



Baltasar Porcel

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Baltasar Porcel i Pujol (Andratx, Majorca, 1937 - Barcelona, 2009) is one of the widest-ranging writers in the history of Catalan literature, as much for the quality of his work as for its quantity and versatility. Porcel is known above all as a novelist, but he has also cultivated—with strength, audacity and rigor—many other genres: drama, short story, travel writing, historical and political essay, interviews with people relevant to the world of politics and art, as well as opinion pieces, which appeared almost daily from 1982 in *La Vanguardia*, a column in which immediate—and often controversial—reflection provoked by the conjuncture of daily events does not impede in-depth analysis, nor complex, robust, and wide-ranging thought.

Andratx and Majorca, the town and island where Baltasar Porcel was born and lived for the first years of his life, suffered the penuries of the post-war period (after the civil war of 1936-1939) in the forties and fifties, which ultimately meant the accumulation of a long string of historical penuries, including everything from a nearly endemic poverty to the inevitable difficulty of field work. The town where Porcel grew up was a place dominated by nature, by the presence of the sea, the mountains, the plants and cycles of the countryside. Family links were also fundamental, the warmth of clans, the events—sea battles against pirate Turks and North Africans—experienced by ancestors who were still alive through the memories transmitted by those who knew them. This was a world in which fatality predominated and subsistence was the only objective, but in which there were also opportunities for the more daring and ambitious: emigration to Cuba or smuggling, for example. Or reading and literary ambition. In Porcel's case, this atmosphere and these elements had decisive effects, not only on his personality, but also on all of his work: an important—the most important?—dimension of his novels consists in the mythic recreation—impassioned and adventurous, imaginative and tragic—of this atavistic and intractable Majorca.

When he was sixteen, Porcel moved to Palma, where he frequented certain literary circles and established a close relationship with Llorenç Villalonga. This closed and somewhat provincial world soon deceived him, however, and he decided to leave for Barcelona. His first books—*Els condemnats* (The Condemned), *Solnegre* (Blacksun)—had already been published and had won him his first prizes. Settling in the Catalan capital allowed him to channel his vocation more fully. Further, as luck would have it, Porcel attended the War Council convened by Jordi Pujol, future president of the Catalan Generalitat, which began a long friendship and political complicity that would last for many years. In the late sixties, Porcel began his collaboration with the journals *Serra d'or* and *Destino*, where his interviews with the great Catalan and Spanish figures of the era stood out. In this way he came to know Josep Pla, who would become, much more than Villalonga, his great teacher: a model of a professional dedicated to his work, and author of a vast and laborious oeuvre.

It was in the late sixties and early seventies that Porcel definitively opened his field of action, interesting himself in the great events happening around the world, from Paris in May 1968 to Mao's China and California's hippie, countries and occurrences that he knew first hand thanks to his many

travels, from which he extracted abundant literary material. Parallel to this ever more restless and expansive life, Porcel established himself as a powerful novelist (*Cavalls cap a la fosca* [Horses into the Dark], is from 1975), and as an intellectual to reckon with, wise and incisive, with the capacity and lucidity to act and maneuver in reality.

Thus the three backdrops of Baltasar Porcel's vital and intellectual action become defined. The three backdrops are: a) the intimate Majorca that the artist converts into a novel; b) the socio-politically convulsed and complex Catalonia and Spain that the opinionated author explains and influences (in this respect, the friendship that united Porcel to King Juan Carlos during the transition and early democratic period is very relevant); c) the broader world that the impenitent traveler knows from end to end. It was precisely in the late seventies and early eighties that Porcel the traveler made a discovery that would leave a personal and creative mark: black Africa, where he traveled tirelessly and where, in 1984, a novel took shape that simultaneously had elements of classic adventure and of existential litany, titled *Els dies immortals* (The Immortal Days). As an example of the ease with which Porcel is a writer of the world, in that same year, 1984, *Les illes encantades* (The Enchanted Isles) appeared, a recompilation of nonfiction material with which he had explained and conveyed the Balearic Islands and his relationship to them. Islands as homeland of departure and the world as homeland of arrival, novels as the backbone of an oeuvre in which books of other genres also achieve a tremendous quality: Porcel is son and brother, of this there is no doubt, of all the artists who have aspired to the absolute.

During the 80s and 90s, the author of Andratx participated very actively in the dynamics of the Spanish and Catalan sociopolitical world. He continued to write in the press, he continued working—as a constructive critic—with President Pujol, and he continued to write his novels, which continued to bring him awards. In 1988, he won the Sant Jordi with *Les primaveres i les tardors* (Springs and Autumns), the nucleus, together with *El cor del senglar* (Heart of the Boar), of what has come to be called "the Andratx myth." It was also during these years that Porcel founded and directed the Catalan Institute of the Mediterranean, a personal bet in favor of the knowledge and interrelationship of the peoples of the Mediterranean. From this Mediterranean fervor, for which Porcel has always waved a flag, came one of his most spectacular books: *Mediterrània* (Mediterranean). Tumultuous swells, which would be for the Mediterranean what Magris' Danube was for that great river of the same name.

Through his experiences as an agent of the sociopolitical system, Porcel has developed a kind of novel that does not have anything to do with either the myth of Majorca or the world adventures that predominated in his work from the sixties through the eighties. A type of realist novel, crude, brutal, but also sarcastic and mocking, normally with a protagonist who is ruined, bitter, cynical, and who analyzes and explains with excruciating disenchantment the miseries of a certain Barcelonan life (*Lola i els peixos morts* [Lola and the Dead Fish], *Ulisses a alta mar* [Ulysses on the High Seas]) and that of a Majorca devastated by tourism (*Olympia a mitjanit* [Olympia at Midnight]).

These novels are the definitive proof of the heterogeneity of Porcel's talent: both old and modern, comparable as much to Homer or Heracles as Faulkner, Camus, or Céline. In 2007, Baltasar Porcel was awarded with the Prize of Honor of Catalan Letters.

Translated by Robin Vogelzang