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Gabriel Ferrater



Gabriel Ferrater: a New Direction in Catalan Poetry?

Xavier Macià (Universitat de Lleida)

The work of Ferrater is the effort of a great intellectual. His considerable versatility (he was a mathematician, a linguist, a literary critic, a translator, a university lecturer and a writer) accounts for the varied nature of his opus, which ranges from articles on linguistics to major poetic compositions. A fervent reader, Ferrater was well-acquainted with the English language and German writers of his time. He describes his poetry, in which the influence of his masters Josep Carner and Carles Riba is discernible, as "poetry of experience".

The intellectual and poetic career of Gabriel Ferrater i Soler (Reus 1922 - Sant Cugat 1972) covers a relatively short period (from 1950 to 1972, the year of his tragic death) but it was intense, brilliant and of undeniable intellectual vigour and quality.

Gabriel Ferrater represents a heterodox and atypical model of the intellectual and poet, at least according to the canons of his time. A long way from being the organic intellectual type described by Gramsci - which was totally unthinkable in the Catalonia under the Franco dictatorship - and also at quite a remove from the patriot-resistance model, Ferrater appears as a liberal and independent man of letters, sceptical, anti-provincial, suspicious of any ideology and dogmatism, politics and aesthetics and, above all, he was lucid, iconoclastic and provocative. He was an unconventional character, self-taught, rigorous, elegant, didactic and always impassioned.

Ferrater is mainly known as a poet, and it was in this domain that he undoubtedly achieved his most remarkable results. Noteworthy too, however, are his professional activities as a publishing reader and director, teacher and translator, while his contributions as an art critic, linguist and literary scholar are particularly interesting. His approximations to the works of [Josep Carner](#), [Carles Riba](#) and [J.V. Foix](#) are obligatory references, both for the readings of them he proposes and for the way in which he discusses them.

Taken as a whole, his intellectual career is quite coherent, with a manifest complementarity among its different elements. His non-poetic production, despite its partial and, in some cases, unfinished nature, offers a glimpse of a clear unity of purpose so that it seems to be part of a deliberately comprehensive project. Ferrater himself defined this in a critical piece published in the review *Laye*, as a basic requirement for the modern "culture worker", whose work should only consist of "making his speciality robust enough to absorb all possible knowledge and to integrate this into an organised and dynamic expressive system".

His small body of powerful and original poetic work appears to be a very particular synthesis of tradition and modernity and the result of a selective appropriation of the principles proposed by some of the most significant writers of Catalan literature ([March](#), [Josep Carner](#), [Riba](#), [Foix](#)) and also by some European and American writers (Catullus, Chrétien de Troyes, Villon, Baudelaire, Rimbaud,

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Frost, Graves, Pavese, Kavafis, Eliot, Lowell, Auden, Brecht...).

Not remotely susceptible to being labelled as belonging to any particular movement, Ferrater represents the clearest example of the will to breathe new life into the Catalan literary system of the period after the Civil War. His poetry, written and published throughout the 1960s, at a crucial time of change and aesthetic polarisation between the post-symbolist tradition and the emerging trend of historical realism, represented in itself a third alternative possibility that was synthesising, new and different, while also particularly attentive to the evolution of contemporary poetry. However, there was little interest in his poetry until after 1968, which coincided with the beginning of the decline of historical realism and, in particular, until after his death four years later. But the vindication and real propagation of the Ferrater model, which is decisive for understanding Catalan poetry today, would not come about until the 1980s when his works were published posthumously.

Brief Biographical Note The poet's life, more mystified than studied even today, might be summarised thus: he was born in Reus on 20 May 1922. His father was a wine merchant and the family was well-to-do and cultured and, although their son's entry into the formal education system was delayed until he was ten years old, they were concerned to create a favourable atmosphere for solid intellectual education and training. Ferrater lived in Reus until 1938, when his family went into exile in France. This was the childhood paradise and framework reference in many of his poems, in particular "In Memoriam".

In 1941, he returned to Spain, did his military service (1943-1945), worked in his father's business, somehow passed his school-leaving examination (1945-1947) and went on to study Exact Sciences at the University of Barcelona, only to drop out in the third year (1950). In 1951 his father, who was financially ruined, committed suicide. This coincided with a key turning point in Gabriel Ferrater's intellectual and personal life. On the one hand, the poet went to live in Barcelona and took his first steps in a career as an art critic, translator and publishers' reader and, on the other, he came into contact with different Barcelona-based artistic and intellectual groups. In the early 1950s, Ferrater met and frequently saw José M. de Martín (with whom, in 1951, he would write the detective novel *Un cuerpo, o dos* [One Body, Or Two]),

[Joan Vinyoli](#), Rosa Leveroni, Eduard Valentí, [Carles Riba](#) and also the circle of young intellectuals around the review *Laye*, for which he would write articles about art. *Laye*, published between 1950 and 1954 by the Delegación Provincial de Educación de Barcelona (Provincial Office of Education of Barcelona), with the Falangist Eugenio Fuentes Martín as its director, is regarded today as the point where the members of the so-called "Barcelona School" converged. It was also at this time that he met the younger Spanish-language poets Jaime Gil de Biedma and Carlos Barral, who were both greatly influenced by him.

Ferrater wrote and published his entire poetic work between 1958 and 1968. In these years, the poet was striving to achieve a certain professional and personal stability. First, he tried outside the country, going to London to look for a publishing job, which, however, he found in Hamburg as a reader for Rowohlt Verlag. Then, in Barcelona, in the autumn of 1963, he accepted the job as literary director of Seix Barral, married the American journalist Jill Jarrell the following year (they separated in 1966) and settled in Sant Cugat, not far from Barcelona. In 1968 he finished his Arts degree and began to work as a lecturer in Linguistics and Literary Criticism at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. These are the years of his greatest intellectual activity (teaching, conferences, seminars, projects, prologues, translations ?) and also the time of his first official public recognition. But, on 27 April 1972, a few days before his fiftieth birthday, Gabriel Ferrater killed himself in his Sant Cugat flat.

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Women and Days Ferrater's irruption as a poet was as sudden and disturbing as his silence. First, were the quality, strength and novelty of his poetry and then came the shockingly premature and definitive withdrawal just at the time when he was beginning to receive major recognition. The poet himself describes some of the factors that led to his extraordinary but fleeting poetic career: the need to explain - and to overcome - the oppressive obscurantism of the period that followed the Civil War, the desire to understand himself and to understand the reality around him and the happy coincidence of more or less fortuitous circumstances.

Ferrater wrote almost all of his poetry in less than six years, from 1958 to 1963. After that he only wrote a few new poems, revised some he had already published and prepared the edition of his complete works *Les dones i els dies* (Women and Days, 1968). This volume contains 114 poems, most of them brief with the notable exceptions of "In Memoriam" and "Poema inacabat" (Unfinished Poem), which is more narrative in style. The collection is structured into numbered sections that generally respect the order of appearance and internal organisation of the only three books he had published: *Da nuces pueris* (1960; republished by Empúries, 1987), *Menja't una cama* (Eat a Leg, 1962; republished by Empúries, 1997) and *Teoria dels cossos* (Theory of Bodies, 1966; republished by Empúries, 1989). However, in eliminating all the paratexts that accompanied these collections (epigraphs, subtitles, epilogues) Ferrater produced an even more naked poetry, purging it of all non-essential elements and highlighting and reinforcing its internal coherence. The title of the collection *Les dones i els dies*, ironically borrowed from Hesiod (*Erga kai hemerai*: Works and Days), underlines the unitary nature of the whole and synthesises the main areas of interest and themes in Ferrater's poetry: the complexity of human relations and the moral dimension of his experiences (women) and the contextual framework - the temporal and spatial variants - in which they occur (days).

Gabriel Ferrater was not at all given to writing about poetry in general or his own in particular. The only occasion when he specifically discussed it was in the Epilogue of *Da nuces pueris* while there are scattered references in his poems (for example, some passages of "Poema inacabat") and, in particular, in some of his texts on language, painting and literature (especially in the studies devoted to [Foix](#), [Riba](#) and [Carnet](#)).

Nonetheless, it is possible to indicate some of the general facets of his poetry: the obligation of every writer to give a clear indication of the place he or she occupies with regard to the literary tradition (see "Els aristòcrates" (The Aristocrats)), the need to assume that in art everything is form, and the conviction that literature is made with words and not ideas. But the central aspect of his thinking is that the poet must unequivocally define his moral stance in the act of writing or, in other words, "The distance between the feeling that the poetry reveals and the centre of his imagination". In order to achieve this distancing, Ferrater resorts to two very specific and effective devices: irony and metrics (the distancing itself is understood as a third, arbitrary, element that enables a balance of tensions between the personal forms of the poet and those of the common language).

Ferrater's poetry, which is not exempt of abstruseness and symbolism verging on extreme imaginative complexity, is basically characterised, however, by its austerity and realism, in good part the result of a deliberate discursive spontaneity and a marked concretism and colloquialism. His poetry aims to fulfil the following basic conditions: intelligibility, sincerity, good sense, interest and elegance, fleeing, above all, any baroque embellishment and gratuitous conceptual and formal virtuosity. However, what most exemplifies Ferrater's poetic procedure is the singular tone of his poetic voice, which is patently experiential, reflective, contained and sincere, while it is sustained by a number of highly effective discursive strategies. Particularly notable is the pre-eminence he gives to

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the moral reflection offered by each poem, which is much more central than the situation he describes or the original pretext for writing it.

As for his subject material, we have already noted that his basic areas of interest are suggested in the title *Les dones i els dies*, making explicit reference to the dual dimension of the human being, as a social - and moral - being and as a creature of history (aware that his existence is circumscribed within a specific space and a specific time, determined by the temporary process of being). The different themes and motifs that appear in his poems (youth, eroticism, fear, loneliness...) are intimately related with these two areas of interest. Finally, and with regard to a framework that transcends the particular themes, we may identify three main domains: 1) poems that come under the heading of literature: "Literatura" (Literature), "A través dels temperaments" (Through Temperaments), "El lector" (The Reader), "Si puc" (If I Can), "Tam gratumst mihi", "Els aristòcrates" (The Aristocrats)...; 2) poems concerned with social observation: "Faula primera" (First Fable), "Faula segona" (Second Fable), "Cançó de bressol" (Lullaby), "El lleopard" (The Leopard), "Economies rivals" (Rival Economies), "Els jocs" (Games), "Diumenge" (Sunday), "Mecànica terrestre" (Earthly mechanics), "Sabers" (Things One Knows), "Paisatge amb figures" (Landscape with Figures...; 3a) poems essentially focused on the passage of time, for example "La platja" (The Beach), "La cara" (The Face), "No una casa" (Not a Home), "Per no dir res" (So As Not to Say Anything), "By Natural Piety" [original title in English - translator], "Fi del món" (End of the World), "La mala missió" (Bad Mission) and "Un pas insegur" (An Uncertain Step); 3b) amorous or erotic poems, which include all those of the second section of *Teoria dels cossos* along with earlier ones such as "Temps enrera" (Some Time Ago), "Mala memòria" (Bad Memory), "Cambra de la tardor" (Autumn Chamber), "El mutilat" (The Mutilated Man) and "Posseït" (Possessed).

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A selection of texts

Text



WEB: Selecció de Poesia Catalana

En aquesta pàgina trobareu una fotografia i 14 poemes de l'autor.

<http://www.uoc.edu/lletra/especials/folch/ferrater.htm>



WEB: Bibliografia i poemes

El web del Festival de Poesia de Sant Cugat recull els títols publicats per Ferrater i una selecció de poemes.

<http://ilma.orgfree.com/poesiasantcugat/ferrater.htm>



WEB: "Poems by Gabriel Ferrater"

Tres poemes de Ferrater ("Dawn", "The Aristocrats", "House in Fall") traduïts per Johannes Beilharz. En anglès.

<http://www.beilharz.com/ferrater-e.html>



WEB: "Gedicht von Gabriel Ferrater"

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La "Cançó del gosar poder" en català i traduïda a l'alemany.

<http://www.jbeilharz.de/katalan/ferrater-ged.htm>



WEB: Ferrater en anglès

Enllaços que ofereix *Interviews with Poets*. En anglès.

http://dmoz.org/Arts/Literature/Authors/F/Ferrater,_Gabriel/



WEB: Selecció de poemes

Tres poemes de l'autor al web *Viu la poesia*.

http://www.viulapoesia.com/membrespocio/arxiu/lletra/gferrater_index_poemes.html



WEB: Gabriel Ferrater

Three poems in Catalan, English and German.

http://www.escriptors.cat/autors/ferraterg/pagina.php?id_sec=771



WEB: Selection of Catalan Poetry

This page offers a photograph and fourteen poems by the author.

<http://www.uoc.edu/lletra/especials/folch/ferrater.htm>



WEB: "Poems by Gabriel Ferrater"

Three poems by Ferrater ("Dawn", "The Aristocrats", "House in Fall") translated by Johannes Beilharz.

<http://www.beilharz.com/ferrater-e.html>



WEB: Poem by Gabriel Ferrater

"Cançó del gosar poder" ("Song of Daring to be Able") translated from the Catalan into German.

<http://www.jbeilharz.de/katalan/ferrater-ged.htm>



WEB: Selection of poems

"Fe" [Faith], "El distret" ([The Dreamer] and "Joc" [Game] on the website of Poetry in Sant Cugat 2001.

<http://ilma.orgfree.com/poesiasantcugat/ferrater.htm>



WEB: Ferrater in English

Links offered by *Interviews with Poets*. In English.

http://dmoz.org/Arts/Literature/Authors/F/Ferrater,_Gabriel/

Audio



AUDIO: Parcerisas says Ferrater

Parcerisas says Ferrater

http://lletra.uoc.edu/anterior/noms/gferrater/html_especials/gabrielferraterrecita1.html



AUDIO: Mercè Rayner llegeix 'El mutilat', de Gabriel Ferrater

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< <http://lletra.uoc.edu/en/author/gabriel-ferrater> >

<http://soundcloud.com/lletra/el-mutilat-g-ferrater>

Bio-bibliography

Biography



WEB: A la Hiperenciclopèdia

http://www.enciclopedia.cat/fitxa_v2.jsp?NDCHEC=0026693



WEB: A la Viquipèdia

Nota biogràfica al web de l'enciclopèdia lliure.

http://ca.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gabriel_Ferrater_i_Soler



WEB: The author in the Catalan Encyclopaedia

<http://www.grec.cat/cgi-bin/hecangcl2.pgm?&USUARI=&SESSIO=&NDCHEC=0026693&PGMORI=E>

Bibliography



WEB: Què hi ha a la Biblioteca de Catalunya

http://cataleg.bnc.cat/search*cat/?searchtype=a&searcharg=Ferrater+Gabriel&sortdropdown=-&searchscope=13&searchscope2=13&SORT=D



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

http://ccuc.cbuc.cat/search*cat/a?SEARCH=Ferrater+Gabriel&sortdropdown=-&searchscope=23



WEB: Què hi ha a les biblioteques públiques

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



WEB: Per comprar-ne llibres

<http://www.llibres.cat/ca/detall-autor/ferrater-gabriel>



WEB: Articles de l'autor (Traces)

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



WEB: Articles sobre l'autor (Traces)

http://traces.uab.cat/search?ln=ca&p=Ferrater%2C+Gabriel&f=keyword&action_search=Cerca&c=Traces+%3A+base+de+dades+de+lengua+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=Ferrater+Gabriel&sortdropdown=-&searchscope=13&searchscope2=13&SORT=D

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WEB: The author in The European Library

<http://search.theeuropeanlibrary.org/portal/en/search/%28%22creator%22+all+%22ferrater+gabriel%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=Gabriel+Ferrater>

Comments on the author

Criticism



WEB: Pàgina de l'AELC

Biografia, informacions, publicacions.

<http://www.escriptors.com/autors/ferraterg/>



WEB: L'autor al Corpus Literari Clutat de Barcelona

Biografia, enllaços i transcripció d'articles sobre Ferrater.

http://www.ducros.biz/corpus/index.php?command=show_news&news_id=903



WEB: Pàgina de Magisteri Teatre-Mag Poesia

Amb una fotografia, poemes i un article de l'autor sobre Josep Pla.

<http://www.mallorcaweb.com/Mag-Teatre/ferrater/ferrater.html>



WEB: "Gabriel Ferrater parla de Carles Riba"

A Magisteri Teatre-Mag Poesia.

<http://www.mallorcaweb.com/Mag-Teatre/riba/ferrater.html>



WEB: L'erotisme a la poesia de Ferrater

Article de Montserrat Roser a la revista digital JOCS (2000).

<http://www.uoc.edu/jocs/3/articles/ferrata2/>



PDF: Les metàfores del desig remembrat: una aproximació cognitiva a *Da nuces pueris* de Gabriel Ferrater

Estudi d'Eduard Garcia, a UOCtreballs.

<http://lletra.uoc.edu/offlletra/files/4e8c4f23-2434-41ae-97df-31c02ea5c0a4.pdf>



WEB: Gabriel Ferrater on the Lletra website in Catalan

Including more resources and reading suggestions.

<http://www.uoc.edu/lletra/noms/gferrater/index.html>

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< <http://lletra.uoc.edu/en/author/gabriel-ferrater> >



WEB: Website of the AELC

Biography, information, publications.

http://www.escritors.com/autors/ferraterg/pagina.php?id_sec=772



WEB: Gabriel Ferrater in the City of Barcelona Literary Corpus

Biography, links and a transcription of articles on Ferrater.

http://www.ducros.biz/corpus/index.php?command=show_news&news_id=903



WEB: Magisteri Teatre-Mag Poesia

With a photograph, poems and an article by the author about Josep Pla.

<http://www.mallorcaweb.com/Mag-Teatre/ferrater/ferrater.html>



WEB: "Gabriel Ferrater Speaks of Carles Riba"

At Magisteri Teatre-Mag Poesia.

<http://www.mallorcaweb.com/Mag-Teatre/riba/ferrater.html>

Miscellaneous



WEB: Un llibre dedicat a ell

A Internet es pot llegir sencer *Chameleon's Cadmium* (1976), un poemari en anglès de Janet Rodney dedicat a Gabriel Ferrater.

<http://www.thing.net/~grist/l&d/jr1>



WEB: A Book On Him

The whole collection of poems entitled *Chameleon's Cadmium* (1976), written in English by Janet Rodney and devoted to Gabriel Ferrater, may be read on Internet.

<http://www.thing.net/~grist/l&d/jr1>



WEB: Activitats per treballar poemes

Tres poemes amb propostes al web *Viu la poesia*.

http://www.viulapoesia.com/membrespocio/arxius/lletra/gferrater_index_props.html



WEB: Interacció multimèdia de "A través dels temperaments"

El web *Viu la poesia* presenta una activitat interactiva d'aquest poema.

http://viulapoesia.com/pagina_interaccio.php?tipus=1&subtipus=2&itinerari=13&idpoema=242&ind=106