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## Francesc Trabal



### Francesc Trabal, Novelist

Dolors Oller

The work of Trabal is basically that of a journalist who, in time, became more and more inclined toward literature in the strict sense of the word, and wrote a number of novels

that had a certain impact in the years prior to the Spanish Civil War. These novels are refined, artificial, and brilliant, and deal with the middle-class society of that period. They stand radically apart from their predecessors of the nineteenth century and attempt to establish links, in their subjects, structure and style with the models of the psychological technique practised above all by French writers such as Proust and Gide. Trabal's humour, more characteristic of avant-garde literature, tends slightly towards the absurd.

Francesc Trabal i Benessat was born in Sabadell on 5 May 1899. Brilliant and of restless disposition, he played an active and notable role in the Catalan cultural world of his times. By the time he was eighteen, he was part of a circle of friends that included a number of influential personalities in the world of art, letters and politics. [Joan Oliver](#), his friend, colleague, travelling companion and facetious foil for many years, offers in his book *Tros de paper (Piece of Paper)*, a cordial, anecdotal, sensitive and sufficiently rigorous sketch of Trabal for us to have a good idea of his character, activities and his group of friends in the years of his adolescence and young manhood. Again, thanks to the valuable information kindly offered by Joan Oliver, I can also say that Francesc Trabal was an enthusiastic, sociable man who was very much taken up with his cultural activities. Editor and eventually director of the newspaper *Diari de Sabadell*, he published there his curious, diverting articles about politics or pieces that were full of new jokes and tough brain-teasers, very much along the Dadaist lines of the *épater-le-bourgeois* posture. He encouraged and directed magazines, organised debates and associations, for example the Federació d'Associacions de Música (Federation of Music Associations) -a number of groups of music lovers that, located in each regional capital and all of them under the auspices of the Barcelona Music Association, were able to work the miracle that people in all the towns in Catalonia could go to their theatres and listen to the most outstanding musicians of the day. He also worked with others to create the publishing house "La Mirada" of Sabadell, which would subsequently merge with Proa to become the "La Mirada" Collection. It was in these Sabadell publications that his first book would appear in 1925 under the title of *L'any que ve (Next Year)*, thereafter making him known as a humorist and writer who was part of the group that came to be called the Grup de Sabadell (Sabadell Group).

*L'any que ve* is a book of Trabal's jokes, illustrated by his own drawings along with those of [Joan Oliver](#), Antoni Vila Arrufat, Ricard Marlet, Lluís Parcerisa, Josep M. Trabal, Armand Obiols and Miquel Carreras. The book is presented with a Prologue by [Josep Carner](#), "Un Humor Indeliberat, Difós, Secret dins l'Automatisme Tradicional de les Paraules Òbvies (A Non-deliberate, Diffuse, Secret Humour within the Traditional Automatism of Obvious Words), which discusses the meaning of the book and the type of humour it represents. Carner describes the group as "... select spirits united by joyful cordiality, subtle curiosity, daily emulation ?" He goes on to praise the Sabadell Group, because it was "able to skewer our primary collective defect -Obviousness- on the spear of Suprasensitive humour. If we weren't so obvious, we'd be a bit more sophisticated and we'd gain from that ?" He

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continues, "The Sabadell Group sheds an elegant, purifying light, with very civil criticism and comforting causticity ?" This quote from Carner helps to explain what we feel on reading the book, while also capturing its humour. With this humour, the connection between drawing and text reveals the ineffectiveness of the word in expressing an idea. Here, we are quite close to avant-garde humour, its reflections on the inability of codified language for expressing highly subjective or new ideas, and its endeavours to discover ambiguous wordplays or multiple meanings. In brief, the influence of the trends of the period is hardly surprising in the case of a man like Trabal who made periodic trips around Europe and who kept up contacts he had made with people in other countries. In 1929, La Mirada brought out his *L'home que es va perdre* (*The Man Who Lost Himself*), a novel in which the hero, Francesc Picabia, who is emotionally unhinged for sentimental reasons, is subject to a progressive neurosis that takes the form of a penchant for losing things. The things he manages to lose range from a fountain pen to the Stockholm Parliament building, from a secretary to a hospice for Chinese Children. Whatever the case, what is important is not so much the verisimilitude of the events as of the characters and the simple descriptions of atmospheres and reactions, along with the book's delirious humour, absurd situations and complicated adventures that will all end in tragedy: the hero lost to himself, demented, devouring his lover. In 1930, La Mirada published *Judita*, the story of a sexual idyll that is locked into itself. The two main characters, who have lost their heads in their feverish, platonically idealised love, seek a hiding place for "just the two of them" and go off to live on a deserted beach in California, where disenchantment soon sets in and mystery is revealed for what it is. The hero develops a split personality as his view of things changes. His lover, Lidotchka, formerly sweet, passionate, generous sincere, and brimming with adventurousness and sensitivity, becomes the wearisome, pretentiously prissy, tyrannical and obvious Judita. The novel is narrated by the male character in the form of letters to a friend, which gives the reader an ironic view of the character and the situation. The *amour fou* of the first part of the book ends in a deadlock, which Trabal resolves in the least painful way: through the absurd. Judita, dancing in a field of flowers, ceases to torment her lover when she explodes into the air: "she went pop like an acorn, and flew into little pieces". This book reveals Trabal's great gifts as an erotic writer, one of the principal and constant features running through all his novels, even the more playful ones, for example, the book he published in 1931, *Quo vadis, Sànchez?*, which has a sporting background and is illustrated by Castanys. This work, which belongs among his writings of more simple humour (in subject matter, reactions, gags), offers a veiled glimpse of another of Trabal's constants: unfulfilment. His main character, a poor lower-class man, does everything he possibly can to be appreciated by the upper class he so admires and from which he only receives humiliation and slights. Following his failed psychological mystery, the novel *Era una dona com les altres* (*She Was a Woman Like the Rest*), Francesc Trabal returns to the theme of *amour fou* with his *Hi ha homes que ploren quan el sol es pon* (*There Are Men Who Cry When the Sun Goes Down*), a parody of the bourgeois sentimental drama within a caricatured naturalist line that was published by Proa in the "La Mirada" Collection in 1933. Three years later, in the same collection, he would publish a book entitled *Vals*, his most successful novel and one that was to earn him the 1936 Crexells Prize. Following the structure of a waltz *in crescendo*, Francesc Trabal, with a backdrop of civic sentiment and bourgeois dilemmas, tells the story and describes the failure of a sensitive, idle and romantic young man of twenty years of age, whose brand of romanticism makes him somewhat oblivious, a little cowardly and very unhappy. Apart from a kind of biological determinism with echoes of the nineteenth-century novel, *Vals* is written with narrative simplicity and fluidity, and the cinematographic resources of Trabal's language and the expressionism with which he reveals the key means by which the reader can decipher each situation, are a sample of Trabal's sensitivity to the aesthetic tools that his times presented and also of his qualities as a writer.

Trabal continued to live in Sabadell although his work as collaborator and correspondent with *La Veu de Catalunya*, *La Publicitat* and "Mirador" was fully based in Barcelona. When the Civil War broke out,

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he went to live in Barcelona where he joined the l'Agrupació d'Escriptors Catalans (Catalan Writers' Group) and became secretary of the Institute of Catalan Letters. The defeat of 1939 obliged him, along with many others, to take the path of [exile](#), first in France and subsequently in Chile, where he died in 1958. From Chile, and with the Catalonia publishing house of Mexico, which was headed by [Avel·lí Artís](#), he published his last novel *Temperatura (Temperature)* in 1947, this being perhaps his most ambitious if not most successful work although it has all Trabal's distinguishing traits. Increasingly stylised, frenetic and imaginative, his writing closes with a great display of literary and cinematographic resources that could come under the heading of science fiction. [...]

Humour is frequently understood as an author's disinterest in continuing to sustain the weight of a work once it is underway ` an anti-cultural attitude and absence of concern for the literary work in itself ` so that a chapter may be ended with some absurdity, or some exposition is offered in order to move quickly on to other chapters. But Trabal's real humour, his most significant humour, has something in common with many great humorists such as Groucho Marx, Woody Allen and others. Given a certain reality, the author subtly furnishes us with all the right clues so that we can see what the characters, befuddled and haunted by their own obsessions, are blind to, both in themselves and in their immediate surroundings or, if they are aware, they think the problem is secreted away, dissimulated and well covered up. The spectator or reader is thus made to interpret reality through humour. It is a reality, as happens with most humorists, that is made up of contradictory elements oscillating between irony and tenderness, between comedy and tragedy, between reality and the absurd. The reality and the absurd are always controlled by the author who seems indifferent in his contemplation of the mechanics of the events that are arbitrarily and frivolously occurring as a pretext for other sequences. We can speak of sequences here because I believe that Trabal's language is basically cinematographic in its images and visual in its situations and movements. His style is punctilious in its accounts of atmospheres and situations and is almost certainly the fruit of a curious and observant temperament. Agile in his suggestiveness through simple, well-chosen details, he is a writer of elegant and modern language. A brilliant, cosmopolitan writer.

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They Have Said ...Other writers of Trabal's period did not manifest the modern concept of topicality in their work. However, we find it in Trabal's work as a novelist since he incorporates everything that is the fashion of the day: the names of actresses, the most recent brand names ? In particular, his language is what people most commonly used and the most characteristic of his times, encompassing the entire universe of his fiction. Trabal therefore demonstrates that he is the novelist of susceptibility and sensibility, which makes him truly modern. And if improvisation sometimes fails him, at other moments it is his greatest strength. Thanks to improvisation, he achieves the spontaneity and authenticity, which at times only this procedure can offer.

**Carme Arnau**, *Marginats i integrats en la novel·la catalana (1925-1938) (Insiders and Outsiders in the Catalan Novel (1925-1938))* (Barcelona, Edicions 62, 1987).

If Trabal's characters, even when they don't want to recognise it, are people who are everlastingly in love because this is what is appropriate for a character in a novel, there is another very important reason for this emphasis. Love is one of the borderline manifestations of the relations between fiction and reality and of the bonds between subject and object. One of the most vulgar human experiences -vulgar because it is so generalised- is perceived as unique. Through it, individuals construct an awareness of total individuation that at once reveals the problem of the existence of the Other

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through the Ego. Yet the models that lead to the self-representation of the amorous experience are codified by the cultural tradition. However, and not least, what is beautiful is to describe love because it enables an ideal reconstruction of the vulgar experience. Nonetheless, there is another factor that is even more important. Through description, one of the mechanisms inherent to the amorous experience is taken through to its final consequences: domination. It is evident that novel, inasmuch as it is "modern", has become a first-rate instrument in constructing representations of the amorous experience. Hence, there is nothing at all wrong with somebody's seeing it as a tool that is obliged to contribute towards undoing some of the messes it has helped to create.

However, the harsh test of the war, overwork, the anxieties that came with the acceptance of hefty responsibilities and his dark forebodings about the near future, which Trabal strove to hide under a veneer of communicative optimism, were the cause in my friend, as in so many others who endured and suffered those terrible years, of a wounded spirit and serious depression. The Trabal who went into exile was no longer the same man. However, in France, he was tireless in his hard work for his companions who were held in the concentration camps and he organised the refuge at Roissy-en-Brie, where a large group of writers were able to wait until they were able to cross the Atlantic.

Things were not easy for him in Chile and, in fact, he never managed to achieve a stable situation. Nonetheless, he did an excellent job in making our culture known and in approaching university circles and intellectual groups and individuals in the country. Sometimes he published articles in the review of the Catalan colony and two of his books, *Judita* and *Vals*, were published in Spanish there. And his last and least successful novel *Temperatura* was published in Mexico.

**Joan Oliver**, "Francesc Trabal, recordat" (Francesc Trabal, Remembered) in *Tros de paper* (Barcelona, Ariel, 1970).

## A selection of texts

### Text



**WEB: Per llegir**

Breu biografia de Francesc Trabal i un fragment de la seva obra *Vals*, al web literari d'Andreu Sotorra.

<http://www.andreusotorra.com/vinyetaliteraria/docus/trabalf.html>



**WEB: To Read**

Brief biography of Francesc Trabal and a fragment of his work *Vals (Waltz)*, at the literary website of Andreu Sotorra.

<http://www.andreusotorra.com/vinyetaliteraria/docus/trabalf.html>

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## Bio-bibliography

### Biography



**WEB: A la Hiperenciclopèdia**

[http://www.enciclopedia.cat/fitxa\\_v2.jsp?NDCHEC=0067164](http://www.enciclopedia.cat/fitxa_v2.jsp?NDCHEC=0067164)

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**WEB: The author in the Catalan Encyclopaedia**

<http://www.grec.cat/cgi-bin/heclangcl2.pgm?&USUARI=&SESSIO=&NDCHEC=0067164&PGMORI=E>

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**WEB: Què hi ha a la Biblioteca de Catalunya**

[http://cataleg.bnc.cat/search\\*cat/?searchtype=a&searcharg=Trabal+Francesc&sortdropdown=-&searchscope=13&searchscope2=13&SORT=D](http://cataleg.bnc.cat/search*cat/?searchtype=a&searcharg=Trabal+Francesc&sortdropdown=-&searchscope=13&searchscope2=13&SORT=D)



**WEB: Què hi ha a les biblioteques universitàries catalanes (CCUC)**

[http://ccuc.cbuc.es/search\\*cat/a?SEARCH=Trabal+Francesc&sortdropdown=-&searchscope=23](http://ccuc.cbuc.es/search*cat/a?SEARCH=Trabal+Francesc&sortdropdown=-&searchscope=23)



**WEB: Què hi ha a les biblioteques públiques**

<http://argus.biblioteques.gencat.cat/iii/encore/search/C|STrabal+Francesc|Orightresult|U1?lang=cat&suite=pearl>



**WEB: Per comprar-ne llibres**

<http://www.llibres.cat/ca/detall-autor/trabal-i-venessat-francesc>



**WEB: Articles de l'autor (Traces)**

<http://traces.uab.cat/search?f=author&p=Trabal%20Francesc%20&sc=1&ln=ca>



**WEB: Articles sobre l'autor (Traces)**

[http://traces.uab.cat/search?ln=ca&p=Trabal%2C+Francesc&f=keyword&action\\_search=Cerca&c=Traces+%3A+base+dades+de+llengua+i+literatura+catalanes&sf=&so=d&rm=&rg=10&sc=1&of=hb](http://traces.uab.cat/search?ln=ca&p=Trabal%2C+Francesc&f=keyword&action_search=Cerca&c=Traces+%3A+base+dades+de+llengua+i+literatura+catalanes&sf=&so=d&rm=&rg=10&sc=1&of=hb)



**WEB: Works in the Biblioteca de Catalunya**

[http://cataleg.bnc.cat/search\\*eng/?searchtype=a&searcharg=Trabal+Francesc&sortdropdown=-&searchscope=13&searchscope2=13&SORT=D](http://cataleg.bnc.cat/search*eng/?searchtype=a&searcharg=Trabal+Francesc&sortdropdown=-&searchscope=13&searchscope2=13&SORT=D)



**WEB: The author in The European Library**

<http://search.theeuropeanlibrary.org/portal/en/search/%28%22creator%22+all+%22trabal+francesc%22%29.query>



**WEB: The author in the Congress Library (US)**

<http://catalog.loc.gov/cgi-bin/Pwebrecon.cgi?DB=local&PAGE=First>



**WEB: The author in the COPAC Catalogue (UK)**

<http://copac.ac.uk/search?&au=Francesc+Trabal>

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## Comments on the author

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## Criticism



**WEB: Francesc Trabal a l'AELC**

Inclou biografia, obra, premis, transcripció d'articles i enllaços.

<http://www.escriptors.cat/autors/trabalf>



**WEB: L'autor al Corpus Literari Ciutat de Barcelona**

Biografia, enllaços i transcripció d'articles sobre Trabal.

[http://www.ducros.biz/corpus/index.php?command=show\\_news&news\\_id=2858](http://www.ducros.biz/corpus/index.php?command=show_news&news_id=2858)



**WEB: Francesc Trabal in AELC (Association of Catalan Language Writers)**

Includes biography, works prizes, interviews and links.

[http://www.escriptors.cat/autors/trabalf/pagina.php?id\\_sec=2018](http://www.escriptors.cat/autors/trabalf/pagina.php?id_sec=2018)



**WEB: Francesc Trabal in the City of Barcelona Literary Corpus**

Biography, links and a transcription of articles on this author.

[http://www.ducros.biz/corpus/index.php?command=show\\_news&news\\_id=2858](http://www.ducros.biz/corpus/index.php?command=show_news&news_id=2858)

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## Comments



**WEB: Instituto Chileno-Catalan de Cultura**

Notícia informativa sobre aquest Institut fundat per Francesc Trabal.

[http://www.encyclopedia.cat/fitxa\\_v2.jsp?NDCHEC=0256509](http://www.encyclopedia.cat/fitxa_v2.jsp?NDCHEC=0256509)



**WEB: Instituto Chileno-Catalan de Cultura (Chilean-Catalan Institute of Culture)**

Information about this institute, which was founded by Francesc Trabal.

[http://www.encyclopedia.cat/fitxa\\_v2.jsp?NDCHEC=0256509](http://www.encyclopedia.cat/fitxa_v2.jsp?NDCHEC=0256509)