

When I sing, mountains dance

Canto jo i la muntanya balla

Presented by: Andrea Gastón Codony

Published within the last decade, *Canto jo i la muntanya balla* is already one of the most widely translated works of Catalan literature. It tells the intergenerational story of a family living in a village of the Pyrenees, a family marked by the accidental death of the father first and of the son afterwards. A juxtaposition of timelines collapses centuries of Spanish history around them (the creation of the Pyrenees, witch hunts and Francoism), but the events are not told by these protagonists. Instead, they are recounted by the nonhuman entities that surround them: clouds, mountains, mushrooms, deer, water fairies and even the dead – each one narrating a single chapter. *Canto jo i la muntanya balla* interrogates how collective memory, language and landscape are shaped by historical violence, therefore lending itself to a political reading while not depicting politics in a conventional sense.

The main historical events represented in the novel are related to the Spanish Civil War and Francoism, an open wound of Spanish history. The transition from dictatorship to democracy in the 70s was not a clear-cut rupture with the previous regime. Some sectors were suspicious of this new democracy. As a result, justice to the victims of the regime was delayed, and memory debates were belated (Ribeiro de Menezes 15). The Transition was thus based on a pact of forgetting that is still controversial today, and successive Laws of Historical Memory have been proposed and rejected (Winter 15).

The choice to represent the memory of Francoism's past is therefore significant, since this explicit collective forgetting still affects the present. In her book, Irene Solà chooses to represent instances of indiscriminate violence from both sides of the conflict. This reflects a complex strategy that resists simplistic interpretations of history, intervening in contemporary debates about the politics of forgetting in Spain.

The novel also avoids simple oppositions in its treatment of language. This is visible in the relationship between Catalan and Spanish. Solà's experimental use of Catalan, especially in the creation of distinct nonhuman voices, is juxtaposed to its political uses within the narration, for instance, the acknowledgement of the ban on teaching Catalan during the dictatorship. Significantly, the only characters that speak Spanish are a member of the Civil Guard and the ghost of a Republican girl, two figures on opposing sides of the War.

These ways of presenting history and language that do not centre the nation clash with previous representations of the rural landscape in Catalan literature, which tended to mythologize it or turn it into a national allegory (see Illas). Here, instead, the Pyrenees are a space where Catalan mythology and folk narratives, historical events relevant to the construction of the Spanish State and personal histories are presented in the same plane. And this effect is reached as they are all viewed

by the nonhuman (Báder 599). This is Solà's main innovation in the politics of forgetting of contemporary Spain.

Solà's novel thus intervenes in this unresolved debate by offering an alternative form of memory, one that does not rely on official narratives but emerges from the land and its nonhuman inhabitants. This differs from recent novels dealing with the memory of Francoism, which use characters that aren't witnesses of history but rather explain it using other sources, such as diaries or archival research (Winter 25). In *Canto jo i la muntanya balla* it is not an uncovered document or radio transmission that gives us access to the past, but the memory of the land itself and those beings who compose it. As a result, we don't get a single point of view but rather a dispersed and partial set of perspectives that together resist a single, authoritative version of the past.

The fragmentarity of this remembering is shown in the objects described, not only in the use of multiple nonhuman narrators. One character's collection of found grenades shows how the past persists materially, even when social actors attempt to hide, cover, or bury it: the traces of memory residing in the nonhuman will remain there. It may not be necessary to catalogue and hierarchise them: to acknowledge their material presence is already to recognise their mnemonic force.

Thus, the book in itself posits the mountains not only as a site of memory but also as a site of resistance to collective amnesia. In this way, the Pyrenees become a political space: do mountains keep the memory of what history has forgotten? Can they help us understand our political past differently?

Ultimately, *Canto jo i la muntanya balla* not only rethinks the politics of forgetting in Spain, but literature itself. Solà's multivocality, juxtaposition of timelines and use of language form a narrative experiment in how nonhuman beings remember. Literature, in this sense, becomes a way of making visible both what is remembered and what has been silenced.

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References

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