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Catalan Review és la primera revista internacional dedicada a tots els aspectes de la cultura catalana. Per la cultura catalana s'entén totes les manifestacions de la vida intel·lectual i artística produïda en llengua catalana o en les zones geogràfiques on es parla català. Catalan Review es publica des de 1986.

Translations:

Quim Monzó: On the Volubility of the Human Spirit (N. B. Smith)

Catalan Review, Vol. II, number 1 (1987), p. 177-181

TRANSLATIONS

ON THE VOLUBILITY OF THE HUMAN SPIRIT

(for the omnivorous VallcorbaPlana)

The first time he ate a letter he found it amusing. When he was small, of course, he had eaten alphabet soup, but consuming an A cut out in white paper was a strange new sensation. He had snipped out the A little by little, with care and some enormous scissors, while drowsily watching evening fall outside the terrace windows. It was one of those sad days when you don't know what to do and find yourself clutching at your little routines—watering the plants, dusting off the books on the top shelf, trimming your nails—until the scissors in your hand surprise you by cutting out meaningless forms. And now he discovered he was greedily eating a sublime dish. He cut out a B and a C and a D and gobbled them up with increasing pleasure. Then, when night was already a slice of pumpernickel, he began to compose words—AXE, BEE, CAR, HOUSE, LAMB, JOHN—and devoured them with gusto. Two days later he discovered he didn't have to eat anything else: he could subsist on letters alone. He didn't need fruit or milk or meat or vegetables or fish; conventional food left him more and more indifferent and, two weeks later, became repugnant to him. He began to be able to distinguish letters from each other not so much by the material they were made out of (which had little importance: soon he realized that this aspect had no nutritional effect), but rather by the different types, sizes, variants, and characteristics. Thus, he discovered that sans-serif was more digestible than with-serif and that among the latter Egyptian was heaviest, to the point that if eaten before going to sleep it produced insomnia or ter-

rifying nightmares. Experience taught him that English was effective against constipation, Swiss demi-gras unbeatable for hepatitis and Futura Medium for tachycardia. If sometimes he ate Futura Bold—always well seasoned with a little American Type-writing—it had to be in sizes below 24 points. He began to develop certain preferences: Baskerville, Gill, Stymie... On the other hand he hated Blippo and Avant-garde. Times was indifferent to him, like boiled hake, as he described it one day; but right away he reflected that well-boiled hake could be excellent. So, he had texts printed in Times on different papers: blue and green martelé, pink couché, yellowish bible... In the same way, Venus Fina (which until then he had found somniferous) became—printed in 38 point with dark green ink on turquoise blue satin—one of his favorite dishes. Then came the question of which wines to drink with each type of letter. This led him to a long series of experiments, with some failures but often with success. He found that Swiss called particularly for Burgundies, Montrachet, Mersault, Corton-Charlemagne, Riojas and Priorat, while with Futura, whether thick or fine, the most appropriate wines were from Alsace or the Rhineland or else a Moriles at its best; and, in general, with all the sans-serifs, the Ribeiros or a good Penedès, Montrachet, a Valdepenya, Sylvaner or Riesling, Sancerre, Chablis... The fonts graced with serifs were best accompanied by wines from Bages, the great Bordeaux like Château-Latour, Château-Margaux or Saint-Emilion, some of the Burgundies and Basque wines from Tudela and Elciego.

After two months he was devouring newspapers, magazines, pharmaceutical prospectuses, books, lightweight cardboard boxes, and small neon signs (which got progressively bigger); and dinner wasn't dinner unless it included a volume of the *Encyclopedia* spiced up with a few pink neon letters. He bought enormous quantities of letraset. At night he broke into printing

shops and ingested all the characters he could get his hands on. (He took the place of the linotypists and gobbled up the lead bars as they flowed out of the machine.) He discovered the gastronomical qualities of the Greek alphabet—somewhat cloying, he had to admit—, the magical pleasures of Cyrillic, the exotic taste of Chinese characters, the subtle differences between Thai and Cambodian, the oiliness of Arabic. He swallowed spelling primers as others breathed air. The only thing that he found lacking in the world was time, for he had achieved happiness by the sweet path of letterophagia: day and night and life itself became mere means of tasting new characters. When he traveled it was to discover national variances of the usual types of letters. He visited foundries as others visit champagne cellars or breweries, and he was the happiest man on the face of the planet Earth if he held in his hands—and teeth—some new letter, fresh and just designed. He visited designers and helped them to vary their previous models (it is worth noting that, though taking him for a lunatic, they considered his advice useful and correct, for it perfected those somewhat disorderly forms that no one had known how to complete; so, they let him have his say and even sent for him before introducing a new font onto the market). It was he who, with an immense smile on his lips, gave the final suggestions that would make some new type gastronomically and typographically desirable.

After three years, however, he began to be irrevocably satiated with letters, and a few months later they positively disgusted him. Fortunately, at the same time he began to develop a growing gastronomical desire for model boats.

QUIM MONZÓ

(translated by N.B. Smith)