



LUNATI MARUNY, Monserrat, *Imma Monsó: la narrativa de la ironia i la diferència*, Vic: Eumo Editorial. 2007. 333 pàg. ISBN: 978-84-9766-239-0

Imma Monsó's narrative has met with the acclaim and recognition of readers and critics alike. However, apart from the attention they are given periodically in the cultural press of both Catalunya and Spain, her novels and short stories had so far only been the focus of one academic article by Fina Llorca Antolí (2003). Montserrat Lunati's book is the first monographic study on Monsó's narrative to date, and the much awaited result of her ongoing interest in this author, which had previously materialized in a series of articles and an interview with Monsó herself. Put together, Lunati's studies on the author constitute a careful, searchingly detailed body of work, perfectly placed in the context of contemporary Catalan and European literary studies and their related theoretical debates. In this sense her book is not only of direct interest to Catalanists, but to researchers on peninsular studies, gender studies and contemporary literary theory more generally.

The book's theoretical framework and the contextualization of Monsó's trajectory in the Catalan context are explained in the first part of the book. Lunati's theoretical sources are wide-ranging and pertinently applied. They include, among others, the work of Linda Hutcheon for the postmodernist take on irony as a liberating discursive strategy; Rosi Braidotti's *nomadic subjects* as a conceptual framework for the cognoscitive model exemplified by Monsó's protagonists (that of a sensitivity constantly in flux, constantly *perplexed*); Judith Butler and Elizabeth Grosz for the self-reflexive figurations of gender on discourse and Deleuze's critique of binaries when thinking about cultural systems. But the theoretical spaces of this book intersect with, or are enhanced by, Lunati's engagement with other equally pressing contemporary debates, such as the critique of nationalist discourse and its historical intersection with cultural policies in stateless nations (she dialogues for this purpose with the

work of Dominic Keown and Josep-Anton Fernàndez on the Catalan context [79]), or the question of how to qualify as ‘feminist’ those artistic products which, like Monsó’s novels, do not explicitly topicalize gender-related matters in visibly contentious ways. Although she never uses the label, the thinking behind third-wave feminist positions, characterized by the shared experience of having grown up with feminism, may inform Lunati’s words in this regard:

Jo qualificaria els seus textos de feministes, sense cap por a un terme que sovint provoca desconfiança ni a una identificació que no pretén limitar la seva literatura, al contrari, la vol relacionar amb el context social i històric en què es produeix, sense oblidar el cos sexual que s’apodera del llenguatge i sense ignorar les urgències polítiques relacionades amb el factor de gènere.(24)

In the context of feminist literary studies and the reception of Monsó’s works in particular, Lunati’s book also tries to distance itself from (and simultaneously undo) potentially stereotypical readings of the central themes of her novels and short stories. In this regard, questions such as the possible ‘feminization’ of Monsó’s narrators as limited by personal phobias and obsessions or the characterization of familial bonds, particularly the mother-daughter relationship, as essentially (and typically) claustrophobic are not only avoided but dismantled. In so doing, Lunati’s book consciously and conscientiously evades the often calcifying effect that criticism on women’s writing can have on both the creative corpus it analyses and the version of literary history it means to promote. It is in this sense that I have found Lunati’s critical discourse to converse harmoniously with Monsó’s. The scholar’s words about the literary texts are thus easily applied to the writer’s own project, when she says that: ‘El discurs monsonià és molt conscient del que l’ha precedit, se’n sent part, inevitablement, però al mateix temps desemmascara, amb ironia, allò que s’hi ha reïficat’”(33).

The second part of the book turns to the literary texts. Analyses include Monsó’s first novel *No se sap mai* (1996), *Com unes vacances* (1998), *Tot un caràcter* (2001) and the short story ‘Millor que no

m'ho expliquis' (2003), all dealt with in separate chapters. Although there is no individual study of Monsó's last novel to date, *Un home de paraula* (2006), this work is referred to more than just in passing at several points in the book (50-53, 253). Enrichingly too, the author includes as her sources the posthumously published *La farmacia del olvido. Un ensayo filosófico* (2006), by Roger Moreno. The book's corpus constitutes a carefully selected body of texts that gives the reader a measure of the coherence and degree of interpenetrability in Monsó's narrations.

In her reading of *Non se sap mai* (1996), Lunati highlights the subversive value of the text's play on narratorial voices, seen as a strategy to bring the adulterous woman trope, historically characterized as a form of disoriented feminine desire and fraught with culpabilities, under a new light. But Lunati's analysis goes beyond highlighting the liberating effect that such a depiction of desire can have in feminist terms, and foregrounds what can be considered the central motor of the narrative: the female narrator's need to understand Franz intimately, the model of masculinity that his character represents (134) and ultimately, the implications for the more protean forms of identity in favour of which the text argues. In Lunati's words: 'El reconeixement de l'altre/altra comporta un concepte relacional de la identitat' (116). Such a reading of Monsó's first novel enters into dialogue with the content of chapter two, where Lunati's analysis of *Com unes vacances* (1998) also highlights how the novel advocates relational models other than those prescribed by traditional discourses on romantic love: 're-escriu el amor literari en termes d'encontre, de respecte mutu i total per la singularitat i la diferència de l'altre/l'altra. L'amor no és possessió [...] (146)'.

In her reading of *Tot un caràcter* (2001), in Chapter 3 of the second part of the book, Lunati similarly avoids falling into the accustomed reading in Freudian terms of the matrophobic tension perceivable in the daughter's narrative voice (64). Rather, she highlights how Monsó's novel aims to disclose not the process whereby young Júlia identifies the stereotype of the overbearing or engulfing mother in her own mother and tries to fight it, but the patriarchal discourse that has served to perpetuate such a stereotype by

reproducing it in a variety of ways. The target is therefore not the mother, but 'la multitud de discursos matricides de la nostra cultura, localitzables a tot arreu, des de la cultura popular a la psicoanàlisi' which have hindered a gentler intergenerational encounter (68). Ensnared in this critique is Lunati's commentary on the intergenerational tensions within the feminist movement, and how the initially circumspect views on domesticity and maternity, which the author says 's'associaven de manera indiscriminada i negativa' (227), have given way to more nuanced approaches.

Chapter 4 analyses the short story 'Millor que no m'ho expliquis' in the context of Monsó's short story production. Lunati underlines what she sees as a common feature of the female characters in Monsó's short stories, those women who 'sempre intenten fugir de la tristesa de viure, de la mala fortuna o de l'atracció de la mort amb tàctiques que acaben qüestionant les estructures socials i culturals que les conformen' (250). She singles out 'Millor que no m'ho expliquis' as an example of a woman faced with the possibility of dying of cancer and her battle not with the disease, but with the social and cultural constructions thereof, which debilitate the ill(ed) body further by surrounding it with taboos, silences and false beliefs. One of the most interesting points in Lunati's analysis in this chapter is her noting of the absence of any reference in the story to where Clara's cancer is located. Lunati reads into Monsó's blurring of the female body in this context an attempt to subvert the sort of discourses on cancer and women which 'sempre el localitzen en parts del sistema reproductor del cos' (286). As a result, cancer is, in this context, never *feminized* (286).

Monserrat Lunati's readings of each individual work blend with her treatment of themes such as irony, autobiography and perplexity (as an attitude with which to apprehend the world). Autobiography, both central and elusive in Monsó's work, is approached with particular sophistication and in tune with the book's overall aim to treat Monsó's narrative as spacious and open-ended. And so the autobiographical drive in her works leads us to meaning that is not 'el reflex d'una realitat prèvia, sinó un dels molts significats possibles, una de les moltes versions' (43). Such meaning also fuses with future

ones under the rubric of what Lunati terms ‘un dinamisme moral’ (43), certainly one of the creative forces in Monsó’s most recent work *Un home de paraula*: an immensely inspiring personal account of what little principles we may wish to carry with us on the journey from past to future, when the company that makes that journey a joy has disappeared. Lunati’s book is, like Imma Monsó’s own work, stimulating in the critique of established or engrained discursive formations whose disturbing nature often goes unnoticed, and generous in its paving the way for comparably alert readings of Monsó’s work, and of contemporary peninsular writers in general.

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