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## Joan Fuster



### Joan Fuster: Essay Writing

Vicent Salvador (Universitat Jaume I)

Joan Fuster was undoubtedly the most important Catalan essayist of the generations that emerged after the Civil War. The force of his intellectual personality and the

breadth of his work — which expresses both a profound humanist view, undeniable political voluntarism, critical scepticism and corrosive humour — have gone beyond the literary ambit and have projected themselves into the cultural and civil life of the Països Catalans, making a major contribution towards the shaping of their unitary conscience.

Joan Fuster (Sueca 1922-1992) is, as an essayist, a leading figure in the Catalan literature of his time, apart from his extensive activity as a literary historian and critic, and social historian of the language. Also noteworthy is his brief career as a poet, at the end of the 1940s and early 1950s. This left its trace in poems like the famous "Criatura Dolcíssima" (Sweetest Child), which appeared in the book *Escrit per al silenci* (Written for Silence, 1954) and was also set to music by Lluís Llach. However, the polymorphism of this "homenot" (big man) whose unforgettable features [Josep Pla](#) portrayed with agile pen, revolves around his production in the form of essays, which is, in essence, no more than an epiphenomenon of the never-ending diary where the writer leaves a daily record of his reflections on the world.

**Vindicating the Essay** All in all, Fuster upholds the essay as the most appropriate genre for his literary activity: the essay is "shirtsleeves" writing. And he brings back the memory of the European master of the genre, Michel de Montaigne, this first, disbelieving, self-analytical and sceptical essay writer who was so aware of the physiological basis of all humanism, which Fuster humorously referred to as "the autonomy of the trouser fly". Montaigne had proudly inaugurated, at the dawn of the sixteenth century in Europe, this egotistical and intellectual genre, without any narrator or fictional characters interposed between author and reader. It was a long way, too, from the intimate shamelessness and exclamatory character that were associated with lyrical poetry. Fuster amply theorises on this, offering yet another display of the self-sufficiency of this literature of ideas that is born in the personal diary, frequently by way of the daily newspapers -through journalistic opinion pieces- to end up in the pages of the bibliographic volume.

In effect, one of the characteristic features of the genre lies precisely in its innate fragmentary nature. It has often been remarked that a good essay can be read in any of its pages because it lacks a closed structure, revealing a clear intention of unfinished discourse, and also becoming an eternal preparation for what, in the work of theatre, would be the definitive fixation of the play through its premiere. The interior deliberations of the essayist for the reader's eyes do not so much pursue definitive conclusions as the pleasure of silent conversation through the pages of a book, developing the lines of an argument that is always reversible or at least open to modification.

On the one hand, the book - or the incorruptible laws of the bibliographic product in the publishing market -imposes a minimal determined length and certain expectations of thematic coherence bringing together different themes. Auto-prologues, or prologues written by the author himself or

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herself -frequent in these volumes of collected pieces- are the ideal place to justify the publishing manoeuvre of compiling fragmentary writings. In his first book of essays -*Les originalitats* (Originalities, 1951)- Fuster explicitly addresses this aporia and concludes that the unity of the volume being presented will have to be sought in the personality of the author, in the internal coherence of an intellectual trajectory of which the book is simply a faithful example. In a much later volume, *Sagitari* (Sagittarius, 1985), he justifies in the following words the title he has given to a whole heap of texts that are diverse and yet in harmony as a whole, "If the collection I am presenting today with all the digressions that obsess me is to be sustained by any rhetorical reference, it might as well be 'Sagittarius'. After all, I was born on November 23rd". In other words, the writer's ego itself, along with its intellectual concerns, constitutes a guarantee of the profound coherence of the polymorphic discourse.

On other occasions, more conventional formulas are sought for organising a diverse range of contents under a formal and apparently incontrovertible heading. Such is the case of *Diccionari per a ociosos* (Dictionary for the Idle, 1964), a book that was successful in its Spanish, Italian and English translations. In this work the typical arrangement of lexicographic compendia -alphabetical order- permits the structured presentation of a series of essay-format texts that vary considerably in their execution and length. The criterion is practical, at least, and indisputable at first glance despite its considerable arbitrariness. After all, Fuster himself had hinted, not without a pinch of irony, in one of his aphorisms, "Alphabetical order is merely a variation on public order".

**Culture and Other Matters** If we think about it, the essayist limits himself to talking about the obsessions and tics that are awakened by his reflections on the world. The central theme of the Fuster essay is precisely this: a continuous examination of conscience where, by "conscience", we are given to understand the interaction of a rational "I" with the world. The author takes up a distinctive space with regard to pure fiction or the description of external reality and also vis-à-vis the pure, intimate and irrationalist cry of poetry. The object of the essay is, then, the process itself of the essayist's inner deliberation about the world that surrounds him. And this deliberation must depart from a scepticism that, like an antidote or disinfectant, neutralises the inertia of any kind of dogmatism. In very graphic terms, Fuster speaks of not being "wet behind the ears". It must equally be a rationally controlled discourse because only the light of knowledge and explicitness can guarantee the public utility - for readers - of texts that are submitted to the rules of critical discussion. After all, this critical discussion is the first stimulus of knowledge. "Give me a good arguer and I shall be capable of constructing the most sublime theories."

One of Fuster's favourite thematic packages in his essays is culture, understood as the set of mechanisms through which the human animal reacts with its surroundings. For example, the invention of the chair, or the fork or any other accessory that contributes towards human control of the world, or the transformations that the aspirin or penicillin have meant for humanity, are all themes for his original critical reflections.

Hence, in the *Diccionari per a ociosos*, the entry headed "chair" contains a lucid investigation into the historical evolution of this piece of furniture, or the changes that have been wrought in the criteria of social appearances and bodily comfort, or technological progress... Another example appears in the book *Babels i Babilònies* (Babels and Babylons, 1972), which deals with the sociological transformations of the 1960s and where the author insists several times on a concept of culture that defines anything that is not nature. One of the chapters of this book sets out on a rhetorical discussion as to what item of clothing should take chronological priority in the history of humanity: the scarf, the fig leaf, the pouch or the belt from which to hang a weapon. Obviously, each option

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conceals a different conception of the *quid* of the human condition where, beyond mere defence against the inclemency of the immediate environment, are urgencies and interests that are more concerned with vanity, embarrassment, or aggressiveness, and so on.

To the themes I have just mentioned should be added a range of other matters that occupied Fuster's pen, for example literature, history and politics. It is undeniable that Fuster's scepticism is not incompatible -on the contrary- with a national and social commitment that takes shape in what he called "political pamphlets" or in such a paradigmatic work as *Nosaltres els valencians* (*We the Valencians*, 1962), a veritable essay of interpretation of the history and identity of the Valencia region.

In any case, in his essay writing Fuster never deals with these matters in the form of the specialised monograph or a book of philosophy -he insistently rejected this kind of description of his intellectual activity- but rather delves into the material as a "specialist in general ideas", with a mixture of scepticism, insatiable curiosity and the urge to be read, which, for him, was the foremost obligation of any writer. In the background was a long literary and cultural tradition: Montaigne, Voltaire, *Xènius*, [the pseudonym used by the Catalan writer Eugeni d'Ors - translator], *Josep Pla*... This is a wholly discursive archive of strategies for developing the examination of conscience where the writer tests himself on any theme that provides the raw material, the original impulse of the deliberation. Moreover, in order to embody his reflections in writing and, through the golden rule of producing something that is pleasurable to read, to generate readers, the essayist must work at a personal linguistic style that gives substance and the sap of vitality to his discourse.

**Some Features of Fuster's Style** One of Fuster's main contributions to Catalan literature is undoubtedly the stylistic labour that made of his prose an agile instrument of thought, discussion and agreeable reading. The shadow of *Josep Pla*, Fuster's friend and mentor, who devoted to him one of his portrayals of what he called the *homenot* (big man), often hovers over Fuster's prose as one of its most inescapable stylistic references. Not in vain did Fuster devote a memorable critical study to the work of this writer from the Empurdà region of Catalonia in a kind of admiring reciprocity. Among other points, he noted the anti-lyrical proclivity of Pla's style.

One of the most recurrent features of Fuster's style is precisely a demystifying irony and a very Pla-like biting wit, which offers a sceptical contrast between the vacuity of *big words* and the material aspects -frequently crudely biological- of social reality. His use of adjectives, for example, might take the reader by surprise because of references to material attributes that do not seem to fit with more abstract or even more solemn concepts, for example when he says that traditional nationalism is "flaccid and faded", that certain words or ideas are "glassy", "pallid" or "refrigerating", that the Spanish left of the 1970s was often "stuttering, volatile and hypothermic", that minority languages can be "subject, cornered, Lilliputian or quaint". What is true of adjectives is also true of nouns -"the indigenous book-loving *livestock*- and of adverbs -"*accumulatedly* deceased salmon". At times the declaration of demystifying materialism is expressed throughout a text, for example when he says that the philosophical idea of the unity of the ego is not credible unless it is "a condition that includes rheumatism, the Oedipus complex and orgasm."

With all this, the writer manifests his goal of *decoagulating* the gaze or, in other words, to present the world in a new light that shakes up inertia of perception and brings to light the ideological snares that hide in discursive routines. This operation might be achieved with a vivid turn of phrase, frequently a conceptual definition that entails a surprising metaphor, hyperbole or turning some commonplace on its head. Aphorisms like, "He who has language, from Rome comes", or "Marriage is the only legal and honourable form of complicity that our society recognises", or "Each word is in itself a

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periphrasis", illustrate these techniques that constitute the pithy style that Fuster employs to give force and rhetorical efficacy to his discourse, either in autonomous aphorisms or laconic, resounding and memorable phrases that are seeded throughout the longer texts. This tendency to pithiness is one of the most remarkable features of Fuster's style.

Aphorisms, which at times constitute an entire book, as is the case with *Consells, proverbis i insolències* (Advice, Proverbs and Insolence, 1968) are the author's contribution to a centuries-old genre that fascinated him and in which he had found exponents among the French moralists, Nietzsche and, in his own century, the glosses of [Eugeni d'Ors](#). But what in *Xènius* tends to come out as the *slogan*, in Fuster systematically flees the dogmatic tone, to become an *enigma* to be deciphered by means of meditation rather than the slogan to be uncritically accepted, whereby he displays the most insolent facets of scepticism.

One strategy that contributes towards creating this effect is the contamination of conversationalism to which Fuster submits his essays and even the epigrammatic and essay-like miniature, which is the aphorism. This would be another essential feature of his style, which comes close to writing the world of immediate orality, to the interaction between author and reader. One example is the aphorism he ironically dedicates to *Xènius*: "[Eugeni d'Ors](#)? Yes, man! That old rightist French intellectual!" Fuster's discourse is full of interjections and other examples of orality that bring their prose of ideas to a model of deliberate dialogue that is a long way from the monotonous abstraction of philosophical texts. In this balance between the profound idea and vivacious conversation probably lies one of the most relevant merits of the model of essay writing that Fuster advocates.

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## A selection of texts

### Text



**WEB: Magisteri Teatre-Mag Poesia**

Reproducció dels poemes: "El matí i tu", "Cinc invocacions" i "Tres poemes inútils per a dos pintors que volen reinventar el món".

<http://www.mallorcaweb.com/Mag-Teatre/poemes-solts/fuster.html>



**WEB: Antologia de textos**

Dins de la Biblioteca Joan Fuster, hi ha aquesta bona selecció digital de textos de l'autor. Amb selecció i pròleg de Francesc Pérez i Moragón.

<http://nti.uji.es/fuster/IndexEHC.html>



**WEB: "Qüestió de noms"**

Reprodueix un text de Fuster sobre les denominacions dels habitants dels diferents territoris de parla catalana.

<http://www.unitat.org/etnia/fuster.html>



**WEB: "La poesia"**

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Un poema de l'autor al web *Viu la poesia*.

[http://www.viulapoesia.com/pagina\\_2.php?itinerari=13&tipus=1&subtipus=2&idpoema=249](http://www.viulapoesia.com/pagina_2.php?itinerari=13&tipus=1&subtipus=2&idpoema=249)



**WEB: Fuster a EPdLP**

Nota biogràfica en castellà amb un fragment d'una de les seves obres a El Poder de la Palabra.

<http://www.epdip.com/escritor.php?id=1734>



**WEB: Magisteri Teatre-Mag Poesia**

Reproduction of the poems: "El matí i tu" ("The Morning and You"), "Cinc invocacions" ("Five Invocations") and "Tres poemes inútils per a dos pintors que volen reinventar el món" ("Three Useless Poems for Two Painters Who Want to Reinvent the World").

<http://www.mallorcaweb.com/Mag-Teatre/poemes-solts/fuster.html>



**WEB: Joan Fuster**

Prose fragments in Catalan, English and German.

[http://www.escriptors.cat/autors/fusterjoan/pagina.php?id\\_sec=1938](http://www.escriptors.cat/autors/fusterjoan/pagina.php?id_sec=1938)



**WEB: "Qüestió de noms" (A Question of Names)**

Reproduction of a text by Fuster on the denominations for the inhabitants of different Catalan-speaking territories.

<http://www.unitat.org/etnia/fuster.html>



**WEB: Antologia de textos (Anthology of Texts)**

In the Joan Fuster Library there is a good digital selection of the author's texts. Francesc Pérez i Moragón did the selection and wrote the Prologue.

<http://nti.uji.es/fuster/IndexEHC.html>



**AUDIO: Enric Sòria diu Fuster**

Enric Sòria diu Fuster

[http://lletra.uoc.edu/anterior/noms/jfuster/html\\_especials/joanfusterrecita1.html](http://lletra.uoc.edu/anterior/noms/jfuster/html_especials/joanfusterrecita1.html)

## Comments on the author

### Criticism



**WEB: Biblioteca J. Fuster de textos electrònics**

Bona biblioteca virtual d'autor a càrrec de la Universitat Jaume I de Castelló.

<http://nti.uji.es/fuster/>



**WEB: Pàgina de l'AELC**

Biografia, cronologia, llista de referències.

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



**WEB: Joan Fuster on the Lletra website in Catalan**

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Including more resources and reading suggestions.

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



**WEB: The J. Fuster Library of Electronic Texts**

This fine virtual library on the author has been compiled by the University Jaume I of Castellón.

<http://nti.uji.es/fuster/>



**WEB: Website of the AELC**

Biography, chronology, list of references.

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

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## Miscellaneous



**WEB: Biblioteca Casa-Museu Fuster a Sueca**

Informació sobre la Biblioteca Casa-Museu Joan Fuster al web Espais escrits de la Xarxa del Patrimoni Literari Català.

<http://www.espaisescrits.cat/home.php?op=6&module=escriptors&ides=22&idioma=cat>



**WEB: "Auca de Joan Fuster"**

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

<http://www.auques.cat/tot.php?auca=fuster>



**WEB: Library House Museum Fuster in Sueca**

Information about the Library House Museum Joan Fuster at the website "Espais escrits. Xarxa del Patrimoni Literari Català" [Written Spaces. The Catalan Literary Heritage Network].

<http://www.espaisescrits.cat/home.php?op=6&module=escriptors&ides=22&idioma=eng>

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## Comments



**WEB: "Joan Fuster, literatura, nació i compromís"**

Notícia sobre l'homenatge a Fuster a la Facultat de Ciències de la Comunicació Blanquerna.

<http://www.blanquernaradio.com/especials/fuster/default.htm>



**WEB: "Joan Fuster i la funció de la crítica"**

Comunicació de Josep Ballester (U. de València) a la III conferència virtual "Catalan Culture and the Academy" (2000).

<http://www.uoc.edu/jocs/3/conferencia/ang/ponencies2.html#balles>



**PDF: "Epistolari fusterià"**

Ressenya de Josep Iborra sobre el primer volum de *Correspondència* de Fuster a *Caràcters*, núm. 2 (1998).

<http://www.uv.es/caracters/pdf/CARACTERS-2.pdf>



**PDF: "Uns nous lectors de Joan Fuster?"**

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Ressenya de la reedició de *Contra Unamuno y los demás* de Fuster a *Caràcters*, núm. 5 (1998), signada per Vicent Raga.

<http://www.uv.es/caracters/pdf/CARACTERS-5.pdf>



**WEB: "Joan Fuster, literatura, nació i compromís" (Joan Fuster, Literature, Nation and Commitment)**

News about the homage to Fuster in the Blanquerna Faculty of Communication Sciences.

<http://www.blanquernaradio.com/especials/fuster/default.htm>



**WEB: "Joan Fuster i la funció de la crítica" (Joan Fuster and the Function of Criticism)**

Paper by Josep Ballester (Universitat de València) at the Third Virtual Conference "Catalan Culture and the Academy" (2000).

<http://www.uoc.edu/jocs/3/conferencia/ang/ponencies2.html#balles>



**PDF: "Epistolari fusterià" (Collected Letters of Joan Fuster)**

Review by Josep Iborra of the first volume of *Correspondència* (Correspondence) by Fuster, in *Caràcters*, num., 2 (January 1998).

<http://www.uv.es/caracters/pdf/CARACTERS-2.pdf>



**PDF: "Uns nous lectors de Joan Fuster?" (New Readers for Joan Fuster?)**

Review by Vicent Raga of the reprint of *Contra Unamuno y los demás* (Against Unamuno and the Rest) by Fuster in *Caràcters*, num., 5 (October 1998).

<http://www.uv.es/caracters/pdf/CARACTERS-5.pdf>

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## Bio-bibliography

### Biography



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[http://www.enciclopedia.cat/fitxa\\_v2.jsp?NDCHEC=0028550](http://www.enciclopedia.cat/fitxa_v2.jsp?NDCHEC=0028550)



**WEB: Fitxa al "Qui és qui a les lletres catalanes"**

<http://cultura.gencat.net/ilc/qeq/FitxaAutors.asp?nom1=fus&nom2=&cerca=Cerca&quinform=form1&NRegistre=6&idregistre=6920>



**WEB: Membre de l'IEC**

Joan Fuster, membre numerari de l'Institut d'Estudis Catalans.

<http://apmembres2.iec.cat/detall.aspx?pkMembrePLE=291>



**WEB: Joan Fuster a Literatura valenciana actual**

Fitxa dedicada a l'autor en aquest web de la Universitat d'Alacant.

<http://www.iifv.ua.es/lletraferit/consultes/veureAutor.asp?pld=15>



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

<http://www.grec.cat/cgibin/heclangcl2.pgm?&USUARI=&SESSIO=&NDCHEC=0028550&PGMORI=E>

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**WEB: The author in the Who's Who of Catalan Literature**

<http://cultura.gencat.net/ilc/qeq/fitxaAutorsuk.asp?nom1=fuster&nom2=&cercauk2=Search&quinform=form1&NRegistre=3&idregistre=6920>



**WEB: In Wikipedia**

Briography and works in the free encyclopaedia.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joan\\_Fuster](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joan_Fuster)



**WEB: Member of the IEC**

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

<http://apmembres2.iec.cat/detall.aspx?pkMembrePLE=291>

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

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

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

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



**WEB: Per comprar-ne llibres**

<http://www.llibres.cat/ca/detall-autor/fuster-ortells-joan>



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

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



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

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

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

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**WEB: Activitats per treballar “La poesia”**

Un poema amb propostes al web *Viu la poesia*.

[http://www.viulapoesia.com/pagina\\_6.php?tipus=1&subtipus=2&itinerari=13&idpoema=249](http://www.viulapoesia.com/pagina_6.php?tipus=1&subtipus=2&itinerari=13&idpoema=249)