I can still remember the impact made in 1980 by the publication of “Olivetti, Moulines, Choffataux and Maury”. Quim Monzó’s first books (including “Uf, he said”) formed part of the rhetoric of the counterculture. They contained psychedelic references (blue fields, green and bright orange skies), false crime stories similar to those of Handke or Godard and surrealist solutions (women with transparent breasts and men who ate printed letters), “Olivetti...” moved in a different direction. In contrast to the way the counterculture defended and praised its own lifestyle, Monzó observed human behaviour and described it in great detail. His stories were basically urban. In the 70s the same locations (the Ramblas and Escudellers Street) formed the background to two radically different visions of the city: festive, liberated territory (“Ramblas” by Siza) and the setting for contemporary neurosis (“Bilbao” by Bigas Luna). Monzó’s vision showed more contrasts. In his stories, we were shown a Barcelona which was full of familiar places (bars and restaurants open till dawn) and which promised wonderful things (freedom from routine, and swinging) but also, in equal measure, alienating routines and confusing mix ups.

There are two key stories in “Olivetti” which help us understand the change from the 70s to the 80s. The first, “Cacofonia”, describes the journey taken by the main character, very early in the morning, as he goes from Tibidabo to the Ramblas and then meets a girl in the Bavierea bar. She tells him that their generation’s imaginary space with no names). Monzó develops short series of stories which reappear in different books. At the start, he used cinematic images as a metaphor for the frailty of conscience, desire and memory (“Un cinema”, “Nines ruses/Russian Dolls”). He based scenes on typical situations from pornography: romantic seduction (“Historia d’amor/Love Story”), a meeting in a train (“La dama salmó/The Salmon Woman, “Ferrocarril”/“Railway”) or the piano lesson (“Filantropia del mobiliari/The Philanthropy of the Furniture ”). Some of the stories contain numerous references to the obsession with tidiness and its opposite, the gratuitous act (“El nord del sud/The North of the South”, “To Choose”). The last books highlight the anguish of the professional writer (“El segrest/The Hijack”, “La literatura”/“Literature”) and include superb parodies of short stories and literary classics: “Sleeping Beauty” (“La bella dorment”), Cinderella (“La monarquia/The Monarchy”) or Kafka’s Metamorphosis (“Gregor”).

One of the keys to Monzó’s success is that his work can be interpreted in a variety of ways. He has often been considered as the writer responsible for reviving modern literary Catalan. Some traditional Catalan philologists compare him to Carles Riba and even, I read the other day, to Martí de Riquer because of his intensity and discipline. European critics, however, link his work to that of Kafka, Borges and Rabelais. It is interesting to note how the strategies of cultural legitimisation have worked in his case. I believe that Monzó has created his own aura of success. For me, he is a curious enthusiast and a great individualist. The description of a character in one of his most recent stories fits him perfectly (he never manages to finish reading a book because, as he sees it, nothing is better than the sense of potential and freedom implicit in the first pages, when you don’t know how the story is going to continue). Throughout his career Monzó has had many models, including Cabrera Infante, Frank Zappa, Grupo Pánico, Wolinski, Trabal, Handke and Donald Barthelme. Recently he has also discovered affinities with writers such as Robert Coover or Slawomir Mrozek. Whilst not committing himself to any of these in particular, he has managed to integrate and ensure the continuity of their influence in a personal interpretation of the literary tradition which stretches from the vibrant literary utopia of the 70s to the shock and amazement caused by living in current times.