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Narcís Oller



Narcís Oller: from Tradition to Modernity

Rosa Cabré (Universitat de Barcelona)

Narcís Oller is the creator of the modern Catalan novel with such notable works as *La febre d'or* (Gold Fever).

Shaped in the current of romanticism, he turned later toward realism and naturalism. He also wrote a psychological novel - *Pilar Prim* - short stories, and works for the theatre. The world of Oller's novels moves between two poles: realism, which at times verges on naturalism, and late romanticism, which manifests itself both in and as a not-inconsiderable residue of moralistic sentimentality. Oller represents the most important achievement of the Catalan novel in the nineteenth century.

The personality and work of Narcís Oller cannot be understood without taking into account the political-cultural conceptions that arose from the Revolution of September 1868. This background led to two factors that enabled a renovation of literary production. First was a desire in the more progressive intellectual sectors to impose rationalism and criticism, and then there was the impact of the historic events themselves. Together they ensured the greater significance the novel would have in relation to other genres, even theatre, in the period of the Restoration. Under debate at the time, as [Yxart](#) notes, was the "issue of realism and naturalism in art, which nourishes and colours all other matters, definitively bringing literature, and even poetry, to the immediate and living reality". This experience, which Narcís Oller describes in one of the stories of the collection entitled *Croquis del natural* (Sketch of the Natural), and in the novel *La bogeria* (Madness), meant that he would become disabused about events that he had previously understood as liberating and hopeful. From then on, according to Yxart, he became "conservative and close to the middle-of-the road parties".

The life and work of Narcís Oller fall into three periods. The first is a time of learning, until 1877. The second, until 1906, is a period of plenitude and recognition both inside and outside Catalonia, while the third stage represents a period of recuperation of memory and of working to complete the compilation of his work until his death in 1930.

Narcís Oller i Moragas was born on 10 August 1846. He was educated by his maternal uncle, the legal adviser Josep Moragas, in the Moragas family mansion in carrer del Forn Nou in the town of Valls, where his mother had gone to live on being widowed when Oller was three years old. Since his younger brother Josep died very young (in 1853), his relationship with his mother was very close (and in *La febre d'or* (Gold Fever), is translated into that between senyora Mònica and her son). He shared his games, an inclination for drawing and painting, readings and literary ambitions with his cousin [Josep Yxart](#), who was six years younger, and they always exchanged opinions about one another's writings. Oller soon combined his taste for socialising with his powers of observation of human behaviour and a "growing enthusiasm for investigating the truth", which he would later bring to his work. In 1863, he went to Barcelona to study the final year of his school-leaving exams, after which he studied Law at the university. In this period, the cousins wrote to one another and met during their holidays. However, between October 1868 and June 1871, they also shared student accommodation. In 1873, Oller succeeded in obtaining, through public examinations, the post of Secretary at the

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Provincial Council of Barcelona and went to live with his mother in a flat in carrer de Mendizábal. In May the following year he married Esperança Rabassa, but his happiness was short-lived because his mother died on 18 February 1876, eleven days after the death of his uncle Josep Moragas. Some months later, the couple moved with their daughter Maria to live in the Rambla de Catalunya, where their two sons, Josep and Joan were born.

After 1868, Oller was determined to become a writer. He read widely, from works on customs and manners from the Romantic period (for example, *Leyendas de oro* (Golden Legends), *Mme. de Staël*, Goethe's *Werther* and others by writers such as Lamartine, Fernán Caballero, Alarcón, Longfellow, and Henri Murger), along with works of a more realist tendency such as *Cádiz o La corte de Carlos IV* (Cadiz, or the Court of Charles IV) and *La falsa querida de Balzac* (The False Beloved of Balzac). He also discovered the Greek and Latin Classics as well as Dante, Tasso, Shakespeare, Rousseau, Voltaire, Sue, Hugo, Chateaubriand, Dumas, Zorrilla, Balmes, Espronceda, Mesonero, Bretón, Bécquer and Larra, etc.. These are readings he shares with his characters, Miquel de Castellfort of *La papallona* (The Butterfly) and Francesc of *La febre d'or*. With this eclectic education, his criteria of beauty are, from of his early literary works, naturalness, sincerity and spontaneity.

Joaquim Riera i Bertran, who worked with him in the Provincial Council of Barcelona after 1875, introduced him to the Catalan nationalist literary nucleus around the review *La Renaixensa* and, in May 1877, he attended the festival of the literary competition [Jocs Florals](#) for the first time. The impact of *L'Atlàntida* (Atlantis) by [Verdaguer](#) and the fact that he had no text in Catalan to read at the dinner after the festival made him want to write in Catalan thenceforth. In the 1879 Jocs Florals, he received a prize for his short story "*Sor Sanxa*" (Sister Sanxa) and the following year, his novella *Isabel de Galceran* was also awarded a prize. In the *La Renaixença* group, where he had introduced [Josep Yxart](#), he became friendly with Emili Vilanova, Francesc Matheu and [Àngel Guimerà](#) and, as a result of the publication of *Croquis del natural* (1879), with Joan Sardà. In 1878, Oller and Yxart travelled to Paris in order to write about the World Fair for the review and there they discovered a great modern industrial city. Thenceforth, Paris was the model city that was the mirror in which Oller saw Barcelona. During this trip, Oller (who had met Zola through Yxart at least as early as 1877) bought and read *Une page d'amour*.

The second stage of the life and work of Narcís Oller covers his period of plenitude as a writer. It goes from 1878 - when he presented his work for the first time in the [Jocs Florals](#) and wrote his two first realist fictional works in Catalan: "Lo trasplantat" (Transplanted) and "Lo vailet del pa" (The Bread Boy) - through to 1906 when he published his last novel *Pilar Prim*. This was when he read Zola's *Germinal*, Clarín's *La Regenta* (The Madam), Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, *The Kreutzer Sonata* and Carducci's *Ode barbare*. He now constructed his stories on the basis of Zola's naturalist procedure but also introducing some romantic elements, which, however, became increasingly sporadic. He was slowly replacing the setting of manners and mores with the social backdrop and was thus fusing the narration of action, in accordance with the laws of cause and effect, with the story of a setting of customs and manners, or the objective description of landscape with the intermittent intervention of the narrator in the story. In 1881, in order to have more free time for writing, he accredited himself in Madrid as a judicial attorney.

This period is comprised of two stages. In the first, Oller is established as a realist writer and is recognised by the best Spanish-language writers of the time, some of whom, for example Pardo Bazán, Pérez Galdós and, in particular, Pereda, would become close friends. He published stories and novels, from *La papallona* (1882) to *La febre d'or* (1890-92). In between came *Notes de color* (Notes of Colour) and *La bufetada* (The Blow, 1884), *L'escanyapobres* (The Usurer), which received

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a prize in the 1884 [Jocs Florals](#), *Vilaniu* (1885) and *De tots colors* (Of All Colours, 1888). The chronology of these works reveals a progressive preponderance of the naturalist procedure, although it was a long way from Zola's determinist philosophy.

Oller, as [Yxart](#) says, starts out from real events and characters, to which he applies his imagination, not to deform them but to give them colour, or he imagines situations that he then recounts according to his criterion of verisimilitude. The aim of the novelist is to analyse a universal passion through the study of a particular social and historical context. There are works that stress one aspect or another but, in general, all of them combine this aim to a greater or lesser degree. Hence, *La papallona* and *L'escanyapobres* are, above all, studies of passions within a broader framework. The scientific treatment of each case does not prevent (especially with the former) the presence of romantic elements (adjectivisation, sentimentalism, standard characters, the intervention of chance and mystery, the narrator's interjections in the story and moralising idealism, particularly directed to the relations between rich and poor). In *La papallona*, which Albert Savine published in French with a letter from Zola by way of a Prologue, Oller evokes his student experiences and contrasts the frustrated relationship of Lluís and Toneta (the only character who is developed throughout the story) with that of the married couple, the Castellforts, without describing anything of the Barcelona milieu in which they move except for noting some social mores and the movements within the city of the anonymous multitude. *L'escanyapobres*, set in a country town that is undergoing industrialisation, is the study of a couple who have made greed the driving force of their relationship. The tension between the obsession of these two leading characters and the modernising transformations of the society is resolved in favour of the latter. In this work, Oller describes the coming of the railway line to Valls in January 1883.

Vilaniu (an extension of *Isabel de Galceran*) and *La febre d'or* are essentially tableaux of the social life that Oller remembered from his days in Valls, or experienced while living in Barcelona. In these two works there is a clear indication of the literary ambition to try - like Balzac or Zola - to construct the complete novel, where every part focuses on particular situations or characters, forming a great encyclopaedic representation of the epoch. Writing these two works was quite stressful. Oller started working on *Vilaniu* in the summer of 1883 but was unable to finish it until the end of September 1885, while, although he had conceived *La febre d'or* in 1883, he did not begin to write it until the summer of 1889 after returning from a third trip to Paris. This time, the uncertainty that now assailed him after discovering - during his second stay in Paris (1886) - that the naturalist novel had now been displaced by the new Russian fiction (with its contribution of a psychological study of the characters) was aggravated by the fact that the subject he had chosen coincided with that of Zola's next novel *L'argent*, which obliged Oller to advance publication of his own book so as not to be accused of plagiarism.

In *La febre d'or*, Oller seeks a better-balanced relation between the study of a specific case - the rise and economic decline of Gil Foix - and the portrayal of the social, economic and historical background of a modern, cosmopolitan Barcelona. Nonetheless, this balance, which he achieves in the first part of the novel, is lost in the second. Behind the stories of his main characters, the author reduces what should have been a poetic composition portraying grand-scale and terrible speculation into describing a simple change of customs. The denouement is only resolved on the individual scale, on the basis of a vulgar swindle, which undermines the dramatic intensity of the novel. However, there is much that is right about the novel as a whole. Yxart stresses that, besides ambition, a fecund imagination enlivened by observation of the most intimate areas of life, the account of the transformation of the commercial bourgeoisie and their customs, the absence of theatricality and violence, the subordination of reality to a strict principle of causality, the novel has a style that is at once precise and poetic. The city is brought alive by detailed descriptions of social movements and the

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cosmopolitanism of urban life.

In the latter stage of this second period, some writers and critics (such as (Brunetière, Marcel Prévost, Maupassant and Clarín) began to question the naturalist novel, especially after 1886, and this fact, along with the deaths of the critics Yxart and Sardà (1895 and 1898) only accentuated Oller's creative insecurity.

The situation led to his progressively increasing interest in theatre and translations, especially of Turgenev and Tolstoy, although he remained devoted to fiction too, publishing the short-story collection *Figura i paisatge* (Figure and Landscape, 1897), and the novels *La bogeria* (1899) and *Pilar Prim* (1906), works that did not diverge from the general evolution of European fiction. The new narrative tendencies found fertile ground in Oller, who had always spoken out for the role of creative imagination in the artist. He was now seeking to go deeper, using the naturalist technique, into his study of the psychology of two characters. In *La bogeria* he analyses Daniel Serralonga's psychology over the years through a narrator-character who contrasts his own opinions with those of Doctor Giberta, who tends to positivism, and the lawyer Armengol, who inclines to [Romanticism](#). The decline into madness of this character is described in terms of scientific determinism, on the basis of the laws of heredity and surroundings that Zola espoused. Pilar Prim's psychology is given a certain symbolic dimension that is already suggested by the name of the character [Prim suggests "slender", "slight", "frail", "fussy" - translator]. This novel, planned by Oller before 1899, took him four or five summers to complete. It is the intimate drama of a young widow whose feelings undergo a process of expansion thanks to a last will and testament and a family. The inner monologue, written in an indirect style, permits analysis of the subjectivity of the main characters. The reader notes characteristic elements of Romantic prose, which [Modernism](#) had brought into circulation once again (melancholy, gloomy descriptions, the links between the setting and the character's state of mind, revelation of knowledge through ecstasy, visions and impressions rather than reason), and also the tendency to subordinate life to art, which is manifest even in the intention of turning the novel into a poem through the narrator's voice and fragments of poetic prose. While maintaining absolute fidelity to his own fiction, Oller connects with the new tendencies, thanks to his literary origins as a poet.

The third period of Oller's career is occupied by almost twenty-five years of his life. It began in 1906 with the novelist's public withdrawal in the years when the [noucentista movement](#) held sway. Between 1913 and 1919 he wrote his *Memòries literàries* (Literary Memoirs, 1962), which he envisaged as a dialogue with [Víctor Català](#), whose real name was Caterina Albert. In these years, he published two collections of short stories *Rurals i urbanes* (Rural and Urban, 1916) and *Al llapis i a la ploma* (To the Pencil and the Pen, 1918). In 1925, he was brought back to prominence by the Catalan literati in a homage held at the Hotel Majestic and was awarded the Crexells Prize of 1929. Between 1928 and 1930, the year of his death (in Barcelona, on 26 July), he saw the publication of the twelve volumes of his *Obra completa* (Complete Works), according to the linguistic norms established by the Institut d'Estudis Catalans.

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A selection of texts

Text

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WEB: Sobre l'Exposició de 1888

"Sortosament torno de la Cerdanya mig guarit...". Fragment de Narcís Oller, amb notes de vocabulari.

<http://www.xtec.es/~evicioso/bcnes/ollexpos.htm>



WEB: "Els pardals de la Rambla"

Fragment de prosa de Narcís Oller, amb notes de vocabulari.

<http://www.xtec.es/~evicioso/bcnes/ollrambl.htm>



WEB: Oller a EPdLP

Nota biogràfica en castellà amb un fragment de *L'Escanyapobres* a El Poder de la Palabra.

<http://www.epdip.com/escritor.php?id=2099>



WEB: On the 1888 World Fair

"Sortosament torno de la Cerdanya mig guarit..." (Fortunately I've Returned from la Cerdanya Half Cured). Fragment of Narcís Oller, with notes on the vocabulary.

<http://www.xtec.es/~evicioso/bcnes/ollexpos.htm>



WEB: "Els pardals de la Rambla" ("The Sparrows of the Rambla")

Fragment of prose by Narcís Oller, with notes on the vocabulary.

<http://www.xtec.es/~evicioso/bcnes/ollrambl.htm>

Bio-bibliography

Biography



WEB: A la Hiperenciclopèdia

http://www.enciclopedia.cat/fitxa_v2.jsp?NDCHEC=0047225



WEB: A la Viquipèdia

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

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



WEB: The author in the Catalan Encyclopaedia

<http://www.grec.cat/cgi-bin/hecangcl2.pgm?&USUARI=&SESSIO=&NDCHEC=0047225&PGMORI=E>

Bibliography



WEB: Què hi ha a la Biblioteca de Catalunya

http://cataleg.bnc.cat/search*cat/?searchtype=a&searcharg=Oller+Narc%C3%ADs&sortdropdown=-&searchscope=13&searchscope2=13&SORT=D



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|SOller+Narc%C3%ADs|Orightresult|U1?lang=cat&suite=pearl>



WEB: Per comprar-ne llibres

<http://www.llibres.cat/ca/detall-autor/oller-i-moragas-narcis>



WEB: Articles de l'autor (Traces)

<http://traces.uab.cat/search?f=author&p=Oller%20Narc%C3%ADs%20&sc=1&ln=ca>



WEB: Articles sobre l'autor (Traces)

http://traces.uab.cat/search?ln=ca&p=Oller%2C+Narc%C3%ADs&f=keyword&action_search=Cerca&c=Traces+%3A+base+dades+de+lengua+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=Oller+Narc%C3%ADs&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+%22oller+narc%C3%ADs%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=Narc%C3%ADs+Oller>

Comments on the author

Criticism



WEB: Sobre Pilar Prim

Pàgina de lletra sobre aquesta obra de l'autor.

<http://lletra.uoc.edu/ca/obra/pilar-prim-1906/>



WEB: Un dels "Dotze mestres"

Pàgina de lletra sobre aquesta obra de Maurici Serrahima.

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

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WEB: Web Oller

Un molt bon web a càrrec de Josep Maria Pallàs adreçat especialment a professors i alumnat de secundària.

<http://www.xtec.es/~jpallas/index2.htm>



WEB: Narcís Oller a l'AELC

Inclou biografia, obra, premis, transcripció d'articles, fragments de la seva obra i enllaços.

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



WEB: L'autor al Corpus Literari Ciutat de Barcelona

Biografia, enllaços i comentaris sobre l'obra d'Oller.

http://www.ducros.biz/corpus/index.php?command=show_news&news_id=2059



WEB: Narcís Oller en format vídeo

Vida i obra de l'escriptor a la Videoteca Digital del Departament d'Ensenyament de la Generalitat de Catalunya.

http://www.edu3.cat/Edu3tv/Fitxa?p_id=18144&p_ex=narc%EDs%20oller



WEB: Narcís Oller on the Lletra website in Catalan

Including more resources and reading suggestions.

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



WEB: On *Pilar Prim*

Lletra page devoted to this novel by Narcís Oller.

<http://lletra.uoc.edu/en/play/pilar-prim-1906/>



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: Narcís Oller in AELC (Association of Catalan Language Writers)

Includes biography, works, prizes, interviews and links.

http://www.escriptors.cat/autors/ollern/pagina.php?id_sec=2441



WEB: Narcís Oller in the City of Barcelona Literary Corpus

Biography, bibliographic information and links.

http://www.ducros.biz/corpus/index.php?command=show_news&news_id=2059

Miscellaneous



WEB: Societat Narcís Oller

Web oficial de la Societat Narcís Oller. Inclou bibliografia, documentació, rutes literàries i informació sobre la societat.

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<http://www.narcisoller.cat/>



WEB: Societat Oller a Valls

Informació sobre la Societat Narcís Oller al web Espais escrits de la Xarxa del Patrimoni Literari Català.

<http://www.espaisescrits.cat/home.php?op=6&module=escriptors&ides=34&idioma=cat>



WEB: Narcís Oller i Valls

Descripció de la ruta literària dedicada a l'autor (Vilaweb Lletres).

http://www.vilaweb.cat/www/noticia?p_idcmp=3616432



WEB: "Auca de Narcís Oller"

Auca escrita per Joan Vilamala i il·lustrada per Lluís Albert Arrufat al web La paret de les auques. Amb suggeriments de treball.

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

Comments



WEB: Sobre realisme i naturalisme

Article de Paul Brians (Washington State Univ.). En anglès.

http://www.wsu.edu/~brians/hum_303/naturalism.html



PDF: L'escanyapobres

Dossier de Montserrat Corrius i Carme Vilà sobre aquesta novel·la, dins el Seminari didàctic "El gust per la lectura" (2000-2001).

http://www.xtec.es/lic/centre/professorat/dossiersgust/Oller_2000.pdf



PDF: "Una lectura de L'escanyapobres"

Conferència de Margarida Casacuberta dins el Seminari didàctic "El gust per la lectura" (2000-2001).

http://www.xtec.es/lic/centre/professorat/dossiersgust/conf_Oller.pdf



WEB: On Realism and Naturalism

Article by Paul Brians (Washington State Univ.).

http://www.wsu.edu/~brians/hum_303/naturalism.html



PDF: A Reading of L'escanyapobres

Lecture given by Margarida Casacuberta at the didactic Seminar "El gust per la lectura". (2001-2002).

http://www.xtec.es/lic/centre/professorat/dossiersgust/conf_Oller.pdf



PDF: L'escanyapobres

Paper by Montserrat Corrius and Carme Vilà on this novel for the didactic Seminar "El gust per la lectura".

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WEB: *La bogeria*

Guia interactiva de lectura del departament d'Educació.

<http://www.edu365.cat/batxillerat/lectures/catalana/labogeria/index.htm>
