

# Baltasar Porcel and the Mediterranean Sun

**Tomás Alcoverro.** Writer and journalist

Baltasar Porcel (1937-2009) was a Mallorcan writer, journalist and critic. He was born in the small coastal village of Andratx but very soon moved to Barcelona, where he began frequenting literary circles. His first novel *Solnegre*, written in Catalan, was published in 1961. At that time, Porcel was already a contributor to several newspapers and magazines, notably *La Vanguardia*. Although his non-fiction work is recognised in all the fields he cultivated (essays, travel books, biographies...), with his fiction he built a Mediterranean and adventurous world in which the stories of the Andratx cycle, with a marked elegiac tone, stand out. Based on the tragic and poetic mystification of his native village, he developed a metaphor for human beings, their passions and their struggle to forge a destiny.

Before the magical world of the Latin American writers, Baltasar Porcel created his own magical realism of the Mediterranean. He was only twenty-three when he published his first novel, *Solnegre*, with a foreword by Pere Gimferrer. With its first sentence, “*Feia un sol que cremava el cul de les llebres*” [The sun was so hot that it burnt the backsides of the hares] he began his great and extensive Catalan literary production. His approach to the Mediterranean was simple and direct. In his splendid lyrical, encyclopaedic, arbitrary and truthful essay *Mediterrània. Onatges tumultuosos*, published in 1996, twenty-two years after *Solnegre*, and translated into several languages, he describes it as follows: “How can I not reach the Mediterranean on the path of my house, its garden and its landscape, my family in Andratx.” And in another paragraph he specifies: “I write about the Mediterranean as a natural consequence of my being, of my existence.”

From the outset, the young writer managed to bring together the oral Mallorcan tradition thanks to his family, the songs and legends of the mythical Andratx, his literary *Solnegre*, his original insular Macondo. If his first novel is an explosion of powerful creative drive, deeply rooted in his surroundings, his *Mediterrània*, at 488 pages, is a book of experiences and journeys, elaborate meditations about our sea. In this work, the writer’s lyrical strength prevails over the essayist’s knowledge.

Porcel, who had powerfully broken into the then *petit cementiri de les lletres catalanes* [small cemetery of Catalan literature], according to Joaquim Molas’ bitter description, was for decades one of its greatest creators and provocateurs who, like Josep Pla, wrote his journalist pieces in Spanish *propanem lucrando*. Thanks to his trips abroad to write reports and columns for the newspaper *La Vanguardia*, he broadened the borders of the Catalan literary

sphere, opening it up to the world, as Josep Pla had done before, in those years of the miserable and enclosed dictatorship.

I have a good memory. His first article in *La Vanguardia* as a regular contributor in 1967 dealt with the defenestration of Eugeni D'Ors, one of the most eminent Catalan contemporary intellectuals, criticised by his peers, who Porcel in his *Mediterrània* qualifies as “Mediterranean baroque”. The triumphant success of the son of Andratx with his great interviews in *Destino* or *Serra d'Or* in the vein of Pla's *Homenots*,<sup>1</sup> including to those living in exile, such as the poet Josep Carner, who in the 1930s had been consul in the Mediterranean, Arab and Westernised Beirut, helped him to publish in the *La Vanguardia*, then based in Barcelona's Pelai Street and whose editor-in-chief was Horacio Sáenz Guerrero, a close friend of Néstor Luján, who ran *Destino*. Some contributors, such as Lluís Permanyer and Sergio Vilar, also joined the former offices of *La Vanguardia* at that time.

I remember sitting with Permanyer in the international news office, talking about one of Porcel's novels, *La lluna i el cala llamp*, also about Mallorcan issues. Most of my contact with him was not in Barcelona but beyond our borders. I remember Baltasar with the very young Maria-Àngels Roque, an anthropology student in Paris, in Saint Martin Le Beau, where they went to visit President Josep Tarradellas. At that time, I was Paris correspondent and closely followed the negotiations between the government of Adolfo Suárez and Tarradellas to re-establish the Catalan Government and his return from exile to Catalonia, which culminated in a historic journey in a light aircraft from Tours to Madrid.

It was the world of the Mediterranean that finally brought us closer. I sometimes visited

him in his office in the high tower of the Banco Atlántico in Avinguda Diagonal when he was the director of the recently-founded Catalan Institute of the Mediterranean. But I met him during some trips to Amman and Damascus, where a travelling exhibition organised by this institute was being held. On an outing to the outskirts of Amman, visiting the Umayyad castles decorated with Byzantine frescoes – in one of which the legendary Lawrence of Arabia had lived – I discovered a funny, spontaneous Baltasar, determined to open a stone door with brute force. I surprised him once when I told him that in the abandoned Ministry of Information in Baghdad, before the American invasion in 2003, I found a copy of his novel *Solnegre* in its Spanish translation.

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Porcel, an islander in whose village lived ancient Xuetas or Jews, was vitally Mediterranean. How many of his daily columns in *La Vanguardia* did he write about the peoples of the Maghreb and the Mashreq, about the endless “War of the Diehards” – the Arab Israeli war, according to Joan Roura's appropriate expression – of the Middle East? His report on the Six-Day War in 1967 achieved notable journalistic success.

Porcel, gripped by the desire to travel, especially around the Mediterranean villages, was a great journalist, and a splendid special

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1. *Homenots* is a series of 60 portraits by Josep Pla on characters of his time, published between 1958 and 1962.



Baltasar Porcel in Empúries, around 1970 (Maria-Àngels Roque).

correspondent in many of those countries. He explained their culture, described their landscapes, talked to writers and artists, and scrutinised their history beyond the vicissitudes of the politics of the time. He was, in the best sense of the word, cosmopolitan. Many of his columns, most of them on Mediterranean issues, were collected in a volume published after his death. He never achieved his desire to visit Beirut, in the past the happy and confident Eastern Mediterranean city.

Re-reading *Solnegre* I underline another expression: “*un sol d’escorpins*” [a sun of scorpions], and I realise that this novel encapsulates the seeds of an ancestral, magical and violent world that the writer developed into later novels such as *La lluna i el cala llamp*, *Els argonautes*, *Difunts sota els ametllers en flor* and *Cavalls cap a la fosca*. I remember

some pages from *The Plague* by Albert Camus, whose mother was born in Menorca, from *Alexis Zorba* by Kazantzakis, a great narrator of the world of the Greek islands, their beauty and cruelty, with characters such as Bubulina, whose neighbours, like magpies, tore up her sheets and stole her poor trousseau just after she died in her bed. The treatment of some of his works evokes that cinematographic style of post-war Italian realism or the narrative strength of the outstanding American novelists of the time.

By entitling his first novel *Solnegre*, Porcel successfully stressed, through the sun, one of the most characteristic elements of the diverse peoples of the Mediterranean world. “First was the sun,” he wrote in his major essay *Mediterrània*. Writers as different as Nietzsche and Camus coincide in emphasising this solar

element, this luminosity that can help knowledge. “The Mediterranean,” wrote the author of *The Plague*, “has a solar tragedy that has nothing to do with the tragedy of the mists.” Nietzsche had noted: “The sun has appeared to me today as the king of civilisation. Its banks are beautiful. It is there where humankind has germinated.”

Proust pointed out that the writer focuses on a single issue. I am convinced that Baltasar Porcel is one of the great creators who, together with the Moroccan Tahar Ben Jelloun, the Turkish Mehmet Yasin, the Greek Stratis Tsircas, the Italian Leonardo Sciascia or Andrea Camilleri, found inspiration in the diverse Mediterranean world.

The labyrinths of Mediterranean identity are an inexhaustible subject. “My novels,” wrote Porcel, “are not really Mediterranean. They deal with the essence of man but the style I seek, my way of describing the landscapes, my faith in mankind, are radically Mediterranean.”

If in *Solnegre* he narrated the torment of a soulless landlord and his murder in a context of mass crimes in the Mediterranean area, in *La lluna i el cala llamp* he described the crossing trade between Mallorca, Valencia and Barcelona and in *Els argonautes* he told of the adventures of a group of smugglers during an eventful boat trip between Gibraltar and Mallorca using a baroque, sensual and precise style. It is a setting of penuries and miracles in a dark and gloomy period of Spain.

A few years later he published *L'emperador o l'ull del vent*, on the French prisoners deported to the island of Cabrera after the Battle of Bailén during the Spanish War of Independence. *Olympia a mitjanit* featured a new description of Mallorcan society, shaken by the ravages of real estate speculation and savage mass tourism.

In one of his plays, *Retorn a Andratx*, he deals again with vital issues such as All Souls

Festival or the appearance of the souls of the dead, in the expression of a lyrical and violent imaginary world. Most of his novels revolve around the passionate, adventurous and tragic recreation of his Mediterranean. It is a world where fatality prevails and the primary objective was survival by emigrating to Cuba, to the village of Batabano or by smuggling.

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Edgar Morin wondered if today it would be illusory to seek some common character that was not just geoclimatic on the three African, Asian and European shores, and he responded that beyond this reality there was another poetic and mythological reality because myths and poetry form part of our Mediterranean imaginary. Thierry Fabre notes that rather than specific common roots, we should refer to the sources of knowledge (Athens, Cordoba, al-Andalus, Rome, Jerusalem...). The Mediterranean is a mixture of these Greek, Latin, Arab and Jewish legacies, *The Odyssey, One Thousand and One Nights*. A world of languages and diverse influences in which the solar element prevails in a setting that oscillates between moderation and excess. For the historian Henry Laurens, the societies of the Mediterranean were formed around the culture of the olive tree “imposed by the climate and by the sun.” The Lebanese historian Georges Corm, very critical of the policy of the West on this turbulent region, has entitled one of his books *La Méditerranée, espace de conflit, espace de rêve*. The Goncourt-winner Tahar Ben Jelloun wrote that in the last century there was no place in the world with so many

wars as this middle white sea, as Arabs call it, which has hardly been an oasis of peace. Eastern Mediterranean people rarely write about the Mediterranean. There are no institutes or study centres or major journals dealing with its political, economic and cultural issues. From its shores, it is seen as a matter dealt with from the European shore.

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The novelist Najat el Hachmi, of Moroccan origin, the author of award-winning novels in Catalan, has written in this journal: “The Med-

iterranean does not exist. This is the conclusion we reach immediately if we try to define the nature of being Mediterraneans. It is risky to think that the geographical area around this vast extension of water is something more than the juxtaposition of its different regions. This image, if it exists, forms part of our imagination, of an imaginary made of highly quotidian intangibles.”<sup>2</sup>

“First was the sun,” repeats Porcel in his *Mediterrània*. If in *Solnegre* he wrote a beautiful novel of fertile creative initiation, a nihilistic and almost adolescent diary, in *Mediterrània* he expresses his attachment to his homeland with a kind of pantheism: “I open a bottle of white wine. I have crusty bread. I am close to happy moments. I form part of everything that is and will be. I am from the Mediterranean.” It is the lyrical vitality of a great writer of the world.

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2. *Quaderns de la Mediterrània* no. 24, “Between Myth and Conflict”, Barcelona, IEMed, 2017.