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Literary news about Carles Riba in Lletra, the Open University of Catalonia (UOC) virtual space for Catalan literature

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Carles Riba



Carles Riba

Jordi Malé (UOC consultant)

"More than once", Goethe told Eckermann, "they have not wanted to see me as I am and they have averted their eyes from anything that might show me in my true light."

On a different occasion he declared, "My works can never become popular".

It is not at all improbable that Carles Riba felt these words as his own. He was certainly not a Goethe, but equally certainly he would not have done anything to avoid resembling him. Even in his youth he was regarded as an obscure, hermetic, cerebral and intellectualist writer and these adjectives were not lacking in a touch of disparagement. This prejudice has conditioned the reception of almost all his work and has meant that he was frequently not seen, as Goethe put it, "in his true light", in addition to being condemned to an unremitting lack of popular acclaim. Riba complained of this more than once. One of the consequences, when it comes to evaluating his literary activity, has been that his oeuvre has come to be considered as a homogeneous block in which each book can be pigeonholed - and dispensed with - using one set of labels. Nonetheless, among Catalan authors, Riba's lifelong literary evolution was one of the richest and most varied of all.

The Early Period: until 1922 Born in 1893, Riba, like all his literary generation, was shaped by his reading of *Glosari* (Glossary), the daily column of [Eugeni d'Ors](#). The adjective "noucentista" [referring to an early 20th-century urban-based cultural movement of political scope, inspired by Eugeni d'Ors in reaction to the "excesses" of Modernism - translator] is thus perfectly applicable to him, although two aspects of this must be clearly distinguished.

First, Riba went through a period in the second decade of the century that was fully "noucentista" in the sense of being heavily influenced by d'Ors. The sway of [Xènius](#) [the pseudonym used by Eugeni d'Ors] is evident, for example, in Riba's collected articles of literary criticism (*Escolis i altres articles* (Scholia and Other Articles, 1921) and the first articles in the collection entitled *Els marges* (1927), where he strove to construct his own style of literary thought, borrowing concepts and terms from different Romantic critics, symbolists, et cetera, and in particular the ideas of the noucentista writer Pantarca. Unfortunately, he had not yet been able to escape from the influence of the mannerism and rhetorical emphasis that were so characteristic of Eugeni d'Ors' writing and which, in these early articles, partially undermined his effectiveness as a critic.

Again, when he ventured into the world of fiction, for example in *Les aventures d'en Perot Marrasquí* (The Adventures of Perot Marrasquí) a book for children written in the second decade of the century and published in 1924, he achieved a more successful style, which, although it remained literary, also had a colloquial and unaffected tone. This was not the case, however, with the book *L'ingenu amor* (Ingenuous Love), consisting of stories not specifically for children about love and sacrifice, etcetera, which were also written between 1910 and 1920 and published in 1924. This time, his deliberately literary aim was to move slightly towards noucentista artificiality. However, it was with his translations of prose works in this period (stories of Edgar Allan Poe and the Brothers Grimm, some of Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*, Xenofont's *The Ten Thousand* and Gogol's *The Inspector General*, etc.) that the

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clearest hints appeared of the possibilities of what Riba's prose would later become (for example in the stories for children in the collection *Sis Joans* (Six Johns, 1928)).

Riba's poetry of the years between 1910 and 1920, which appeared in *Primer llibre d'Estances* (First Book of Stanzas, 1919), may also be described as "noucentista" in a certain d'Ors-evoking sense since his rigorous formal construction and the constant presence of learned references (Homer, medieval Catalan and Italian poets, French symbolists, etc.) reveal in this work his desire to engage in an exercise of high culture. Yet it would be mistaken to imagine that it was only that. These early poems clearly and especially reveal an introspective urge to engage in deep analysis of moral life, for which Riba stood out with regard to the predominant realism that characterised the work of the Catalan poets of his time (with the exception of J.M. López-Picó).

The second aspect of Riba's work for which the adjective "noucentista" is applicable goes beyond the strict influence of [Eugeni d'Ors](#) to embrace the thought of Prat de la Riba and Pompeu Fabra. This was manifested in his firm and sincere conviction as to what the collective labour of noucentisme really meant in terms of constructing the country and setting it to rights. He wished to contribute to this, as the intellectual and man of letters that he was, through his activities in the world of culture. If Riba translated, or wrote manuals, or devoted himself to teaching beyond any material need, it was because he truly believed in what he saw as his "duty" in the enormous task of educating individuals and the general public who were only then awakening politically, linguistically and culturally. Riba always used the concept of "duty" with Socrates in mind. He was never to abandon this conviction and this "noucentista spirit" of his until the day he died.

The Sojourn in Germany The shift between Riba's first and second personal and literary phases is marked by the year of 1922 and his stay in Germany where he went to study under the eminent philologist Karl Vossler. This period of one year in Germany would determine the new direction that all his work was to take. First, in his poetry. The turning point here had already appeared in 1919 when, after finishing his first book *Primer llibre d'Estances*, Riba entered into a phase of poetic crisis - with some existential elements as well (as is reflected in his correspondence of 1920 when he was travelling in Italy). [Gabriel Ferrater](#) suggests, as causes of this crisis, the "lack of tradition" to sustain him poetically and the fact that he had exhausted the possibilities of the style on which he had based his first collection of *Estances*, with his repeated resort to allegories and medieval-style prosopopeias. To this must be added the Catalan public's negative reception of his first book of poems, which even led him to consider stopping writing. It was [Josep Carner](#) - as Riba would recognise years later - who convinced him at this difficult time to remain true to his own style of writing and to continue with his personal evolution, whatever the opinions to the contrary might be.

The effects of the crisis are evident in the long time it took him to write the poems that constitute the first part of the *Segon llibre d'Estances* (Second Book of Stanzas): a mere twenty poems between 1920 and 1928. The first eight (in particular numbers 6, 7 and 8, dated between 1922 and 1923, from Germany) vividly reflect his state of crisis, while many of those that were to follow, with poetic motifs such as memories and dreams, are concerned with the - very Goethesque - theme of reconstructing one's own identity.

The activity that took up the time he had for creation in those years of the early 1920s was translation of both modern (Gottfried Keller and Hölderlin) and ancient Greek (Xenofont and Plutarch) authors. With regard to the latter group, it is worth noting that in the middle of 1922, while in Germany, Riba began to work with the Fundació Bernat Metge, which had been created at the time by the politician Francesc Cambó. This allowed him to give free rein to his humanist vocation - in the technical sense

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of the scholar and translator of Greek and Latin classics - which he had already revealed in his youthful translation of Virgil's *Eclogues* (1911), and in the fact that he had crowned an early literary summit with the completion of his version of Homer's *The Odyssey* in 1919, and then of Sophocles' *Antigone* and *Electra* (1920). Moreover, in 1925, Cambó created a chair of Greek for him in the Foundation, which offered him the possibility of working as a full-time teacher of Greek.

However, Riba's humanist vocation should not be understood in the exclusively philological sense because his interest in the classics was never scientific and erudite but rather that of an intense personal and deeply humane involvement. If Riba translated and taught the Greek classics it was because he believed in the enduring relevance of the educational effectiveness of these works - and this brings us back once again to his noucentista spirit, while also sweeping aside the false cliché of a Riba who had been enslaved by Cambó to translate Plutarch. Again, predominating over his facets as philologist and translator were those of poet and writer, which meant that he would regard the classics not as works to examine and analyse but rather as a departure point for his own creative work. Hence we have the constant presence of Greek themes in his work and also the great significance of his trip to Greece in 1927, which brought him into direct contact with the landscapes of the authors he most valued.

Finally, his sojourn in Germany in 1922 was also to have its consequences in the field of literary criticism since it gave him the opportunity to study in greater depth the stylistic method of Karl Vossler (already familiar to him from his translating endeavours), which he would apply to his studies of the poetry of [Jacint Verdaguer](#), of the art criticism of Francesc Pujols and of the prose of [Josep Pla](#) (these articles being collected in *Els marges*).

Valéry's InfluenceRiba's contact with Vossler's ideas would enable him to begin to resolve another aspect of his crisis of the 1920s: that of his conception of poetry. Accusations of obscurity in his work had led Riba to doubt his own theory of poetry (sparingly presented and explored in several critical pieces). The total overcoming of his doubts, however, came thanks to another figure, Paul Valéry, whom Riba met in 1924. With Valéry as a reference, the idea of "obscurity" lost its negative connotations to become a quality that was inherent to the new kind of poetry: post-symbolist. The debate on so-called pure poetry was soon to begin in the aftermath of a lecture given by Henri Bremond at the French Institute on 24 October 1925.

It is worth remarking, however, that in speaking of Riba's discovery of Valéry, it is necessary to distinguish between the influence the latter exerted on his literary theory, which was intense, and that appearing in his poetry, which was much less and, in fact, Riba always strove to distance himself from it. In terms of theory of poetry, Valéry's authority was decisive in providing Riba with concepts and ideas that were powerful enough to explain the literary phenomenon as well as the mechanisms of poetry itself: the distinction between literary language and practical language, the expressive possibilities of the word, the singular perception of the world in the poetic state, and so on. These were ideas and concepts that Riba would combine with others of Mallarmé (a poet to whom he would return in these years) and some of the idealist doctrine of Vossler until he established his own, original theory of poetry, which he would formulate in some of the articles in the collection *Per comprendre* (To Understand, 1937) and in other subsequent pieces.

In the domain of poetry, Valéry's presence in Riba's poems may be detected in the second part of *Segon llibre d'Estances* (composed between 1929 and 1930, the year in which the book appeared) and in the sonnets of *Tres suites* (Three Suites), which were written between 1930 and 1935 and published in 1937. Motifs like the female nude, the closed room, the mirror, Narcissus and others of

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the kind frequently appear in these poems (as in those of other European poets of the time, from Jorge Guillén through to Rilke).

Yet if Riba shared these poetic motifs with Valéry, he was always aware - as he himself expressed in a letter to Montoliu in 1951 - that they did not coincide in "anything that is fundamental: themes, attitude about life and death, the quality of the poetically expressed experience, external devices, etc.". The value of poetry for Valéry was as a pure "formal exercise" ("une valeur de pur exercice"). For Riba, poetry had a profound personal value, while it also aspired to universal validity, as Goethe had wished. In a speech given in 1929 (at a reading of some of his poems) he used the occasion to highlight his difference from the French poet: "Valéry has said, 'At the extremity of every thought there is a sigh'. I composed verses for many years without knowing these words and, I would say, I was moving in another direction, for my aim has been to determine the thought that might develop over a sigh, when not taking up the sigh within the trembling mesh of a thought".

In brief, while Valéry starts, in his poetic creation, from thoughts (meaning rational structures and mental concepts), at the basis of Riba's poems are "sighs", in other words, affective experiences that the poet, avoiding spontaneous sentimental effusions, strives to enclose within a rational structure (in thoughts) so as to give them substance and to transcend their anecdotal nature. The human - warmly human - aspect of Riba's poems is thus contrasted with Valéry's frequently, although not always, colder poetry. It is true that Riba, at one point during these years, had the very Valéry-like temptation to lock himself away in an "ivory chamber", isolating his poetry from the world outside and from human beings and to enclose it within itself so as to make it pure. This seems to be reflected in the first and part of the second sections of *Tres suites*. However, by the second section the poet had also realised that the vital impulse in him was not to be curbed, that he needed to avoid such closure and to return to life, like an "impatient Ulysses", another symbolic figure he would never abandon.

War and exile At the beginning of the 1930s, Riba was very active. Besides his critical articles, he was also engaged with writing poetry and translating Aeschylus, his work as a university lecturer and that pertaining to the Chair at the Fundació Bernat Metge, and as a member of the Institut d'Estudis Catalans, activities that were not interrupted by the outbreak of the Civil War. Between 1936 and 1939 he composed the first sections of the poetic work *Del joc i del foc* (On Fire and on Play), which, complemented with another section, would appear in 1946. Again, in 1937 he participated in the creation of the Institució de les Lletres Catalanes, attended the

[PEN Club](#) Congress in Paris, in the middle of the bombing of 1938, read his doctoral thesis on

Nausica by [Joan Maragall](#), which enabled him to rediscover Maragall's poetic work while, at the same time, working again on Goethe. In 1938 he also demonstrated his commitment, as an intellectual, to the Republican cause with articles like "Literatura i grups salvadors" (Literature and Saviour Groups), "Posicions i tasca" (Positions and Task), "Als escriptors del món" (To the Writers of the World), etc..

Riba and his family (he had married the poet [Clementina Arderiu](#) with whom he had three children) were among the last to go into [exile](#) in France, along with Josep Pous i Pagès, at the end of January 1939. They settled in Bierville, a town that would give the name to the best-known of his poetic works, [Elegies de Bierville](#) (Bierville Elegies), which was written between 1939 and 1942. The first edition appeared in 1943, to be followed by a complete edition in 1949. These poems recount the metaphysical adventure of a man who returns to his own soul "as an ancient land". With the *Elegies*, and as a result of the traumatic experience of exile ("I went into it as if into death", he says in the Preface), a hitherto unknown religious dimension appears in Riba's poetry and penetrates all his

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subsequent thought (including his conception of literature), so that it is present, too, in his later poetic works, *Salvatge Cor* (Savage Heart, 1952) and *Esbós de tres oratoris* (Outline for Three Oratorios, 1957).

The Final Decades Once the Civil War had ended, Riba kept working, and not just as a writer - apart from his poetic works, he also published a collection of literary criticism... *Més els poemes* (The Poems As Well, 1957), and, thanks to the help of a patron, produced a new version of *The Odyssey* (1948) and translated Sophocles and Euripides. He was also active as a public figure, representing Catalan culture at poetry congresses in Segovia, Salamanca and Santiago de Compostela (1952, 1953 and 1954), which were held to foster contact between Catalan and Spanish intellectuals. Always opting for rigour and producing works that were undisputedly difficult in their richness and complexity, Riba also continued teaching throughout the difficult years of the 1940s and 1950s. Writing like his could not be, cannot be, popular but, whether it was only barely or very popular, it could not, nor cannot, be exempt of an exemplary quality either. At least we rediscover with Riba a man who was totally committed to his creative work, a man with whom one can be more or less in agreement. In this, Riba did no more than to follow in the footsteps of the Goethe whom he so admired.

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A selection of texts

Text



WEB: Pàgina de Magisteri Teatre-Mag Poesia

Poemes dels llibres d'*Estances*, *Tres suites*, *Del joc i del foc*, *Elegies de Bierville* i *Salvatge cor*.
Versions catalanes de textos de Rilke, Hölderlin i Kavafis.
<http://www.mallorcaweb.com/Mag-Teatre/riba/riba.html>



WEB: Traductor de Kavafis

Nou poemes de Kavafis en les versions de Riba.
<http://www.lletres.net/pla/kavafis-ED.html>



WEB: L'Odissea

Fragment d'aquesta obra clàssica traduïda per Carles Riba.
<http://ca.wikipedia.org/wiki/L'Odissea>



WEB: Selecció de Poesia Catalana

Divuit poemes (quatre amb versió anglesa) de *La paraula a lloure*, el primer i segon llibres d'*Estances*, les *Elegies de Bierville*, *Salvatge cor*, i *Del joc i del foc*.
<http://www.uoc.edu/lletra/especials/folch/riba.htm>



WEB: Carles Riba musicat

Dos poemes musicats, per Lluís Llach i Ovidi Montllor/Toti Soler.
<http://www.trovadores.net/cerca.php?CT=Carles+Riba&x=38&y=11&TIP=0&ID=0>

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WEB: Gedichte von Carles Riba

Tres poemes en català i traduïts a l'alemany.
<http://www.jbeilharz.de/katalan/frameset.htm>



WEB: Sis Joans

El reconegut llibre de literatura infantil de Carles Riba.
<http://www.xtec.es/~malons22/personal/riba.htm>



WEB: “La Poesia?”

Un poema de l'autor al web *Viu la poesia*.
http://viulapoesia.com/pagina_2.php?itinerari=13&tipus=1&subtipus=2&idpoema=248



WEB: Riba a EPdLP

Nota biogràfica en castellà amb dos poemes a El Poder de la Palabra.
<http://www.epdlp.com/escritor.php?id=2203>



WEB: Magisteri Teatre-Mag Poesia

Poems from the books *Estances (Stanzas)*, *Tres suites (Three Suites)*, *Del joc i del foc (On Play and Fire)*, *Elegies de Bierville (Bierville Elegies)* and *Salvatge cor (Savage Heart)*. Catalan versions of texts by Rilke, Hölderlin and Kavafis.
<http://www.mallorcaweb.com/Mag-Teatre/riba/riba.html>



WEB: Kavafis' Translator

Nine poems of Kavafis translated by Riba.
<http://www.lletres.net/pla/kavafis-ED.html>



WEB: L'Odissea (The Odyssey)

Fragment of the classic translated by Carles Riba.
<http://ca.wikipedia.org/wiki/L'Odissea>



WEB: Selection of Catalan poetry

Eighteen poems (four in English translation) from *La paraula a lloure (The Word at Leisure)*, the first and second books of *Estances*, *Elegies de Bierville*, *Salvatge cor (Savage Heart)*, and *Del joc i del foc*.
<http://www.uoc.edu/lletra/especials/folch/riba.htm>



WEB: Poems by Carles Riba

Three poems in Catalan translated into German.
<http://www.jbeilharz.de/katalan/frameset.htm>



WEB: Sis Joans (Six Joans)

Carles Riba's well-known children's book.
<http://www.xtec.es/~malons22/personal/riba.htm>

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VIDEO: Sebstià Alzamora llegeix Carles Riba

L'últim guanyador del premi Carles Riba recita un poema de *Salvatge cor*.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YPR AQ9wBaGk>



TXT: Elegia segona

Elegia segona

http://lletra.uoc.edu/anterior/obres/elegiesriba/html_especials/elegiasegonaaltres.html

Comments on the author

Criticism



WEB: Sobre les *Elegies de Bierville*

Pàgina de lletrA sobre aquesta obra de l'autor.

<http://lletra.uoc.edu/ca/obra/elegies-de-bierville-1943/>



WEB: Un dels "Dotze mestres"

Pàgina de lletrA sobre aquesta obra de Maurici Serrahima.

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



WEB: Pàgina de l'AELC

Biografia, i publicacions.

<http://www.escriptors.com/autors/ribac/index.html>



WEB: Carles Riba on the lletrA website in Catalan

Including more resources and reading suggestions.

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



WEB: On the *Elegies de Bierville* [Bierville Elegies]

lletrA page devoted to this work by Carles Riba.

<http://lletra.uoc.edu/ca/obra/elegies-de-bierville-1943/>



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

lletrA page devoted to this work by Maurici Serrahima.

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



WEB: Website of the AELC

Biography, information and works.

http://www.escriptors.cat/autors/ribac/pagina.php?id_sec=2128

Miscellaneous

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< <http://lletra.uoc.edu/en/author/carles-riba> >



WEB: Aula Carles Riba

Espai de debat sobre les literatures clàssica i catalana.
<http://www.ub.es/acr/>



WEB: Viatges a Itaca

Aproximacions catalanes a la Grècia moderna. Fa esment de la relació de Carles Riba amb la cultura i la literatura gregues. Per Wolf Lustig.
<http://www.uni-mainz.de/~lustig/texte/Catgrec.htm>



WEB: Carles Riba en vídeo

Informació del vídeo *Carles Riba, passió i lucidesa*. Formulari per a l'adquisició.
<http://www.ictisp.com/~ge382930/Riba.html>



WEB: "Auca de Carles Riba"

Auca escrita per Joan Vilamala al web La paret de les auques.
<http://www.auques.cat/textos.php?auca=riba>



WEB: Premi Carles Riba de poesia

Enllaç amb la pàgina del premi de poesia que porta el nom de l'escriptor, convocat cada any per Edicions Proa amb el patrocini de la Fundació Enciclopèdia Catalana.
<http://www.grec.com/fundacio/pcr.htm>



WEB: Carles Riba Seminar

Space for debate on classical and Catalan literature.
<http://www.ub.es/acr/>



WEB: Journeys to Ithaca

Catalan approximations to modern Greek. Mentions Carles Riba's relationship with Greek culture and literature. By Wolf Lustig.
<http://www.uni-mainz.de/~lustig/texte/Catgrec.htm>



WEB: Carles Riba on Video

Information on the video *Carles Riba, passió i lucidesa* (Carles Riba, Passion and Lucidity). Order form.
<http://www.ictisp.com/~ge382930/Riba.html>



WEB: Carles Riba Poetry Prize

Link with the page of the poetry prize that is named after the author and offered each year by Edicions Proa with the sponsorship of the Fundació Enciclopèdia Catalana.
<http://www.grec.com/fundacio/pcr.htm>

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WEB: "Rilke i l'orfisme a les Elegies de Bierville"

Article d'Isidor Marí (UOC) a la revista digital *JOCS* (2000).

<http://www.uoc.edu/jocs/3/articulos/orfeu/>



WEB: "Gabriel Ferrater parla de Carles Riba"

A Magisteri Teatre-Mag Poesia.

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



WEB: "Rilke i l'orfisme a les Elegies de Bierville" (Rilke and Orphism in the Bierville Elegies)

Article by Isidor Marí (UOC) in the digital review *JOCS* (2000).

<http://www.uoc.edu/jocs/3/articulos/orfeu/>



WEB: Magisteri Teatre-Mag Poetry

Gabriel Ferrater speaks of Carles Riba.

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

Bio-bibliography



WEB: A la Hiperenciclopèdia

http://www.enciclopedia.cat/fitxa_v2.jsp?NDCHEC=0055271



WEB: A la Viquipèdia

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

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



WEB: Membre de l'IEC

Carles Riba, membre numerari de l'Institut d'Estudis Catalans.

<http://apmembres2.iec.cat/detall.aspx?pkMembrePLE=225>



VIDEO: "Carles Riba: el far solitari"

Documental sobre la vida i obra de l'escriptor al programa *El meu avi* de Televisió de Catalunya.

http://www.edu3.cat/Edu3tv/Fitxa?p_id=658



VIDEO: "Carles Riba, passió i lucidesa"

Documental de 46 minuts de la col·lecció "Viure i escriure. Els grans noms de la literatura catalana" a Edu3.cat amb producció de la Fundació Videoteca dels Països Catalans.

http://www.edu3.cat/Edu3tv/Fitxa?p_id=26801



WEB: The author in the Catalan Encyclopaedia

<http://www.grec.cat/cgibin/hecangcl2.pgm?&USUARI=&SESSIO=&NDCHEC=0055271&PGMORI=E>



WEB: In Wikipedia

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< <http://lletra.uoc.edu/en/author/carles-riba> >

Biographical note in the free encyclopaedia.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carles_Riba



WEB: Member of the IEC

Carles Riba, a permanent member of the Institut d'Estudis Catalans (Institute of Catalan Studies).

<http://apmembres2.iec.cat/detall.aspx?pkMembrePLE=225>



VIDEO: "Carles Riba: el far solitari" [Carles Riba: the Lonely Lighthouse]

Documentary on Riba's life and work in the programme *El meu avi* [My Grandfather] on Televisió de Catalunya.

http://www.edu3.cat/Edu3tv/Fitxa?p_id=658

Bibliography



WEB: Què hi ha a la Biblioteca de Catalunya

http://cataleg.bnc.cat/search*cat/?searchtype=a&searcharg=Riba+Carles+1893&sortdropdown=-&searchsopce=13&searchscope2=13&SORT=D



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

http://ccuc.cbuc.cat/search*cat/a?SEARCH=Riba+Carles+1893&sortdropdown=-&searchscope=23



WEB: Què hi ha a les biblioteques públiques

<http://argus.biblioteques.gencat.cat/iii/encore/search/C|SRiba+Carles+1893|Orightresult|U1?lang=cat&suite=pearl>



WEB: Per comprar-ne llibres

<http://www.llibres.cat/ca/detall-autor/riba-i-bracons-carles>



WEB: Articles de l'autor (Traces)

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



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