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## ***The Town and the City in the Narrative of Narcís Oller*** **Toni Dorca**

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## THE TOWN AND THE CITY IN THE NARRATIVE OF NARCÍS OLLER

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As a result of his adherence to the Realist creed, the narrative of Narcís Oller centers on the radical transformations that altered the fabric of Catalan society during the second half of the nineteenth century. Not unlike Balzac and Galdós, Oller records with utmost fidelity the process that signals the hallmark of European modernity, that of the accession to power of the bourgeoisie. In this respect the three volumes of *La febre d'or* (1890-1892) are to be regarded as his most representative work by virtue of the focus they place upon the rising middle class. Oller's ambivalence with regard to progress, however, makes it difficult to know whether he sympathized entirely with the new mentality or clung still to the principles of the ancien régime. At first glance, Oller seems to endorse the bourgeois ideal whereby the individual is allowed to forge his or her own destiny. Yet at times he cannot conceal his nostalgia for the pre-capitalist era in which social mobility was severely restricted by tradition.<sup>1</sup> I will not attempt to resolve what probably constitutes an insoluble contradiction in Oller's ideology. Instead, in this paper I purport to fill a void in our current bibliography on the Catalan novelist, that is, the lack of studies dealing with "la relació de l'escriptor amb la seva societat i la idea que d'ella projecta des de la seva visió del món" (Cassany 18). The first part of the essay will account for the relationship between two predominant loci in Oller's narrative, the town and the city, in order to arrive at a better understanding of his views on progress. The second part will single out *Vilaniu* (1885) as a significant example of his perspectives on the provincial and the urban topoi. Lastly, I hope to add to the interpretations of this novel by emphasizing two aspects that have been hitherto ignored: the motif of the return and the prevalence of an anti-idyllic mode.

<sup>1</sup> The issue is further complicated when ambiguity is found in the same text. In *La febre d'or* Bernat Foix eulogizes his brother Gil's efforts at bringing the railway to Vilaniu: "Si no es troba un home ambiciós de glòria, i arruixat i acreditat, com ell, el Vilaniu no es fa" (Oller I, 602). But paradoxically enough, Gil's return to his humble artisan origins is meant to elicit a positive effect on the reader. Bernat Foix concludes: "Torna a caure al punt de partida: de fuster va sortir; a fuster torna. Deixem-lo exhalar: potser això el curi" (Oller I, 604).

## THE TOWN AND THE CITY

One of the short stories included in Oller's first published volume, *Croquis del natural* (1879), "El transplantat" ranks undoubtedly among his greatest achievements. It is a tale of disillusionment about Daniel, a small town baker who follows his son to Barcelona lured by the prospects for an exciting and enriching life. No sooner has he settled in the city, though, than he realizes his inability to adjust to the rapid pace of its dwellers. Afraid of declining into a dehumanized existence, he longs for the placidity of his hometown and decides to return there. However, as melancholy and loneliness get the better of him he learns that he will not be able to regain the happiness he once enjoyed. Like a transplanted old tree that can no longer blossom again, Daniel's health quickly begins to deteriorate until he passes away shortly thereafter.

Alan Yates's insightful reading of the story points in the first place to the similarities between Daniel and Oller himself. As we know, in his early years the future novelist resided alternatively in Valls and Tarragona before moving to Barcelona for good. In a sense, then, "ell mateix era un *transplantat*" (Yates 21). But more important than biographical considerations is the fact that "El transplantat" provides a synthesis of the elements that furnish Oller's house of fiction: "conté, en forma embrionària però ja ben definida, els motius temàtics i les preocupacions fonamentals que s'aniran definint i matisant al llarg del procés d'articulació d'un món de ficció propi i d'una visió pròpia de la societat catalana de finals del segle XIX" (Yates 24). Foremost among them is the constant transit to and from Barcelona, which attests to a recurrent theme underpinning Oller's art: the mobility of his characters. Furthermore, one can perceive in "El transplantat" the early adoption of a Realist mode. Far from endorsing the town over the city, or vice versa, he presents the reader with an unbiased depiction of each that underlines both their advantages and their shortcomings.<sup>2</sup> Oller's detachment reinforces the idea that, despite the limitations adduced by Sergi Beser, his ascription to Realism was a conscious one.<sup>3</sup>

2 In Yates' precise terms, "[l]es satisfaccions de la vida senzilla en una petita comunitat rural són contrastades amb les limitacions reals de l'idil·li; alhora, les amenitats diverses i l'efervescència de la gran urbs industrial es paguen amb l'anonimat i la deshumanització" (21).

3 These limitations can be summarized as follows: "la imperfecció del llenguatge literari" (Beser 337); "la no existència d'un llenguatge adient al realisme narratiu" (Beser 341); "la falta de tradició d'una narrativa realista catalana" (Beser 342); "una gran inseguretat personal i literària i una certa tendència a la indolència" (Beser 343); finally, "dues tendències innates en Oller...[e]s tracta del moralisme i del sentimentalisme" (Beser 344-5).



If the creation of a fictional realm is the litmus test to determine whether a writer qualifies or not as a true artist, then there should be no question as to which category our author belongs. To put it succinctly, no novelist in nineteenth-century Catalonia, and only a handful in Spain, came close to Oller in the configuration of an autonomous space properly defined as his or her own. The peculiarity of Oller's genius lies thus in the creation of a literary world that dramatizes above all the interaction between province and capital city at the dawn of modernity. Such an interaction not only permeates the majority of his novels—with the exception of *Pilar Prim*, which already partakes of a Modernist aesthetics—but a good deal of his short stories as well. To account for this correlation of time and space in the Vilaniu cycle—*Isabel de Galceran* (1880), *Vilaniu*, *La febre d'or*, and *La bogeria* (1899)—, Margarida Arizeta has acutely resorted to Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the chronotope: "un cronòtop que marca els seus propis espais i temps de ficció... Oller presenta Vilaniu com un mite volgudament diferenciat de la realitat externa, que cita i utilitza com a document i clau de la seva poètica realista" (48). One has to bear in mind, however, that Barcelona plays no less prominent a part in this chronotope. As a matter of fact, Oller did not seek so much to depict the province—even though he devoted numerous efforts to that, especially in *Vilaniu*—as to illustrate how the emergence of the industrial metropolis circa 1870 changed forever the social and economic landscape of Catalonia. In short, only by acknowledging the interplay of two spatial referents, Vilaniu and Barcelona, can Oller's enterprise be fully apprehended.

While in "El transplantat" a fine balance is achieved in the representation of the town and the city, in the rest of his fiction the implied author appears to be unmistakably tilted to the latter. The plot of *La febre d'or* is built around the extraordinary development of Barcelona during the boom of the stock market in the years 1880-1. Despite some reservations on the part of Oller, Barcelona comes to incarnate the nineteenth-century idea of progress in a positive light. The author's own circumstances have something to do with this preference: "Barcelona l'atreia, i ell en tenia consciència, perquè havent-se hagut de desprendre del passat provincià, només la capital de Catalunya podia fixar-lo definitivament" (Triadú 39). In his analysis of the articulation of the capitalist metropolis in *La papallona*, Laureano Bonet draws upon Walter Benjamin's pioneering "On some motifs in Baudelaire." Bonet's study is of paramount importance in understanding how Oller's portrayal of Barcelona follows in Baudelaire's footsteps. A series of motifs, such as the anonymous crowd, the *flâneur*, the hum on the streets, or the wandering mysterious woman who attracts Lluís at the end of the

novel, testify to the psychological impact of the urban scenery on the consciousness of the characters: "dicho hervor, ciudadano, colectivo, 'democrático' influye sin duda en la andadura psicológica de los protagonistas de *La papallona*" (Bonet 112).

The presence of the Catalan capital is felt in other narratives as well, albeit generally in contrast to the province. The rise of the industrial city came undoubtedly at the expense of the traditional mode of subsistence in the pre-capitalist era, the agriculture, and its forms of association centered on the small towns and surrounding country areas.<sup>4</sup> At the outset of his career, and for reasons not entirely alien to his own condition of convert urbanite, Oller was already intent upon conveying an essentially negative image of the province. Vilaniu and the like carry thus the stigmata of backwardness and hypocrisy so habitual in European Realist fiction. In "Tres mesos de món", also included in *Croquis del natural*, one of the protagonists, Adela, returns to her hometown after completing her education at a Perpignan boarding school. A premonition of the gloomy atmosphere later to be developed in *Isabel de Galceran* and *Vilaniu*, the "senzillesa poètica" (Oller II, 28) one might expect to find in Adela's birthplace is conspicuously absent. On the contrary, the townspeople are characterized as "molt retrets, molt murmuradors i envejosos" (Oller II, 28). To make matters worse, Adela's friends are responsible for the breakup of her relationship with a young civil servant, Eduardo. The mother of one of these rivals, donya Isabel, wields her enormous influence to have Eduardo transfer to an administrative post in Galicia. As Adela finds out in the end, "[l]'enveja ha guanyat i quedarà satisfeta" (Oller II, 37). The other protagonist of the story is Maria, with whom Adela communicates by letter about her affair with Eduardo. Imbued with nationalistic feelings and more experienced than her friend, it can scarcely surprise that Maria resides in Barcelona rather than in the province.

The short novel *Isabel de Galceran* was awarded the first prize in the Jocs Florals of 1880. A remainder of Oller's fondness for Romanticism, the story deals with the tragic infatuation of Albert, a recent law graduate, with an older woman, Isabel, married to the deputy of the district's Conservative Party. The action is set in a nameless Catalan town in the months immediately antedating the Revolution of September 1868. And even though Oller's goal was not to describe life in the province, but rather to focus on the unfortunate

<sup>4</sup> This accounts for "the dynamic that consciously or not informs modern Catalan thought and imagery: the aporetic antagonism between city and country, between 'man' and 'nature', between *nomos* and *physis*" (Sobrer 179). This opposition "tends to surface in societies undergoing a process of rapid economic growth" (Sobrer 179).

destiny of the two protagonists, the narrator Albert does not shrink from casting blame upon "una població curta a la vista d'un jove que ha petjat altres centres on el raquitisme no té tanta ufana ni l'exclusivisme pot gallejar tant" (Oller I, 830). Having just returned from Barcelona after his graduation, Albert feels completely out of place among his family and peers, as though he had been forced into exile: "enterrat a la vila en què vaig nèixer" (Oller I, 829). Barcelona's titillating life, its "teatres, acadèmies, balls i billars" (Oller I, 829), still resonates amidst his tedium. The opposition town/city emphasizes therefore the restrictions imposed upon individual freedom in the former. An outdated code of conduct pervades there that bestows more importance on keeping up appearances than on showing one's authenticity: "Enlloc no viu tan encadenada l'expansió, enlloc hi ha menys ingenuïtat ni tanta hipocresia" (Oller I, 832). As a consequence, defamation and pretense reign supreme. Isabel's outgoing personality, on the other hand, can be only misinterpreted as a sign of frivolity: "lleugera, freda de cor i, en una paraula, cap de pardals" (Oller I, 832). That she comes originally from Barcelona only adds to her mounting discredit among the people. As the false rumors about adultery between Isabel and Albert arouse the suspicions of her husband, the story drifts inevitably towards a tragic ending —Isabel declines into incurable madness, whereas Albert takes his own life in desperation.

*Isabel de Galceran* was expanded a few years later into a full-length novel, *Vilaniu*, whose relevance for the purpose of this article warrants a separate analysis. Oller continued nonetheless to inveigh against the province even after the publication of *Vilaniu* in 1885. "La fàbrica", included in *Figura i paisatge* (1897), introduces the reader to another underprivileged village, Vallfonda, marred by the lack of initiative and the complacency of its inhabitants: "menjaven del que collien venut a mal preu, sense ambicionar res ni sospitar que pequessin d'imprevisors i pròdigs" (Oller II, 196). But things will take a sudden turn for the best when the heir of the Comes family takes upon himself the task of transforming an old mill into a textile factory. In barely two years the population increases by five hundred people, new stores and factories are built, and peasants and cattlemen alike benefit enormously from the demand for raw materials. Progress is further propelled when a spa and a cluster of summer residences begin to mushroom around the area's mineral spring. Vallfonda is no longer "un recó de món", but "una vileta alegre, rica, visitada, que cada dia creix" (Oller II, 200). Amidst the prosperity, though, no one ever shows the slightest gratitude to the heir for his efforts. Instead, people continue to harry him on political grounds when the district's alien deputy asks them to do so: "lluny d'aixecar una estàtua a en Comes, no reparen a fer-li guerra ni a martiritzar-lo,



si un tal *Sánchez*, diputat per aquell districte, que viu a Madrid i a qui no coneixen, així ho mana" (Oller II, 200). Even in a small, affluent community, conviviality is hindered by the intrigues of local politics.

*La bogeria* is the only novel by Oller where "els dos marcs clau de la seva obra novel·listica, Barcelona i Vilaniu" (Tayadella 660) appear explicitly side by side.<sup>5</sup> The switch from one place to another follows the haphazard trajectory of the *vilaniuenc* Daniel Serrallonga from his days at the University until his death in an asylum. The story opens in Barcelona "a mig curs del 67" (Oller I, 745), when the first-person narrator—also from Vilaniu—is introduced to Serrallonga by a common friend. Daniel's relentless enthusiasm for the upcoming revolution lands him in jail for a couple of months. His release is contingent upon returning to Vilaniu and surrendering his subversive activities. While in town he embarks upon a feud with his sisters about the validity of their father's will, which eventually alienates him from his family. In light of the terrible accusations aimed at Daniel, the narrator, in his capacity as lawyer and friend, suggests that he resign the claim and come back to Barcelona with his wife and son: "Vagi-se'n de Vilaniu: vingui-se'n a viure aquí" (Oller I, 782). Serrallonga's stubborn refusal to oblige will only exacerbate his impending madness. After his demise, the sisters continue to fight the widow by resorting to Vilaniu's favorite strategy: slander. In their distorted view, Daniel was not deranged but rather a victim of a complot orchestrated by his wife in order to appropriate his funds. Not surprisingly for a reader already familiar with *Isabel de Galceran* and *Vilaniu*, the lie takes root immediately and very soon half of the town becomes "*soliviantat* contra la pobre muller i els seus parents" (Oller I, 790). Besides reiterating the negative stereotype of the province, *La bogeria* makes occasional references to past events, such as the animosity between Galceran and Rodon (Oller I, 762), or the construction of the Vilaniu railway (Oller I, 783). Finally, Oller opts to bring back the "conco lasciú i ridícul" (Oller I, 767) Tomàs Riudavets from *Vilaniu* so that he may at last receive his due. Now married with one of Daniel's sisters, he is portrayed as a pitiful old man completely subjugated by his wife until death puts an end to his ordeal.

*La bogeria* takes place during a period that spans approximately fifteen years, from the Revolution of 1868 to the economic boom of 1880-1. This is roughly the same narrative time that elapses between

<sup>5</sup> In *La febre d'or* Vilaniu plays by no means a subsidiary role, but there is not a single scene explicitly located there. And despite numerous references to the town, in particular to the construction of the railway, criticism of the province does not figure prominently among the author's goals.

the plots of *Vilaniu* and *La febre d'or*. The insistence on a specific chain of historical events, along with the reappearance of characters, reaffirms our conviction that Oller was consciously trying to model a fictional realm after the tenets of Realism. He achieved so with great difficulty and not without the help from friends and critics —most notably, Josep Yxart and Joan Sardà.<sup>6</sup> Be that as it may, though, Oller succeeded in forging a universe of his own in the form of a distinct chronotope. It is mainly this combination of a spatial unit —*Vilaniu*/Barcelona— and a specific segment of time —1868–81— that entitles Oller to be universally reckoned not only as Catalonia's first modern novelist but also as one of its foremost.

### THE FUTILITY OF THE RETURN IN *VILANIU*

The publication of *Vilaniu* bears witness to both Oller's tenacity and his lack of confidence. According to the author's testimony in his *Memòries literàries*, he promised his friend Riera i Bertran that he would develop *Isabel de Galceran* into a full novel: "no en parlem més fins que l'hagi feta... ja t'ho anuncio... ara que... si Déu em dóna vida i salut, la faré, sí, la faré" (Oller II, 739).<sup>7</sup> Since the task proved to be much harder than originally thought, Oller put it aside for a while before he was able to complete it in 1885. But the final product was less than satisfactory, as he himself admitted to Galdós: "Le aseguro con sinceridad que es una obra mal compuesta, escrita con pie forzado, casi por despecho, a grandes intermitencias y por consiguiente con falta de calor" (Shoemaker 277). The majority of Oller's contemporaries were unanimous in their perception that the interrupted process of composition had seriously undermined the novel's cohesion. In a similar vein, recent interpretations dwell upon the uncertain balance between a first part that moves too slowly and a second one that moves too fast: "[e]l lector no deixa de percebre un desequilibri entre les dues parts de la novel·la i una manca de coordinació entre acció i descripció" (Yates 191). In an epoch when a carefully wrought structure was a norm rather than a choice, Oller's decision to precipitate the ending could scarcely be justified. Moreover, Maria

6 Whether Oller veered naturally towards Realism or was rather led by his critics remains a fascinating hypothesis for future studies. We are indebted to Alan Yates for having brought the issue to our attention: "un Oller *alternatiu*, el que esdevingué novel·lista realista, una mica a instàncies d'amics i crítics (Yxart sobretot), sota la pressió del moment cultural ... potser una mica a contracor, quan la seva sensibilitat personal s'hauria decantat tal vegada cap a altres esquemes i solucions artístiques" (59).

7 I would refer those interested in the similarities and differences between the short story and the novel to Mercè Vidal-Tibbitts's thorough article on the topic.



Nunes has persuasively argued that the two sections of the novel conflict with one another concerning the literary codes Oller avails himself of. Whereas at first the plot leans towards a Realist depiction of the town and its inhabitants, the dénouement draws heavily on Romantic referents —unrequited love, alienation, *mal du siècle*, revenge, jealousy, suicide and so on. Such a commingling contributes neither to fulfilling the readers's expectations nor to enhancing their sense of familiarity. In Nunes' words, the audience cannot come to terms with "l'anacronisme que comporta trencar un contracte realista per subscriure'n un de romàntic" (*Drama* 49).

And yet despite its serious shortcomings, *Vilaniu* excels in the portrayal of a social milieu. This aspect of the novel elated the majority of Oller's critics, among them Felipe B. Navarro: "Todo lo del principio: el viaje, la llegada a Vilaniu, la *Festa Major*, el baile en el Casino, superior. Nadie —lo oyes bien—, nadie, incluso Pereda, lo hace tan bien" (Oller II, 744).<sup>8</sup> Besides showing Oller's mastery of the rhetorical devices of *costumisme*, the lengthy description of the festivities reveals how adept he was at integrating a series of sketches into a bigger picture, that of Vilaniu as a collectivity. By the same token, the choice of a new title immediately switches the perspective from a psychological insight into the female protagonist to a quasi-scientific study of a community: "vull que es digui *Vilaniu* perquè el lector fixi més la mirada sobre la vila que sobre donya Isabel" (Oller I, 164). The change in narrative voice, from Albert to a heterodiegetic agent, was also intended to replace the biased account of a character with the reliable authority provided by an omniscient narrator.

From a comparative standpoint *Vilaniu* shares a series of motifs with other contemporary novels. Adultery and the dullness of provincial life, for instance, can be easily linked to such masterpieces as *Madame Bovary* or *La Regenta*. Others are less obvious and have thus received little, if any, scholarly attention. Among them, the return to the homeland is worth exploring in relation to *Vilaniu* because it focuses on the dialectics between the town and the city. The motif is named after Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native* (1878), in which the protagonist, Clym Yeobright, surrenders jewelry in Paris to settle back in Edgdon Heath as itinerant preacher. It is precisely the character who gives up his or her ambitions to come back to the

8 Marcelino Menéndez y Pelayo held a similar opinion: "¡Qué estudio tan verdadero y profundo de caracteres y costumbres de las villas pequeñas!" (Oller II, 744). So did Galdós: "Le declaro con toda ingenuidad que pocas cosas me han encantado tanto como la descripción de la fiesta de *Vilaniu* y en general la exposición de toda esta hermosísima obra" (Shoemaker 279). And Sardà: "Com a estil descriptiu, és d'una justesa i d'una força comprensiva admirables, superior a la dels altres novel·listes espanyols i a l'altura dels millors de l'estranger" (152).

motherland that constitutes a recurring theme in nineteenth-century narrative. As we shall see, the returns of don Pau and Albert to Vilaniu not only set the novel in motion but also become central to its dénouement—and ultimately to its final interpretation.

The return opens two possibilities for unfolding an action, namely, either the characters reacquaint themselves with their native place or else they react against it. In the first case we usually come across a lineage descending from the Classic idyll to what José F. Montesinos called *novela idilio*. Montesinos purported to underpin Pereda's narrative by setting it apart from the uppercase Realism of Balzac, Dickens, Galdós and the like. And even though he did not choose to elaborate on the specifics of the *novela idilio*, he clearly outlined its poetics: the presentation of a static reality in which the individual abode by the rule of tradition and lived in harmony with the environment.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, when the protagonists are unable or unwilling to adjust to the habits of the community the idyll is bound to shatter. This mode tends to prevail in the post-Romantic period, as the emergence of capitalism makes for an increasingly complex relationship of the people with their milieu. The moment when "the outside world is no longer adapted to the individual's ideas and the ideas become subjective facts—*ideals*—in his soul" (Lukács 78) requires a new form of artistic expression that results in the Realist/Naturalist novel.

The impossibility of bridging the "chasm between the reality that is and the ideal that should be" (Lukács 78) was soundly perceived by Oller in spite of his ambivalent attitude towards progress. He could have indeed ranked among the earliest Realists in Spain already in *La papallona* (1882), had he not yielded to the melodramatic reconciliation between the protagonists. Small wonder that the perceptive Zola rejected the final scene and characterized Oller as "un talent attendri" (7)! In *Vilaniu*, however, neither the author's tenderness nor his desire to please his readers interferes with the novel's resolution. The tragedy befalling Isabel and Albert may come too unexpectedly, but it shows the extent to which Oller understood that in Realist fiction, to paraphrase Lukács, the protagonists' strife for authentic values in a degraded world is irremediably destined to fail. Neither is there in *Vilaniu* an attempt to redeem the protagonists from their shortcomings by resorting to a *deus ex machina*. Hence, when he detaches himself from the fate of his characters Oller is ushering in a

<sup>9</sup> This worldview "arranca de la convicción de que la belleza está en la vida natural, en las formas espontáneas de esta vida, que para Pereda, como para Fernán, en virtud de una extraña manipulación dialéctica, son las que se conforman con una tradición nacional y cristiana" (Montesinos 68).

historic moment in the evolution of Catalan fiction, that of the birth of the Realist novel. As Tayadella has pointed out, *Vilaniu* "és, més que no pas *La papallona*, i al marge dels resultats assolits, la novel·la de l'aprenentatge conscient d'Oller com a novel·lista realista" (646). Herein lies its greatness.

### The return of the natives

The idea of settlement in one's native land is laden with a structure of values that draws on "an attachment to the place, the landscape, in which we first lived and learned to see" (Williams 84). In nineteenth-century Peninsular fiction this nostalgia led to the vogue for *costumisme* that arose from an anxiety of modernity in the ranks of the more traditional, if not openly reactionary, authors. Pereda's *Peñas arriba* (1895) may be said to epitomize the ideology of *costumisme* in the Spanish novel. Pereda makes use of the *Bildungsroman* model in order to grant verisimilitude to the conversion into rural mores of a profligate urbanite, Marcelo, during a visit to his father's homeland in a secluded Cantabrian village. Yet Oller's world is by no means akin to his good friend Pereda's. Both his allegiances to Realism and his familiarity with Barcelona life contributed to making him far more receptive to progress than the relatively isolated and financially independent Pereda. As a result, Oller's sympathies tilted to the urban artisan or the petty bourgeois who made a living by the sweat of their brow: "la dignitat que dona a cada un d'ells, ple i tot de limitacions, l'haver de lluitar per a viure en aquest món" (Serrahima 1092). This quintessentially Catalan framework diverges from Pereda's celebration of a feudal or an aristocratic order in *Peñas arriba*.

In the opening scene of *Vilaniu*, groups of people from neighboring areas are making their way into town to attend the *Festa Major* on the eve of Saint John's Day. From Barcelona come two stagecoaches as well, one carrying Albert Merly and his father, the other the Galceran family. Upon the instigation of his parents, Albert is going home to practice law after his graduation from the university. Pau Galceran, for his part, has decided to return to Vilaniu in the hope that its salubrious climate will help his wife, Isabel, recover from her ailments. The arrival of these prodigal sons has stirred up the enthusiasm and the patriotism of the people. Albert is expected to become Vilaniu's first lawyer and pursue a political career under the wing of the Galcerans. As for Pau, he has been the uncontested head of the district for years despite the increasing opposition of Josep Rodon, a self-made man who leads the town's Progressive Party. In



the end, however, neither the cacique nor his protégé will be able to live up to the expectations. Their failure will shatter their dreams of setting roots in their native land and alienate them forever from their community. And while it could be argued that their fall from grace is due to character flaws, the real culprit that emerges in the end is no other than Vilaniu.

Albert's move appears to be a wrong decision from the start. As Bonet has acutely observed, the psychological implications of having a young, bright and cultivated city dweller transfer to the town are by no means negligible: "Retornar al pasado, al viejo sustrato rural, representaría para el hombre 'burgués' —aquí concretamente Albert Merly—entrar en las tinieblas" (70). Following Bonet, an interesting contrast can be drawn between the city lights as depicted in *La papallona* and *La febre d'or* and the pitch darkness of the Vilaniu streets. More importantly, the effect of obscurity recurs in a series of episodes pregnant with symbolism. One night, as he struggles to keep up with his father on their way to the Galcerans, Albert inadvertently steps into a hole and falls on the ground: "una caiguda perillosíssima, que, com qui es beu un ou, podia deixar-lo amb una cama trencada" (Oller I, 215). Even though Albert does not sustain serious injury and is able to go on, he figuratively never picks himself up after that—he remains in the dark, so to speak. Reluctant to put up with the gossiping about his friendship with Isabel, and ashamed of the ignorance of his compatriots, he takes no interest in pursuing his career or in making a name for himself in the political arena. Instead, he sinks into a state of melancholy and unsociability. The hostility towards Vilaniu goes unabated too, as evident in the final glance, filled "de fàstic i d'odi", that he casts upon "la vila que el veié nèixer" (Oller I, 308).

At the heart of Albert's rejection of his community is a spiritual malaise that results from his impossible love for a married woman, his propensity for pessimism—he reads no other than Schopenhauer!—, and his unwillingness to accept mediocrity. Unlike his protégé, don Pau has no such symptoms of a Romantic condition. Yet his feverish political activity, spurred by his rivalry with Rodon and the imminence of a popular upheaval, forces him to often neglect his marital duties. His frequent absences from Vilaniu suggest a lack of intimacy with his wife: "el llit matrimonial, amb sos llargs cortinatges, s'albirava, entre la fosquedat de l'alcova, com un túmul" (Oller I, 231). Moreover, he behaves in an authoritative manner with Isabel, who has no choice but to obey his orders: "s'apressà a ajupir-se una vegada més a la voluntat de son senyor" (Oller I, 232). Later on, rather than comforting Isabel when rumors about her adultery begin to circulate, Pau loses control of his emotions and tries to kill Albert in an

outburst of jealousy. This is a point of no return in the story that seals the fate of Isabel –a miscarriage that eventually leads to her death—and impels Albert to suicide. In the meanwhile, the truth about Isabel's untainted honor dawns upon a repentant Pau: “quina imprudència més horrible, la seva! ¡Ell, ell, l'assassí de sa muller, de la mare de sos fills, orb botxí d'un àngel ultratjat i perseguit per la més infame mentida” (Oller I, 312). He seeks to atone for his error by displaying affection to his subordinates: “Llàgrimes silencioses solcaren son rostre; sos accionats i sa paraula eren sumament tendres amb tothom” (Oller I, 316). But humility soon changes to contempt, as he holds the town responsible for the tragedy: “Son cor sentia un odi tan universal vers Vilaniu com el del mateix Albert” (Oller I, 316).

One could easily conclude that calumny wins the day in *Vilaniu*. Henceforth, in their role of scapegoats (Nunes, *Boc* 301), the protagonists fall prey to the vengeance plotted by Mercè Rodon and Assumpteta Tàrraga. It is also evident that the novel depicts the province as a locus of decadence and animosity, a staple of Oller's narrative as much as of Realist fiction at large. And yet I consider that this reading does not properly account for the final switch of events that occurs immediately following Isabel's demise. It is worth recalling that, as the novel advances, Albert's and Isabel's dream of setting out for Barcelona becomes increasingly obsessive. Albert first hints at the possibility of doing so in order to silence all gossip and protect Isabel's reputation: “No hi ha manera de salvar a vostè si no és deixant de tractar-nos o anant-me'n jo de Vilaniu” (Oller I, 255). Isabel begs her husband to take her away as well, since she can no longer stand being suspected of adultery: “Tornem-nos a Barcelona, porta'm allà on vulguis; però treu-me de Vilaniu! Fugim d'aquest poblot!” (Oller I, 257). Finally, when news break out that Pau Galceran is leaving for Barcelona the town falls into a state of shock: “queia com una bomba sobre Vilaniu que l'hereu Galceran se n'enduia el cadàver de donya Isabel a Barcelona” (Oller I, 316). The fact that he has opted for a self-imposed exile inflicts tremendous damage on the snug inhabitants of Vilaniu: “veure marxar, carretera amunt, aquell taüt, dins d'un cotxe endolat, i darrera d'ell tota la família i servei de la casa en dos cotxes més, fou un dol i un afront per a Vilaniu” (Oller I, 316). The prospects for a definitive *return* of the patriarch evaporate with a sudden *flight* that will deprive Vilaniu of its most representative family.<sup>10</sup> A somber mode prevails among the crowd who gets together to watch Pau Galceran's departure on a gloomy

<sup>10</sup> Assumpteta Tàrraga reacts with anger rather than sorrow: “I tan esperat, i tanta festa, i tanta cosa per la seva vinguda!... La desgràcia de tots, la pesta de Vilaniu!” (Oller I, 277).



autumn morning. Ramon Merly sums up the prevailing feeling of despair when he utters: "És massa fort això! És massa fort!" (Oller I, 317). In short, the suggestion that Oller may indeed be punishing Vilaniu for its sins echoes through the last pages of the novel. Unlike *Vetusta*, whose depraved customs remain unchanged after the fall of the protagonists, Vilaniu is to pay dearly for its mistakes. Oller's ingrained sense of justice, his concern "per l'home moral, no per l'home total" (Cassany 24), has ultimately conducted him to calling for retribution.

### The destruction of the idyll

In his chapter on "The Idyllic Chronotope in the Novel", included in *Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel* (1937-8), Mikhail Bakhtin satisfactorily accounts for the transition from the Classic idyll to the eighteenth—and nineteenth-century idyllic novel. In consonance to its ancestor, the idyllic novel lays bare a unity of place while blurring temporal boundaries in order to emphasize "the cyclic rhtymicalness of time" (225). It also limits itself to life's basic realities, such as love, birth, death, marriage, labor, food and drink, or stages of growth. It usually dispenses with trivial aspects, and when it incorporates them is "in a softened and to a certain extent sublimated form" (226). Lastly, there is "the conjoining of human life with the life of nature" that manifests itself in the "common language used to describe phenomena of nature and the events of human life" (226)<sup>11</sup>. The expansion of capitalism in nineteenth-century Europe, however, proved fatal to the "world view and psychology of the idyll" (234) in light of the latter's growing inadequacy to the new order. Consequently, the reader of Realist fiction perceives not so much an idealized image of people and nature linked harmoniously together as "the breakdown of provincial idealism under forces emanating from the capitalist center" (234). At best, like in *Vilaniu*, the Realist text contains only traces of such an idyllic relationship.

<sup>11</sup> Some of the varieties are the *love idyll*, in which the "utterly conventional simplicity of life in the bosom of nature is opposed to social conventions" (226). Fernán Caballero's *Clemencia* (1852) and *Un verano en Bornos* (1853) come immediately to mind. As for the *agicultural idyll*, it is relevant to Pereda by virtue of the presence of a labor aspect that binds the phenomena of nature and the events of human life—a link clearly emerging in *El sabor de la tierruca* (1882), *Sotileza* (1885), *La puchera* (1889), and *Peñas arriba*. Marià Vayreda's *Sang nova* (1900) exemplifies the nineteenth-century Catalan idyllic novel. This "novel·la muntanyenca", in many respects so similar to *Peñas arriba*, veers towards the sublimation of the country as an ideal locus on which to lay the groundwork for the rebuilding of Catalan national identity.



Little has been written about Oller's penchant for the representation of nature in his works, regardless of the fact that the titles of his collections of short stories consistently reverberate with pictorial echoes: *Croquis del natural*, *Notes de color*, *De tots colors*, *Figura i paisatge*, or *Al llapis i a la ploma*.<sup>12</sup> This lack of scholarly attention has been particularly detrimental to *Vilaniu*, since the novel is no less grounded in the opposition between the country and the town than in the aforementioned polarity Vilaniu/Barcelona. Albert exemplifies once again this duality, first of all in his sensibility to the landscape of *la vall de Flors* where Vilaniu sits: "Cada cop que el contemplava, trobava en aquell espectacle tota la poesia de la naturalesa" (Oller I, 171). At the same time, in his eyes the delightful scenery provides a stark contrast to the town's moral decline: "Totes aquelles esplendors li semblaven un sarcasme rodejant Vilaniu, cau d'odis insaciabls i rancúnies" (Oller I, 258).

The possibility of a Romantic merge of the individual into the bosom of nature is further enhanced by the introduction of another spatial unit, La Maiola, the Galcerans' summer residence in the country. The second part of the novel opens with the family setting off for La Maiola on June 28, where they intend to spend a couple of days in the company of the governor. The narrator's gaze dwells upon the picturesque sites—forest, vines, trees, water springs—that present themselves before the ecstatic passengers on their way to the Galcerans's homestead. In the afternoon everybody indulges in his or her favorite pastimes. The governor, don Pau, and don Ramon sit down and converse about the recent turmoil in the district. For their part, Albert, Isabel, her father, and the kids decide to go on an excursion. Having roamed "les vores del torrent, on havien baixat rellescant pels còdols", and collected a bunch of fruits and flowers, they return to the house "tots ells animats" (Oller I, 249). Even the apathetic Albert has surrendered his melancholy for a festive mood after the exercise.

As the summer goes by Isabel's health begins to improve drastically as a result of the "enveuable tranquil·litar" (Oller I, 266) that she enjoys in the country. The pastoral intertext makes itself even more evident when La Maiola is compared to "un nou Paradís, on tot el dia ressonava el col·loqui amorós de persones i parelles alades" (Oller I, 266). In the meanwhile, Albert is consumed with boredom in

12 Joan Gilabert has devoted an article to the question in which he asserts the importance of nature in Oller's novels: "Las descripciones de la naturaleza en la obra novelística de Narcís Oller son un ingrediente técnico de suma importancia. En dos de sus novelas—*Vilaniu* y *Pilar Prim*—las descripciones de la naturaleza ocupan casi tanto volumen como el desarrollo argumental de las obras" (169).

Vilaniu as he hopes in vain for an opportunity to visit Isabel: "la Maiola! 'I ell no hi podia anar; ell, que hi hauria volat cada minut dos cops'" (Oller I, 266). The significance of La Maiola for the overall design of the novel lies in the pristine image that it conveys of the country vis-à-vis the decadent town. The idealization of the former, therefore, seeks to preserve the innocence of the idyll. Oller achieves so by excising the "living tensions" (Williams 18) that inevitably surfaced, both in the country and in the city, in the wake of capitalism. In *Vilaniu* no mention of social conflict is made apropos the quasi-feudal relationship between don Pau and his tenant, Aleix.

The destruction of the idyll in *Vilaniu* comes about when the political unrest in the area combines with the increasing rivalry between the Galcerans and the Rodons. At this point the author does not evade reality as he did with country life. Instead, he implies that the upcoming Revolution of 1868 does indeed culminate the struggle for power of the industrial bourgeoisie —Josep Rodon—against the feudal order —Pau Galceran: "Eren les fortunes naixents, pastades amb suors encara calentes, que anaven a encarar-se amb els noms antics, amb les autoritats de sempre, amb els rebrots, ja corsecs, de l'enderrocat feudalisme" (Oller I, 235). There is no doubt as to the outcome of the confrontation once the reader infers that Rodon, his incarceration notwithstanding, is about to become Vilaniu's new *de facto* leader after Galceran has opted for exile. Oller's impassible account of the events aims at averting the danger of turning *Vilaniu* into a political *roman à thèse*. By way of comparison, we should mention here how Pereda's *Don Gonzalo González de la Gonzalera* (1879) and *Peñas arriba*, or Vayreda's *Sang nova*, treat the subject of the Revolution in a blatantly didactic tone that undermines the validity of the message.

Conversely, Oller was not willing to surrender objectivity for propaganda. In his review of the novel, the conservative critic Miquel i Badia reacted against the overly negative image of the region: "algo habrá de color de rosa en Vilaniu y en las comarcas y aldeas a ellos parecidos que existen en nuestra tierra de Cataluña" (Yates 210). But Oller quickly replied to him that he would by no means forfeit artistic truth for the depiction of an enameled Vilaniu: "de tomar lo bueno cuando la verdad ofrece, a desnaturalizar esta misma verdad hasta un punto que hace del mundo una Arcadia pueril o un nuevo Paraíso sin serpiente ni manzana siquiera, media una distancia inconmensurable" (Oller II, 754, my emphasis).

The idyll-turned-tragedy knits together Oller's *Vilaniu* and Hardy's *The Return of the Native*, since both novels have recourse to the motif of the return in order to reject the possibility of a harmonious assimilation of the protagonists into their environment.



Looking at the extent to which the notion of progress influenced their work can also make a deeper connection between the two novelists. We would certainly do little justice to Hardy if we were to reckon him merely as a regional novelist, "the incomparable chronicler of his Wessex" (Williams 197). To put it simply, Hardy's lucid perception of the social and economic transformations affecting rural England would be missed in its entirety. Likewise, if we fail to acknowledge that constant and universal change is an integral part of Oller's poetics we are denying his most valuable contribution to modern Catalan fiction. Subsequently, my analysis of the town and the city in the narrative of Narcís Oller aims primarily at asserting the importance of the Vilaniu/Barcelona chronotope vis-à-vis the polarity tradition/modernity. In so doing I intended to show Oller's relentless pursuit of a Realist aesthetics against the almost insurmountable difficulties, both intrinsic and extrinsic, that he had to face. Last but not least, my reading of *Vilaniu* links the futile return of the protagonists to the anti-idyllic mode that prevails in the end. The idyllic chronotope incarnated in La Maiola quickly collapses under the threat of an upcoming revolution, thereby providing nothing but a temporary relief to Isabel's and Albert's ordeals. In the age of Realism, in sum, the pastoral can no longer shield the protagonists from the pressure of historical forces.

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