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REVIEWS

Pere Calders, *The Virgin of the Railway and Other Stories*.
Translated by Amanda Bath. Warminster, England: Aris and
Phillips, 1991, 151 pages. \$22

Writing in these same pages, back in 1989, about Shelley Quinn and Albert Forcadas' translation of Manuel de Pedrolo's *Trajete final*, I deplored the fact that Catalan authors were not being translated into English in sufficient numbers and accused publishing companies of being less than adventurous when it came to the marketing of authors from little-known cultures. I hoped, then, that these tendencies would be soon reversed. Although there is still much that needs to be done in this area, thanks to the work of presses such as The Seal Press and now Aris and Phillips, more and more Catalan writers are being introduced to the English-speaking world.

The book under review here is the first of a series of publications of works by contemporary Catalan authors that the Centre for Mediterranean Studies, at the University of Bristol, in cooperation with the Institut Català d'Estudis Mediterranis, and the Institute of Catalan Literature, acting for the Department of Culture of the Generalitat, which sponsors the promotion of Catalan literature abroad, will make available to the English-language market. And a timely one it is. Unless I am mistaken, this is the first time that Pere Calders, one of the most important contemporary Catalan writers, but basically unknown outside of his native Catalonia, is made accessible to English-language readers.

This book contains a two-page foreword, written by Geoffrey Pridham, Director of the Centre for Mediterranean Studies, an eighteen-page introduction, prepared by the translator, Amanda Bath, eleven short stories, a bibliography of publications by Pere Calders and a useful (for those who read Catalan and Castilian) select bibliography of studies on Calders work. It features as well eight charming caricatures drawn by Calders himself. Interestingly, this is a bilingual edition, with the English translation presented opposite the original text.

Despite its brevity, the introduction covers a lot of ground. In «Pere Calders's Life and Times», Bath, a recognized expert who wrote her postgraduate thesis on Calders, discusses the political and cultural movements that existed just prior to Calders' birth and during his formative years, traces Calders' early artistic pursuits, as a writer and caricaturist, follows him through the Spanish Civil War, into exile in Mexico, back to Barcelona in 1962, after twenty-three

years in exile, and lists the many prizes that he has won since his talent was finally recognized. In «Calders' Short Stories», the best part of this introduction, Bath analyzes the structure of Calders' stories, the narrative techniques he employs, and the characters that populate the usually fantastic world he creates. Two other brief sections complete the introduction: «Humor in Calders' Work», and «The Message of Calders».

The Virgin of the Railway and Other Stories is made up of eleven short stories, out of the more than two hundred that Calders has published to date. Amanda Bath has clearly attempted to offer the reader a selection that spans over a thirty-year period, varies in content and length (the shortest has two lines; the longest seventeen pages), and is representative of his several creative periods. These stories are excellent representatives of Calders' art and afford the English-language reader an opportunity to enter for the first time into a world of «magic realism» where incongruity dominates, surprises abound, fantasy coexists with the mundane, and a distinctive brand of humor prevails.

Calders' preoccupations are clearly existential. The Caldersian character, as Bath asserts, «is the ubiquitous "little man": a tiny cog in the machinery of a modern, industrialized society» (p. 11) Calders depicts with amused detachment this modern man as he attempts rather unsuccessfully to cope with his environment.

Although it can be said that Calders belongs to the first generation of the so-called «magic realist» school of writers, those reading him for the first time will not fail to recognize as well the influence of such writers as Poe, Kafka, and Pirandello. The world he creates is also reminiscent of that presented in the Theater of the Absurd.

A word about the translation. Although at times the English language seems to fail Bath, as she attempts to convey the poetic beauty and linguistic richness of some of Calders' rather idiosyncratic expressions, her translation is of very high quality and makes Calders eminently accessible and enjoyable.

In the «Foreword», Pridham informs the reader that «other Catalan writers being considered for translation include Mercè Rodoreda, Joan Perucho, Salvador Espriu, and Baltasar Porcel». Given the quality of this first publication one can only hope that the translation of works by these and other Catalan authors will soon follow.

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Abelló - Anglada - Arderiu - Ballester - Fuster - Leveroni - Marçal - Pessarrodona - Salvà, *Survivors*, bilingual edition, selected and translated by D. Sam Abrams, Institute of North American Studies, Barcelona 1991.

El món cultural i acadèmic català ja coneix l'activitat sòlida i rigorosa de D. Sam Abrams. Aquesta antologia que presentem avui confirma tant la seva capacitat traductora com l'organització coherent que fa de la seva tria. La mà de l'antòleg i traductor no es limita a posar de renglera una sèrie de versos d'altri, sinó que els estructura en una unitat que li pertany, tot respectant, com cal, l'autoria de les escriptores que tradueix.

L'antologia és regida per una intenció unitària, ideològica, d'homenatge a les dones que escriuen i, a través d'elles, a totes les dones. La dedicatòria, les cites i la breu introducció que obren el llibre ens deixen clar, amb encert concís, que si la literatura es deu potser a una pulsio de supervivència, en la dona hi ha, a més, la necessitat d'afirmar-se des d'una situació tradicionalment marginada, en què s'ha discutit, no ja la seva capacitat artística, sinó la seva plenitud humana. Tenim, doncs, un bon recull de supervivents en aquest doble sentit.

Si la portada ens presenta el nom de les autores per ordre alfabètic, que les situa en un pla igualitari d'importància, a l'interior del llibre apareixen per ordre cronològic: M. Antònia Salvà, Clementina Arderiu, Rosa Leveroni, Montserrat Abelló, Felicià Fuster, M. Àngels Anglada, Marta Pessarrodona, Margarita Ballester i Maria-Mercè Marçal.

El conjunt ens sembla encertat per diversos motius:

-Com a lector, tria, amb gust segur, poemes representatius que, sense ser-ho tant, reflecteixen les afinitats electives, la complicitat cultural que ens acosta als mots dels altres i ens els fa estimar.

-Com a antòleg, ens ofereix una selecció equilibrada.

-Com a traductor, és fidel als poemes originals, i això vol dir que ho és essencialment als quatre elements que els constitueixen: al sentit i a la forma de la llengua, però també a l'autor i al lector. Crec que en anglès no perden el contingut que els han donat les autores catalanes i poden ser llegits per un lector equivalent, en el qual despertem impressions anàlogues.

La tria de la forma és molt sovint la més delicada, perquè és la més difícil de conservar sense forçar-la fins a límits que en podrien esbravar el contingut. Sam Abrams ha resolt amb criteri unitari aquest aspecte, amb un anglès en què el ritme sintàctic llisca sense violència i esdevé ritme poètic. Defuig així la dificultat de reflectir el paral·lelisme mètric o rítmic dels versos originals.

Evita els poemes d'excessiva complexitat formal. Ha traduït, en gran part, poemes en vers blanc o lliure. Només en set dels poemes catalans trobem una rima rigorosa i, en un parell més, rima assonant. Això li permet més llibertat de ritme, que apunta, didàcticament, al poema original que tenim al costat, però que es deixa llegir amb valor poètic derivat de la construcció anglesa.

L'ús de majúscules és determinat, a la catalana, per l'ús sintàctic i no perquè iniciïn un vers, fins i tot quan tradueix els poemes de M. A. Anglada, que els comença tots en majúscula.

És arriscat per a un lector no nadiu jutjar com sonen els versos en anglès i, molt més, apuntar solucions alternatives. A més, quan en algun cas dubtem d'una solució concreta, ens adonem, després de pensar-hi, que és la més plausible, com en les difícils traduccions dels poemes de Felicià Fuster. Potser ens xoca una mica la *insignificant death* com a traducció de la *mort petita*, però hi trobem fragments magníficament resolts:

Obscure have i run, hiding, perhaps,
behind the thread of interrupted
dream, sleeping
in empty baskets, waiting
for grandmothers
that lead
with hands of wind, clover, extenuated
treasures
from expired springtimes. (p. 63.)

En algun cas, per exemple a *Quatre coses*, de M. A. Salvà, hi trobem a faltar la senzillesa popular que ens transmet la rima catalana, i la traducció resulta més prosaica. *Providència*, com que manca de rima, es presta més a la ductilitat de l'anglès de Sam Abrams.

Tota traducció té aspectes que la llengua mateix fa de difícil solució. Com es pot traduir el datiu ètic de *se't fon* (p. 104, 1.5)? Com que en anglès la mort és masculina, el *he* (*Presence of Death*, 31.17) em fa pensar més aviat en el pare acabat d'esmentar, si bé el títol ja en dona la pista adient. Al mateix poema (31.3), no caldria repetir l'article davant de *pink*? Potser *Thou* escauria més que *you* al *Tu* de Rosa Leveroni (42.6). *Arbres d'hivern sense ufana* (78.1) em suggereixen més la manca de frondositat, i no estic segur que el *pride* de la traducció no ho desvirtuï una mica. Recull *trade* el sentit de *skill* que té l'expressió *tenir ofici* (96.16)? Si bé literal, *agile* (99.4) em sona poc lleuger, poc «swift», per a l'*àgil* català.

Tot plegat quatre ombres d'objecció, que no afecten el conjunt i que estic disposat a admetre que responguin a una percepció, per part meua, no prou fina de l'anglès.

La paràfrasi o la puntualització, ben legítimament, apareixen algun cop: *aferrissat / raging and clinging* (13.10), *i / and yet* (21.4), *marceja / roars or bleats* (23.4). De vegades interpreta, volent-lo precisar, el significat: *classe baixa / working class* (103.2), *companya / bedfellow* (87.7), o hi troba un equivalent que li sembla més adient: *vareta / hammer* (33.10).

Més important, però, que qualsevol observació de detall és la bona impressió que crea el llibre com a unitat; la possibilitat del lector de parla anglesa d'accedir a veus poètiques catalanes sense que es perdi l'essència que les fa sobreviure. Ens basta assenyalar-la en breus fragments. En un poema de Maria-Mercè Marçal:

By day i am the worker
of fate raising walls
around you, the convicted
traitor of your
future. Yet at night
i am the reckless hand
mining the foundations
and your fellow conspirator,
throwing dice with death (107).

o en una frase de Rosa Leveroni:

i want the gentle silence of the seagull's flight (37.3).

JOAQUIM MALLAFRÈ

Mercè Ibarz, *Mercè Rodoreda*. Barcelona: Editorial Empúries, 1991. 140 pp. Chronological table. Selected bibliography. Montserrat Casals i Couturier, *Mercè Rodoreda; contra la vida, la literatura*. Barcelona: Edicions 62, 1991. 350 pp. Illustrations. Selected bibliography.

Mercè Ibarz's biography of the author of *The Time of the Doves* is cast in a somewhat gushy style and follows what to me seems an excessively vindicating path; it is nevertheless an eminently readable essay and a fine introduction to a fascinating life. Ibarz presents Mercè Rodoreda as a rebel and a survivor, a woman of great will and talent, one richly deceived by life, and by men. The man

who was both Rodoreda's uncle and husband and symbol of her oppression remains little more than a shadow in this book: the stingy boor who would have a meek, though pretty, homemaker for a wife. Their son, whom Ibarz sees as having some unspecified but serious psychological problems in his later years, remains another mystery. Ibarz's reader gets a slightly better sense of Rodoreda's long-time lover, Joan Prat, the man who signed his few writings with the pen name Armand Obiols. Obiols is shown here as a typically greedy man, someone unwilling either to return to his legitimate wife in Spain or divorce her in favor of his «wife» in exile, Rodoreda, who was known in Paris as Mme. Prat. He also took to manipulating Rodoreda's creative output. Ibarz passes no judgment on this character's overall influence on Rodoreda, and invites the resigned supposition that in its ups and downs the affair was no different from most long-term relationships. Rodoreda appears possessively in love with Obiols, both attracted and disappointed by him.

Many of Rodoreda's narrators are men: the eccentric, the dissident, the obsessive, the mad. Her female narrators tend to be the innocent, the tired, the disenfranchised, even the unaware victims of direct violence, but also the resilient: resisters, endurers. These are the two sides of Rodoreda's personality that begin to emerge in this helpful biography.

For all its merits, however, Ibarz's work pales in comparison with the more detailed, extensive, and personally drawn biography by Montserrat Casals i Couturier. Casals's book held my interest unflinchingly. It shows an admirable familiarity with Rodoreda's work; it is both a biography and a dialogue with Rodoreda's fiction: abundant and pertinent quotations from the works punctuate Casals's points about the life. The biography is also a critical exploration, and betrays a rare intensity of emotion in the biographer. Casals shows that she has read a copious amount of documentation—letters, journals, memoirs—relating to Rodoreda, to Armand Obiols, and in general to the world of postwar Catalan literature in exile. The main appeal of Casals's book, of course, lies in the emergence of Rodoreda as a character, independent both from the control of the biographer and from Rodoreda's self-portrayal in the many interviews she granted and the few prefaces she wrote after her return to Catalonia in 1978.

Rodoreda's fiction is marked by her astonishing sensitivity to the pain of others. Details in her novels and short stories are microscopically described; some of her descriptions lure the reader's eye, for example, to a piece of crumbling wall, or to an old pine table scratched by a curious, seemingly distracted fingernail. Similarly, Rodoreda penetrates with great empathy the souls of her characters, both male and female, good and bad, sane and crazed. Zerafina, that lisping naïve who bears no resentment for the economic exploitation perpetrated upon her or for the rape of her body, and yet is ultimately aware of her sacrificial fate (without such wordless awareness she could not function as the

narrator of the story that bears her name in *La meva Cristina i altres contes*), Zerafina, then, is a clear example of the kind of narrator-character that abounds in Rodoreda's stories and who manage to move us so deeply.

The Rodoreda who emerges in Casals's book is a whiny, relentless, almost callous pursuer of financial independence and literary glory. Clearly ambition failed to poison Rodoreda's creativity –if Casals's portrait is as true as it is convincing. Anyhow, this picture hangs together, it makes sense. The woman concerned about her image –literary and otherwise–, fussy about her comfort, the jealous and possessive lover, seems not at all alien, reading this biography, to the wide-eyed, silent, and self-denying young women of so many short stories and novels. Or to their hardened, obsessive, and cowardly men. I have never felt a stronger union between Rodoreda the writer and her characters than in reading this biography, the perfect companion to Rodoreda's work.

Another beguiling character in Casals's book is of course Rodoreda's lover, Armand Obiols. Casals herself seems to have felt a strong affinity for Obiols: her book pays homage to his sharp, book-wormish, indefatigable, and ultimately loving image. You can almost see in Casals's pages his tobacco-stained fingers leafing through the latest novel, his eyes straining behind his thick and heavy-rimmed glasses, his yellowing smile and saturated breath as Obiols is described in bed reading, while next to him Rodoreda pouts. Rodoreda and Obiols are both one another's character and one another's author. Not that Casals implies that Obiols had any definitive influence on Rodoreda's literature –whatever that accusation, raised by some and reported in this book, might mean. And not that I have myself somehow formed that impression. Rodoreda needs no co-author, no live-in support system, no *eminence grise*. But an important part of Rodoreda's talent lies in having used Obiols—as a first reader, critic, supporter, adviser, and ideal audience who, fortunately, accompanied her in her long French and Swiss exiles. Rodoreda for many years relied on Obiols and, surely, molded him into the kind of reader she needed—even after she met Joan Sales, her devoted but demanding editor/publisher. Sales also fell, as had previously fallen Andreu Nin, Francesc Trabal, and perhaps even Rafael Tasis and Josep Carner, into the ensnaring charms of Rodoreda as a woman and as a writer, and theirs are some of the stories in this book. As for Obiols, an important part of his talent lies in having allowed himself to become a reader, an editor, a critic: to be no one to his own literary fame and everyone to the other writer's art.

When Obiols was dying in Vienna, Rodoreda came from Geneva to keep him company at the hospital. She visited daily, regularly, and witnessed his decay. Meanwhile she was staying at the best hotel, had her hair done often, and wore her best. And took long, almost clinical notes. This unrhretorical

parting between two friends is, at any rate, a touching element in the poignant portrait that emerges in *Contra la vida, la literatura*. And it ushers in the end of that other novel, Rodoreda's life.

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