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Literary news about Joan Francesc Mira's novel *Purgatori* (Purgatory) at Lletra, the UOC's virtual space devoted to Catalan literature
< <http://lletra.uoc.edu/en/play/purgatori-2003> >



Purgatori

Joan Josep Isern

Salvador Donat is a country doctor, a bachelor who lives alone, surrounded by his books and music in the former rectory of a small village. He has little work but does not want any more. Among the people whose health he takes care of are the cloistered Carthusian monks of the Porta Coeli monastery near the small town of Silla, and a community of nuns in a village of the same area, also a closed order. Salvador was born in the city of Valencia in

1940 so, since the novel is set in 1996, he is 56 years old. The action of *Purgatori* begins one day or, to be precise, early in the morning of 19 March (the feast of Saint Joseph and the annual festival of Valencia): while he is making a routine visit to the monastery he receives a message that his brother Josep -who is four years older- has terminal lung cancer, upon which he decides to leave everything so as to be by his side during the last weeks of his life. This means he has to go back to Valencia, the city from which he had set out many years before in his desire to seek a more spiritually fulfilled life in the service of the less privileged in Africa, working with doctor Albert Schweitzer. Salvador Donat is, then, a stranger in his own city. He is a man who, if it wasn't for his having no qualms about declaring himself an atheist, would make a perfect Carthusian.

On his return to Valencia -riding his powerful Harley Davidson with its Rio Muni number plate- he is accompanied (or rather guided) by a luxurious Mercedes driven by the perfectly uniformed Teodor Llorens, the black chauffer of Valencian father and Guinean mother, a poet who writes in Catalan and right-hand man of his brother Josep, a rich and powerful figure who is exactly the opposite of Salvador.

Dante's Purgatory The story of Dante's Purgatory is thus retold here but in reverse. Salvador comes down from the sky -the monastery at the top of the mountain- and begins his journey to the city accompanied by a poet -a black Virgil- who acts as his guide. Having gone through the ritual of the journey, he still has to go through the Ante-Purgatory -the hospital where they remove his brother's lung- after which, now staying in Josep's flat, he remains at his side during the slow wait for death, which is punctuated by a series of discrete episodes that bring him into contact with the sordidness of city life and the seven deadly sins. To round off the comparisons with Dante's work it must be said that, in the end, Salvador will find his Beatrice with whom -in the chapter that brings the novel to its end in the cemetery one day in May, when everything is over- he will return to his simple country life on the Harley Davidson after having seen to the distribution of the dead man's bequest. And he leaves with his Beatrice sitting behind him, "without any luggage, with the metal compartments empty", as we are told by the last sentence in the book.

An Ambitious Narrative Project Before going into the details of the novel, it should be noted that *Purgatori* is the second part of an ambitious narrative task that [Joan F. Mira](#) has set himself: a trilogy set in the city of Valencia, which began with *Els treballs perduts* (Labours Lost), which was published by Tres i Quatre in 1989 and republished by Proa in 2005, and which, as I write these lines, is still to be concluded. The common features of the three volumes are that each is inspired in classical mythology, they are all set in a specific part of the city of Valencia, there is an underlying philosophical theme and the main character has the attributes of a hero from bygone times.

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In *Els treballs perduts*, the first book, these features correspond respectively to the myth of Hercules' labours, with its action taking place in a medieval walled Valencia that consists of twelve parishes, the philosophical strand is Greek paganism, and the hero is called Jesús. In *Purgatori*, the mythical reference is The Divine Comedy, the latterly built-up area of Valencia becomes the first circle beyond the walls, the philosophical reference is Christianity and the main character also has a clearly identifiable name: Salvador.

As I have just remarked, at the time of writing this review little has been revealed about the book that is to close the trilogy (and given the pace at which [Joan F. Mira](#) works, some years might go by before we know anything more) although it seems from hints the author has given that it will be based on the myth of Faust, that it will be set in the periphery of Valencia, its philosophical reference will be the Enlightenment, science and modernity and that the main character will be called, since he could not be called otherwise, Manuel.

We have, then, what we might define as a cycle of novels with a certain constriction. In other words, they have a structure in which the author has imposed for himself specific rules that are observed to the letter. This brings us to something like a game, or speculation, along lines that would approach us to the Oulipo experience. It is a game, however, that in this case bolsters creativity, that does not constrain and, from what we have seen of the cycle so far, we might say that it generates novels that, although they reinforce each other when they set up interrelationships, function perfectly well as separate books. There are a number of proofs of this. In the case of *Els treballs perduts*, we might recall that in 1990 it was awarded the Prize offered by the magazine *El Temps*, on the basis of its readers' votes, for the best novel published in Catalan in 1989. Moreover, a number of critics and analysts do not hesitate to describe it as one of the best Catalan novels to be published in the last fifty years. As for *Purgatori*, we only need to recall that it was the winner of the 2002 Sant Jordi Prize for the Novel, the most prestigious in our literary world, while in 2003 it was awarded the Catalan Critics' Prize as the best novel of the year.

Symbology and MeaningsAs is usual in the work of [Joan F. Mira](#), *Purgatori* is a novel that is full of symbols and meanings. One example is the duality between the Donat brothers. Salvador is contemplative while Josep represents the unscrupulous, pragmatic man of action, a womaniser, speculator, schemer and convinced practitioner of all the capital vices. All except, perhaps, pride, which is more attributable to his brother, the pure man who has withdrawn from the world and who, though he does not manifest it, intuits that he is superior. This is hardly surprising, however, because we are talking about the two classical branches of Christian thought, the contemplative and the active.

In *Purgatori* [Joan F. Mira](#) offers a portrait of today's society. It is a society that, if it has evolved in any sense, it is for the worse, one that we also find in other contemporary novels on the theme, for example *Societat limitada* (Limited Company) and *Espècies protegides*, (Protected Species) by Ferran Torrent, or *Olympia a mitjanit* (Olympia at Midnight) by [Baltasar Porcel](#). In this symbolic context, the reader is fully aware of the image of silent, lethal lung cancer as a metaphor for the ills of our communities. With regard to the typology of characters, we find that the heroes in the books of [Mira](#) - Jesús Oliver of *Els treballs perduts*, and Salvador Donat of *Purgatori* - are disoriented, out-of-place individuals who voluntarily locate themselves on the fringe of things. They are people who might have thought about saving the world at some point but, at the moment of truth, have more than enough on their hands in saving themselves, or at least in resolving their conflicts in the most comfortable way possible.

As the critic [Joan Triadú](#) has noted, *Purgatori* is the novel of a humanist who knows a lot about writing.

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It is not, however, the novel of a thinker, but of a novelist who thinks. [Joan F. Mira](#) offers us, then, a moral vision of existence -something that is not very usual- writing in a solemn tone with a narrative flow in which interior monologue frequently appears in combination with third-person description. It is a fascinating narrative flow in which a master's hand alternates everyday activities with philosophical reflections without interrupting the rhythm or diminishing the interest of the reading. So, for example, waiting in the queue in the hospital restaurant becomes the pretext for Salvador to meditate upon the impossibility of paradise on Earth, while in another scene in a lift in the same hospital he deliberates on the accelerated pace that governs our lives.

Purgatori is a considerable achievement, an intense and deeply human novel that brilliantly illustrates the spirit of the last line that Dante wrote in *The Divine Comedy*: "The love that moves the sun and all the stars". It is, in brief, a moving novel.

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It begins thus...Quan es va mig despertar perquè una ratlla prima de llum li tocava el front i els ulls, acabava de baixar del taxi en una estació desconeguda, corria per l'andana però el tren ja havia arrancat, accelerava, i aquest era el tren bo, el que havia de portar-lo allà on ell havia d'anar, més o menys el mateix somni de sempre. Es va girar d'esquena a la finestra mal tancada, mig pensant que devia ser ja tard però que havia dormit poc, havia d'haver ajustat del tot el finestró i ara la llum no el despertaria: avui no l'esperava ningú, ni ací ni enlloc, podia dormir una miqueta més, tornar al final del somni desitjant que aquesta vegada tinguera algun final. Mai no en tenia: els recordava sempre, aquests somnis de l'instant abans de despertar-se, eren els únics que recordava i eren sempre el mateix, sense arribada i sense desenllaç: un temps van ser dones somrients que s'acostaven fins al límit de la pell i desapareixien, que perseguides sense resistència fins a l'abraç i a la carícia es desfeien en el no-res quan tot estava a punt de consumir-se en la glòria, i llavors l'ansia de la plenitud imminent el somovia i tardava segons a comprendre que una altra volta estava despert i sol al llit, que l'erecció sí que era real i dolorosa, i que les dones somniades no s'aconsegueixen mai. Després van ser únicament viatges, començaven d'una manera normal i previsible, amb cotxe, amb autobús, en algun aeroport europeu, i la primera part del trajecte el duia cap a destinacions igualment previsibles, una excursió a un poble de muntanya, un trajecte regular entre ciutats, però en l'escena següent, cada vegada, el viatge es convertia en aventura trencada i desastrosa, el feien baixar de l'avió a punt d'enlairar-se, el cotxe es perdia per camins de terra o encallava en l'arena d'una platja imprevista, ell errava en els horaris o els enllaços, s'omplia de l'angoixa creixent de qui no sap on és ni on va ni com acabarà el viatge, es trobava travessant rius a gual, en vaixells que no entraven a port, en un camió desballestat amb gent desconeguda, es despertava només en part conscient però perfectament perdut i atarantat. No valia la pena consultar cap manual de psiquiatria, ni cap psicoanalista, no calia: el sentit de tot plegat era fins i tot massa evident; també ell havia estudiat els manuals quan feia la carrera, també ell havia llegit una mica Freud.

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Fragments dels capítols 3, 4 i 6 de *Purgatori* al web Joan F. Mira. Tria de textos.
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bibliography

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Miscellaneous



WEB: Premi de la Crítica Catalana 2004

Mira guanyà aquest premi amb *Purgatori*.
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Comments



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