



JAUME CABRÉ

‘WITH OUR OWN STATE, WE CATALANS WOULD BE HAPPIER AND WOULD LIVE MORE PEACEFULLY’

Interviewed by Eva Piquer*
Photos by Xabier Miquel Laburu

Jaume Cabré (Barcelona, 1947) writes in Catalan. The German edition of his latest novel Les veus del Pamano (Voices from Pamano) has so far sold over 300,000 copies. Over 300,000, which is not to be sniffed at. His books have also been translated into Spanish, English, French, Dutch, Italian, Portuguese, Greek, Norwegian, Hungarian, Romanian, Croatian, Albanian, Slovene and Galician. Jaume Cabré's novels have a life of their own, each is unique, but they also form part of one of the most solid narrative projects ever witnessed in Catalan literature. As a recipient of the Premi d'Honor de les Lletres Catalanes in 2010, Cabré is in a delightful period in which the critics praise him and the public, as usual, read his books.

You have become the ambassador of Catalan literature, and therefore of Catalonia in general. Do you think of yourself in this way?

Yes, and I'm delighted to do so, but I find that I need to explain what Catalonia is less and less. Five or ten years ago, in order to explain what Catalan literature was you had to go back as far as Adam and Eve. Nowadays, largely due to Frankfurt 2007, both in Europe and America, they understand what Catalonia and Catalan literature are. Barcelona is always practical as a reference, but now they also know that Barcelona is the capital of Catalonia. I mean people of a certain cultural level, who I deal with professionally. They still keep asking me about the situation regarding the Catalan language, as they find it very interesting.

And do you offer them an optimistic view of the situation regarding the Catalan language?

I speak about reality. But the truth is that above all I can now talk about literature and that's what I like about it. Ten years ago you almost couldn't speak about literature. Nowadays, they ask me about Catalan at the end and it generates interest, but it's not the main topic of conversation.

So nowadays you can go around like a normal writer.

Precisely. I tell them about my new books and I discuss my own literary tradition. I can mention my colleagues, knowing that some of those present will have read them. This didn't happen before. As for the publishers, I get the impression they have a lot of respect for my work and for Catalan literature in general.

Is being Catalan and writing in Catalan a handicap to international exposure?



I've never had the experience of writing in any other language. I could say that, theoretically, yes, it is a handicap, but for me the real handicap would have been to have written in Spanish, because I'm sure my novels wouldn't have come out in the same way as they do in Catalan. They wouldn't have interested anyone and they wouldn't have been translated. But I'm talking about a situation that hasn't happened.

It's always more difficult to get known when one comes from a small country...

Of course, yes. I've seen it with my Slovenian colleagues and even with Hungarians, even though they write in a language that has a state and one imagines that a state favours a language, something which doesn't happen in our case. It doesn't happen to us clearly, repeatedly and obsessively. It's hard for us to become known because we're from a small country, but mostly because we write in a language from a country without a state. This is already a big reason for independence. With our own state all

of our problems would not be solved, but I'm sure we'd be happier and we'd live more peacefully in terms of personal and collective dignity. Albania, Hungary and Slovenia have problems being heard in Europe and the rest of the world, in spite of being independent countries. Nevertheless, they have an interior calm. They know that if something doesn't happen this year it will happen the next, or the next, or whenever, because they don't have the urgency which we have. I'd change places with them any day.

Does the future for the Catalans reside in independence?

Yes, I think so. If not, then tough!

Do you think it's possible that we'll achieve independence?

It depends on us. If we have to depend on Spain, we'll never be independent. But thanks to Spain's attitude, more and more Catalans are com-

ing to appreciate that independence is the only way out. Our independence will never be given to us from outside and neither will it be understood. That's why we have to slam the door shut!

Do you think Catalan society is currently capable of slamming the door shut?

I'm not a sociologist or a politician. Maybe the hardest part is convincing ourselves. But as with all processes, it has its stages. We can't imagine that it will be over in a month, but it can be solved in a generation. There is currently a very interesting process taking place, the referenda in which every town votes on independence. There's only a 30% turnout, but imagine if money was spent on it and it received the support of all the state's apparatus of persuasion. They're done in good faith by members of the public that go leafleting door to door after work. It's something entirely voluntary and makeshift that nevertheless manages to achieve the participation of considerable numbers. This 30% that vote in favour of independence are a cross-party political force that the traditional political parties should take into account. One thing is the people, who are beginning to take things into their own hands with initiatives such as the referenda, and another thing are the political parties, who look like they need to go to the gym and are in need of a makeover. I believe they need to place themselves in another reality. Today I was listening to the president speak to parliament. The politicians come to argue with each other. It's a show, but there are aspects that they don't dare touch. The parties have to keep in mind that the desire for independence is nowadays shared by 50% of the population. Look how we Catalans are committed to the ballot box, I'm pleased to say. We want to become independent via the ballot box.

But it might turn out that a lot of pro-independence Catalans don't know who to vote for in November.

It's what I said: if the parties don't go to the gym and don't get into shape, then it's not good. We'll have to see what will happen between now and November, how they'll regroup, but I believe that it won't be good if abstention wins. Look at the Basque Country, which is in the hands of the socialists and the People's Party thanks to absten-

tionism. If abstentionism wins, everything will end up in the hands of those who know how to take advantage of it.

Can we Catalans hold our head up high in the world?

Yes, in a lot of ways yes, even in football.

Mainly in football...

Well, not entirely, since we only have one football team at this level. But in economic, industrial and business aspects there's a very impressive network of Catalans around the world. In cultural terms one could mention literature or art or contemporary music made by Catalans. Catalan artists are clearly well known and Catalan writers are an interesting discovery. Before there was a hidden agenda: 'these Catalans have so many problems, let's see what they've got to say'. Now they think: 'yeah! I like Catalan writers, they help me make money'. We're talking about market forces and literary interest. And I'm not speaking about myself, but in general. In the past, Catalan writers moved in circles that protected them, made up of people who were sensitive to minorities. But not any more. My Italian publisher has even hired someone who speaks Catalan so they can answer the Catalan writers' phone calls and emails in their own language. It's because Catalan writers earn them money.

**NOWADAYS, THANKS TO SPAIN'S
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What social responsibility does a writer have? Should a writer have to publicly commit themselves to certain causes?

Everyone has to do what they feel is right. I can't ask anyone to define themselves, that's if they're not already in a situation in which they define themselves or they are defined by someone else. A writer has as much of a responsibility as a lawyer, a politician or an economist. Perhaps rather than writers, we should speak of think-



ers or intellectuals, a term which includes more people. Intellectuals have a moral obligation to say what they think, here and everywhere. For example, right now it makes sense that we complain about the silence of Spanish intellectuals as to Spain's current relationship with Catalonia.

They say nothing because they know they'll be attacked. It may also be that they've changed their minds, because Spain is very much in favour of a single way of thinking. This upsets me, it's a way to hide in the shadow of the majority, you feel you're right because everyone thinks like you do and those that don't think like you do are far away and you don't see them and that's comforting. So the intellectuals have to say what they think. But the fact that a person is a good painter a good philosopher, a good writer or a good poet doesn't mean they're a good thinker. An intellectual can demonstrate their own way of thinking or, if they have the capacity to do so, they can reflect on and make proposals on

a collective level. And just to be clear that I don't mean the so-called experts, the know-it-alls that inhabit debates and speak about things they don't even know anything about. The intellectual has to think bravely, say what they think in terms of the political situation in their country.

Now in particular we are at a time when we need intellectuals to make themselves heard...

Yes, we need voices that speak with foresight, that know how to direct people's desires to move one way or another. And here I don't mean the professional politician. It's one thing for the intellectual to jump into the political arena, which I think is a good thing, and another that the intellectual world reflects on society.

In the eyes of those who keep track of things, you've gone from being a commercial writer to being a literary writer, but your books are essentially the same now and then.

I've always done my own thing, ignoring the way people around me might perceive my actions. I realise that the fact that I've dedicated myself so much to the audiovisual realm might have scandalised some, although I guess eventually they've stopped being scandalised, but I just don't care.

The same ones that before despised you now defend you arguing that you are the most solid author that we've got...

And what's odd is that they defend me based on the same novels. This could mean that things are reread, they make intellectual rereading. I've carried on writing and have avoided discussions about this topic.

A writer said to me: 'Literature is an endurance race; the winners are those that don't throw in the towel'. In your case, you have won the race by miles. They have ended up putting you in the place that you deserved.

What I had written was already written. *Fra Junoy o l'agonia dels sons* (Brother Junoy or the Agony of Dreams) came out in 1984. Now when they say to me, 'what a great novel' I'm flattered, but it

was just as good in 1984. I didn't ask them to flatter me then and nor do I ask for it now. What I do say is that every novel that I've made is nourished by the previous one. I like the image that you've mentioned of the ability to resist. You have to keep on making your own way, what you can't do is expect that somebody shows you where you have to go, because this somebody will change their opinion or someone else will come along saying that you have to follow another way. You have to make your own way, and if you don't know what it is, it will turn up in the end. It's something that I learnt or guessed at quite an early age: you can't be a slave to fashion, because fashion changes. Francesc de Borja said: 'I'll never serve a master who will eventually die'. You can't serve a master who'll eventually die, you always have to do what you believe you have to do.

Have you always known what path you had to follow?

No. I've realised I had to do a particular novel, that it took a lot out of me, and that when I finished I saw that I had to write another one, making use of everything I'd learnt from my experience on the previous one. I have the feeling I've climbed a stairway, not because I'm higher, but because there are steps built on top of steps lower down. Every new step I've taken is due to having climbed the previous step, which in turn is built on top of the previous one. In this sense you could argue that I resist the temptation to rush myself, because it leads nowhere. Being in a rush only leads you to regret, to waste your efforts. If a particular speed is creative for me, that's it, I don't change it. If I need to fight to defend it, I will. You're limited and you realise that at any one moment you have to dedicate your time and energy to whatever you consider to be most important, and you have to be consistent.

Is that why you publish a book every seven or eight years?

I'd prefer not to be so slow, but that's the way it is. Something I'm proud of is that a lot of my books are still in print and are reprinted every year. There are people who discovered me at the start of the nineties with *Senyoria* (His Lordship), and those who discovered me in the seventies with

Carn d'olla (Stew), and there are youngsters who have discovered me now with *Les veus del Pamano* who have to go back. Foreign publishers have this problem: they don't know what order to publish my novels in. German readers have begun to read me with *Les veus del Pamano*. The Italian publisher will now publish *L'ombra de l'eunuc* (The Shadow of the Eunuch) and they've asked me to wait before bringing out the next book.

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Have you ever felt less respected for having commercial success?

I don't feel like I'm too successful. I never compare myself to others, every situation, every personal circumstance is different. Writing a novel takes a lot of work, whether it ends up being good, average or bad. I know what it takes to write one and I have a lot of respect for those who decide to write novels. When I see a young person who has written a couple of stories and wants to continue writing, I say to them, 'Well done, but you don't know what you're letting yourself in for'. Because it's complicated. There comes a time when you risk your life on it or it's not worth it.

You often say: writing is only worthwhile if you believe your life depends on every book.

If you don't feel like your life depends on every book, you don't try hard enough. And you always have a way out by thinking, 'I'll do another one that'll be better'. If you're placing bricks, you need to put mortar in the joints to hold the wall up.

On one hand you have to put everything into it, and on the other I guess you have to know how to keep things in proportion and not take yourself too seriously.

You have to take the work you're doing very seriously, but the role of a reader helps keep you

very balanced. As a reader you need books that are unputdownable and you give thanks that Proust, Arthur Miller and Rodoreda exist. You give thanks for the fact that they have taken the risk and that they have had the talent, luck and energy to do the work they have done. You aspire to produce a similar feeling of joy and euphoria in a reader as you get when you read the work of Proust, Miller and Rodoreda. And you know that other people won't like you at all. A bad review can dishearten you, but you need to know how to keep critics at a distance, both the negative ones and the enthusiastic ones.

I FEEL THAT BEAUTY AND INTELLIGENCE ARE PRETTY MUCH INSEPARABLE. I'M SURE THAT A BEAUTIFUL PHRASE IS INTELLIGENT

What opinion do you think literary critics deserve?

This is like asking me what opinion literature deserves. Every critic has their own style, their own ways, likes, dislikes, criteria, level of seriousness...

What should the role of a critic be?

Well, this is something else. I firmly believe in the role of the critic. They guide the reader, because the critic is a privileged reader. They have made reading their profession, which presupposes they have special knowledge of that literary tradition and that they know how to transmit the fruit of their reading. Critics provide the writer with feedback. There are critics that teach you things about your books. Aside from this, there's their evaluation of your book. I enjoy the feedback of someone who understands and for this reason I also have to take both praise and rejection.

Have critics revealed aspects of your work that you were unaware of?

Of course, because there are a lot of things in a novel, but the writer puts them there unconsciously. With the eyes of someone looking from a different angle, they come out in an obvious way. This goes

both for the approach to characters and the structure of the novel.

Were you always certain you wanted to be a writer?

When I was young I wanted to be a farmer, a pilot, a fireman, the Pope, or just about anything. But I ended up being a writer. You get to a point when you say, 'for a while now, aside from reading, I also write'. And you make attempts that are increasingly more serious, that take longer, until you end up with a novel. And you say, 'look, I've published a book'. But you still don't know if you're a writer. Bringing a character to life with words isn't easy. As it's something you build piece by piece you don't have the foresight to say: 'in forty years from now I'll have written twenty or thirty novels'. You never know, it's impossible.

Nowadays, when you look back, are you surprised by what you have written?

It's part of my life. Now I look at myself and it seems obvious that that is what I should have done. But in reality it wasn't obvious at all. It all depends on your own biographical circumstances, on your artistic circumstances and what you read and your interests. It could have been one thing or another. One thing that hasn't changed is the striving for excellence or the desire for excellence, for never allowing myself any weakness that I could detect and that I could do something about. Another thing is whether I later find all the weaknesses I'd missed, but while I can detect them and do something about them I'll never give in.

Can literature change the world?

It can change the way people see the world, yes of course. From a romantic, idealistic point of view I'd say that literature can change the world, because history is affected by politics and it is written by the winners. But literature is done from liberty. This is the advantage literature, philosophy and the arts in general have, above that of history. The history we know is overly influenced by the political process.

Do we need to change the world?

Yes, the world always needs changing. From the role of women in society, to the rural-urban



dichotomy, the East and the West, the spread of culture, the distribution of profits, tolerance for economic, ideological, religious and thought processes. The world has to evolve in so many ways! I'm convinced that any time in the past was worse, but sometimes there are people who deny it. The twentieth century was so full of brutal wars and unimaginable cruelty that it makes you think badly of humankind.

Do you believe humanity progresses, in spite of everything?

Yes it progresses, but there's a long way to go!

What do you appreciate more, beauty or intelligence?

As an artist, I guess I pursue beauty, but I know that if you're in an indifferent situation, beauty disappears and the way to fight against indifference, greyness and *déjà vu* is by using intelligence. I feel that beauty and intelligence are pretty much inseparable. I'm sure that a beautiful phrase is intel-

ligent. Whatever is good is beautiful, as the Greeks said.

What have you learnt by getting old?

One thing I've learnt is to be tolerant with my surroundings, with life, because you see that you operate at a different speed. People who are older or younger than you have a different rhythm and you need to be able to negotiate. On one hand I'm becoming more tolerant, but on the other I'm in a hurry, I have a different kind of impatience, because my time is running out. In the past I was incapable of leaving a book half read out of respect for the writer, but now I do.

Is there a positive side to being old?

The best thing about it is that you've made it.

I see you're happy...

Yes, I am. I'm about to be a grandfather and it makes me really happy.

*EVA PIQUER

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