

# JOAN FUSTER

AFTER I HAD RUNG, THE DOOR WAS OPENED TO ME BY A YOUNG MAN, A BIT ON THE THIN SIDE, SUMMARILY DRESSED IN GREY, AND WITH A SLIGHTLY UNEASY LOOK ABOUT HIM, HIS EYES BULGING BEHIND THE THICK LENSES OF ONE WHO IS SEVERELY SHORTSIGHTED, AND HIS EXPRESSION THE SORT OF THING WE MEAN WHEN WE SPEAK OF A FACE AS LONG AS A FIDDLE.

JOSEP BALLESTER POET



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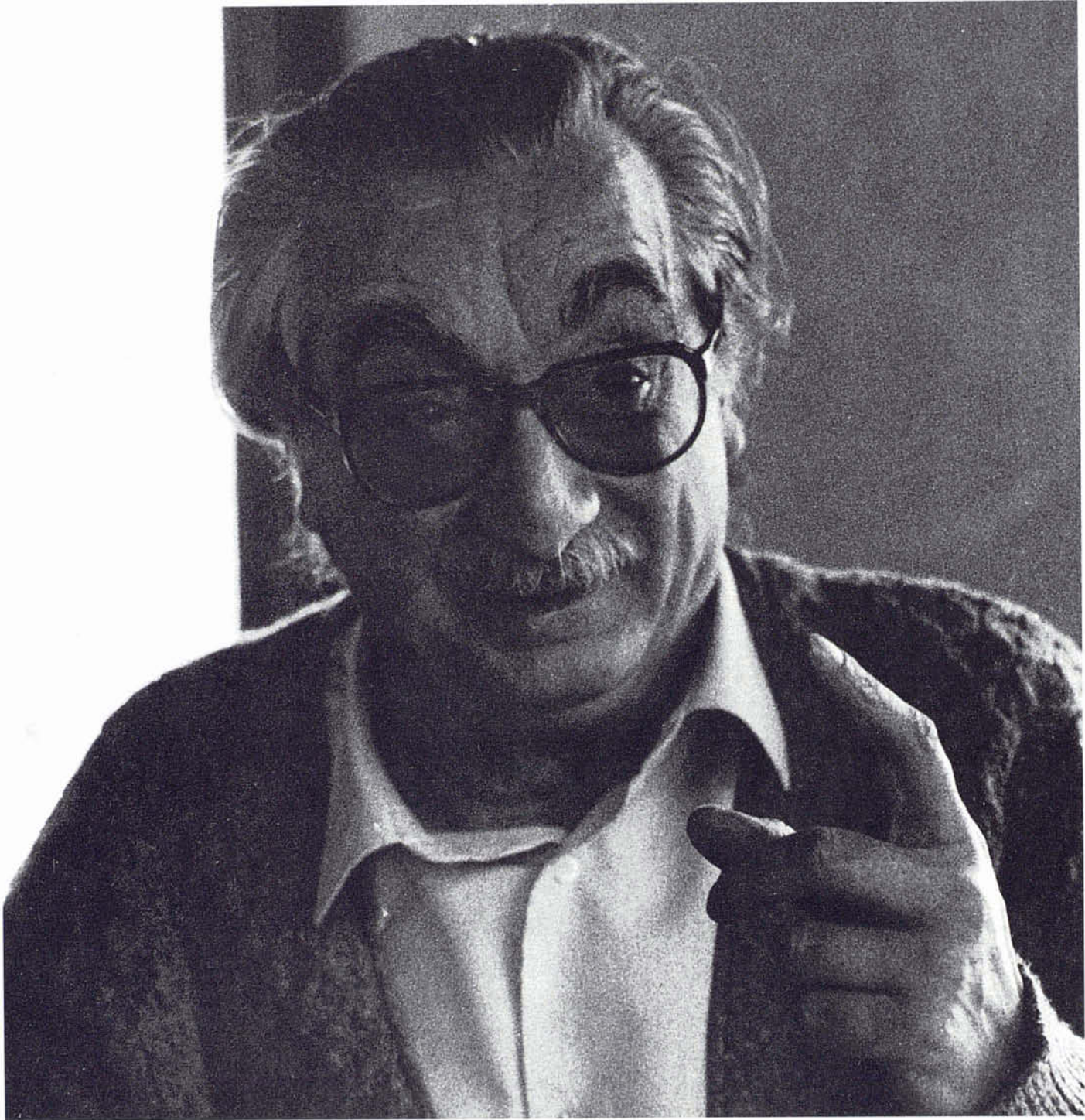
**T**his somewhat unsociable man, who is really more kind-hearted than he would have you believe, isn't at all sure that the Gods didn't do him a bad turn in making him live in a country and an age so far removed from the co-ordinates that would have given him the warm welcome he deserved. Josep Pla painted a remarkable literary portrait of him. Pla turned up at number 10, carrer Sant Josep, Sueca, soaked to the skin, for the very good reason that that Sunday in February 1959 it was raining cats and dogs. He may not have been quite as wet as he says he was, because he covered the three hundred yards from the bus stop to Fuster's ancestral home in a taxi. "After I had

rung, the door was opened to me. I found myself facing a young man, a bit on the thin side, summarily dressed in grey, and with a slightly uneasy look about him, his eyes bulging behind the thick lenses of one who is severely short-sighted, and his expression the sort of thing we mean when we speak of a face as long as a fiddle." Later on he adds, "Joan Fuster's face seems to have a vertex: the vertex of his bulging eyes, that keep all the tissues of his factions pulled taught, right down to the ligaments of his neck, which are extraordinarily tense. This general state of tension makes his presence very visible—a presence which has a characteristically uneasy, nervous, impassioned edge to it."

Joan Fuster i Ortells was born in Sueca (Ribera del Xúquer) in 1922, into a family of farming origins. His father, a man of Carlist leanings, was a painter and art teacher. In 1943, Joan began studying Law in Valencia, and from 1947 he practiced for a few years as a lawyer. However, his career in the legal profession was short-lived; before long it was displaced by his literary interests, which had already been quite noticeable during his years as a student. From that moment on, his life has been almost entirely devoted to literature and to his country.

It is not at all easy to cover Fuster's extensive and varied work in all its complexity. In him more than any other





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contemporary writer, we find the idea of a totality which attempts to include everything, every aspect of man and everything that surrounds him; man as the centre of all intellectual speculation, man as "the measure of all things". In the words of Joaquim Molas, Fuster "is an intellectual in the truest sense of the word, that is to say, in the sense that he is a man whose job it is to work with ideas". He has devoted himself mainly to the field of non-fiction. A quick look at his extensive work presents us with practically every form of non-fiction there is: his dictionary of philosophy, his aphorisms, lengthy dissertations, press articles and diaries, amongst others. Although the wide range of elements covered by Fuster's production are closely interrelated, it is possible to make out three main branches: his political writings, his studies of cultural and literary history, and his humanist writings. The publication of *Nosaltres els valencians* in 1962 caused a real stir in Valencian society. Written from a historical point of view, the book takes a critical look at traditional ideas about the "Valencian question", and establishes its Catalan identity as a defining element of our country, while at the same time pointing out the differences that exist as regards the *Principat*. The book is a landmark which, as Jaume Pérez Muntaner says, "allows us to speak, in our present situation, of a before and after in relation to this book, whenever we refer to the culture and the national awareness of the País Valencià." This book epitomizes one part of Fuster's work, those writings that arise from his moral and political position, his commitment, from the writer's ties to his country and his age. Amongst other books that come under the same heading, he has published *El País Valencià* (1962), *Qüestió de noms* (1962), *Un país sense política* (1976) and *Ara o mai* (1976).

Another area of interest to him is the study of cultural and literary history. At first he concentrated on the Catalan classics, amongst which the most outstanding are the works on Saint Vicent Ferrer, Sister Isabel de Villena, Ausiàs March and Roís de Corella. From the classics of the Middle Ages, the writer of Sueca has shifted his interest towards more modern times, as in the case of *Poetes, moriscos i capellans* (1962), *La decadència al País Valencià* (1976) or *Contra el Noucentisme* (1978). In the

field of literary history, an excellent general work should be mentioned: *Literatura catalana contemporània* (1972). These books, written in a lively interpretative style which is at all times rigorous and informative, are as full of suggestions and intuitions as they are free of academic erudition.

In 1955, Fuster brought out the first in a more strictly discursive line of books, *El descrèdit de la realitat*, a study of the motivations and characteristics of modern art. His work in this field belongs to the European tradition of humanist thinking, which goes back to the 16th century. Montaigne, it should be remembered, is one of his favourite authors. Fuster's reflections focus on man and his creative activities. Humanism, in his own words, is "mere critique: of texts, ideas, habits [...] and always as a means of examining". This is the Fuster of *Les originalitats* (1956), *Judicis finals*—included in *Consells, proverbis i insolències* (1968)—, *Diccionari per a ociosos* (1964), *L'home, mesura de totes les coses* (1967) and *Diari 1952-1960* (1969), amongst others.

Joan Fuster's poetic work has always been considered scarce in comparison with his prose. Also, it is not readily available on the market. He himself has repeatedly stressed the insignificance of his poetry. Amongst his remarks on the subject, we come across the following: "In 1953, I still dared to write the occasional poem. Perhaps it's going a bit too far to call them poems."

Or else:

"Some years ago, I published three or four collections of poems—not much, either in quantity or quality, and something both the critics and I have discreetly tried to ignore."

But Fuster's readers know that the "man from Sueca" treats the thing he loves best with a certain cruelty, or severity, cloaked in irony and scepticism.

His first collection of poems, *Sobre Narcís* (1948), reflects his enormous admiration for Symbolism and the work of Paul Valéry. The second part of the book, under the title "Alguns poemes menors", consists of twelve short, highly sensuous heptasyllabic poems, which reveal beyond a doubt the poet to be found underlying his other work. A year later, Fuster published his second collection of poetry, *Ales o mans*, in which we discover the writer of love poems who was to reach the peak of

post-war Valencian poetry with *Escrit per al silenci*. In 1953, the Barcelona publisher Josep M.<sup>a</sup> Casacuberta published his *Terra en la boca*. This book of poems is important for two reasons: it covers the whole of the history of poetry in the *País Valencià*—the Andalusian poets who wrote in Arabic, Ausiàs March, Teodor Llorente, the common ground shared with the Catalans in the five invocations of the sonnets in *Va morir tan bella* (1951), also included here—and, at the same time, it introduces Fuster the ironic poet, with his biting wit. Although written in 1953, but not published until 16 years later, in his *Diari*, it also includes his highly enjoyable "Elegia a Rabelais", a long poem, of four hundred verses, which shows the lucidity with which Fuster has read François Rabelais. But we also find a profound change in his approach as well as on a formal level, one with clear Surrealist overtones, a marked "caustic streak". His latest poems also follow this new line in his work, as do "Tres poemes inútils per a dos pintors que volen reinventar el món" (1973) and *Ofici de difunt* (1950), a highly entertaining collection of witty, ironic puns, and the somewhat similar *Poemes per fer* (1953-54), both of which appear in *Set llibres de versos*, and were published in 1984, though written earlier. All this work is characterized by clearly avant-garde elements, though we can make out a certain crude realism in it, with its sceptical approach, as well as an affirmation of life and eroticism.

Perhaps Joan Fuster's best book of poetry is *Escrit per al silenci*, which has already been through three editions. Part of the author's skill lay in his being able to ward off the prophecy in the title. "Criatura dolcíssima" has a beautiful, almost mathematical structure, effective correspondences, verses full of the best of Aleixandre, but, at the same time, of an extraordinary poetic atmosphere of its own.

To sum up, Fuster is a moralist who is concerned about man and the crisis he suffers in a world in constant transformation. His method is scepticism, which, in "the intellectual aspect", he has described as follows: "Sceptics are always reasonable people: reasoning people. They take care to put themselves on the side of reason, so that reason is usually on their side. Or, to put it another way: they have doubts, and are right." ■