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## Eugeni d'Ors (Xènius)



Eugeni d'Ors, "Xènius"

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**His Life** With a turn-of-the-century cultural education, Eugeni d'Ors i Rovira (Barcelona, 1881 – Vilanova i la Geltrú, 1954) is an early and exemplary case of the

professionalisation of the Catalan intellectual as a writer and cultural organiser.

After 1906, he was an assiduous daily contributor to *La Veu de Catalunya* with his *Glosari* [Glossary], an opinion column through which he emerged as the man who put [Noucentisme](#) into words and leading theorist of this politico-cultural trend in the service of bourgeois reformism.

Appointed secretary of the Institute of Catalan Studies in 1911, he became head of the newly-founded Librarians' School in 1915 while, in 1917, he was put in charge of Public Instruction of the Mancomunitat [union of the four provincial governments of Barcelona, Girona, Tarragona and Lleida] of Catalonia. After the death of Prat de la Riba, his most stalwart protector and promoter, Ors progressively distanced himself from the programme of the conservative political party the Lliga Regionalista and this would culminate with his being victimised in the form of abrupt dismissal in 1920, which led to his defection from his country.

Once established in Madrid, he continued his incessant activities as publicist and public speaker, now in Spanish. Elected to the Royal Spanish Academy of Language (1927), the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War and his joining the seditious government in Burgos enabled him once again to participate in tasks of cultural organisation as permanent secretary of the Institute of Spain (1937) and as director general of Fine Arts (1938).

After the end of the Civil War, he established the Academia Breve de Crítica de Arte [Academy of Art Criticism], a veritable focus of promotion of modern art in the Spanish capital in the early 1940s. After 1946, in a renewed attempt of approximation to his country, he succeeded in bringing together a group of admirers in another academy he founded, the Faro de San Cristóbal Academy near Vilanova i Geltrú, the town in which he was to die in 1954.

**The *Glosari*** The column headed *Glosari* (1906–1921), which continued under the same rubric – *Glosario* – throughout the Spanish phase of his life in the dailies *ABC*, first, and then *Arriba España* during the war, is his great work, the true quarry from which, directly or indirectly, all the other works are mined, both those of unmistakably literary intention (*La Ben Plantada*, 1911 [The Elegant Woman]; *Gualba, la de mil veus*, 1915 [Gualba of a Thousand Voices]; and *Lliçó de tedi en el parc*, 1916 [Lesson on Tedium in the Park]), and those of more ideological intent (*Filosofia de l'home que treballa i que juga*, 1914 [Philosophy of the Man Who Works and Plays]; *Lletres a Tina*, 1914–1915 [Letters to Tina]; *La Vall de Josafat*, 1918–1919 [The Valley of Josaphat]; and *El nou Prometeu encadenat*, 1920 [The New Prometheus Bound]).

Before anything else, however, and independently of the monographic series that appeared under the auspices of *Glosari*, it must be noted that a glossa is a brief essay, a gloss of rarely more than a page

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where, in dazzling style that seeks the reader's complicity and starting out from different occasions held out by reality in any one of its guises, value judgements are pronounced or reflection is invited on matters or circumstances of a diverse range, with attention both to individual points that are outstanding for whatever reason and, in particular, to questions that are somehow relevant for collective existence.

The *glossa*, as Xènius (the pseudonym with which d'Ors signed *Glosari*) conceived and practised it, thus becomes a textually proteiform and thematically versatile genre, notable for the minimum significative unity of a wide-ranging well-meshed system of thought, Orsian thought, which is structured around an analogy, convinced of the primordial unity of the world and the cosmos, and attentive in its reconstruction.

Starting out from the pretension of using a merely verifying language (asserting that he limited himself to taking note of what he called "palpitations of the times"), the author of the *Glosari* pieces popularised through the column some of the key words that best responded to the expectations of change hatched by the more dynamic nuclei of the bourgeoisie, which was progressively more committed to the cause of political Catalanism as represented by the Lliga Regionalista party and its undisputed leader, Prat de la Riba.

Prominent among these key words, which Ors structurally set off against their corresponding antonyms, and besides his coinage of the expression *noucentisme*, are his Catalan equivalents of *imperialism*, *arbitrarism*, *civilism*, *classicism*, and *Mediterraneanism*. All of these, duly repeated in different formulations throughout the *Glosari* columns in a multiplicity of contexts and by way of a range of pretexts, would constitute the backbone of Ors' cogito, while also contributing to the shaping of the bourgeois ideals and morality which aimed at legitimating the project of government embarked upon by Catalanism in the hands of the reformist bourgeoisie.

Hence, for example, if the appellation *noucentisme* referred to the regenerationist urges of the times in the supposedly new conjuncture opened up with the turn of the century, exaltation of Ors' concept of *imperialism* was in keeping with the goal of finding a denomination (then prestigious) for a third way between classical liberalism and revolutionary socialism, which is to say a way that, opting for more active intervention in public affairs, would thereby also block the way to any possibility of collectivisation of private property.

*Arbitrarism*, the most polysemic and controversial of the terms made fashionable by Ors, essentially designated the justifying ethics of an interventionist or imperialist stance in social and political matters as well as in the aesthetic and cultural domains or, in other words, an ethics based on the affirmation of will as a subsidiary corrective to the limitations imposed by bourgeois rationalism and by the adverse material conditioning factors faced by this rationalism.

*Civilism* (or *civility*) was at once the model incentive of behaviour and the yearned-for result of the infrastructural transformations wrought within the most ideal and attainable spatial framework, that of the city conceived in the image and likeness of the Greek polis, while *classicism* and *Mediterraneanism* went back, by way of a landscape- and history-based pretext, to a past (Greco-Roman) and a space (the Mediterranean) that were hypostatically united, and in which were situated the origins of certain cultural and characterological constants also inherited by the Catalan nation.

Taken schematically and retrospectively from a cold, abstract viewpoint, this ideology, which might

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today seem abstruse and almost incongruous, thrived nevertheless, partly thanks to the eloquence of Ors' essentialist verbalising and his activism in all the intellectual domains in order to mobilise the best energies of the Catalonia of the early decades of the century. And this was translated into both a doctrinal corpus which, in many senses, has not been surpassed, and a literary, artistic and institutional practice that has left a deep imprint on the whole of Catalan cultural life in the twentieth century.

**The Monographic Series** Within the copious flow of the *Glosari* pieces, ever-adapting to the pace of the events of the day, Ors eventually put together several monographic series of his *glosses*, often at a rate of one every second summer. While they were extracted from the whole, these series, thanks to their status as an autonomous entity, complemented the essentially rational and argument-based dimension of the *Glosari* writings with another plastic, image-laden facet that was eminently literary.

Shaped in keeping with the structure of the journalistic milieu in which they originally appeared, they reveal characteristics that are akin to the anti-novel genre that was making its appearance at the time, while the figure of the woman – or the Oceanides, to use Ors' expression following Aeschylus – is ever-present to a greater or lesser extent, always overlaid with a symbolic dimension that transcends the strictly narrative circumstances of the character or any simple devotional invocation he may make of womankind (as in the case of Maria in *La Vall de Josafat*).

Published in the summer of 1911, the *glosses* of *La ben plantada* revolve around a colony of summer holidaymakers in a coastal village and the feelings of expectation aroused with the appearance on the scene of a young woman who is to become, through the process of mystification that Ors deploys around her figure, not only a galvanising agent among that small collective – representative of Catalan society as a whole – but also a paradigm suitable for exercising, by virtue of the sensitive beauty of the human reference in which it is incarnated, a beneficial, cathartic and uniting influence over the whole of Catalonia. *La ben plantada* thus appears as the aesthetic sublimation of the ethics of *Noucentisme*.

The outbreak of the First World War in August 1914 resulted in the *Lletres a Tina* series in the *Glosari*, which continued until the end of the year, later to appear in book-format publication with the title of *Tina i la Guerra Gran* [Tina and the Great War]. Taking as his pretext a Prussian girl he had met the previous summer, Ors began a unidirectional correspondence in which, in keeping with the rhythm of the events of the war, he set about marrying (with considerable syncretic effort which entailed frequent resort to paradox) the Latinness of France and the Germanness of the Central European empires. The subsequent ideological balancing act reveals the split-off position of the Lliga Regionalista with regard to the war.

The summer *divertimento* of 1915 was constituted by the *glosses* of *Gualba, la de mil veus*. A widowed father and his adolescent daughter are cloistered in this village in the massif of Montseny for the summer holidays, during which they keep themselves busy by translating Shakespeare's *King Lear*. The perfect friendship – consisting of culture – reigning between the two of them will be replaced by the incestuous passion – consisting of nature – to which they succumb. The instinctive drives of the unconscious domain of the human psyche, which Ors called "larvae", are unleashed thanks to their solitude amidst settings that are subject to the rule of nature. The romantic flavour of the novelette is countered by its "cold" structure, with a great abundance of premonitory elements.

The series entitled *La lliçó de tedi en el parc* (1916), subsequently better known by the title of its publication in book form as *Oceanografia del tedi* [Oceanography of Tedium], ponders the supremacy

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of intelligence over instinct, of art over life, of man over chaos. Obligated by medical prescription to take a rest cure, Ors continues exercising his skills of observation and introspective analysis amidst the tough test of tedium, into the ocean of which he dives without drowning or letting himself be seduced by the presence of the Other, half-glimpsed here in the form of a woman. The epiphonema of the work points to the non-viability of transgression and, hence, a return to the activities of the intellect.

The most enduring monographic series, in terms of time, was that of *La Vall de Josafat*, which covered the period from January 1918 to February 1919. Fed up with the ravages of the war and progressively disenchanted with the politics of the Lliga Regionalista, he set aside the *glosses*, or his daily updating of events to take refuge in evaluative portraits of historical characters, just as God will do with men on the Day of Judgement in the biblical Valley of Josaphat. The result is an unequivocally "arbitrary" work, stripped of any gratuitous element of unnecessary realism – of "veronicity" to apply Ors' own term – and formulator of a proposal of knowledge transformed into pure literature.

Written in August 1920 and at this point published in *El Día Gráfico* – the newspaper that took the *Glosari* articles after Ors' victimisation – the *glosses* of *El nou Prometeu encadenat* re-create the old theme of Aeschylus to establish a parallel between the fate of Prometheus and that of Ors himself after he had been stripped of all his positions by the Lliga Regionalista government.

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