

Joaquim Molas (1930-2015)*



Joaquim Molas died in Barcelona on the 16th of March. He was a member of the History-Archaeology Section of the Institut d'Estudis Catalans since 1978 and a promoter and steadfast leader of the Fundació Mercè Rodoreda, created within the Institut in 1992. He had turned 85 years old on the 5th of September: an entire life devoted to the humanities with

methodical rigour, a capacity for innovation and recognised repercussions and mastery.

He studied philosophy and humanities at the Universitat de Barcelona, where as a disciple of Martí de Riquer he earned his Bachelor's degree in Romance Philology in 1953 and his doctorate in 1958 with a thesis on the poet Lluís Icart, who spanned the 14th and 15th centuries. He also attended courses on Catalan literature and the history of Catalonia offered in secret by Jordi Rubió i Balaguer and Ferran Soldevila, respectively, at the Estudis Universitaris Catalans. More informally, he benefitted from constant contact with Josep M. de Casacuberta, Jaume Vicens Vives, J. V. Foix, Salvador Espriu and especially Carles Riba, who inspired the shift of his scholarly interests towards the modern centuries, as opposed to the Middle Ages, to which he almost exclusively devoted his attention at the beginning of his career. This early stage came to a practical close with his two volumes of *Literatura catalana antiga* from the "Popular Barcino" collection (1961 and 1963). Prior to that, he had been the assistant to the chair in Mediaeval Romance Literatures (1953-1955) and in charge of the course on the critical text editing methodology (1955-1959) at the Universitat de Barcelona. In academic years 1959-1960 and 1960-1961, he served as a lecturer at Liverpool University, but when he returned to Barcelona in 1961, he was unable to rejoin the university faculty until he was hired by the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona in 1969, where he was the chair of Catalan Literature until 1984, when he joined the Universitat de Barcelona. In 2000, he became an emeritus professor.

His influence over the newer generations of scholars of Catalan literature was truly felt after 1961 through his twofold activity as a militant critic and professor of the history of literature, even if he did not have a steady, prominent platform and had to teach in the Estudis Universitaris Catalans, which was still semi-clandestine at that time. Viewed as a natural consequence of the taste for reading and the need to understand and assess texts, his

exercise of literary criticism and research into literary history was grounded first upon the solidity of the theoretical body which he built, in constant revision, his knowledge of the topics and authors studied and the current context and historical referents (which allowed him to properly justify his value judgements and the hierarchical response that derived therefrom), and secondly upon his insight into the selection of the relevant aspects and his capacity for synthesis.

The resulting working method is the outcome of his dissatisfaction with the positivism of the school that emerged around Manuel Milà i Fontanals, which Molas himself studied ("Els estudis de literatura: l'escola històrica", 1981; "Sobre la periodització en les històries generals de la literatura catalana", 1984). This had led him to take an interest in stylistics and similar propositions postulated by Leo Spitzer, Erich Auerbach, Dámaso Alonso and Amado Alonso, and later, after his Liverpool years, to become deeply familiar with Marxist-leaning literary sociology. Thus, in England he became familiar with the works of Lukács, and either there or upon his return he delved into the works of Arnold Hauser, Antonio Gramsci, Bertold Brecht, Jean-Paul Sartre, Edmund Wilson, Raymond Williams, Cesare Pavese and Lucien Goldmann, which he wanted to join with the works of the theoreticians and promoters of comparativism and literary theory and history from the spheres of the New Criticism and formalism in general. His natural interest in new critical currents, comparativism and literary theory and history as academic disciplines was stimulated by his stringency with his own involvement in university teaching and research, which led him to constantly include readings by Northrop Frye, Wayne C. Booth, Viktor Sklovski, René Wellek and William Empson, and later Hans-Robert Jauss, among others.

Both criticism and historical-literary research take an interest in all expressions that coexist within the same society and evolve in that society, that is, in the cultivated literature of both celebrated authors and not-so-well-known authors, both popular and marginal literature. His study on "La cultura catalana i la seva estratificació" (1983) was the culmination of a long process of reflection which included the compilation of brief articles from the 1971 entitled *Una cultura en crisi*. In it, Molas inventoried the deficits of Catalan literary research, questioned some of the more traditional approaches and proposed suggestive and often bold working hypotheses for tackling literary history through general or more monographic studies in an effort to revise – given the impoverishing cliché of "decline" – everything related to the major European movements of the day, from the Renaissance to Romanticism and to the more modern movements which drew procedures from comparativism.

In 1979, he published an innovative chapter in an unfinished synthesis of the history of modern and contemporary literature dating from 1970 entitled "La decadència: del Renaixement al Pre-romanticisme". Its correlate

* Text prepared by Manuel Jorba, emeritus professor at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona and member of the History-Archaeology Section of the Institut d'Estudis Catalans. E-mail: Manuel.Jorba@uab.cat

was a coeval study on popular poetry (“Esquema i evolució de la poesia popular catalana”, 1972-1973), a subject expanded in a chapter from the modern part of *Història de la literatura catalana* entitled “La nova literatura popular: tradició i modernitat” (1986, in conjunction), specific aspects of which he revisited in “La novel·la popular: del fulletó a la novel·la de quiosc” (1987) in the prologue to the facsimile edition of *La Llumanera de Nova York* from the same year, and more recently in the brief monograph on his grandfather, *Emili Molas i Bergés 1870-1918* (2014), an artisan stained glass window, militant cooperativist, cultural activist, poet and dramaturge. In the latter publication, he once again used a specific case to emphasise the importance of popular culture in the culture of modern Catalanism. He spearheaded a reinterpretation of authors from the Baroque and participated in the revision of the period with “Francesc Vicenç Garcia vs. Rector de Vallfogona” (1976), the prologue to the publication on the theatre of Francesc Fontanella (1988) and “La literatura catalana del Barroc” (1989).

In his part of the two volumes of *Un segle de vida catalana*, he first addressed the literary currents from the age of the Enlightenment, which he would revisit in *Poesia neoclàssica i pre-romàntica* (1968), “Erudició, polèmica i creació en la poesia neoclàssica catalana” (1977), “Poesia barroca i poesia neoclàssica el 1802” (1981) and “Literatura ‘provincial’ i literatura ‘nacional’: introducció a la literatura catalana del tombant dels segles XVIII i XIX” (1991). Likewise, he sketched some of the avenues of study of the literary currents from the Romantic century in a sweeping overview that ignored the traditional, deformed concept of the *Renaixença*, which was revisited with new significance in subsequent studies. Indeed, while he refused to apply the term ‘*Renaixença*’ in a socially and culturally indiscriminate way to all the literary, cultural and political phenomena that arose in Catalonia throughout the 19th century, he did apply it, based on Rafael Tasis’ *La Renaixença catalana* (1967), to a movement that emerged “under the aegis of the major transformations caused by the Industrial Revolution”, in a vein he would further refine in *La cultura catalana durant el segle XIX* (1979), in *Milà i la Renaixença* (1984), in the prologues to *Il·lustració i Renaixença* by Jordi Rubió i Balaguer (1989) and to *Índexs* of the journal “L’Avenç” (1989) and in “Josep Franquesa i Gomis, poeta i activista oblidat” (1996), among other studies. As a whole, Molas suggested establishing the historical causes of the movement, not only at its start but also the ones that led to changes and a diversification of its objectives and strategies throughout the 19th century, which were complementary and even at times contradictory, and its social base. To do so, he reconsidered the significance of the role attributed to Frederic Soler and other reluctantly or openly critical personalities, with certain public repercussions especially after 1865, with the conservative, religious orientation of the majority of personalities and platforms that were the most deeply involved in the movement.

The consolidation, survival and crisis of Romanticism are the issues initially addressed in *Poesia romàntica* (1965) and *Poesia catalana de la Restauració* (1966), which he would later revise and unify in *Antologia de la poesia romàntica* (1994) and expand in the corresponding chapter of the aforementioned *Història de la literatura catalana* (“La crisi del Romanticisme: la poesia”). There he would also spotlight Apelles Mestres, who had featured previously in two rigorous popular-style monographs (in the prologue to the anthology *Apelles Mestres, 1984*, and in the collaboration entitled “*El poeta*” in *Apelles Mestres (1854-1936)*, 1985). In particular, he also spotlighted Jacint Verdaguer in an extensive chapter and later continued to focus on him in an innovative way in benchmark studies which culminated in the publication of *Totes les obres of Verdaguer* (2003-2006, with Isidor Cònsul) and the extensive compilation of his own studies entitled *Llegir Verdaguer* (2014). Both poets, Mestres and Verdaguer, are considered representative of literary modernism from the turn of the century in “La poesia catalana i els inicis de la modernitat” (1999). This study confirms his shift years earlier towards studies of Modernism after “El Modernisme i les seves tensions” (1970), which was part of the programme involved in “historical realism”, whose most prominent historical-critical expressions came with *Poesia catalana del segle XX* (1963), written in conjunction with Josep M. Castellet. This was one of the early books of Edicions 62, which, according to, Enric Sullà, “offered [...] a rigorous and politically (progressive) historical schema in line with the age, and a generous anthology which also had ideological leanings (emancipatory, combative), yet which were not too bothersome”. This was most likely because, as also seen in *Literatura de postguerra* (1966), which includes an essay on “Vint-i-cinc anys de teatre”, and as Josep Murgades has written, “even in the most programmatic era of historical realism, Molas continued to draw from analytical and evaluative procedures other than the ones strictly stemming from the Marxist-leaning sociologism”.

The drive to study contemporary literature and the literature of his day could be seen in his teaching and criticism, which he contributed occasionally in *Serra d’Or* and *Destino*, and in a few magazines, as an activity involving analysis, guidance and the creation of states of opinion, and likewise as an antidote to the widespread conformity and self-complacency in some echelons of Catalan society which tended to forgive quality and rigour in some literature which was supposedly justified by patriotism and voluntarism. It also came in the literary collections and publishing projects that Molas envisioned or on which he consulted, such as “Antologia Catalana”, started in 1964 and made up of 100 titles from all times, which he co-supervised with Jordi Castellanos starting with number 73. This collection shifted the Noucentista literary hierarchy with the inclusion of authors like Robert, Mestres, Pin i Soler, Brossa and Zanné in literature, and Pi i Margall and Marià Cubí in the realm of ideas. Other examples include

the *Diccionari de la literatura catalana* (1979), which started in around 1965 with a team of direct partners who were basically and necessarily devoted to contemporary literature because it had a briefer tradition of studies; “Clàssics Catalans del Segle xx”, started in 1965 and featuring works by Riba, Villalonga and Arbó; and “Les Mil·lors Obres de la Literatura Catalana”, launched in 1978 following a much earlier project, and closed in 1996 with 125 volumes, which provided access to many works that had disappeared from the market and from everyday reading habits. In 1974, he founded the magazine *Els Marges*, which he directed until 1990. It was academic in inspiration but not exclusively university-focused, and it served as a much-awaited platform to spread the studies primarily by the new language professionals and, more regularly, literature professionals.

The movements and authors of the 20th century which he treated with special interest were the avant-gardes in general, visual poetry and Salvat-Papasseit, Dalí and Foix in particular, in studies like *La poesia catalana d'avantguarda. 1916-1936* (1983), *La crisi de la paraula. Antologia de la poesia visual* (2003, with Enric Bou) and *Les avantguardes literàries a Catalunya* (2005). And regarding many other authors, he kept publishing monographic studies on Riba, Pla, Espriu, Fuster, Rodoreda and Villalonga, which were included, along with many other stud-

ies, in the far-reaching systematisations of *Lectures crítiques* (1975), the two volumes of *Obra crítica* (1995 and 1999), *Sobre la construcció de la literatura catalana* (2010) and *Aproximació a la literatura catalana del segle xx* (2010). Literary reflection, critical notes and historical evocations, in extensive paragraphs or brief writings, often resembling aphorisms, appeared in “Fulls de dietari”, which he published occasionally in numerous brief extracts after 1976 and more extensively in *Fragments de memòria* (1997) and *El secret de la literatura* (2009).

He was a member of the Acadèmia de Bones Lletres since 1993. In 1998, he won the Prize of Honour in Catalan Letters, in 1999 he received the Cross of Saint George from the Generalitat, in 2002 the Medal of Cultural Merit from the Barcelona Town Hall and in 2003 the Gold Medal from the Generalitat.

On his own initiative, based on the trove of books and documents he had managed to amass, which he organised and worked on over the course of his lifetime and bequeathed to the Biblioteca Museu Balaguer, in 2012 the Aula Joaquim Molas was created through a partnership agreement between the Vilanova i la Geltrú Town Hall, the Universitat de Barcelona and the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona with the goal of stimulating academic research and the training of new researchers, particularly in 19th and 20th century literature.