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Josep Maria de Sagarra



Josep Maria de Sagarra

Marina Gustà (University of Barcelona)

The work of Sagarra is the result of his being a complete writer, one of the clearest examples in Catalan literature. He creates verse of extraordinary quality both in poetic works and in plays, and cultivates almost all the spheres of prose. He wrote novels; he was one of the great exponents of journalistic articles; and he was also a major memoir-writer, and a chronicler of his age.

The childhood and adolescence of Josep Maria de Sagarra (Barcelona, 1894-1961) were spent in a house where "the ambience of remote existences remained present in smells, objects and even in customs". An "eighteenth-century mentality" permeated family life in the family mansion of carrer de Mercaders, the Barcelona residence for three hundred years of this lineage of country gentry. The future writer, who was born in 1894, began delving into the library at a tender age, almost as early as he was initiated into frequenting the miscellany of relics of the family history. Readings of the "Segle d'Or" (Golden Age) writers and the Spanish romantics, along with [Verdaguer](#) and [Pitarra](#) were the first sources of inspiration and imitation for a boy who went to a Jesuit secondary school thinking that there was no secret to writing verses. At school, however, he acquired a better grasp of metrics and studied rhetoric, and would discover Dante, Ariosto and [Costa i Llobera](#): "pleasure in the classics and pleasure in great pomp and circumstance" marked his literary beginnings.

His circle of friends from the Law Faculty ([Carles Riba](#), Lluís Valeri, Eudald Duran Reynals...), the habit he soon cultivated of competing in the [Jocs Florals](#) literary competitions, his acquaintance with such widely differing personalities as [Guimerà](#) and [Carner](#), frequenting the premises of the Institute of Catalan Studies and of the newspaper *La Veu de Catalunya*, becoming a member of the Barcelona Ateneu (Athenaeum) whose other members were quite a lot older than he was, all contributed towards the social life that would cushion the role of poet that Sagarra had acquired by mid-1914 with his *Primer llibre de poemes* (*First Book of Poems*). Consisting of a selection of his written works, this volume offers glimpses, behind the expressive opulence of his writing and a tendency to channel the lyrical experience into poetic narration (which would become distinctive characteristics of his poetry), of his adolescent discovery of Nature and a balanced interplay of sensuality and melancholy: the classicised pomp had disappeared in favour of personal experience as his poetic raw material. The book is a springboard for a dazzling and productive career that, in the space of only a few years, would diversify into his working with all genres and that would not be interrupted until the Civil War. For the moment, however, what the twenty-year-old Sagarra envisages is becoming a diplomat, which he feels could combine well with writing. When he eventually decides that his professional life will not be spent in consulates but in the proverbial field of journalism, it is already 1918. He does not know at this point that he is soon to be caught up in yet another activity in which he will make his premiere that same year -as a playwright. His theatre career began at the Romea with *Rondalla d'esparvers* (The Kestrel Story).

Thenceforth, and until the outbreak of the Civil War, he would produce collections of poems and plays, always with the background of his constant flow of journalistic pieces as well as a -lesser- production

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in prose fiction. His extraordinary mastery of language and innate gifts only partly explain his graphomaniac prodigality and his idyllic relation with his public, especially theatregoers.

PoetryThe poetic genre of the song accounts for much of Joseph M. de Sagarra's output after the first book in which the ballad cohabited with the eclogue and other forms. A whole series of collections underscore this without going any further than the titles: *Cançons d'abril i de novembre* (April and November Songs - 1918), *Cançons de taverna i d'oblit* (Songs of the Tavern and Oblivion - 1922), *Cançons de rem i de vela* (Songs of the Oar and the Sail - 1923) and *Cançons de totes les hores* (Songs for Every Hour - 1925). In each work, the poet unfolds an experience or state of mind. He generally does so in strophic compositions and long verses, in keeping with the Leopardi model of free song but he also admits into his repertoire -for reasons of correlation, one might say- related popular forms and themes. His poetry moves away from the prevailing tendencies of Noucentism. On the one hand, his perspective is close to Maragall's marvelling at reality and, on the other, his bedazzlement by words and his facility in producing accentuated imagery distances him from expressive restraint (Maragall's and what came later). Sagarra's other interest as a poet is the narrative poem of legendary overtones, which has him writing long compositions with roots in the romantic ballad. *El mal caçador* (The Bad Hunter - 1915) and *El comte Arnau* (1928) take up themes to which [Maragall](#) had given the ultimate, essential vision. Sagarra unfolds the two legends in narrative form but in no way does he go back to the romantic hero who defies the absolute, but rather he eliminates as much miracle and mystery much as he can, while highlighting the elements that respond to a realist treatment, which he frequently rounds off with picturesque touches.

In *La rosa de cristall* (The Glass Rose - 1933), one perceives a change that is subsequently to be confirmed with the publication of the less descriptive *Àncores i estrelles* (Anchors and Stars - 1935, winner of the Joaquim Folguera Prize) with its more contained and intimist tone, its tendency to metaphysical speculation on the basis of amorous sentiments, its use of free verse and the discursive continuity of the poetic "I". All of this brings Sagarra closer to the characteristic post-symbolist trends of the time. In *Entre l'Equador i els Tròpics* (Between the Equator and the Tropics), a direct result of a trip he made to Polynesia in 1936 and which was finished in 1937 but not published until 1945, he does not diverge in any essential way from this line, despite the singularity of the Tahitian theme. The consistency of the poetic "I" that clearly evolves in his different books highlights a number of elements of continuity in his world view (mainly tinged with scepticism) that should be seen in relation with the rest of his work and the fact that after 1937 there would be no more collections of poetry.

TheatreThe dramatic poem is the genre that brought Sagarra his most resounding successes in the theatre. It is also the one to which he was enslaved from the moment in which some of his attempts to break away failed to give the hoped-for results: this was the risk of professionalisation. From the literary point of view, his theatrical writing complements his inclination for the genre of the narrative poem. Perhaps his fascination for the stage was also fuelled by an imagination of the past that was awakened by the family history and all its redoubts. After *Rondalla d'esperpers*, the greater part of his works for the stage consists of a large number of plays that always have as their nucleus a triangular conflict with a happy ending that is the result of repentance and forgiveness. Historical works of manners and mores with their pathos deriving more from the "verse effect" than from dramatic situations, are sustained by a whole gallery of hoteliers, heirs, farmers, heiresses, masters and servants who act out scenes that are mostly set between the seventeenth and early nineteenth century (the period of pastoral Sagarra-type nostalgia that coincides with the mythology of the family's origins). The efficacy, within these parameters, of *Marçal Prior* (1926), *La filla del Carmesí* (Carmesí's Daughter - 1929), *La corona d'espines* (The Crown of Thorns - 1930) and *L'hostal de la Glòria* (Glòria's Hostel - 1931) more than adequately accounts for his success, the success he would also

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have with *El Cafè de la Marina* (The Seaside Café - 1933), which sets the action in the contemporary period. Accepting the reductionism entailed with the device, situation and sense of Josep Maria de Sagarra's plays, can lead to two different points of view, that of Jordi Carbonell for whom, "Josep M. de Sagarra has, more than anybody else, borne Catalan theatre on his shoulders, from the 1920s through to his death", and that of [Josep Pla](#) who said that "Sagarra has written what somebody (...) should have written between the sixteenth century and [Verdaguer](#)".

ProseBesides journalism (two collections of his pieces have been published: *Cafè, copa i puro* (Coffee, Drink and Cigar - 1929), which includes articles from *La Publicitat*, and *L'aperitiu* (Aperitif - 1947), with material from his column of the same name in *Mirador*), Sagarra applied all the brilliance of his prose to fiction writing: *Paulina Buxareu*, published in 1919, is a product of the times and perfectly in tune with the typical books produced by his publisher, Editorial Catalan. However, in the light of two subsequent novels this book may be seen as part of a wider project of portraying the country's different social segments, a task that Sagarra, in keeping with a rather nineteenth-century conception of the genre (that has certain parallels in the narrative conventions he uses), assigns to the novel. In *All i salobre* (Garlic and Salt - 1928) the main character is a student priest without any vocation and as primitive as "befits" the setting of his woes: the geography of Cap de Creus and an isolated rural community. *Vida privada* (winner of the 1932 Crexells Prize) has quite a different setting: it is a portrait of the "great world" of Barcelona and its loyalties in the years that preceded the Republic and in the early days of the new regime. Rigorous contemporaneity, stylistic effectiveness, the structural *tour de force* (although not totally successful), and its daring treatment of manners and mores, make this book a unique product in Sagarra's work as a whole. It becomes less so, perhaps, and takes on its full sense, when we realise that Sagarra implanted the key elements of his own historic situation in this work: his quasi-mythologizing of the early nineteenth century, the upheaval of the First World War, which was the true ending of the nineteenth century and the starting shot for what Sagarra considered the senseless maelstrom of modern times. This did not stop him from being fascinated by what his version of Barcelona has in terms of being at once cosmopolitan and picturesque. "Modern life" -precisely because there is an ancient life conserved in the bastion of personal and family memory- has its own charms.

The Final YearsThe other war, the Spanish Civil War, meant the disappearance of the Barcelona landscape that united past and present for Sagarra. He lived and wrote because of this bond. Disconcerted and insecure, he left for Paris where he married and almost immediately afterwards embarked upon his journey to Tahiti. The Polynesian evasion lasted eight months. After his return to Paris, he went briefly into exile in Prada and finally went to live in Banyuls. It was from the latter that he returned to live in Barcelona in 1940. The situation to which he had to adapt was completely different from the circumstances that had enabled him to enjoy an untroubled professional existence until 1936. Everything had been dismantled: groups of intellectuals and clubs, newspapers and reviews, contact with the public, publishing contacts, night life ? Josep Maria de Sagarra's popularity had lost the stage on which it had been enacted.

Translation -engagements undertaken with patrons- became his main work: he finished his translation of *Divina Commedia* in 1941 and then began to work on Shakespeare's plays. Meanwhile he took part in clandestine activities and began to write a work of his own (*El poema de Montserrat* (The Poem of Montserrat), between 1942 and 1945). As soon as he could, he went back to the theatre with a revival of *L'hostal de la Glòria*. But his theatrical interests had changed direction: Sagarra was now attempting to respond to the dislocation by presenting modern conflicts in a modern world. However, the public was not receptive to a Sagarra who did not bring back the past. Neither *La fortuna de Sílvia* (Sílvia's Fortune - 1947) nor *Galatea* (1948), both highly estimable works, enjoyed a favourable

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response. Yet, his return to the dramatic poem (*L'hereu i la forastera* (The Heir and the Foreigner - 1949)) restored the blessings of box-office success. In particular, his expectations were amply exceeded with the attempted contemporaneity of *La ferida lluminosa* (The Luminous Wound - 1954), a melodramatic tear-jerker with a religious theme, which was an unexpected success. Now, the author is a Sagarra who has distanced himself from the resistance groups: nominated to the board of the Sociedad General de Autores (Society of Authors) he makes frequent trips to Madrid, is close to some official sectors and tries to find some way out of a situation of increasing unease. He would die in 1961 without having achieved this, a controversial figure in many quarters. A final balance of his last twenty years would have to highlight the superior dimension of two books of prose, precisely in the domain where he said he felt least committed: first, *La ruta blava* (The Blue Route - 1965), a work that had been published in Spanish in 1942 as *El camino azul* and written during his journey to Polynesia as the diary of an impossible flight and, second, the *Memòries* (Memoirs - 1954), an elegy to a past of which no trace is left. The crumbs of history and imaginative reconstruction underpin the thematic material of many of Sagarra's verses. Direct expression of a personal interpretation of reality without the apparent fetters of fiction is the key, in the end, to the sense of his work as a whole.

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A selection of texts

Text



WEB: Selecció de Poesia Catalana

Breu nota biogràfica i els poemes "Record de Solsona", "Cançó de suburbi", "Vinyes verdes", "A una nova amiga" i "Canço de pluja".

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



WEB: Magisteri Teatre-Mag Poesia

La pàgina de Mag Poesia recull una àmplia selecció de la poesia satírica sagarriana.

<http://www.mallorcaweb.com/mag-teatre/sagarra/sagarra.html>



WEB: "El nostre avantprojecte de Constitució"

Poema polític irònic aparegut a la revista *El Be Negre* (07/07/1931). Al bloc Tinta xinesa.

<http://tintaxinesa.blogspot.com/2009/02/josep-maria-de-sagarra-poemes-satirics.html>



WEB: Cançons de Sagarra

Poemes de Sagarra musicats per cantautors catalans.

<http://www.trovadores.net/ctr.exe?AA=250&FR=1>



WEB: Selection of Catalan Poetry

Brief biographical note and the poems "Record de Solsona" (Solsona Memory), "Cançó de suburbi" (Song of the Suburbs), "Vinyes verdes" (Green Vines), "A una nova amiga" (To a New Lady Friend) and "Canço de pluja" (Rain Song).

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

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WEB: Magisteri Teatre-Mag Poesia

The Mag Poesia page offers a wide selection of Sagarra's satirical poems.

<http://www.mallorcaweb.com/mag-teatre/sagarra/sagarra.html>



WEB: "El nostre avantprojecte de Constitució" [Our Draft of the Constitution]

An ironic political poem published in the review *El Be Negre* (7 July, 1931). In Tinta xinesa weblog.

<http://tintaxinesa.blogspot.com/2009/02/josep-maria-de-sagarra-poemes-satirics.html>



WEB: Songs of Sagarra

Poems by Sagarra set to music by Catalan singers.

<http://www.musicadepoetes.cat/app/musicadepoetes/servlet/org.uoc.lletra.musicaDePoetes.Poeta?autor=199>



AUDIO: "Cançó del desig farsant" interpretat per Joan Manuel Serrat

"Cançó del desig farsant" interpretat per Joan Manuel Serrat

<http://www.musicadepoetes.cat/app/musicadepoetes/servlet/org.uoc.lletra.musicaDePoetes.Titol?autor=199&titol=1344>

Bio-bibliography

Biography



WEB: A la Hiperenciclopèdia

http://www.enciclopedia.cat/fitxa_v2.jsp?NDCHEC=0057732



WEB: A la Viquipèdia

Extensa biografia, obra i enllaços sobre l'autor al web de l'enciclopèdia lliure.

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



WEB: Membre de l'IEC

Josep M. de Sagarra, membre numerari de l'Institut d'Estudis Catalans.

<http://apmembres2.iec.cat/detall.aspx?pkMembrePLE=234>



WEB: The author in the Catalan Encyclopaedia

<http://www.grec.cat/cgi-bin/hecangcl2.pgm?&USUARI=&SESSIO=&NDCHEC=0057732&PGMORI=E>



WEB: Member of the IEC

Josep M. de Sagarra, a permanent member of the Institut d'Estudis Catalans (Institute of Catalan Studies).

<http://apmembres2.iec.cat/detall.aspx?pkMembrePLE=234>

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WEB: Què hi ha a la Biblioteca de Catalunya

http://cataleg.bnc.cat/search*cat/?searchtype=a&searcharg=Sagarra+Josep+M.+de&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=Sagarra+Josep+M.+de&sortdropdown=-&searchscope=23



WEB: Què hi ha a les biblioteques públiques

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



WEB: Per comprar-ne llibres

<http://www.llibres.cat/Catalogo/Autor/sagarra-josep-maria-de>



WEB: Articles de l'autor (Traces)

<http://traces.uab.cat/search?f=author&p=Sagarra%20Josep%20M%20de&sc=1&ln=ca>



WEB: Articles sobre l'autor (Traces)

http://traces.uab.cat/search?ln=ca&p=Sagarra%2C+Josep+M.+de&f=keyword&action_search=Cerca&c=Traces+%3A+base+de+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=Sagarra%2C+Josep+M.+de&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+%22sagarra+josep+maria+de%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=Josep+Maria+de+Sagarra>



WEB: The author in the Gutenberg Project

<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/24729>

Comments on the author

Criticism

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WEB: Un dels "Dotze mestres"

Pàgina de lletrA sobre aquesta obra de Maurici Serrahima.

<http://lletra.uoc.edu/ca/obra/dotze-mestres-1972/>



WEB: Josep Maria de Sagarra a l'AELC

Biografia, informacions, publicacions.

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



WEB: L'autor al Corpus Literari Ciutat de Barcelona

Biografia, enllaços i transcripció d'articles sobre Sagarra.

http://www.ducros.biz/corpus/index.php?command=show_news&news_id=2593



WEB: Sagarra a EPdIP

Breu biografia i transcripció del poema "Vinyes verdes".

<http://www.epdlp.com/escritor.php?id=2255>



WEB: Vida privada, 75 anys després

Entrevista amb el fill de Josep Maria de Sagarra en el 75è aniversari de la publicació de *Vida Privada*.

http://www.vilaweb.cat/www/noticia?p_idcmp=2602293



WEB: One of the "Dotze mestres" [Twelve masters]

lletrA page on this work by Maurici Serrahima.

<http://lletra.uoc.edu/ca/obra/dotze-mestres-1972/>



WEB: AELC Website

Biography, information, publications.

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



WEB: Josep M. de Sagarra in the City of Barcelona Literary Corpus

Biography, works, links and a transcription of articles on Sagarra.

http://www.ducros.biz/corpus/index.php?command=show_news&news_id=2593



WEB: Sagarra in EPdIP

Brief biography and transcription of the poem "Vinyes verdes" (Green Vines).

<http://www.epdlp.com/escritor.php?id=2255>

Miscellaneous



WEB: "Auca de Josep M. de Sagarra"

Auca escrita per Joan Vilamala al web La paret de les auques.

<http://www.auques.cat/textos.php?auca=sagarra>

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PDF: Vida privada

Dossier de Joan Chavarría, Jordi Dolç i Màrius Pont sobre aquesta novel·la, dins el Seminari didàctic "El gust de la lectura" (1998-1999).

http://www.xtec.cat/lic/centre/professorat/dossiersgust/Sagarra_1998.pdf
