



# Josep Pla, universal localist, largely unrecognised

by Xavier Pla

“Josep Pla is as impetuous as the north wind of his native country. His gifts as an observer, his sense of paradox, his revolutionary spirit, his contact with men and ideas from all countries, make Josep Pla a formidable writer.”

With these words, there began the presentation that the French literary critic and Catalanophile Albert Schneeberger of a then extremely young writer and journalist called Josep Pla. This was in 1926, and the anthology *Conteurs Catalans* offered a translated narrative by Josep Pla to a French audience for the first time, alongside authors as established as Narcís Oller, Santiago Rusiñol, Prudenci Bertrana or Josep Carner. Described as a highly original author, full of verve, frankness, cynicism and humour, influenced by Dostoyevsky and Chekhov, everything led one to believe that Pla's easy-going, simple and anti-rhetorical prose would attract the attention of the French critics and public. In reality, however, almost fifty years would go by before another sample of Pla's literature was translated into French: in the volume *Écrivains de Catalogne*, professor Mathilde Bensoussan included extracts from *El quadern gris* [The Grey Notebook] in her anthology of Catalan texts, and compared Pla with Ramon Llull, Montaigne and Sterne, and described the author as a “wild man from the country, gifted with a terribly lucid and intelligent outlook, and with an encyclopaedical culture.” Meanwhile, the odd narrative by Pla had appeared in Portuguese, and also a selection of his journeys in Italian, and a book of his, *Viaje en autobús*, was translated into German from the Castilian original. Leaving to one side the occasional anecdotal translation, such as the guide to the monastery of Poblet (in French, English and German), it would not be until 1992 that a small publishing house in Nimes published what until now has been the most important translation ever made of a work by Josep Pla (excepting the translations into Castilian): done by Pascale Bardoulaud, *Le Cahier gris* was the first of Pla's works to be well received by the public and to enjoy considerable critical success in France. Just one year later, there appeared the translation of this same emblematic book of Pla's in Dutch: *Het Grijze schrift*. Recommended by Jorge Semprún on one of the most famous book programmes in French public television, *Le Cahier gris* opened the first page, that Spring, of the book section of the *Le Monde* newspaper with a heading that read: “At last a great unknown author has been translated: Josep Pla”.

Translated by Matthew Tree