment compared the four nations of Spain to the four ages of man and rightly so. [...] [Madrid] is a Babylon of Nations that find themselves sharing bad lodging”.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps Gracián's book and the concept of nation it contains should be required reading. His respect for the various historic identities “badly lodged” in Madrid is laudable.

My book *De la inexistència d'Espanya* drew on Verdaguier, Maragall, Carnet, Pla, Riba, Rodoreda and Baltasar Porcel, among others, and recalls Goya's painting in which Saturn –metaphorically representing Spain– devours his children. Meanwhile, horror-stricken Castilians look on. Hence Luis Cernuda's comment “Spain has died” following the exile of millions of Spaniards during the 1936 Civil War, uprooted souls lost in the three worlds of which Juan Ramón wrote. Spain's death agony is captured by the great Baroque poets and the anguished generation of '98. This contrasts with a Catalan tradition whose roots were put down by Ramon Llull and which –for the moment at least– ended with Aribau, the *Renaixença* [Catalonia's 19th century political and cultural renaissance], driven

by an urge to establish what Porcel would term Catalonia's “spiritual architecture”.

*El cuerpo espiritual*<sup>4</sup> is the title of an article by Porcel on Josep Pla. The book ends with these words: “Literature and the arts form the spiritual bedrock of a country both in historical and in day-to-day terms. While a country's politicians seldom make great contributions in these fields, nevertheless they govern those who do. Economics is of great importance here. Barbados, a tax haven, is a paragon in this respect. In this context, what does Catalonia's Statute of Autonomy mean? I fear the answer is impoverishment. We have to draw up a Cultural Statute for Catalonia's culture or else we shall merely end up running the country in the same way a CEO runs a firm”.

In Porcel's work, the origin of this spiritual architecture lies in his first book of essays, *Els xuetes mallorquins* (1969). These essays took final form in *Les illes encantades* (1984). In particular, I think the essay titled *El ser de las Baleares*<sup>5</sup> holds the key not only to Porcel's identity and nature but also to his native land and oeuvre.

*El ser de las Baleares* begins by quoting the final verse of a poem by Bartomeu Rosselló-Porcel, *A Mallorca, durant la Guerra Civil*:

*Tota la meva vida es lliga a tu,  
com en la nit les flames a la fosca.*

(My whole life is wedded to you  
as flames are bound to the night.)

Given this fiery stanza, Porcel asked: “Did the verse of Rosselló-Porcel merely exude short-sighted parochialism or did

■ <sup>2</sup> *La rebelión de Barcelona ni es por el güevo ni es por el fuero.*

<sup>3</sup> *Agudeza y arte de ingenio* and *El criticón.*

<sup>4</sup> “El cuerpo espiritual”. *La Vanguardia* newspaper, 2nd June 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Porcel, Baltasar, “El ser de las Baleares”, *Cuenta y Razón*, issue 7 (Summer 1982).

it reveal a much deeper link to man's spirit in general and to Balearic man's in particular? [...] I would wager that the latter is the right interpretation".

*El ser de las Baleares* can be seen as Porcel's first attempt to sketch a "spiritual architecture" of his homeland or *Heimat*<sup>6</sup>.

It was to become a recurrent, essential theme in the rest of his work, reaching its greatest expression in his last two novels –*Olympia a mitjanit* (2004) and *Cada castell i totes les ombres* (2008)– and his posthumously published book: *El cel i la terra segons Baltasar Porcel* (2009).

In a way, *Olympia a mitjanit* is a novel that tells of "the end" of Mallorca, a chronicle of the destruction of all its main values, foundations, and the relationships both tangible and intangible that forged the island's society and with it, Mallorcan man' as depicted in Rosselló-Porcel's poem. Only Mallorca's tales of *boiets* or demons<sup>7</sup> survive the wreck. These spirits of place symbolise hope and are conjured up through both the written and spoken word.

In Porcel's work, the construction of a mythical land is used to craft a "spiritual architecture" that melds past and present and whose bounds go beyond those of the author's native land to embrace Catalonia and the Mediterranean.

In fact, many of the characters and stories in Porcel's Andratx cycle are

either influenced or possessed by devils and spirits of place that echo the *boiets* (demons) of Mallorcan folklore. These spirits are imaginary beings who are called upon to give mortals moral and spiritual succour. In Porcel's words, it is the dead beneath flowering almond trees who weave the stuff of which both dreams and real life are made.

The same occurs in *Mediterrania. Onatges tumultuosos* (1996), which is not a history book or a poem or a literary conceit. Rather, it draws upon History, Art, Architecture, cuisine and personal memory. Porcel constructs his own world that is the flip side of this mythical world yet is more real than our contemporary Mediterranean one, which is plagued by political fragmentation, endemic social crises, opposing political models, age-old armed conflicts, voluntary and forced migrations, among other ills. Porcel is aware of all these tragedies but, in this enlightened book, he argues that the only solution to such conflicts lies within a community of Mediterranean peoples that reflects undeniable historical and geographical realities.

Despite the wide range of divisions and clashes found between Mediterranean lands, there are also strong geographical and historical links between its peoples. This shared heritage is all too often sacrificed on the altar of political and financial gain. As a result, the

■ <sup>6</sup> Dictionaries tend to translate the German word *Heimat* by *homeland*. However, *Heimat* as used by Nietzsche and Heidegger goes deeper than that. As Luis Rosales puts it, *Heimat* is the soul's natural abode. In commenting on the purpose or final consummation of metaphysics and poetry, Heidegger stressed that modern man suffers the tragedy of the loss of his *Heimat* whether through exile form or destruction of his homeland. This loss of roots, Heidegger argues, has terrible consequences. To some extent, the survival of the spirit involves seeking and rebuilding

this moral, earthly and spiritual home. The absence of *Heimat* condemns man to a rootless, Godless existence. Jünger said that the great task facing 21<sup>st</sup> century man was to "spiritually repopulate" a world that has been wickedly colonised and laid waste by industry. We thus find ourselves once again in the war between the Titans and the Gods, with the latter losing ground and possibly facing annihilation.

<sup>7</sup> See Quiñero, Juan Pedro, "Porcel i la construcció de Catalunya", *Lluc* 870 (October, November, December 2009).



spiritual architecture nurtured over the centuries begins to totter and the bonds that tied communities together weaken and sunder. The *Heimat* is threatened when what used to be a communion of like-minded souls begins to fall prey to the demons of old.

This battle, so like the war between the Titans and the Gods related in Hesiod's *The Theogony*, was the main theme of Porcel's last novel: *Cada castell i totes les ombres* (2008). In it, Porcel highlights the historical links forged between Catalonia's society, institutions, language and culture.

The novel is a scathing, riotous chronicle (evidently inspired by Valle Inclán and by Josep Pla's *Nocturn de primavera*, 1953) of the erosion and destruction of Catalonia's morale and spirit at the hands vengeful demons. Porcel partially reconstructed the ensuing trials and tribulations in his Barcelona Cycle of stories and novels and later on in his bitingly witty monologue *Lola i els peixos morts* (1994).

In *Cada castell i totes les ombres*, Porcel speaks of a Messianic Creator who nurtures Olympian striving for love, pleasure, passion, fecundity, Art –in short, what Joan Maragall termed *aigua virginal* (clear springs). In this, he drew on inspiration from Lull, Verdaguier, Rodoreda's *Quanta, quanta Guerra* (1980) and *Viatges i flors* (1980). This spiritual force was rooted in memory and the Catalan language and found expression in various stories, including those in *Difunts sota els ametllers en flor* (1970).

In *Cada castell i totes les ombres*, Barcelona is an urban theatre suffering Calvary in which it is unclear whether its

two protagonists are in their death throes or on the verge of redemption in the unfolding tragedy. In the book, Catalonia is the victim of ideological nihilism, its culture threatened, its citizens reduced to zombies publicly devouring their fellows. Yet at the same time another Catalonia lives on whose greatest talents are capable of dreaming of new worlds and scaling the heights of Art and Literature. The work likens Catalonia to a Ship of Fools, in this case a motley crew of crazed ideologues destined to end up in a Catalan theme park to delight naïve American students seeking “local colour”.

Yet there is another Catalonia, which goes its own sweet way, building upon its rich language to bespeak its delight in communication, creation and Art (in Porcel's case, Italian, Renaissance, Greek and Classical Art). Here, there are no holds barred. Instead, the Catalan language and mindset provide a moral and spiritual architecture that is refreshingly free of fratricidal strife and cant.

The denizens of this Messianic Catalonia are a mixed bunch, like those found in Josep Pla's *Homenots* (Little Men) and the line between fact and fiction is blurred. Pla fleshes out his protagonists as he goes along so as not to hold up the story.

Following suggestions by Jaume Vicens i Vives, Pla's *Homenots* are exemplary biographies whose purpose is to re-awaken Catalans' civic pride. Menéndez Pidal felt that a historical biography of Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar was urgently needed and this idea inspired one of his best works, *La España del Cid* (1929)<sup>8</sup>. Ortega created

Jo a 65 (Me at 65), Miquel Barceló (2009)  
Ceramic, 16 x 37 x 46 cm

■ <sup>8</sup> The mythical flip side of which is the story of the protagonists in my novel *El caballero, la muñeca y el tesoro* (2005).

a collection of biographies. These were a step towards rebuilding Juan Ramón Jiménez's "spiritual architecture", which Spain's age-old "demons" were threatening to tear down.

To some extent, Porcel's *Homenots* was written in the form of interviews and these were partially compiled in *L'aguila daurada: grans creadors de la Catalunya del segle xx* (2003). Here, Porcel's hero was Joanot Colom (-1523), the hero of the Mallorcan brotherhoods and the protagonist of *Els gegants*<sup>9</sup> (2009), of which the author only wrote a chapter:

The reasons for this study will become clear as we go along. My purpose here is to discover the true nature of Joanot Colom –the man within the statue if you will– and of the revolt of the Mallorcan guilds against aristocratic privileges. Although he did not forge a new world, his call for freedom made the welkin ring. If I am successful, Joanot Colom will rise again, floating unconquered in a cubic void over his marble plinth and his host will once again wield sickles in anger. I close my eyes and see it clearly. God Be Praise!

Here, Porcel clearly evoked a kind of "spiritual body" to discern Catalonia's national identity and essence through Josep Pla's work. Such an exercise is needed if Catalonia's is to fashion a "spiritual architecture" capable of withstanding social, political and economic storms.

As Porcel rightly noted, Joanot Colom and his confederates did not create a new world but their battle cry did shake up the existing one. Colom's words sowed seeds that live on in men's minds, as does Porcel's spell for releasing the spirit imprisoned in Colom's statue.

We know little of Joanot Colom other than that he had his throat cut for daring to dream of a new and better world. Porcel proposed building a monument to him that spoke of resistance and final victory through Messianic Art and Culture. He spoke too of blithe spirits that stir mere flesh and blood to build a "spiritual architecture" strong enough to withstand assault by the legions of darkness (which often take the guise of occupying armies)<sup>10</sup> ||

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■ <sup>9</sup> "Els gegants" is the first chapter of *El cel i la terra segons Baltasar Porcel* (2009), a posthumous anthology that Alexandre Porcel and Emili Rosales prepared and to which they wrote a foreword.

<sup>10</sup> The main theme of my *Anales del alba* (2000). Our friendship dates a long way back to a journey we made to California, which left a deep impression on us both.