

Vicenç Pagès Jordà by Sara Serrano Valenzuela

(translated by Anna Barlow Ferrater)

Vicenç Pagès Jordà (born Figueres, 1963) belongs to a generation of Catalan language writers who did not have to struggle against Franco, but who felt the pressure and presence of Francoism during their childhood and adolescence in the sixties and seventies.

They are writers who deal with the exploration of the self – loneliness, lack of communication, longing for a community – and, even more important, who write without offering solutions. The narrative of now, which this generation cultivates, exposes different character outlooks and opinions and leaves to the reader the act of resolving or not resolving the situation.

Vicenç Pagès began his literary journey in 1990 with the publication of *Cercles d'infinites combinacions* (Circles of infinite combinations). It is a collection of twelve short stories about characters who collide constantly with reality, who are lost and who search for intensity in life, but they will not find it. What is special about these tales is that they have their origins in other literature – whether a tone alluding deliberately to Mercè Rodoreda or linguistic parallels with Pompeu Fabra – and in the cultural events which condition it.

It would take five years before *El món d'Horaci* (The world of Horace, 1995) was published, an experimental novel, straddling fiction and a creative essay, which would mark an inflection point in Pagès' trajectory. Television, the theme of duplicity, academia and, above all, the Barcelona setting create a collage formed by the different spaces of a student flat in the Gràcia district – at the end of the book the delineation of spaces is appended to this map. Moreover, the slang used by the characters – *cutiflinx*, *mameluc*, *butiflai* – breathes life into the experimental fiction. The fact that the novel features the map, tokens and the protagonist's notebook is not gratuitous, but rather points to a constant in the writer's literary calculation: the combination of formats.

Carta a la reina d'Anglaterra (Letter to the Queen of England, 1997) is the novella which led to Vicenç Pagès' recognition in wider circles. Through the fable of a blacksmith who makes a pact with the devil, the author reflects on human immortality.

At the same time, using the fable format takes us through the western world from the Middle Ages to the present day, while giving us an overview of the issues which have always preoccupied human beings. The agile and fluid style does not impede the flood of irony across the book's pages.

The subject of duplicity, highlighted in *The world of Horace*, is the central theme of the collection, *En companyia de l'altre* (In each other's company, 1998). It consists of ten short stories, twelve thumbnails – mini-biographies of characters who live up to the adjective which defines them – and an epilogue which includes figures representing each theme, such as Fernando Pessoa, Jorge Luis Borges and Edgar Allan Poe. The stories show the different possibilities leading to the disintegration of identity: identical twins, split personalities, altered states, transfiguration and even the migration in life to another body. The technical execution of each ending, the verisimilitude and commonplace approach to the treatment of each theme, and the multiplicity of forms of identity projected on to these pages, could almost lead the reader to doubt his or her own identity.

As for the broader narrative, in 2003 appeared *La felicitat no és completa* (Happiness is not complete). It could be said that it is Vicenç Pagès' most generational novel, portraying his own generation, who did not have to struggle against Franco, but who felt the pressure and presence of Francoism during the sixties and seventies. Seven chapters trace the life of Àngel Mauri, to whom nothing happens but everything happens. The reader cannot avoid this because this is precisely where its originality lies. While in *The world of Horace* the impression is evident, in *Happiness is not complete* the inner world devours everything surrounding it. There is something else which the reader cannot help but notice: the musical references which run throughout the work. And with these musical brushstrokes the author ensures we come as close as possible to each character.

Related to the theme of this work, in 2005 *El poeta i altres contes* (The poet and other stories) was published. They are fictitious biographies accompanied by photos of the supposed subjects, and narrated with a richly expressive language, between humour and tragedy. The link with *Happiness is not complete* lies in the fact that all these lives describe people who have come to realise, perhaps too late, that happiness does not exist.

Els jugadors de whist (The Whist players, 2010) is a book which examines the crisis of a man of forty who remembers his life during his daughter's wedding. But to say only this would be to diminish it. For starters, it is a portrait of three generations, the focus of which is Jordi Recasens – a man who has ended up installed in his garage as a wedding photographer. We live the crisis of being forty from a humorous and ironic perspective, and although the author adopts the point of view of a mediocre character, at the same time, he is capable of revealing the tragic aspects of his existence.

Vicenç Pagès, as in previous works, correlates formats, and it is in *The Whist players* that this constant is raised to its highest level. Newspaper, musical and film references, the influence of new technologies and social media configure within one of modern Catalan literature's most detailed portraits of our society. The fact that characters' names follow Fotolog handles – Bad Boy, Three Martinis – and that some chapters are written as entire blog posts, prove this.

With *El llibre de l'any* (Book of the Year, 2011) the author has opted for a collection of stories which bring together celebrations and moments experienced during 365 days of a year.

Vicenç Pagès belongs to a generation of Catalan language writers who introduce innovative elements to contemporary narrative. They are writers who deal with the exploration of the self – loneliness, lack of communication, longing for a community – and, even more important, who write without offering a moral solution. It is through seeing different character outlooks and opinions, that the reader becomes responsible for resolving or not resolving the situation. This applies to *mutatis mutandis*, together with *Rodalies* outskirts, 2004) and *Marina*(2010)by Toni Sala; to Jordi Puntí with *Maletes perdudes* (Lost Luggage, 2010) and the recent publication of *Els castellans* (Spaniards, 2011); and to Francesc Serés with his collections *La força de la gravetat* (The force of gravity, 2007) and *Contes russos* (Russian tales, 2010). In short, we are talking of a generation of writers who have opened a new path in Catalan narrative which still has a long way to go.