

ACTIONS & VOICES

Catalan Philosophy in the 19th and 20th Centuries

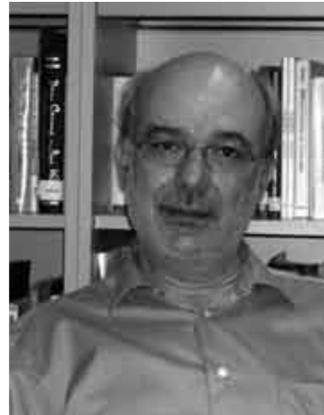
If there is an salient feature of Catalan philosophy, it is the wish not to break with either tradition or modernity. Radical traditionalist or modernising positions aside, the nature of the Catalan philosopher is to seek accord, which is the case of Catalonia's political constitution through to the *Nova Planta* decrees. In Catalonia, the philosopher tries to achieve a harmony between ideas, conflicting powers, and between the future and the past.

In the 19th century, the abolition of the *ancien régime* also saw the end of the Thomist Scholasticism that had gone hand in hand with it. The University of Cervera was replaced by the University of Barcelona and, from the shadow of Xavier Llorens i Barba (the Catalan Socrates), emerged two strands in our philosophy: the philosophy of common sense, inspired by the Scottish school, and the neo-Thomism of Jaume Balmes.

There can be no doubt that this “common sense” evokes the Catalan idea of *seny* (judiciousness, common sense): this is the certainty that there are primary truths that neither pure reason nor pure experience can guarantee, the former because it does not have its feet on the ground and the latter because it does not raise its head from the ground. Common sense or rational instinct, as some call it, is not a single faculty, but a composite of intellectual, sensitive and emotional faculties. Balmes, a student of Llorens i Barba, reinvented Thomism (as would Josep Torres i Bages) for an industrialised and democratic world; for him, Catholicism had been the centre of Catalan spiritual life and renouncing it would mean losing the country's essence.

In the 20th century, there appeared with the Barcelona School a secular academic and non-academic philosophy that, without breaking with the past, assimilated European currents and used Catalan as its language until the Franco dictatorship thrust most philosophers into exile and led some to renounce their thinking, such as Eugeni d'Ors, the father of *Noucentisme*. It is only today that we are starting the recovery, in terms of thought and institutionally as well. We are both rediscovering ourselves and connecting with the world outside of Catalonia. Xavier Rubert de Ventós and Josep-Maria Terricabras, are two good examples of the current trend.

MIQUEL COSTA



INTERVIEW

JOSEP-MARIA TERRICABRAS: LANGUAGE AS THINKING

RAMON ALCOBERRO

Josep-Maria Terricabras (Calella, 1946), has forged a long career as a writer and is one of Catalonia's best-selling philosophers. He is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Girona, one of the country's most prestigious research centres in the Humanities. As a theorist in the Wittgensteinian tradition, he is able to tell us about the sense of being a philosopher in Catalonia today.

You wrote your doctoral thesis on Wittgenstein in German; you published the papers of Wittgenstein at a congress held in Girona in English; and then you published in Catalan. This runs you the risk of not being very well-known outside the country. It would be much easier, when it comes to making your work known, to write in Spanish and yet you haven't done so. Why not?

In fact, I have work published in Catalan, German, Spanish, English, French, Italian and Basque. Generally, however, I write in Catalan, my native language. It shapes my thinking because both education and human experiences are primarily linguistic. I don't mean that they are 'only linguistic', but if a thought is good and interesting, there is always the possibility of translating it. First, I look for rigour and coherence. Then comes making the work known.

You're a maitre à penser in Catalonia and a political reference that transcends party affiliations. Yet, as a philosopher, you come from the analytical tradition and you practise a philosophy that seeks to 'dissolve' problems rather than resolve them. Am I mistaken?

You're right. My most basic philosophical training is influenced by Wittgenstein's work, which gives me the urge – and, I hope, the ability – to describe concepts clearly and rigorously. Social commitment doesn't come to me directly from philosophy but from an awareness of civic responsibility, which is acquired and cultivated in other milieus. But no theoretical reflection can give reality more consistency than it already has.

Fidelity to one's own cultural tradition is a major issue in all cultures of limited reach. When one chooses to think in a minority language is the choice made out of fidelity?

*Theory is not produced to shore up reality, but to understand how it is shored up. Nobody thinks entirely alone, and neither is the individual made in isolation; or, if so, the job is badly done. I tried to explain this in my book *Aprendre a pensar (Learning to Think, 1998)*. Each person is a child of the times of his or her country and culture. When one accepts and knows one's own cultural tradition it is not to submit oneself to it but to manage it and, to the extent that it's possible, contribute to it and improve it.*

ON POETRY

“Despite his enchantment by François Villon, Espriu's poetry is haunted by the Wisdom books of the Hebrew Bible, the Book of Job and Ecclesiastes in particular. Both are closer to Espriu than his chosen precursors in Negative Theology, Meister Eckhart, and Nicholas of Cusa, who himself creatively had misread Ramon Llull into a Negative Theologian. The wisdom of Job, Ecclesiastes, and Espriu is not prudential, but skeptical, which means a wisdom we are unable to comprehend as such, since necessarily it defeats poetry. Like Ausiàs March, Espriu is highly conscious that he cannot love God, as poor Job certainly did. Unlike March, Espriu also cannot fear God, since Hell has no reality for the poet of Sinera, who thus is closer to the Preacher of Ecclesiastes. (...) Espriu is an elegist, like March, and Catalan poetry, like American, can seem more elegiac than not. But for Espriu every canticle of grief is washed away by rain, since he perpetually leaps from one tense to another. Hamlet's final words: “The rest is silence”, could well be Espriu's also.”

HAROLD BLOOM

XL

Però en la sequedat arrela el pi
crescut des d'ella cap al lliure vent
que ordeno i dic amb unes poques lletres
d'una breu i molt noble i eterna paraula:
m'alço vell tronc damunt la vella mar,
ombrejo i guardo el pas del meu camí,
reposa en mi la llum i encalmo ja la nit,
torno la dura veu en nu roquer del cant.

XL

But in the thirst the pine takes root,
sprung from it towards the free wind
which I order and name with a few letters
of a brief, most noble, and eternal word:
ancient trunk I soar above the ancient sea,
shade and protect the treading of my path.
In me sleeps the light, and I placate the night,
I turn my hard voice into naked rock of song.

Harold Bloom, *Ramon Llull and Catalan Tradition*
(Institut Ramon Llull, 2006)

Salvador Espriu, *Llibre de Sinera* (1963)

Salvador Espriu, *Selected Poems*. Translated from the Catalan
by Louis J. Rodrigues (Carcamet, 1997)

WORK IN PROGRESS



ANTÒNIA VICENS

Born in Santanyi (Mallorca) in 1941, Antònia Vicens is one of the leading Catalan-language fiction writers of her generation. Since her first novel *39° a l'ombra* (39° in the Shade, 1967) she has been writing continuously and has produced eight novels, the most recent of which is *Ungles perfectes* (Perfect Nails, 2007), along with several collections of short stories, which have now been brought together into the single volume, *Tots els contes* (All the Stories, 2005). She has been translated into several languages, particularly German.

Fotografia: ILC

NOW

I've fallen into Tòfol's nightmare.

There are no barriers or signs to mark its space. But obviously it's their house because Aniceta and Josep are sitting on the sofa in the living room. She's wearing her dressing gown unbuttoned and you can see the fuzz hiding her slash, and he's completely naked with his tassel hanging down. It looks like they're having a nap after having stripped off.

The bruises that Tòfol has made on their necks out of possessive jealousy have taken on an extra thickness of thought.

And the ball of wool and the knitting needles, along with the sweater she's been knitting for-bloody-ever are floating over their hair. And in a pool of sperm is the book that Doctor Abril left her the day she confessed that:

She wasn't sleeping well.

As soon as she closed her eyes she saw the choppy sea. With flocks of gulls whose wings were falling off and they were drowning.

She was one of those gulls.

No. No way could she get used to the happiness of loving two men: Tòfol her husband, and Josep her lover.

Tòfol picked up the book and started reading aloud the underlined words: **To dissolve your guilt, ask for purification from the bottom of your heart. If you are purified ...**

He is startled.

It's not his voice.

What comes out of his mouth is a kind of barking that mixes with the Bong music coming from the room of the twins, Ros and Rosa, who are also placidly dead, the head of one resting on the genitals of the other.

He throws the book outside.

The book flies.

He tries to kick it.

The book remains suspended in the air. Angel or butterfly.

I go down to another level, down a slippery slope and end up in the middle of a path thick with mist mingled with the green aromas of the earth, the red of the wind and the blue of space.

A whole immensity.

Then standing up straight, like a dog-man, I take the lead and whip Tòfol who is on all fours like a man-dog, give him a good kick in the side, grab his collar and yank it hard and say:

“Let's go.”

We set off walking.

We walk.