



You are accessing the Digital Archive of the Catalan Review Journal.

By accessing and/or using this Digital Archive, you accept and agree to abide by the Terms and Conditions of Use available at http://www.nacs-catalanstudies.org/catalan_review.html

Catalan Review is the premier international scholarly journal devoted to all aspects of Catalan culture. By Catalan culture is understood all manifestations of intellectual and artistic life produced in the Catalan language or in the geographical areas where Catalan is spoken. Catalan Review has been in publication since 1986.

Esteu accedint a l'Arxiu Digital del Catalan Review

A l' accedir i / o utilitzar aquest Arxiu Digital, vostè accepta i es compromet a complir els termes i condicions d'ús disponibles a http://www.nacs-catalanstudies.org/catalan_review.html

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.

1. Introduction

Pere Calders, a Writer for All Seasons

Manuel Duran

Catalan Review, Vol. X, (1996), p. 13-26

PERE CALDERS, A WRITER FOR ALL SEASONS

MANUEL DURAN

"I love being a writer. What I cannot stand is the paperwork." This sentence by the great American humorist Peter de Vries is, I think, an apt introduction to the personality and the works of the great Catalan humorist, Pere Calders. In both cases a gifted writer produces an endless stream of short stories and novels both subtle and powerful, always carefully crafted, always surprising, original, new, brilliant, and does so without apparent effort, the same natural way a bird sings and Mozart used to compose music.

I would like in the following pages to introduce Calders to the English-speaking reader who is not yet familiar with his works. I hope I will also have something to say to the initiate, to the reader, Catalan perhaps, or possibly belonging to another cultural area—Calders is among the most translated Catalan writers—who already knows and loves his work. I would like above all to explain why Calders, the supreme humorist, is much more than a humorist, transcends humor and penetrates into other areas, such as social criticism, psychology, philosophy, even metaphysics. Humor carried to the end always turns out to be something else, something both infinitely wiser and vaguely disturbing.

Humor remains a basic human need, a powerful tool that allows us to cope with the continuous shocks and surprises daily life brings us. Humor is closely linked to irony and the absurd. We should not forget that our century is the century of Beckett and Ionesco. Paradoxes and contradictions abound within and without the Theater of the Absurd. "I can't go on. I will go on," murmurs a character in *Waiting for Godot*.

It is not only daily life and its literary mirrors that bring us face to face with irony and the absurd. Science itself, the glorious science so often praised along the 19th. century, the Scientific Attitude that was about to solve every basic problem, seems sometimes to have become a problem itself. The future, it is said, is no longer what it used to be. How could it be otherwise, since science is constantly revealing unsettling facts, outrageous situations? Who could have imagined a few years ago that birds, winged, light, graceful birds, are most probably the evolutionary descendents of dinosaurs? Is it possible that the dove, the nightingale, the sparrow, are somehow distant descendents of *Tyrannosaurus Rex*? There is worse. Could Dante, for

instance, have imagined that our world, a world in which Love was supposed to be the motor animating the movement of the Sun and the stars, is most probably the result of a most "unfriendly" act, a huge explosion, a Big Bang? Neither Plato nor Aristotle in the past (if they had heard about it) nor Einstein in our own time would accept willingly the idea, proposed by quantum physics, that an electron can be at the same time here and in a different, opposite position, perhaps in neither of the two places, and still go on existing. Or that the act of observing a physical phenomenon would so disturb it that it would be impossible to measure certain data with accuracy, rather it would be totally impossible to verify them.

Briefly, we find our century less comfortable, more confusing, more complex and unpredictable than the 19th. and 18th. centuries. Reason and the scientific attitude had created expectations of a world at peace, with growing prosperity, with a clearer understanding of who we are, where we come from, where we are going. In our times the positive utopias generated by the optimism of the Positivists and the scientists during the second half of the 19th. century (Jules Verne, for instance, among many others) have given way to negative Utopias, such as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. Literature can be often used as a thermometer indicating the fever of the social body. Our times have seen long periods of fever, and our literary works are both harbingers and witnesses of the malaise and confusion that have long hovered over our historic horizon.

It was to be expected that as our century developed into what the poet Auden has defined as "the Age of Anxiety" the role of literature would evolve, both announcing and defining the changes that took place in quick succession. Realism in the novel and the short story would decline, although without disappearing altogether. Realism assumed a strong relationship between the environment—which included, also, heredity—and the actions and thoughts of the main characters. Realism meant that money, health, physical strength or weakness, the environment, the climate, the time of year, many more data of the external or physical world, had to be strictly taken into account, and described in detail, as they might have a strong influence over the development of characters and the ultimate outcome of human relationships. Realism as described by Émile Zola (or rather a somewhat extreme and exaggerated form of realism to which the name "naturalism" soon became attached) meant that the characters' actions were pre-determined by environment and heredity to a degree never before envisaged, save perhaps in the Spanish picaresque novels of the 16th. and 17th. century and later novels strongly influenced by the

Spanish picaresque school. There was no freedom of choice for any of the characters in this type of novel, and if we accept the generalizations in Zola's description of the novel there was no freedom of any kind for the readers, either, as we could be and would be ruled in our acts by the iron bonds of heredity and environment. The great novelists of the 19th. century, the Balzacs, Zolas, Flauberts, Tolstoys, Dickens, Galdós, were all of them to lose ground, to become devalued once we accepted the new premise: linking characters to their environment robbed them of spontaneity and freedom. Realism made the end of novels easily predictable. No surprises, no scope for our imagination. Realism has declined slowly, yet it remains a viable literary style for the novel: a preliminary conclusion could be that realism is no longer fashionable, it is a tool that is still useful but looks more and more old-fashioned. Was John O'Hara the last writer to accept totally the credo of realism? It remains to be seen. What is obvious is that many great works in the field of prose fiction would be written in our century along different lines.

A trend that is often overlooked by critics of literature yet of undeniable power has been the emergence of science fiction. It has trained us to use our imagination, to accept that anything, or almost anything, is possible. In spite of its name, science fiction is much closer to fiction than to science, and the suspension of disbelief that it often entails has prepared the modern reader for the endless surprises and strange, unexplained situations that the new literary trends have brought to the fore.

Another important ingredient in the witches'brew of contemporary literature, one that we should take into account when approaching the works of Pere Calders, is Surrealism. It developed as a full-blown movement, both literary and pictorial, and also philosophical and political, during the Twenties and Thirties, certainly formative years for our author. It thrived on elements springing from the subconscious, irrational impulses, dreams and daydreams, visions, paradoxes, non sequiturs. "Knock, knock." "Who is there?" "Oh, yes, let Infinity come in." These brief sentences, attributed to Louis Aragon, are a succinct summing up of the Surrealist movement. Magritte, Yves Tanguy, Salvador Dalí, were turning upside down, inside out, our daily world. Often the shock of surprise in their paintings came from placing objects where they did not belong: a sofa in the middle of the rain forest, a cloud in a living room. In one of his best, and shortest, short stories Calders has a tree grow unexpectedly in the middle of a room. Surrealism has permeated our taste in so many subtle ways that we no longer see it as something menacing or markedly different from our everyday life, in the same way that we do

not see a Surrealist motif in the clouds inside a huge eye that was until recently CBS' logo.

Surrealism, moreover, as a movement or as an attitude, has always had a strong appeal in Catalonia. Dalí was certainly during several years at the very center of Surrealism and contributed to popularize it even more than André Breton did. Joan Miró has been often linked to Surrealism. In the same Mexico City where Calders wrote some of his best short stories, the great Surrealist painter Remedios Varo (incidentally, also born in Catalonia) was painting her best haunted canvasses. Leonora Carrington, Wolfgang Paalen, several other important painters contributed to create in Mexico a branch of the international Surrealist movement. And did not Benjamin Péret, one of the theoreticians of the movement, declare that Mexico was essentially a Surrealist country? Finally, the Mexican critic and essayist Jorge Cuesta is supposed to have stated that "if Kafka had been born in Mexico and had worked here among us, he would have been classified as a realist (*un autor costumbrista*)."

There are several ways to shock the reader out of complacency, out of banality. One is, obviously, artful exaggeration. As one element of the picture becomes progressively larger, or longer, let us say, Pinocchio's nose becomes longer, we tend to pay attention, first, and soon afterwards we begin to panic, as the whole picture that we had assumed was the true image of the world and of our place in the world becomes subtly changed by the distortion of a single element in it. Yet this anguish is not always unwelcome. It may shake us out of our routine, it may even bring back for us the world of our childhood when everything, or almost everything, was a surprise. Childhood is always a time in which miracles and wonders happen to us and we find them on the whole acceptable and normal, as if creation arose like light out of darkness, and everything was new, fresh, rewarding. Later on, as we become used to wonder, the world becomes familiar: we have become adults and as such we have tasted the bitter fruit of boredom. Calders' stories offer us a weapon against the boredom created by familiarity, as in each of them we find reasons to wonder, to imagine that perhaps our image of the world was not quite correct, and one of the pleasures that these stories offer us is that they make it possible for us to remember our years of wonder, our very own childhood. Nothing in our present adult world is shown in these stories to be as stable, as predictable, as monotonous, as we had previously thought. Innocence and lucidity go hand in hand in the pages of these stories, and as a result whoever reads them can hope for a new chance to reach back into the paradise of childhood. I do not claim that Calders is the only contemporary writer to offer us this window of innocence, an

innocence that comes to us combined with awareness, with a heightened consciousness of the complexity of the world. I would like to claim, instead, that Calders' message is on the whole highly satisfactory. Some anguish may linger in it, yet it is almost overwhelmed by humor, by laughter, by the strong feelings of joy that arise out of our sense of being on top of the events, since we have seen one corner of the world where absurd, impossible events take place, and yet we have managed to survive.

Our times are thus very exciting but somehow uncomfortable for the artist, the thinker, the writer, the philosopher, the scientist. The average citizen, unless he or she happens to live in a Third World country, or in the inner city in the U.S., or during a time of depression or war, leads a life that has seen vast improvements in life expectancy and prosperity. Often this hypothetical average citizen does not see, or does not want to see, the contradictions, paradoxes, and absurdities that surround us everywhere. Calders happens to be an artist, a writer, a thinker, a philosopher. His writings reflect the bewilderment that should be our bewilderment if we really learned to look around and understand what is happening to us.

Calders is in many ways the ideal witness for our times, reliable, intelligent, and at the same time the insider and the outsider. His experiences were molded in great measure by the Spanish war and the long years of exile in Mexico. In 1939 he was in France just before the Nazi occupation. Hundreds of thousands of soldiers and civilians from the Spanish Republic had sought refuge in France after Franco had occupied Catalonia up to the Pyrenees. He sensed the war approaching inexorably, foresaw a dark future for himself and for the other Spanish refugees, and decided the other side of the Atlantic would be a much safer place. The Mexican Government, under President Lázaro Cárdenas, had opened its borders to the Spanish refugees fleeing Franco and Hitler. Calders crossed the Atlantic in July 1939 and arrived in Veracruz with fourteen francs in his pocket, two letters of recommendation and a few unpublished manuscripts. A new country, a new set of values, a long period of painful adaptation awaited him. He would spend over twenty-three years in Mexico, returning to Catalonia at the age of fifty.

Calders had been born in Barcelona in 1912. His father was first a printer and later a travelling salesman, always an avid reader and also a writer of short fictions, one of which received a prize in 1918. His mother, intelligent and sensitive, taught him how to read and write. He was an only son, and received constant encouragement from his parents and his grandmother. Often all the family gathered around the

hearth and each took turns telling stories of crimes, bandits, witches, ghosts, and strange happenings. Calders was eight years old when he entered the Mossèn Cinto School, perhaps the best private school in the area, combining the Montessori methods with other progressive educational trends. Catalan was taught at the school both as a language and as a literature. Stimulated by his parents, his classmates, and his teachers, Calders started to write and produced his first short story, "The First Harlequin", when he was only fourteen years old.

From 1929 to 1934 Calders studied art at the Barcelona Fine Arts School. He did not want to give up literature but he was not quite sure of being able to earn a living as a writer. A commercial artist, or a cartoonist, had a better chance. From 1932 to 1936 he worked as an art critic. By 1936 he was ready to become a writer of fiction. The Spanish Civil War started then, changing his life as it dramatically changed the life of millions of people around him. He soon joined the Republican army, fighting against Franco and the Fascists in the Terol front and slowly retreating towards the Pyrenees during the bitter months that preceded the defeat of the Spanish Republic. Exile followed, first in France, later in Mexico. His intellectual and emotional view of his country was shattered. His emotional life was also in tatters: he had married before the war, only to leave his wife behind during his long exile. Divorce and remarriage followed, after which a period of happiness and creativity allowed him to write some of his best fiction. Yet he was never to enjoy real fame and renown as a writer until late in his life, after he came back to his native land and his writings received deserved recognition, were awarded many literary prizes and were translated into a number of foreign languages. I suspect—although I cannot furnish a sound proof of this statement—that Calders is one of the modern Catalan writers who has been translated into more foreign languages. This is one reason, and a powerful one indeed, why our *Catalan Review* is devoting a special issue to his life and works. If modern Catalan letters are to awake interest in the English-speaking world, Calders is the author most likely to excite curiosity and break a path.

For a writer a long exile is a harsh school, yet it is a real school, an occasion to learn, connect facts and emotions, live through nostalgia and memories, learn to overcome nostalgia without erasing the memories. Above all the experience of exile allows us to compare two realities, the one kept alive in our memory, the memory of "the old country", and the new reality where we live now, where everything is disturbingly different, perversely contradicting what we had learned in "the old country". Where is the true reality, the true experience, in the past that we remember so fondly (and that perhaps we have already

begun to idealize and thus distort) or in the present that somehow, in spite of all the lights, colors, sensations, urgent tasks to perform, people who greet us in the street, still does not look and sound truly real?

For a Catalan writer who wanted to go on writing in his native tongue the Mexican experience was a lesson in heroism and fidelity to his roots. He knew that Franco had decreed the death of Catalan language and culture. It was forbidden in Spain to teach Catalan, to speak it in public, to publish magazines and books in that language. Books in Catalan published abroad could not be imported into Spain. In Mexico, of course, no one spoke or read Catalan, except for the handful of refugees that had just arrived. Calders knew that whatever he wrote would go unpublished or be read only by a small group of friends and companions in exile. He had to find the energy and the courage needed to go on writing in Catalan without any possibility of wide acclaim or success—and, of course, he had to earn a living at the same time, since a starving writer soon ceases to be a living writer.

I arrived in Mexico for the same reasons that motivated Calders: we were both refugees, exiles from Franco's Spain. I was a few years younger than Calders. It took me a while to get to know writers who were also exiles and who knew him. I met him several times and was always impressed by his imagination and his wit. I remember now his huge forehead, his razor-sharp features, his piercing eyes behind thick glasses trying to mask a fundamental shyness. I remembered that he had worked as a cartoonist, contributing his drawings to several humor magazines before and during the Spanish Civil War and I once told him how much I had liked one of his cartoons, one that he had published during the war years, during the tragic, tormented years when we were all dying of hunger under the incessant rain of bombs from Franco's planes, or rather the Nazi and Fascist planes that were doing Franco's dirty work over Barcelona, Madrid, and all the other cities in the Republican area. The cartoon showed a restaurant, a customer seated at a table, in front of a meat dish, and a waiter by his side. The customer was complaining bitterly. "Waiter... this meat is tough, too tough, incredibly tough. What is it? Is it perhaps horse meat?" "No, sir. We are all out of horse meat. This is the carriage."

The Spanish Civil War and the Mexican exile that followed the end of the war were both invaluable to a young writer such as Calders. The war had been a mixture of heroism, chaos, brutality, and despair, a constant source of irrational behavior, with unforeseen and baffling consequences. During the Mexican exile the daily experiences through which he used to relate to his Catalan society had been replaced by alien rules of behavior, hence constant surprises jarred and stimulated his awareness.

If history and everyday life were games to be played according to new rules, literature would also invent new rules for the literary game. The slow retreat of literary realism had led to the introduction of literary texts with shifting viewpoints, narratives with several voices all of them ultimately suspect. Reality as such was perhaps not susceptible of full translation into literature. What could be achieved was, at best, the suggestion of alternative and complementary paths leading towards a single yet unknown core.

Calders was aware of this trend. His first novel, *La Glòria del doctor Larén* (Dr. Larén's Glòria, 1937), written and published during the Spanish war, is an attempt to cope with the problem of multiple viewpoints. The main subject is the relationship between Dr. Larén and his wife, as seen by a candid, naïve, sympathetic observer, and later the same relationship narrated by a cynical, suspicious, diffident bystander, both narratives reported to the reader by a third voice, the real narrator, the writer, who keeps his distance from the other two and shows us that ultimately both stories may be fiction, or else that the contradictions and incongruities of the complex multiple message are to be interpreted as a symbol or an emblem of the contradictions and incongruities of the world that surrounds us all.

Who is right and who is wrong in his approach to everyday life, to life in general? Can different angles of vision give us a more rounded, three-dimensional picture, or are they irreconcilable, or perhaps all of them wrong? Many of Calders' stories start with what we might call a normal (or is it naïve) reading of an event in the daily life of an observer. Soon, however, either through an unexpected event or through the encounter with a friend or an acquaintance who sees things in a different way, tension develops between the first interpretation and the possibility of interpreting the fact from different and unusual angles that enrich our vision yet complicate our understanding of it. These angles can encompass fantasy, dreams, absurdity, irony. New facets of reality appear, superimposed upon the first aspect, erasing or distorting it, and the reader experiments the chilling yet exhilarating sensation of discovering ever richer aspects of a deep reality that was there all the time, both beckoning and menacing, ironic and sinister. Often our attempt to cope with the new aspects of reality does not end successfully. We are clumsy, our knowledge of the world is not perfect, our bureaucratic institutions do not really help us: on the whole we feel pressured and hindered by them. In one of the short stories, a young man, who is not a first-rate scientist, but who resents the constant failures of the official scientists to send a rocket to the moon, decides to build his own rocket in his backyard. His wife is full of friendly advice and of timid admonitions.

"Do you have a permit to ride a rocket into space?" The end of the story is ambiguous, mysterious, full of anguish and suspense. We never know what happens to the hero's bold project. The rocket blasts off, never to be heard from again.

Not all of Calders' stories have happy ends, not all his heroes achieve success. Yet enough of the stories are positive, in the sense that the main characters seem to adapt to failure without too much trouble. Again, when we compare Calders as a narrator to other outstanding short story writers in our century, especially writers who inject a large dose of fantasy in their stories, we perceive him to be more down to earth, more sensible, more careful of the psychological burdens that the development of the plot may inflict upon the main characters. Within the almost limitless boundaries of his world of fantasy he remains a realistic writer, because he never forgets the human side of the equation.

This is why we so easily identify with his characters, why we fall in love with so many of his tales. Amanda Bath, one of the best Calders' scholars so far, has observed that the basic elements of fantasy and imagination in his stories are not important in themselves: their role is essentially as catalyzers that will shed light upon the reactions of the main characters to the new situation they underline. She quotes Tvetzan Todorov as a theorist of fantastic literature, yet without the help of Todorov's framework it is easy to see that Calders cares, above all, about human beings, about their reactions to the mystery and the ambiguity that surrounds them.¹

To be sure, Calders is a master of a new literary game, as Amanda Bath, Joan Melcion, and other critics state, but he is only one of the discoverers of an infinite sea of possibilities, an extensive labyrinth of mirrors. Other illustrious names come to mind: Franz Kafka, Jorge Luis Borges, Julio Cortázar, Italo Calvino. The Mexican Juan Rulfo and the Colombian Gabriel García Márquez also belong to this exalted group. A fair-minded reader who becomes acquainted with just a few of Calders' short stories will conclude, I think –and hope– that Calders, although still less known, belongs to this group of writers and is their equal.

¹ I would like to emphasize now that at this moment Amanda Bath is still the foremost, and most reliable, of Calders' critics, and her book, *Pere Calders: Ideari i Ficció* published in Barcelona in 1987, is still one of the best sources of facts and interpretations concerning Calders' life and works.

One of Calders' favorite devices is the tension between a petty event and the serious consequences that it leads to. In "Rebellion on the Roof", for instance, a dog chews up a valuable tapestry that the owner had left to dry out on a clothesline on a rooftop. This leads to a confrontation that escalates little by little and finally pits the inhabitants of the rooftop apartments against the dwellers occupying the rest of the building. A siege, a class war with possible international repercussions seem imminent. At each turn of the screw Calders masks with logical developments and exciting new events the fact that the original source of the rebellion is almost insignificant, certainly worthless of the great efforts exerted during the struggle. The more we advance into the bombastic and heroic, the more we tend to forget about the dog and the tapestry. We are now dealing with human rights, a fight to the finish, possibly the future of mankind. The end of the story is an anticlimax. We are still prey to strong emotions, we feel the heroic spirit leading us on, victory is achieved. Yet when we remember how limited this victory is and what was the cause for the fight we realize that stubbornness, stupidity, utter lack of common sense and of wisdom are permanent features of the human race and that, therefore, danger lurks behind the humblest incident. Starting with the ridiculous we reached for the sublime, only to realize that slowly, step by step, we were advancing towards a disaster. Laughter mixes with a feeling of shame for the stupidity of mankind. Irony and satire combine in a fashion that reminds us of another bitter humorist, Jonathan Swift.

"The fairest thing we can experience," Albert Einstein has stated in *The World as I See It*, "I" is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and true science. He who knows it not and can no longer wonder, no longer feel amazement, is as good as dead, a snuffed-out candle." There are, however, many ways to introduce a touch of mystery and a sense of wonder in a literary text. Perhaps the best way to approach Calders' technique is to compare some of his short stories with the short stories of other contemporary masters who want to convey similar emotions of awe and wonder. I have in mind at this moment the great Jorge Luis Borges, for instance. Perhaps Italo Calvino or Ray Bradbury could furnish equally valid texts for a comparison with Calders. Yet Borges stands at the pinnacle of the genre, according to many critics. Among his short stories one specifically, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" has attained the exalted status of indisputable masterpiece. In this short story Borges tells how his friend Bioy Casares, reading in an anomalous copy of a pirated edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, discovers an interpolated entry on a supposed country in Asia Minor

called Uqbar. The entry mentions that the legends of Uqbar refer to the imaginary regions of Tlön. Later Borges finds the eleventh volume of the First Encyclopaedia of Tlön. Borges outlines the essential traits of this new universe, where the only realities are mental perceptions. Later strange objects from Tlön, much heavier than our normal objects, are found. A slow, unavoidable invasion of our world by Tlön looms ahead. In another story, "The Circular Ruins," he suggests that we might be characters in another person's dreams. In order to understand properly these stories the reader should be acquainted with Berkeley's idealism, with Lewis Carroll's writings, with detective stories, with Chesterton's novels and short stories, with the Gothic novel and the science fiction texts. Borges' stories are both seductive and irritating. They are also contrived and almost always offer a dramatic—or should we say melodramatic—surprise ending.

Yet the main lesson to be learned from a comparison between Borges and Calders is, I think, much more fundamental. In Borges' stories the dramatic element is placed at the very core of the action, it touches the essence of the main characters, and is fatal, inescapable. Once we learn, towards the end of the tale, in "Tlön...," that the strange objects left behind by the intruders are incredibly heavy, much heavier than any similar object on earth, we realize that the extraterrestrials really exist, and that ultimately we shall be at their mercy. Once we find out, at the end of "The Circular Ruins," that the main character exists only in someone else's dream, there is nothing Borges or the reader can do to restore this character to full and complete reality. The same can be said about many of Kafka's stories, the most obvious example being "Metamorphosis." The hero of this strange tale wakes up one morning and finds out that he has been transformed into a huge, disgusting bug. Nothing will redeem him in the subsequent pages of the novelette: he will die a bug.

All of this should remind us of the basic difference between tragedy and comedy. This difference is one of the most important lessons to be learned in any course of literary criticism worth its salt and it applies fully to the short story and the novel. In a tragic situation something basic is broken, and it cannot be put back together. Humpty-Dumpty will never be whole again. What Hamlet learns from his father is a secret so horrible that it is beyond repair, beyond redemption. The rest of the play follows inescapably the basic premise of a tragic situation: it tends to get worse, not better. Whatever the characters do underlines and reinforces the initial situation, makes the wound deeper and more painful.

Comedy, on the other hand, may frighten us initially but we find out, sooner or later, that the initial crisis is not permanent. A solution will eventually be found. Sometimes the crisis is due to a misunderstanding. In other instances the characters involved in the crisis will find a way to overcome it, or perhaps to adapt to it. After the storm we come back to a solution that inspires in all, characters and public, or characters and readers, a feeling of elation, joy, happiness. The obstacle has been overcome, the misunderstanding has been dissipated, the earthquake that shook individuals and social groups has subsided. Harmony will reign from now on. Applause. More than that: we now realize that the balance has been reestablished, and there is a bonus: our experience has made us wiser. This is the essence of comedy, of the comic spirit, and it permeates many of Calders' stories.

One of Calders' best, and most typical, stories is "Invasió subtil." "Subtle Invasion," included in English translation in this volume, depicts a stubborn, self-centered Catalan observer who shares a table at a country inn in Catalonia with another customer, who seems to him to be Japanese. He does not look really Japanese, he speaks perfect Catalan. Nevertheless the conclusion of the observer is that the man is Japanese. Every detail that seems to contradict his original opinion is explained away. At the end, the conclusion is clear (at least clear to him): the Japanese have become so clever, so subtle, that they are now almost impossible to detect: they are, therefore, much more dangerous than before.

The reader's reaction is easy to foresee: the main character is wrong, ridiculously wrong: the new arrival to the country inn is Catalan, not Japanese. A delusion bordering on paranoia has created a real obsession in the mind of the narrator. As for the consequences, we do not think they will be tragic. At most, the narrator will feel embarrassed if proved wrong, although, we suspect, his mistake may never be found out. We may laugh at his stubborn stupidity, yet the world is not about to end because of it. Laughter prevails—and, as usual, we feel superior to the victim of such a stupid error, and this feeling is extremely pleasant: we want to cheer for ourselves, for we would never have fallen into such a trap. "How can anyone be so stupid?" translates into "I am ten times smarter: I feel so happy about myself!" Comedy has won the day, and with it the warm feelings of satisfaction and self-congratulation it unfailingly brings to the reader.

Again a partial conclusion may be warranted here: Calders is much more in tune with our times than either Borges or Kafka. They (Borges

and Kafka) belong to the tragic mood that permeated our Western world, especially the European world, in the first half of our century. It is true that Kafka foretold in some of his short stories and novels all the anguish and the tragedy of the two world wars, the atrocious period between 1914 and 1945 when Europe unconsciously tried to commit suicide. It is also true that art, music, literature often foretell what is about to happen. Picasso' exploding "Demoiselles d'Avignon" and Stravinsky' frantic drums in "Le Sacre du Printemps" anticipated the big guns of August, 1914. We are now living during the very end of the Twentieth Century, and the second half of this century has been more serene and merciful than the first. Human optimism and confidence always spring back after a period of distress: we are now much more ready for comedy than for tragedy, Calders is much more in tune with our times than the gloomy writers that preceded him and in some ways helped him to acquire his sensitivity to the absurd, the impossible, the wildly imaginative. In other words, Calders is a writer for all seasons, especially *our* season.

Calders is at the same time less strident and more down to earth than Borges. His irony is subtle, his final paragraphs seldom achieve more than a heightened feeling of irony. We tend to smile instead of being amazed or terrified, which is what happens when we read Borges (and often Cortázar follows in Borges' footsteps, including the surprise endings.) Calders handles deftly the complications that arise in our daily life when an unforeseen event, which is often outside the normal experience of the narrator, appears suddenly and brings trouble to an existence that had been untroubled so far. There are contradictions lurking behind our daily experiences, and an unforeseen event will bring them to the surface. From then on, it is anyone's guess as to how the story will develop. Usually the end is absurd and incongruous yet necessary, and the reader accepts it as such because the story has opened a depth of perception, a new set of values, that we did not know we possessed—but are now glad the story has revealed to us.

This brings me to another observation: it is relatively easy for the reader to identify with Calders' heroes, much harder to do so with the main characters created by, say, Borges or Kafka. Calders' heroes are on the whole very normal, ordinary people facing extraordinary circumstances, doing the best they can, trying to adjust to the absurdity and incongruity that suddenly or little by little appear and confront them in their daily life. Because they are not radically, essentially, different from us, and because we sense that they are in trouble, that in many ways they are the underdogs that destiny has slated for a rough time, we tend to sympathize with them. We feel an

empathy not exempt from condescension, a patronizing empathy, yet in any case we feel close to them. This feeling can be mild or warm, yet in some instances it does not last long. The effort made by Calders' heroes to adjust to the new circumstances may be—it often is—clumsy, awkward, it may even end in failure or the hint of failure. In this case we tend to feel even more superior to the hero than at the beginning of the story. We regret the hero's clumsiness, or his lack of foresight, or his outrageous assumption of unwarranted power and ability. Our original sympathy, our feelings of friendship and brotherhood, are not as much erased as superseded, overwhelmed, by ironic distance and comic estrangement. We take one or several steps back, we conclude that we, in any case, would have acted more prudently, more logically, since we are wiser and smarter. Once more the mechanism that creates humor and laughter comes into play. Humor needs a victim: as soon as we find it we feel superior to the victim, this feeling is extremely pleasurable since it entails a victory for our ego, a victory that did not necessitate any struggle or battle. We are elated. Our expansive and extremely pleasant mood requires a physical expression, an outlet in our bodily expression: hence our smile, first, and soon our laughter. Calders is a great comic writer, yet so subtle in his approach to comedy that we seldom suspect this approach until the middle or the end of the story.

I realize that my approach to Calders has dealt mainly with what could be called his "mainstream stories"; there is also, as a voice in counterpoint, a somber Calders, ominous and anguishing, seen for instance in "El batalló perdut" ("The lost Battalion," discussed in this issue by Moraima Donahue). J.M. Sobrer, also in this issue, points out that this dark Calders is increasingly present in the short stories he wrote towards the end of his life. There is also a luminous, innocent, angelic Calders to be found in his tales for children. We are confronted with a rich and complex opus.

Perhaps the summing up, the bottom line, is that Calders' imagination, in its fertile diversity, shows us how vast and complex our universe is, and at the same time offers us hope: we are in the midst of a labyrinth, yet we may suspect that the vast cosmos that surrounds us is not less flawed than we are. Our human condition combines hope and despair, clarity and ambiguity. Our mistakes are duplicated in the world that surrounds us. We belong to it, it belongs to us: even in utter failure, Calders' heroes remain victorious.

MANUEL DURAN
YALE UNIVERSITY