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Jordi Sarsanedas



Who I Am and Why I Write

Jordi Sarsanedas is a poet, fiction writer and translator. He has an Arts degree from the University of Toulouse (Languedoc) and has taught French language and

literature in Barcelona. Between 1948 and 1950, he was a language tutor at Glasgow University, after which he went to live in Milan (1958-1961). Besides his work as a poet and fiction writer, he has also been a theatre director as well as being active in many other cultural initiatives. He was editor of the post-war review Ariel, a founder-member and director of the Agrupació Dramàtica de Barcelona [Barcelona Dramatic Society], president of the Catalan PEN Centre, and president of the Ateneu Barcelonès (1997-2003). In 1994 he was awarded the Catalan Letters Prize of Honour.

One fine day in 1947, I found myself writing. Naturally, I had learned how to write many years before, along paths laid out by Maria Montessori, if such detail is necessary. But the day I am referring to, with more cheerful artlessness and zest than declared ambition, entered the domain of literary life, which I nonetheless felt was radically serious.

The poems that I wrote then and that I would subsequently publish in my first book *A trenc de sorra* (Crack in the Sand) were exhibited in the Pictòria Gallery as manuscripts in Indian ink along with works -painting and sculpture- of friends of mine with which we presented the Grup de Vuit (Group of Eight), to the great unhappiness of the police because in those days they didn't like people coming together in groups. Now that I have a chance to mention it, I'd like to say that I've always felt very close to the plastic arts and not only because I was well-schooled by my father, who was one of the people who introduced the Japanese lacquer art of *urushi* into Catalonia, or because my wife, Núria Picas, is a painter.

The fact that I found myself writing at the age of twenty-five should not be too surprising. I'd been prepared for this. I'd had the good luck to attend a school where books published by Protectora came into our hands and where the atmosphere permitted reading to be done in good faith, as well as the privilege of having books at home: the collections of "Bernat Metge", "Els nostres clàssics" (Our Classics), the volumes of "Biblioteca literària" (Literary Library), "Biblioteca catalana" (Catalan Library), the orange series books of Proa ... And then there was poetry: a little of [Carner](#), [Sagarra](#), [Salvat-Papasseit](#), [Verdaguer](#) ... I read a lot, tumultuously, everything I could get my hands on, mixing titles in the most unjustifiable fashion -Jules Verne and Dostoevsky, [Folch i Torres](#) and Aldous Huxley- but, or so I'd like to believe, acquiring with each reading a certain level of benefit, more or less deep, even if it was very little. And when [exile](#) obliged me to start teaching French, the "text commentaries" I had to prepare ensured that I would come to be grateful to a few good teachers, Villon, Ronsard, Baudelaire, Apollinaire, Gérard de Nerval... So, one might suppose that, at some or other point in this education, in Catalonia or France, I must have felt the prick of the spur that has come down to us reflected in the phrase *Anch'io son pittore*. Again, it is quite clear that the work of writing for the classroom -narration, *dissertation*, which I had accepted in good faith, had also constituted a form of apprenticeship that was not to be totally disdained.

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So it was that I found myself writing. Out of those early poems -very naturally, very smoothly, if I can trust my memory of how I experienced it, and without noting any change in my attitude towards writing- came other texts, some stories that I called *Mites (Myths)*. It seemed to me that I justified the choice of this title by including in the text I had to provide for the flap of the first-edition volume a couple of lines I had found in an article published in *Partisan Review* after many of the stories were already finished. I said that the myth is principally a kind of literature in which the characters and events are enveloped in an aura of strange and prodigious meaning, and that myth is halfway between the dream and non-mythical literature. In fact, because of the requirements of the publishers, the volume was completed by stories of a very different type, which earned me the remark of one critic who said I was a "bicephalus writer". That was the time in which I started to work as an editor in the review *Ariel*.

I've been writing ever since: the poems I collected a few years ago in the volume *Fins a un cert punt* (Up to a Certain Point), books of short stories, a couple of novels, a range of articles, but not many? And perhaps it's worth mentioning the translations, some of which, I can say, are utterly sincere. Sometimes I have used the pseudonyms Emili Xerta and Joan Salou.

I often think that I haven't written as much as I would have liked. Sometimes, looking for an excuse, I've talked of the "distractions" that life has put in my way and that I have accepted. Let's be clear: from my standpoint when I'm talking about literary activity, I have to call "distractions" a number of activities that are simply necessary along with others that I've thought could be useful. For many, many years I taught French Language and Literature at the Lycée and the French Institute -where, moreover, I was secretary of the Literary Circle from 1947 until 1956- and the Aula school, of which I was assistant director. I played a significant role -at least it was significant for me- in the life of the Agrupació Dramàtica de Barcelona (Barcelona Dramatic Association), while, with Edigsa, I was engaged in more than one way in bringing out records in Catalan. For twenty years I have been editor in chief of *Serra d'Or*...

Is it, perhaps, that I have written, and write, to be useful in that way too? I doubt it. I think that, in writing, my only ambition has been the strange efficacy of the "useless works of artists". Nonetheless, afterwards and marginally, I have been content to think that, in however modest a way, this would also contribute to the effort of cultural affirmation that is so essential for our people.

On some occasions I have said, with poetry in mind but not only poetry maybe -and who knows if this is only some trick that seems to flatter me- that writing, as an artistic activity, consists of producing objects that satisfy, in the spirit of the author himself, a need that he discovers and defines -or perhaps even creates, to the extent that the word "create" might have a meaning- at the time of writing. Again, these objects, and this is essential, are susceptible to being offered to hypothetical readers -a whole throng of them or only one- in a gesture of solidarity, or even identification, so that success, if success has really been achieved, however modest it may be, and however small the possibility of doing so, can be shared and propagated.

Jordi Sarsanedas

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Phenomenology of Solitude. An Introduction

to the work of Jordi Sarsanedas

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Francesco Ardolino (University of Barcelona)

Anyone who wishes to approach the task of studying the work of Jordi Sarsanedas, even after negotiating all the tributes, eulogies and praise that have silted down over it, still has to overcome a final obstacle. This is the distorted stratigraphy that has been generated on the basis of the few rigorous analyses devoted to his work. Here is not the appropriate place for handing out bouquets and brickbats, but rather for bringing to light how, in interpretations of his narrative and poetic work, a couple of formulas have been so obsessively reiterated that they have lost any content they might once have had. When [Joaquim Molas](#) in his Prologue to the 1976 edition of *Mites* spoke, with the aim of recovering one of the most original and complex texts of Catalan literature, of a "product of a youthful crisis", he was introducing a concept that would serve thenceforth as a catch-all commonplace for any future reference to the book. As for the poetic domain, a very similar thing happened with the expression for which Àlex Broch appointed himself spokesperson, "solidary in solitary", with the further aggravation that the ambiguity behind this label left the door open for a tendentious reading of Sarsanedas' work by putting it through the filter of a moral recognition of the writer's personality. I am aware of the importance of Sarsanedas who, through his work, represented Catalan culture for half a century (from co-director of the Barcelona Dramatic Association to editor-in-chief of [Serra d'Or](#), from president of the Catalan PEN Club to head of the Institute of Catalan Letters and twice president of the Barcelona Ateneu (Athenaeum), and I know that one must mention this, even as a way of *partially* explaining his long creative silence. But it is also true that the ethical aura around his figure has marked a hagiographic approach that has hampered rather than favoured consideration of his work. I think that the only solution to this impasse lies in identifying a number of key points that can serve as a basis for rereading Sarsanedas' writings. For the purposes of analysis, I should like to propose a basic idea, which is making a clear separation between his poetry and his narrative works.

I am in no doubt that the world of *Mites* is essentially poetic or that the "rough lyrics" of Sarsanedas frequently hark back to prosodic rhythm. However, the positivist quest for a common aetiology is doomed to failure because there is no meeting between the two genres that would go further than some decanting of specific elements or a certain shared imagery. In his prose, even the religious element (that is so present in the collections of poems) is confined to and embraces the *Mites* with a God that, *ex machina* (and almost *extra textus*), sheds the organisational light on the whole collection. In a letter dated July 2002, [Joan Triadú](#) wrote to me that the "nuclear set of the work of J.S. has a catch-cry or title, glorious: *My God, the world*, which says it all". This is true, but it is also true that this could indicate, on the one hand, the Franciscan relationship that is at the core of Sarsanedas' poetry or, on the other, the ontological rupture -as a loss he has suffered or a yearning- that comes to constitute almost the totality of his narrative writing. Moreover, it seems to me that the most significant word of the catch-cry I have cited above is the possessive, which individualises the shift from metaphysics to mundanity. In brief, in Sarsanedas' prose -and here I *also* include *Mites*, the divinity does not go beyond being an epiphenomenon when it comes to interpreting the text and so, in my doctoral thesis, I wanted to label the narrator -and *only* the narrator- as a "humanitarian nihilist".

Most of his fictional pieces can be organised from this standpoint: the absence of the social or protest element is almost total and the texts give prominence to a series of uprooted and isolated characters. This is more evident in the novels: in the middle of a dreamlike universe founded in its chimeras, the narrative voice of *El martell* (The Hammer) proffers suspicious and contradictory information before finally blaming itself for the murder that had been presented in the first chapter, all of which only ends up making the reader mistrust the whole text. Published in 1956, this book, thanks to its systematic

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destructuring of traditional narrative mechanisms, would, along with *Ronda naval sota la boira* (Naval Patrol in the Mist) by [Pere Calders](#), come to form within twentieth-century Catalan literature an anti-novel diptych, hovering over which I detect the instigating shadow of *Temperatura* (Temperature) by [Francesc Trabal](#).

In *La noia a la sorra* (Girl on the Sand), which was written shortly after *El martell*, although it was not published until 1981 -the murder determines the end of the story, while the victim of the senseless crime is a foreigner who comes to the island as a tourist. Within the spectrum marked out by these two novels (where Carme Gregori was able to discover existential motifs with origins in Sartre and Camus) -which is to say, from the grotesque theme that symbolises as a totem the conflict between the unconscious and the conscious through to the representation of the clash between individual and society- one might find a place for almost all of Sarsanedas's stories. The only exceptions, more or less, are the children's stories which, thanks to their didactic component, reach a much higher level on this scale of oppositions, this being occupied by a code of honour that rejects meanness and indolence.

Sarsanedas' prose is not easy. The Atticism of his style misleads the more unwary and leads to critical misunderstandings. This is the price paid by the early *nouvelle Contra la nit d'Oboixangó* (Against the Night of Oboixangó), a (post)-colonial version of Voltaire's *Candide*, which, in a recent re-edition was inserted into a collection for young people. "I see myself as post-Noucentist and post-surrealist", Sarsanedas declared some ten years ago. If we resist the temptation of schematically relating the first notion to style and the second to content (or, worse still, the former to poetry and the latter to prose), this statement will drag us back in time to the poetic tensions that were forged within the group around the review *Ariel*. From here emerged the different atmospheres of the *Mites*, the ideological centre of Sarsanedas' entire *oeuvre*, the extraordinary architectural model he employed to produce -and here I recover in part an old hypothesis of [Triadú](#)- the first work of a new literary genre that was not to have any significant continuity.

I would not think it very risky to assume that the aforementioned apposition of [Molas](#) with regard to *Mites* ("product of a youthful crisis") was corroboration, in fact, of the impossibility of redirecting those writings to the approach advocated by Historical Realism, while the same operation had borne fruit with Sarsanedas' second volume of poems, *La Rambla de les flors*, which was published in 1954. Molas and [Castellet](#) would borrow a line from this collection, "i baixem al carrer" (and we go down to the street) as the title for a section of their *Poesia catalana del segle XX* (Twentieth-century Catalan Poetry) that is concerned with the transition of poetry towards a model of social realism that never managed to find a place in history. This was 1963 and it was some years since Sarsanedas had published a third volume of poems *Algunes preguntes, algunes respostes* (Some Questions, Some Answers).

However, I do not wish to review Sarsanedas' poetic works here but rather to draw attention to a silence. By the end of the 1950s he seemed to be less and less prolific. In 1965 he published *Postals d'Itàlia* (Postcards from Italy), a rather slight little volume that had a somewhat uneven and controversial reception but which, in its intimate and elegiac tone, its capacity for highlighting that "you" to whom most of Sarsanedas' compositions seem to be addressed, contains the quintessence of all his lyrical writing -while among his civic poems are masterpieces like the "Goigs fragmentaris per a Barcelona nostra" (Fragmentary Praise Poems for This Barcelona of Ours), which opens his first collection of poems (*A trenc de sorra*, 1948), and "Esbós d'una oda dialogada" (Sketch for an Ode in Dialogue), of 1967. In brief, we once again leave the floor to Joan Triadú, who has been saying for years that Sarsanedas' poetic line is somewhere between [Maragall](#) and [Salvat-Papasseit](#).

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Until the end of the 1990s, Sarsanedas was squeezing out the occasional poem or story, and taking out of the drawer stories written in long-ago days to put them together as a single unitary book, a macro-structure of children's stories (*L'Eduard el mariner i el país de sota l'aigua* (Eduard the Sailor and the Underwater Land - 1976). There are many reasons for this silence and I shall limit myself to the more convincing of them: in the early phase was his disappointment over the almost zero response to *El martell* from the reading public and critics, along with geographic distance because he was living in Italy at the time (between 1959 and 1961). Second, was the work he undertook on his return with *Serra d'Or* in addition to teaching at the French School and, finally, was the dislocation he must have felt as a result of the brief presence of Historic Realism, a movement that Sarsanedas always refrained from pronouncing on. Nonetheless, at the end of the millennium he once again began to publish his poetry and, in the last five years, has produced three volumes, a trilogy in which the compositions are reflected in a faraway mirror, occupying the space of memory that belongs to a diary, which is then reworked in rewriting exercises.

Before concluding, I should like to add one small aside. Many scholars have highlighted the connection between Sarsanedas' writing and painting. This link is already notable with his active participation in the Grup dels Vuit and appears more or less constantly throughout his work. Hardly anyone, though, has recognised the beauty of the brief texts, signed with pseudonyms that accompanied the cover illustrations of *Serra d'Or*, between 1988 and 1997. If we could break down the absurd barriers that modernity has imposed on the concept of literary work, we would accept that these artistic notes (although I should prefer to call them "art prose") have a rightful place in Catalan literature. In order to rescue them, we perhaps simply need their publication in a single volume so that readers can appreciate the coherence of a mixed genre that Sarsanedas has cultivated so impeccably.

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A selection of texts

Text



WEB: "Beuen vermut"

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

http://viulapoesia.com/pagina_2.php?itinerari=16&tipus=1&subtipus=2&idpoema=314



WEB: Cinc poemes

Nota biogràfica i poemes a la *Selecció de Poesia Catalana*.

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



WEB: Un poema en alemany

Breu biografia i un poema en català i alemany.

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



WEB: Sarsanedas a EPdLP

Nota biogràfica en castellà amb un poema a El Poder de la Palabra.

<http://www.epdip.com/escritor.php?id=2275>

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WEB: Five Poems

Biographical note and poems in *Selecció de Poesia Catalana* (Selection of Catalan Poetry).
<http://www.uoc.edu/lletra/especials/folch/sarsaned.htm>



WEB: A Poem in German

Brief biography and a poem in Catalan and German.
<http://www.jbeilharz.de/katalan/sarsanedas-ged.htm>

Bio-bibliography

Biography



WEB: A la Hiperenciclopèdia

http://www.enciclopedia.cat/fitxa_v2.jsp?NDCHEC=0061068



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

<http://cultura.gencat.net/ilc/qqq/FitxaAutors.asp?nom1=sar&nom2=&cerca=Cerca&quinform=form1&NRegistre=2&idregistre=4986>



WEB: A la Viquipèdia

Biografia, obra i enllaços sobre l'autor al web de l'enciclopèdia lliure.
http://ca.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jordi_Sarsanedas



WEB: The author in the Catalan Encyclopaedia

<http://www.grec.cat/cgibin/hecangcl2.pgm?&USUARI=&SESSIO=&NDCHEC=0061068&PGMORI=E>



WEB: Membre de l'IEC

Jordi Sarsanedas, membre numerari de l'Institut d'Estudis Catalans.
<http://apmembres2.iec.cat/detall.aspx?pkMembrePLE=358>



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

<http://cultura.gencat.net/ilc/qqq/fitxaAutorsuk.asp?nom2=Sarsanedas&cercauk2=Search&quinform=form1&NRegistre=2&idregistre=4986>



WEB: Member of the IEC

Jordi Sarsanedas, a permanent member of the Institut d'Estudis Catalans (Institute of Catalan Studies).
<http://apmembres2.iec.cat/detall.aspx?pkMembrePLE=358>

Bibliography



WEB: Què hi ha a la Biblioteca de Catalunya

http://cataleg.bnc.cat/search*cat/?searchtype=a&searcharg=Sarsanedas+Jordi&sortdropdown=-&se

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archsscope=13&searchscope2=13&SORT=D



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

http://ccuc.cbuc.es/search*cat/a?SEARCH=Sarsanedas%2C+Jordi&sortdropdown=-&searchscope=23



WEB: Què hi ha a les biblioteques públiques

<http://argus.biblioteques.gencat.cat/iii/encore/search/C|SSarsanedas+Jordi|Orightrresult|U1?lang=cat&suite=pearl>



WEB: Per comprar-ne llibres

<http://www.llibres.cat/ca/detall-autor/sarsanedas-i-vives-jordi>



WEB: Articles de l'autor (Traces)

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



WEB: Articles sobre l'autor (Traces)

http://traces.uab.cat/search?ln=ca&p=Sarsanedas%2C+Jordi&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=Sarsanedas+Jordi&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+%22sarsanedas+jordi%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=Jordi+Sarsanedas>

Comments on the author

Criticism



WEB: Sarsanedas, Premi d'Honor

Pàgina a LLETRA sobre el Premi d'Honor de les Lletres Catalanes.

<http://www.uoc.edu/lletra/premis/premidhonor/index.html>



WEB: Pàgina de l'AELC

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< <http://lletra.uoc.edu/en/author/jordi-sarsanedas> >

Biografia, publicacions, informacions.

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



WEB: L'autor al Corpus Literari Ciutat de Barcelona

Biografia, enllaços i transcripció d'articles sobre Sarsanedas.

http://www.ducros.biz/corpus/index.php?command=show_news&news_id=1916



WEB: Un dels Dotze sentits

Sarsanedas és un dels dotze poetes antologats al CD-ROM *Dotze sentits. Poesia catalana d'avui*.

http://www.iua.upf.edu/dotze_sentits/entrada.html



WEB: Jordi Sarsanedas on the Lletra website in Catalan

Including more resources and reading suggestions.

<http://www.uoc.edu/lletra/noms/jsarsanedas/>



WEB: Sarsanedas, Prize of Honour

LLETRA page on the Catalan Letters Prize of Honour.

<http://www.uoc.edu/lletra/premis/premidhonor/index.html>



WEB: AELC Website

Biography, publications, information.

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



WEB: Jordi Sarsanedas in the City of Barcelona Literary Corpus

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

http://www.ducros.biz/corpus/index.php?command=show_news&news_id=1916

Miscellaneous



PDF: Una de les darreres entrevistes

Breu entrevista a l'escriptor, guanyador del Premi Ciutat de Barcelona. A *Barcelona informació* núm. 95 (abril 2006).

http://www.bcn.es/publicacions/b_informacio/bi_95/12-13.pdf



WEB: In memoriam

Extens article sobre la vida i obra de Jordi Sarsanedas. Inclou una entrevista i documents d'àudio i de vídeo. A Vilaweb (16/11/2006).

http://www.vilaweb.cat/www/noticia?p_idcmp=2139922



WEB: Llistat de blocs

Crítics i autors escriuen sobre el desaparegut escriptor en els seus respectius blocs literaris.

http://www.vilaweb.cat/www/noticia?p_idcmp=2141253



WEB: President del PEN Català

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Sarsanedas fou president del Centre Català del PEN Club entre 1983 i 2001.

<http://www.pencatala.cat>



PDF: One of the Last Interviews

Brief interview with Sarsanedas, winner of the City of Barcelona Prize. In *Barcelona informació* N^o. 95 (April 2006).

http://www.bcn.es/publicacions/b_informacio/bi_95/12-13.pdf



WEB: In memoriam

An extensive article on the life and work of Jordi Sarsanedas. Includes an interview and audio and video recordings. On Vilaweb (16 November, 2006).

http://www.vilaweb.cat/www/noticia?p_idcmp=2139922



WEB: "Un home de paraula i d'acció" (A Man of Word and Action)

News of the death of Jordi Sarsanedas. In *Avui* (6 November, 2006).

<http://paper.avui.cat/article/cultura/38807/home/paraula.html>



WEB: List of Blogs

Critics and writers discuss the deceased writer in their respective literary blogs.

http://www.vilaweb.cat/www/noticia?p_idcmp=2141253



WEB: Activitats per treballar "Beuen vermut"

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

http://viulapoesia.com/pagina_6.php?tipus=1&subtipus=2&itinerari=16&idpoema=314

The author 2.0

Blogs of blogs



WEB: La blogosfera diu...

http://blogsearch.google.es/blogsearch?hl=ca&ie=UTF-8&q=Jordi+Sarsanedas&lr=lang_ca



WEB: The blogosphere says...

http://blogsearch.google.es/blogsearch?hl=ca&ie=UTF-8&q=Jordi+Sarsanedas&lr=lang_ca