

**Catalan Identity in the Post-Franco Era: Writing *Desencant* in Torrent's
*Un Negre Amb Un Saxo***

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Abstract

Imagine Spain as a tree, with different branches politically and culturally standing for its different cultures. What would it happen if these branches, except one, were transplanted to a shadowy area? Probably they would dry up and the Spanish tree would grow with just one branch, as *monoarboreal* formation. This metaphorical image may represent the Spanish State that Franco so enthusiastically envisaged. With his death and the establishment of democracy, the Spanish tree experienced a grafting process. The forgotten and dehydrated branches were grafted into the old tree. As is known, the success of grafting depends on the host for nutrition, developing in our case into a grafting ‘complex’: how would these fit in the new democratic Spain (1978–1986)?

The Catalan writer Ferran Torrent focuses on this context to point out that the host, the Spanish host, resembles too much the Francoist one. In consequence, Torrent makes an explicit criticism of his contemporary democratic society regarding the failure of the culture that would represent his graft, Catalan culture.

Always bearing in mind the cultural realm, others have used this metaphorical tree to represent contemporary Spanish society — a nice metaphor but the tree is finding it quite difficult to thrive, since as Torrent highlights, the trunk of that tree is rotten after years of Franco’s fascist dictatorship.

Keywords:



I say what I say without cowardice.
 But I also know the price of that.
 Sooner or later, I will get the sentence.
 Since it does not interest who does not lick with patience.
 They will isolate me, saying that I isolated myself.
 Ovidi Montllor¹

When one is considering cultural identity, the Spanish State is a vast and fertile field that offers complex areas of research. Different nations and nationalities have shaped its cultural past coexisting with Spain in a push-pull relationship. That is why the image of Spain as a multicultural tree comes to mind; a metaphor that several organizations like DENAES (Foundation for the Defence of the Spanish Nation) have used to imagine and to protect all the branches that represent it.

However, in order to understand it we need to go back in time in order to understand this Spanish tree. In a European context the nineteenth century witnessed the creation of the Nations-State, causing the majority of the modern states that we know today, like Germany or France. In the Spanish State the romantic and liberal ideas exalted the Catalan, Basque and Galician peripheral nations. These nations experienced an unimaginable cultural and political impulse at the beginning of the 20th century: the Catalan Renaissance, the Galician *Rexurdimento*, and the postulates of Sabino Arana in the Basque Country.

However, the imposition of the fascist Francoist regime shattered any possibilities of a multinational State, establishing the model *una, grande y libre* (one, big and free). That is to say, Franco's aim was emphatically to cut and dry up the different branches to leave one Castilian branch: a monoarboreal formation.

With the death of Franco Spanish society saw the death of years of imposition of a totalitarian government, which suppressed individual and national freedom. The years named 'transition to the democracy' were keys to end with the pro-Franco ballast, but did all the affairs pertaining to this historical period really finish? Following with this arboreal metaphor, how would these forgotten and dehydrated branches fit in the new democratic Spain (1978-1986)?

My article will explore the role of Catalan culture and identity after Franco's dictatorship, particularly during the first ten years of democracy (1977-1987). Specifically, I will consider the latency of the revisionist critique of contemporary Catalan culture and history: how Catalan contemporary literature must be approached within a wider revisionist critical turn on the

¹ 'Però també sé el preu de tot això/ Mes tard o d'hora, m'arribarà sentència./ Car no interessa qui no llepa amb paciència./ M'aïllaran, dient que m'he aïllat./ Diran o diuen, que ja sóc acabat./ No pense pas donar-me per guanyat.' Ovidi Montllor, 'Autocrítica i crítica', in Ovidi Montllor, *Bon Vent i Barca Nova* (Ariol, 1978).

Spanish Transition period (1976-1978), the consolidation of the democracy (1978-1980) and the *desencant* (disenchantment) experienced with regard to the new political situation.

The Catalan writer Ferran Torrent (València, 1951) focuses on this context to stress the disenchantment that Catalan culture felt with the new democratic situation. In this way, Torrent makes an explicit criticism of his contemporary democratic society and the failure of grafting Catalan culture to it. The reason, for Torrent, would be the host — Spain and the Spanish government — since the trunk of this old tree would be rotten after years of Franco's dictatorship. That is why Torrent would also criticize organizations like the aforementioned DENAES, which support a Spanish nation that is intrinsically centralist and Castilian nationalist. To explore these ideas, I will focus on the Catalan writer born in València, Ferran Torrent (1951), and the analysis of his novel *Un negre amb un saxo* (A Negro with a Sax) (1987).

The story is set in the eighties (1987), following ten years of complex democracy in Spain. The action takes place the city of València, which Torrent explores in order to offer a sharp criticism of its society.²

Thus, Torrent narrates the story of Hèctor Barrera, ex-boxer and journalist for the newspaper 'El Camí', a tough but principled character who submerges himself in the marginal environments of the apparently democratic València ruled by the socialist PSPV (Partit Socialista del País Valencià – Socialist Party of the Valencian Country) government. The pretence of the journalist is designed to discover a net of prostitution of minors and of drug trafficking that splashes high positions in Valencian civil society. For this reason, the night, the sex, the drugs and the prostitution will be daily spaces that Barrera will have to confront with procurers like Sandokan or corrupt judges like Ferragut. Curiously enough, Barrera will be assisted by marginalized and outlawed characters like the thieves el Xino and Penjoll, and by the illegal detective Butxana.³ Finally, after facing the Valèncian night, Barrera feels disappointed and frustrated, having witnessed the passivity of his periodical and of the supposedly official and civil society in general.

² In this context, NS can be considered a thriller in a Valencian city, which Torrent correlates with the Barcelonan genre tradition; and, especially, with black genre films and literature, in which we can point out E. Mendoza, A. Martín, R. Tasis, M. de Pedrolo or F. Bellmunt among others.

³ Toni Butxana is a usual detective in the literary universe of Ferran Torrent that it is rescued for NS. We find him in *No emprenyeu el comissari* (1984), *Penja els guants, Butxana* (1985) *Semental, estimat Butxana* (1997) and *Només Socis* (2008). Moreover, the journalist Hèctor Barrera is also the protagonist of *L'any de l'embotit* (1992); and, like in NS, these two characters share narratologic space in *Cavall i rei* (1989) and *Cambres d'acer inoxidable* (2000).

1. A folkloric graft

As we have just mentioned, one of Franco's obsessions was the construction of a state based on the idea of the artificial unit of Spain under the control of Castile, creating a territorial concept of Spain which suppressed the different historical nationalities. In this way, Franco's national conception sought a Machiavelli-like ideological control; not an original idea by the dictator, since its roots can be traced back to the fifteenth century with the Catholic Kings. The idea permeated in the twentieth century, with philosophers like Ortega y Gasset who, affected by the fin-de-siècle crisis, mourned that 'Spain is today not so much a nation as a series of water-tight compartments'.⁴

As a consequence, the possibilities of development for the different cultures within the Spanish State were simply unattainable, since this imagined Castile community prevented them from it. Instead, for forty years Galicia, the Basque Country and the Catalan Countries were subjugated by totalitarianism whose 'purpose was to build a version of Spain that made their particular view of Spanishness (*Hispanidad*) "the only possible."' ⁵

However, with the death of Franco in 1975 a new context arose putting an end to almost forty years of a fascist dictatorship. His death meant a political change that dramatically influenced Spanish culture. The transition to the democracy (1976-1978)⁶ was perceived as a great opportunity for cultural minorities in the State to experience a rebirth after the repression carried out by Franco. Certainly, in this new milieu the historical nationalities' claims were adamant about receiving from the central government a huge level of protection and concessions after Francoism.

The 1978 Constitution assured a democratic transition in Spain; at the same time, they looked for a territorial organization that would finish with the conflict of Spanish identity. This Constitution was welcomed by most of the political powers in Spain, although with some scepticism from these nationalities. This young democracy was consolidated in 1982 when the PSOE (Spanish Workers Socialist Party) won the elections. It is in this context that Torrent focuses NS, as well as a large amount of his works.

Why is this decade important for Catalan culture and especially for Torrent? In 1982, the Socialist Government impelled the Spanish Constitution, recognizing officially Catalan, Basque and Galician languages, and most of these autonomous regions had, or were in the

⁴ Cited by E. Hansen, the critic explains that 'he was despairing of the difficulties of national political integration that were created by the disparate nature of the regions making up the Spanish body politic'. In Edward C. Hansen's *Rural Catalonia Under the Franco regime* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 24.

⁵ In Triana-Toribio, Núria *Spanish National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 38.

⁶ These dates are the ones that the majority of political scientists have agreed upon, like Redero

process of passing, their Statutes of Autonomy.⁷ A revival of these languages was certainly expected, which would increase the use and consumption of Catalan language and literature. Precisely, as Torrent has commented several times,⁸ one of the reasons for him to start to write in Catalan was the socio-cultural environment that augured a huge increase in the demand of Catalan culture.

Certainly, a revival was needed as we can perceive from NS due to the lack of cultural referents in the noir València that Torrents presents us. Torrent reinforces the idea of a poor society in a cultural way with the allusion to one of the most important symbols for the Catalan Countries, the King Jaume I. The King, a symbol for the spreading of Catalan language, as well as Christianity, is forgotten and devalued as such, certainly through an erosion process initiated by Franco. Ironically, one of the King's statue in the city is no longer surrounded by the royal guard, but in 'company of a bunch of whores in typical tasks of the branch' (NS, p. 49). In addition, if the statue had to coexist during the night with whores, by day he was not saved either, since the growing consumer society was spreading an amnesiac atmosphere: 'The Corte Inglés [a big Spanish department store] tortured him with the techno-pop novelties' (NS, p. 49). Nevertheless, Torrent still sees space for nationalistic claims that they had so much power at the end of the '70s and beginning of the '80s, but that seemed to spoil with time. Torrent retrieves this nationalist feeling that seems to have a ghostlike appearance, a fossil in the capitalist society arisen after Franco's death; hence, Jaume I was claimed as a nationalistic symbol since 'some lost *maulet* [Catalan nationalist] placed a national protest painting on his pedestal' (NS, p. 49).

Therefore, these images may refer to this idea of showing spaces that were suppressed during Franco's dictatorship; so, the fact of portraying them can be understood as a catalyst to retrieve the historical connections and cultural normality.

It is a criticism of the regionalist folklore conception of València as subordinated to Spain, a conception inherited and imposed by Franco that predisposed a servile city spa of Spain. Franco's cultural process of uprooting Catalan culture evolved into a Valencian society understood as a folkloric graft. As Barrera ironically states in the novel 'we, Valèncians, have always been fucked. Here a lot of artist, a lot of fireworks and a lot of flower. And it goes like that for us: "Spa of Spain"' (NS, p. 47).

⁷ In this way, Catalonia and the Basque Country were the precursors, achieving the first Statute after Franco in 1979; then Galicia in 1981, the Valencian Country in 1982 and Balearic Islands in 1983.

⁸ We refer to the interview by Vicent Martí to Torrent in 1986. In Vicent Martí 'Açò és Hollywood, Ferran Torrent', *El Temps*, 24th February 1986, repr. in Ferran Torrent, *Tocant València* (Barcelona: Columna, 1995–2001), pp. 149–59.

València is then depicted as a poor cultural city, whose symbolism is essential in order to recuperate its cultural leadership. Hence, as Rosentone mentions, the pretension of Torrent might be understood in this post-Franco context as a desperate need for ‘historical connections [...] societies recovering from totalitarian regimes or the horrors of war; ethnic, political, social, or sexual minorities involved in the search to recapture or create viable heritages.’⁹

2. Francoist ghosts: possibilities of re-grafting?

But why is the cultural situation as poor as described by Torrent if the story is contextualized in the mid-80s when the democracy was fully consolidated? The reason for this is clear for Torrent – and I would add for most of the civil society: politicians.

In this sense, the reality of the Statutes of Autonomy, although without denying their importance, was quite different and the claims made by the historical nationalities remained just as a statement of intentions. In this way, as Santacreu and Garcia put it when referring to Torrent’s context, Valencians achieved all the formal and social liberties, but ‘it was also necessary an economic and cultural effort from all Valencians due to the deep changes to be generated, [by] the young Spanish democracy that seemed not to settle down.’¹⁰

Hence, Torrent’s NS would represent this cultural effort.¹¹ However, the text oozes a sharp and ironic criticism towards the local and central governments due to their lack of implication in the Valencian and Catalan cultural recovery, a criticism known as a period of *desencant*.

In this way, Torrent’s criticism is related with this idea of *desencant* with the democracy that was experienced by large sectors of the left, mainly communists, and nationalists. In this way, this *desencant* aesthetics would imbricate with the era of postmodernity. The sense of despair, of disillusion would share some of the aesthetics of this philosophical trend. As Dennis Smith considers when analysing *Zygmunt Bauman*, ‘the sense of ambivalence is linked with a deep scepticism about modernity: an unwillingness to believe its promises and a reluctance to be taken in by its ‘big stories’ or meta-narratives (about socialism, democracy and so on)’.¹² In this sense, following Smart, ‘the concept of postmodernity has been invoked to describe

⁹ R. A. Rosentone (ed.), *Revisioning History* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 5.

¹⁰ The authors carry on to stress the difficulties of establishing a ‘normal’ society: ‘socially the efforts that all the social agents had to made in order to overcome the tunnel in which Valencians were, demanded, on one hand, a notable endeavour in the government investments concerning infrastructure and, on the other, a pact between the government and the unions, that would guarantee the support to a huge number of workers facing unemployment’. In J.M. Santacreu Soler and M.Garcia Andreu, *La transició democràtica al País Valencià* (Simat de la Vallidigna: Edicions la Xara, 2002), p. 83.

¹¹ Other artists that promoted Catalan culture include J.F. Mira, Andreu Fabregat, Quim Monzó or Francesc Bellmunt.

¹² In Dennis Smith, *Zygmunt Bauman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), p. 154.

developments in a number of areas [like] the erosion of cultural hierarchies.¹³ In the Spanish context we find the erosion of Franco's cultural hierarchy, but as Torrent makes clear, its perpetuation undermines the possibilities of expression for Catalan culture.

From the beginning, Torrent begins an ironic game when referring to the young democrat and their presumed defence of freedom since the sceptic journalist Barrera considers that she was from those that they call progressives [read it as socialists], since during the trials she quoted constantly the constitution, the freedom of speech and a pair of jokes more, a lot in the line of the young democrats (NS, p. 17).

Torrent certainly is being ironical about the progressives identified with the PSPV, since through the novel we can trace a series of references that undermine their good democratic predisposition. An example in this context is the criticism of the socialist president of the Generalitat Valènciana [the government of València], Joan Lerma. He is disapproved of for not desalinating the waters from Castelló and for damaging the farmers; another politician criticized is the socialist president of the Spanish central Government, and its president Felipe González, who led the law LOAPA of 1982 (Organic Law on the Harmonization of the Autonomy Process). This law had an intrusive character in the Statutes of Autonomy that so much craved the historic nationalities of the State, because it limited the transfer of competences from the State to the autonomies, particularly Galicia, the Basque Country and Catalonia.¹⁴

Politicians again are described as cynical and corrupted due to their implication in the net of prostitution dismantled by Barrera, among which there are progressive left-wing candidates too, like 'A deputy of the party Left Majority' (NS, p.196), as well as active members of the transition.

In consequence, the cultural relationships between Catalonia and Madrid were not satisfactory during these first years of democracy, due to the promotion through political spheres of a Spanish culture based on the Castilian language.¹⁵ The possibilities of re-grafting Catalan culture in this new society seemed to be far away from what was expected. The convention of Castilian and Catalan intellectuals celebrated in Sitges in 1981 demonstrates this

¹³ Barry Smart, *Postmodernity. Key Ideas* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 13.

¹⁴ For more information about the Law, consult 'La España democrática', in Álvaro Soto, *Transición y cambio en España, 1975-1996* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 2005), p. 241.

¹⁵ Thus, it is necessary to remember the frustration reflected politically, since in the first elections of 1977 there was not a Minister for Culture, and it is not until 1991 that we had a Minister from Catalonia. Moreover, in the two first general elections (1977 and 1980) the nationalist Catalanian party *Convergència i Unió* achieved a low representation, with only 8 seats. To check the results of the general election, consult www.congreso.es/elecciones/index.htm (3/01/07).

desencant. In the inaugural speech of the former Catalan President Jordi Pujol the tension can already be appreciated between both cultures:

This meeting was necessary. There must be something that, either does not work properly, or that does not work enough in the dialogue between languages and culture in Spain [...] There are some elements of the political Spanish development in these last times that do not satisfy us [...] the essential about this Spain that we are building, is the respect of the foundations of our identity as a nation: a fact of language, of culture, of historical consciousness, and collective will.¹⁶

In the same convention, the poet Goytisolo reviews the inequality of cultures when affirming that Castilian and Catalan languages have to have the same rights and ‘the same possibilities of teaching and diffusion. But until today, this relationship has been unlevelled catastrophically against Catalan language’ (Generalitat 1981: 50).

Especially, one of the aspects that Torrent wants to stress about this new born democracy is the survival of Franco’s spirits, which does not seem to disappear. Thus, Torrent seems to reinforce the theory of the ‘false’ Spanish transition, specified in a purification of the Francoist sectors that were reinstated again in spheres of power. This was possible, according to Colmeiro, ‘due to the pact of collective amnesia with which was signed the Constitution, and the consequent disenchantment that would turn a utopian ideal more and more distant and unattainable, and because of its conversion into nostalgia and fetish-memory’.¹⁷

In the novel, Torrent leaves footprints of this survival of Franco’s regime in democracy; like the reference to the police and one of the waiters of the police station, who ‘boasts a Spanish flag in the flap of the jacket, white and with stains of red wine. In the other flap he wore an insignia of the Real Madrid. The Spanish flag did not show any ideological additive, either the hen [the Francoist eagle] or the constitutional sticker. He must be a neutral cop’ (NS, p. 80).

There is a mention of the police repression embodied by the GAL (Antiterrorist Liberation Groups), the terrorist organization created by the Spanish State to fight against terrorist groups, mainly ETA and GRAPO (Grupos de Resistencia Antifascista Primero de Octubre — First of October Antifascist Resistance Group). It is important to mention the way Torrent censures this terrorism of the Spanish government and binds it with the State in a moment in which the GAL was still operating (in assets until 1989). In the novel, the vice-chairwoman of Barrera’s newspaper mentions that ‘the GAL is a question of state, you know it, and I add: with the connivance of the government’ (NS, p. 102). The GAL is then a threatening and repressive entity that it seems to transport us back to Franco’s regime, despite having a left-wing

¹⁶ In *Generalitat de Catalunya Relaciones de las culturas castellana y catalana. Encuentro de intelectuales*. Sitges 20-22 diciembre 1981 (Catalunya: Generalitat de Catalunya, 1983), pp. 13-14.

¹⁷ José F. Colmeiro, *Memoria histórica e identidad cultural. De la postguerra a la postmodernidad* (Barcelona: Anthropos, 2005), p. 147.

government. Thus, Torrent associates Franco's dictatorship with democracy and censorship, since the GAL makes impossible the informative task of the newspaper where Barrera works since its director restricts his discoveries because 'the series about the GAL ended on your director receiving a threat of death' (NS, p. 101). The terrorist organization has been a thorny subject in the Spanish context, which has been tackled just recently in cultural and political terms with the release of two films: *Lobo* (Wolf, Miguel Courtois, 2004) and *GAL* (Miguel Courtois, 2006). This is why it is important to stress clearly these references about the GAL since it was criticized in the novel during its activity.¹⁸

Finally, Barrera seems to be alone in this task since the editorial staff prevents him from publishing the articles that may jeopardize the reputation of high members of the society.

- You are a good journalist, Barrera, but your way of working does not fit in with the interests of the company.
- I thought that the company was interested in selling diaries.
- Not, if it is not playing by the rules of the game. And the implications of your report borders on the limits (NS, p. 205).

They censor Barrera for intending to publish articles in the newspaper that would uncover a net of corruption in which politicians and civil representatives, considered as holy cows during the first years of democracy, are implied. Therefore, we find an informative self-censorship that, as Torrent insinuates, represents a Francoist inheritance, since 'I was annoyed by their incapacity of rebellion. Thirty years working in a newspaper forced, I suppose, to revise some attitudes' (NS, p. 206).

What is inferred from the dialogues between Barrera and the director of the newspaper is basically the controversy to combine the new society that was being gestated after the death of Franco and those elements of the dictatorship that were towed during the transition. It is a conflict that dragged on for years in Spanish society due to the fear of the return of a military dictatorship, bearing in mind the recent coup d'état by the Guardia Civil Tejero in 1981, just six years after Torrent wrote the novel.

3. Conclusion

Barrera's personal situation and the censorship taste can be extrapolated to the conformism that a large part of the society had assumed once they acquired the democracy. That is why, Barrera

¹⁸ The book *Los años oscuros de la transición española* by Eduardo Pons is quite useful in understanding the pact of silence and the incorporation of members of the dictatorship into the new democratic system. Pons mentions the case of Martínez Torres who was decorated by the Home Secretary, Barrionuevo. He quotes the criticism towards this policeman by a group of citizens indignant about it, since he was an "infiltrated democrat" in the sinister Social-Politic Brigade and took part in the usual duties (to arrest democrats, imprison them, hit them), although his subsequent "loyalty" to the institutions'. In Eduardo Pons Prades, *Los años oscuros de la transición española* (Barcelona: Belacqva Ediciones, 2005), p. 303.

considers that there is not enough with the ‘understanding left’ of the Socialist party. In this way, as Stuart Hall mentions (1992: 7), modern societies are social formations, constructed according to distinctive social, political, economic, and cultural processes. Certainly true, but I would add that in this case Catalan society and the political-cultural determining are narrowly linked in a subordinated relationship. In this way, Torrent wants to make clear that in this society ruled by capitalism, industrialization, secularization, urbanization and nationalization, politics and Catalan and Spanish politicians subjugate culture due to the new tenets of this capitalist society that forged the socialist government in Spain during the ’80s. In this sense, to the idea of Hall by which ‘the meaning of a cultural symbol is given in part by the social field into which is incorporated’,¹⁹ I would stress that in the post-Franco’s Catalonia that social network is highly politicized.

Certainly, this idea can be linked with the feeling of frustration of sectors of the Catalan and Valencian society, especially nationalistic, whose cultural aspirations were truncated in the democratic process, with examples like the LOAPA, with the deployment of the statutes of autonomy, or the government of the PSOE. A dispute was originated, then, among political and cultural sectors, which certainly conditioned this feeling of frustration of Barrera in the end of NS: ‘What is the aim of a newspaper? The shit continues growing and newspapers serve to use the paper, for cleaning your arse.’²⁰

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¹⁹ Cited by L. Grossberg, ‘History, Politics and Postmodernism. Stuart Hall and cultural studies’, *Stuart Hall. Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. by David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (London: Routledge, 1996–2001), p. 157; first published in *Journal of Communication Inquiry* (1986), 10(2), 61–77.

²⁰ We have to refer as well to the political frustration, since after the first general elections in 1977, there was not a Culture Secretary in the Spanish Government. Besides, in the first two democratic elections in 1977 and 1980, *Covergència i Unió* (Catalan nationalist conservative party) achieved a dicreet representation in the Spanish Parliament. Indeed, it was the only Catalan party to be represented. For more information, check the statistics for the general elections (www.congreso.es/elecciones/index.htm 3/01/07).

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