

CARLES RIBA: TOWARDS A BIOGRAPHY



CARLES RIBA (BARCELONA 1893-1959). DISTINGUISHED AUTHOR AND HUMANIST. WENT INTO EXILE IN 1939, AND ON HIS RETURN TO CATALONIA BECAME A TEACHER TO THE NEW GENERATIONS AND THE UNDISPUTED SPOKESMAN FOR CATALAN INTELLECTUALS. A MEMBER OF THE "NOUCENTISTA" CULTURAL CIRCLES, HIS WORK REPRESENTS ONE OF THE HIGH POINTS OF CONTEMPORARY CATALAN POETRY.

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Carles Riba, poet, translator, critic and teacher, was born in 1893, a hundred years ago. A man of extraordinary precocity, short of stature and with a somewhat undernourished look about him, entrenched behind a pair of thick spectacles, in 1911 he surprised everyone –at the tender age of eighteen!– with his translation of Virgil's *Bucolics*. But the real breakthrough came in 1919 with his translation of the

Odyssey and the publication of his first book of poems *Estances*. "We are all indebted to Carles Riba", writes Josep Pla, "because there is no-one like Riba and because his work as a translator is already of national importance". He was twenty-six years old and three years earlier had married Clementina Arderiu, a poet and the daughter of silversmiths, his faithful companion in life and death, in sickness and in health. Meanwhile, he

had already translated Walter Scott, Poe, the *Song of Songs*, etc. and published some thirty or so articles and literary essays on both Catalan and foreign authors –Browning, Schiller, Goethe, Homer, Dickens, Andersen, Francis James, Poe, etc.–, which he put together in his first book of essays *Estances i altres articles* (1921). In 1920, along with his wife and the painter Josep Obiols, he travelled to

Italy—Florence, Siena, Perugia and Assisi—; more than five months drinking at the springs of classicism and humanism, steeping himself in art and beauty. Once back in Barcelona, he was soon preparing another journey: a one-year visit (1922-1923) to Germany spent studying at the University of Munich, and an opportunity to travel and get to know the country. He was to return unquestionably wiser and, as a poet “lost in a featureless wasteland”, he discovered “a towering lyric poet, a contemporary of Goethe and at times, seemingly, of ourselves: Hölderlin”.

On his return from Germany he continued with his literary writings, which in 1927 he collected in *Els Marges*, and went on to become one of the most accomplished translators of Greek for the recently created Bernat Metge Foundation, for which, during the course of his life, he translated Sophocles, Xenophon, Plutarch, Aeschylus, etc., and of which he was to be a director during the 1936-1939 war and from 1958 until his death. In 1927 Riba and his wife saw one of their dearest dreams come true. They spent two months on “the unforgettable visit to Greece to see the landscapes of all those well-loved authors I have translated”. Like the two poets they are, they drink the waters of Castalia and entrust their future to the Gods. A future full of unforeseen developments. In 1931 the Republic is proclaimed and Catalonia receives its statute of autonomy. At last, after years of dictatorship, the country has a democratic structure and Riba plays an active part. But above all else he is a writer. He carried on writing (in 1930 he published the second volume of *Estances*), carried on translating, carried on teaching. However, these years are little more than a mirage. In 1936 Franco rises against the Republic. A war starts that will overturn the present and put the future at stake. Riba directs the Bernat Metge Foundation, takes part in the creation of the *Institució de les Lletres Catalanes* (Institute of Catalan Literature), contributes to the *Revista de Catalunya*, presents his doctoral thesis, etc., and on his visits to France and Great Britain becomes the ambassador of Catalan culture. In 1937 he published yet another book of poetry, *Tres suites*, and one of essays, *Per comprendre*.

But the arms of dictatorship defeat reason and democracy, and thousands of Catalan and Spanish men and women of every class and condition are forced to



leave their country on the journey into exile. Riba's was not to be the hardest, but exile it was nevertheless. Avignon, Bierville, L'Isle-Adam, Bordeaux and Montpellier. And once again war and the occupation of France by the German troops. Riba was offered the chance to leave for America, but he knew that his work was in Catalonia, and as soon as he could he returned. He had written a book while in exile, probably his most important, *Elegies de Bierville*, “my spiritual hymn”. Written “beneath the noble, spreading kindness of the trees of France”, between Bierville and Montpellier, Riba sent it to those of his readers still in Catalonia by a thousand tortuous paths: “You will arrive without me in the waiting motherland, elegies; from suffering to suffering you are herded by impatience”.

In 1943 he crossed the border secretly and settled in Barcelona. He wrote and translated and opened the doors of his home, offering a welcome and his guidance to the young. But always under cover of discretion. Franco's dictatorship allowed him no public activity and kept watch over his private activities. These were the years of internal exile, during which books had to be published almost clandestinely and sold under the counter. In spite of everything, Riba's work continued: *Les versions de Hölderlin* (1944), a new translation of the *Odyssey* (1949) and two volumes of poetry, *Del joc i el foc* (1946) and *Salvatge cor* (1952). After 1952 the pressure of the dictatorship eased slightly and chinks

began to appear. Franco's Ministry of Education even organised some “Congresos de Poesía” in Segovia (1952) and Santiago de Compostela (1954), to which Riba and other Catalan poets were invited. Riba took the opportunity to describe in detail the situation of the Catalan language and culture, and was discovered and recognized as the great poet and intellectual he was. In 1954 he was once again able to travel abroad—France and Belgium—, and that same year he published *Esbós de tres oratoris*, a volume of poems that marks a new direction in Riba's poetry. In 1955 he travelled to the Camargue and the south of France and in 1956 visited several universities in Germany and Great Britain. In 1957 he received the French Legion of Honour, published ... *Més els poemes*, his last collection of essays, and had for some years been translating Kavafis, “a sensational revelation”, with “coincidences nourished by the same sap and proud of the same demands and the same disdains”. But he was not to see his translation published. He died in 1959, his heart unable to stand the strain of a surgical operation. With public recognition of his work and his importance at its height, Riba left us. “There is no doubt that Riba's death has the proportions of a true national catastrophe”, wrote Fuster. Small groups of young people were the most direct heirs to his work, work which, like his life, can be summed up with a line from Hölderlin: “you have love enough, for love alone be angry ever”.

Further reading

Poems, with English translations by J.L. Gili (Oxford, The Dolphin Book, 1970).

Elegie di Bierville, tradotte di Giuseppe Sansone (Turin, Einaudi, 1977).

Carles Riba in Antologia de poesia català contemporànea, translated by Stella Leonardos (Sao Paulo, Monfort, 1969).

Elegias de Bierville (Madrid, Visor libros / Ministerio de Cultura. Colección Visor de Poesía, 126).

Salvaje corazón, translated by Rafael de Santos Torroella (Madrid, Visor libros / Ministerio de Cultura. Colección Visor de Poesía, 226).

Obra poética, Antologia, translated by Rafael de Santos Torroella, Alfonso Costafreda and Paulina Crusat (Madrid, Insula, 1956).

Carles Riba in Ocho siglos de poesia catalana (Madrid, Alianza Editorial, 1969).