



***Manuel Vázquez Montalbán: el triunfo de un luchador incansable.* José V. Saval. Editorial Síntesis. 2004. 239 pp.**

The assimilation of the literature of Catalonia written in Spanish has, for reasons which require little elucidation, inevitably proved to be not only a polemical exercise in socio-linguistic terms but one also fraught with critical uncertainty. It can, for example, often prove complicated to assign exactly a constituency into which a work should be categorised. And, needless to say, the various ideological positionings in this particular turf war can produce reactions of the most extreme nature. The case of Juan Marsé, for example, might provide an adequate example of the minefield which informs this activity.

It is quite surprising then to note that, unlike his friend and creative counterpart, the late Manuel Vázquez Montalbán is peculiar in the respect – not to say approbation – he inspires amongst all elements of this particular arena. To this effect José Saval's affectionate biography goes a long way to explaining the enigma. The study takes us through the life of the writer with a refreshing emphasis on the intimate side of an individual whose commitment to his roots, his city and social justice found itself seamlessly interwoven with the sharpness, shrewdness and plain old *joie-de-vivre* of an engaging literary idiom.

Saval, with his own particular family interest in the location, takes the reader carefully through the difficult years of the author's childhood in the Raval: his father's imprisonment in Franco's sordid jails, the poverty, victimization and corruption of the post-war years. It is an ethically important exercise to bear witness in this way to the violence of a regime and the squalor and suffering it inflicted on the losers of the Civil War, especially at the present time when certain political and institutional elements have a vested interest in glossing over the more unsavoury elements. And this socio-cultural act of remembering was close to the heart of the writer himself, as we find out, in his insistence on the exposure of the historical reality blurred

and obscured by the imposition of the veil of expediency which was and is the execrable *pacto de olvido*.

It is with this perspective that we become privy to the struggle and solidarity of the dreadful decades of dictatorship: the first years spent in education; the sacrifices of the parents to help their son through the *bachillerato* and then onto university. The communal direction and assistance both from his wife Anna Sallés, friends of his own class and background and others more privileged but no less involved in the exemplary acts of defiance against the directorate. With all his revolutionary greatness Nelson Mandela may well have intoned the famous device of “My life is the struggle”. Here we might find a diluted but no less committed version in an existence dedicated to the cause of human decency, from the years of imprisonment to the presence on the secretariat of the PSUC and the visit of solidarity to Chiapas, a few short years before the writer’s death.

Despite the environmental harshness, however, we are allowed to see the happiness of the family life of Manolo Vázquez and are offered an informed overview of his success both in journalism, satire and the literary sphere; and it is pleasing to note that attention here extends not only to prose fiction but to an appreciation of the no less impressive poetry. The emotive fixation with that emblem of Catalan national identity, FC Barcelona – so close to the heart of the writer –, enhances in turn the vibrant commitment of this individual to his city, his people and his culture. After reading Saval’s warm, congenial study – with the revelation of Vázquez Montalbán’s delight on the publication of the Carvalho series in Catalan in 2003 – one becomes aware of the genial integrity of this author and precisely why his figure inspires admiration from all shades of the critico-linguistic spectrum.

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