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 16 December 2021

Purple Shadows in Catalonia
Josep Pla, Great Questions of Literature, and the Bid for Catalan Independence

I.

Evening falls, the sky changes from gray to a pale and unreal gauzy white. A heavy silence, a silence you can cut with a knife, hangs over the town, weighing down its roofs. The sound of the rain becomes vaguely musical, a monotonous trill. My obsession for the day floats along with it: twenty-one years old!

—The Gray Notebook

“Why, a foreigner might ask, has [Josep] Pla been ‘Discovered’ by so many people so late in the day? The answer is that Pla was discovered, and greeted enthusiastically by everybody that had a bit of brains, back in 1924, when he published his first book. . . . But later, he fell into two traps: he was in the side of Franco during the civil war (I said in, not on: I mean simply that he found himself in the Franco-occupied part of the country), and after the war, to earn his living, he was forced to write in Spanish, not in Catalan. You know how people are here, and will easily imagine how vicious such traps can become.”²

—Gabriel Ferrater, author

Morning in Girona. The professor who is guiding us here strides into our hotel, bobbing a nod to the attendant, to accompany us to the university. He has dark curls and is tall enough that he cants forward when speaking, a tree branch hitched into an angle. Today he wears a white button-up spotted with sheep—we point this out amongst ourselves, and our estimation of his style rises.

It’s a good thing that he is walking us to the university. Last night’s tour of the city was thorough; it guided us across the wall, through the German Gardens, down to the Cathedral and the Jewish quarter, past the Arab baths and how many *Game of Thrones* filming sites? Four, perhaps. But we descended the wall as the sun was setting, and after that I was too taken by the amber and blue shadows cast by sodium streetlights to really pay attention to the directions.

I first hear about Josep Pla from a lecturer at the University of Girona. We’ve been in Girona since yesterday afternoon, when seven of us American students and our program directors stepped off a bus into a swirl of sidewalk traffic. To me, the arrival held some of the same incredulous excitement that I had felt when I first arrived in Spain: *I’m in Spain? Actually?* I was nervous that this was yet another plan the pandemic would terminate—Covid mutating into a

¹ Josep Pla. 2013. *The Gray Notebook*. Translated by Peter Bush. New York, New York: New York Review of Books, 4.

² Joan Ramon i Resina. 2017. *Josep Pla: Seeing the World in the Form of Articles*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, xiv.

computer virus that shut down international travel seemed more realistic than me setting foot on Spanish soil. Arriving in Girona held less disbelief than arriving in Spain, though, perhaps because the signs of where we are are inescapable: this is Catalonia.

We're here with our study abroad program to learn about Catalonia. Most of us knew vaguely about Catalonia even before we arrived, though. The Catalan independence movement has been in the news several times over the past few years, featuring crowds swarming with yellow and red and raising questions about the right to self-determination. The signs of the quest for independence are everywhere in Girona: flags, striped yellow and scarlet, ripple on balconies; yellow ribbons adorn doors, railings, lampposts; yellow spray paint splashes over cobblestones and the sides of buildings: *ACAB, puta Espanya, democràcia...!*

I'm in Girona, I think. And Girona is in Catalonia.

At the university, our guest lecturer introduces himself under the fluorescent lights of a glass-walled classroom, clapping his hands and saying that it is his *great* pleasure to speak with us about Catalan culture today. There's a lot to discuss. The Catalan language, for one, which shares some similarities with Spanish but isn't a dialect. There are the human towers called *castellets*, constructed pillars of clasped arms and trembling legs, amazing in the height and sheer density of humanity they achieve. Some are tall enough that the uppermost members are level with third or fourth story windows. Catalonia has a traditional dance, too, called the *sardana*, and Sant Jordi's Day, on which people give their lovers books and roses. Of course there are famous figures, too: the lecturer pulls up a photo of Rosalía in shimmering stage regalia, followed by photos of the Sagrada Família cathedral and Park Güell in Barcelona, both designed by the architect Gaudí.

In the midst of it all, he mentions a Catalan writer, grappling for the English words with his hands. "Josep Pla wrote a book of . . . essays about Catalonia called *The Gray Notebook*."³ The word *essays* yanks at my attention. It's a happy coincidence that I am looking for an essay collection to read; I study creative writing, so I read for more than pleasure, collecting dogeared books to crack open for reference—this or that technique done well, a pitfall avoided, a complication lit up and unresolved. If I can read about Catalonia as described by a Catalan author while I am in Catalonia—all the better.

It only takes a few pages of *The Gray Notebook* and a couple of Google searches to realize there is more to this story than an essay collection by a famous writer. First, *The Gray Notebook* is not an essay collection but rather a diary-shaped memoir, supposedly written by Josep Pla's 21-year-old self. "I decide to start this diary," he begins. "I'll write whatever happens—simply to pass the time—come what may."⁴ There's a clean-shaven beauty to his prose, sketching scenes in Catalonia with understated charm. Describing someone's daily routine, he writes, "If it's hot, he lies under the soft, caressing rustle of the tall pines. The landscape has an antique stillness, at once benign and paternal. If someone shouts, the wind carries the cry gently away. Time passes, like a trickle of olive oil."⁵ *Place writing that defamiliarizes*, I scribble in the margins of the book. I learned quickly to keep a pen on hand to note Pla's craft. I keep thinking that I would have liked to talk to this 21-year-old Pla about

³ Joan Trias. 2021. *Catalan Culture* Girona, Catalonia: University of Girona, (October 18).

⁴ Pla, *The Gray Notebook*, 2.

⁵ Pla, *The Gray Notebook*, 104.

the craft of writing. Then, nearly 100 pages in, I read an entry that conjures an acidic swell of disappointment: “The shrillness and biological idiocy of a woman’s laughter requires a swift counterattack: Stop it once and for all and move on. . . . When the laughter subsides, you feel you’ve been relieved of a great burden.”⁶ I’m so surprised I think, *Maybe this is a one-off thing, a mistake, not how he really thinks about women*. But when I feel the urge to talk to him again, my interest is tinged with doubt. Perhaps it’s too much to think he would take a woman seriously in a conversation about writing.

The other interesting part of this situation is Josep Pla himself. Pla is described primarily as a Catalan writer, though Google labels him a Spanish journalist. His work, while falling under the umbrella of journalism, is still classified as literature.⁷ When he wrote, *el país* always referred to Catalonia, never Spain, and he is considered in some ways to be the great chronicler of Catalonia, portraying its people and places with such care in his work as to render the image of a particular time period immortal.⁸ At the same time, Pla is remembered as someone who aligned with the Franco dictatorship—possibly. Briefly. Allegedly.⁹

As we learn more about the independence movement over the next few days in Girona, I only grow more curious about how people remember Josep Pla. The independence movement is by nature divisive—it’s such an enormous question, it skews people to one side or another, and voices in the middle tend to get lost—so what happens to the works and legacy of a writer who was politically complicated? Pla had a vision of Catalonia: of its people and places during his lifetime; his writing was meant to bring that into focus. The dictator Francisco Franco had a vision of Catalonia, too: of a future in which Catalonia was indistinguishable from the rest of Spain. Now, the Catalan independence movement has a vision of Catalonia’s future that is entirely opposite of what Franco envisioned. They picture a Catalonia like Pla’s: culturally distinctive and rich. But what to do with Pla’s stunning portraits of Catalonia when they are inevitably accompanied by the rumor of Pla’s support for Franco? And for me, personally: what do I do with this book that has so much to teach me, but which apparently contains such belittlement of women? It begs the question: what does one do with the art when one has reservations about the artist? I find that an impossible question—and yet, people work around it. I wonder if Catalans have found a way to work around it, too.

In 2017, scenes from an independence referendum in Catalonia caught media attention around the world. Protesters pumping fists, air swarming with red and yellow flags. Helmeted police cutting a sharp black line against the crowd. A woman borne to the ground by a riot shield. The

⁶ Pla, *The Gray Notebook*, 93.

⁷ Ramon, *Josep Pla: Seeing the World in the Form of Articles*, 18.

⁸ Peter Bush. 2013. "The Gray Notebook by Josep Pla." *Translation Review*, 60.

Peter Bush. 2013. "Guest Post: Jamming with Josep Pla and The Gray Notebook." *The Creative Literary Studio*. Accessed November 2021. <https://thecreativeliterarystudio.wordpress.com/2013/08/07/guest-blog-jamming-with-josep-pla-and-the-gray-notebook/>.

⁹ Bush, "The Gray Notebook by Josep Pla", 60;

Rosa Ruiz González. n.d. "Josep Pla, 1897-1981." *Associació d'Escriptors en Llengua Catalana*. Edited by Heura Marçal and Julie Wark. Associació d'Escriptors en Llengua Catalana. Accessed November 2021. <https://www.escriptors.cat/autors/plaj/josep-pla-english>.

shattered doors of a polling place gaping open, ballot box conspicuously absent. Reports announced that Spain sent 10,000 police to prevent voting in the referendum, that hundreds of people were injured, that the results of the referendum were unclear.¹⁰ⁱⁱ

Pro-independence sentiment had been gathering strength in Catalonia since 2010, when Catalonia's new statute of autonomy, which had been passed by the Catalan Parliament and people, was struck down by the Constitutional Court of Spain. This prompted backlash in Catalonia, raising questions about Catalans' "right to decide".¹¹ Over the next several years, pro-independence parties gained power in the Catalan government. They requested an independence referendum from the central Spanish government and, when refused, declared their intent to hold the referendum anyway. Spain responded by arresting pro-independence Catalan politicians and activists for inciting illicit political activity.¹² Spain's actions only seemed to spur on Catalan nationalism and calls for independence. After all, people argued, Catalonia is its own nation. Why should Spain dictate what the people can or can't decide?

In academic terms, pro-independence arguments draw on the tidy dichotomy of "us versus them", underpinned by the idea of national uniqueness. As Benedict Anderson famously describes it, a nation is an "imagined community" in which "the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion."¹³ In Catalonia, the construction of the imagined community is strong, driven by Catalonia's touted devotion to democracy—letting the people decide—and cultural distinctiveness. After all, Catalonia has the *sardana* and the traditional instruments that accompany it; there's Sant Jordi's Day, with its books and roses; there are the *castellets*! Other parts of Spain don't share these traits. So, it's easy enough to say that the people who *do* share these traits are a particular community, even if they don't all know each other.¹⁴ⁱⁱⁱ Fueled by historic and current grievances, this community—Catalonia—reached out for independence.

Despite the police's efforts, about 42% of the population voted. 90% of votes were in favor of independence, though many who did not favor independence did not vote at all.¹⁵ After some political back and forth between Spain and Catalonia . . . well, nothing really happened. Catalonia is still a province of Spain. Nine of the pro-independence figures who were arrested have been pardoned.¹⁶ The Catalan president and some other politicians went into exile after the referendum to

¹⁰ 2018. *Dos Cataluñas*. Directed by Álvaro Longoria and Gerardo Olivares. Accessed August 2021.

¹¹ de las Heras-Pedrosa, et al., "Populism and Independence Movements in Europe: The Catalan-Spanish Case," 9.

¹² Serra i Serra, *Politics in Catalonia*.

Maria Patricio Mulero and Juan Pecourt Gracia. 2021. "The writer's contest: manifestos and literary struggle in Catalonia (2014–2020)." *Cultural Trends* 10.1080/09548963.2021.1999769.

¹³ Benedict Anderson. 2006. *Imagined Communities*. Revised Edition. New York, New York: Verso, 6.

¹⁴ Yael (Yuli) Tamir. 2019. "Not So Civic: Is There a Difference Between Ethnic and Civic Nationalism?" *Annual Review of Political Science* 22: 419-434. Accessed November 2021. <https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/10.1146/annurev-polisci-022018-024059>.

¹⁵ 2018. *Dos Cataluñas*. Directed by Álvaro Longoria and Gerardo Olivares. Accessed August 2021; Serra i Serra, *Politics in Catalonia*.

¹⁶ 2021. "Spain pardons Catalan leaders over independence bid." *BBC News*. June 22. Accessed December 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-57565764>.

escape arrest, and they are still exiled. Organizations in Catalonia continue to promote independence. Yellow has become so symbolic of the independence movement that the Spanish government has actually made efforts to prevent its appearance in public spaces, and wearing yellow in any political setting is a clear communication of support for the independence movement.¹⁷ Nonetheless, feelings on pursuing independence are mixed; many people in Catalonia still hold some Spanish identity, and as of 2019, only 26% of the population identified exclusively as Catalan.^{18iv}

We learned about all of this in that glass-walled classroom in Girona. When he finishes explaining, our lecturer plants his hands on the table and shrugs. “It’s a very complex situation; we would have to hold another referendum to find out what people really want. With Spain’s support, this time.”

To understand what prompted the presence of demonstrations in Catalonia, the flags on the balconies—to understand how even a yellow backpack can be a political statement—you have to take a step back and look at historical grievances.

One could say Catalonia and Spain have always been in some sort of dance with each other, a dance that is sometimes more contentious than others. It started when Catalonia was founded in 988 BCE in the southeastern Iberian Peninsula, but it really got underway in 1492, when a royal marriage joined Catalonia to Spain.¹⁹ There have been so many crucial moments in Catalonia’s relationship with Spain, ranging from the four Catalan republics to the Reaper’s War and further—here are just three of those moments.²⁰

One: the War of Succession, 1701 to 1714. King Charles II of Spain died childless, leaving the line of succession dangling in a frayed edge. The resulting war ended with the termination of Catalonia’s civil law, suppression of the Catalan language, and the prevention of Catalonia’s participation in political and trade relations.²¹ It wouldn’t be until the 19th century that Catalonia would see some revitalization. At that point, a cultural renaissance called the *Renaixença* occurred, leading to “renewed Catalan cultural awareness.”²² It included a resurgence of the language and a

¹⁷ Guifré Jordan. 2018. "Spanish government and unionist groups pursue colour yellow." *Catalan News*, May 23. Accessed November 2021. <https://www.catalannews.com/politics/item/spanish-government-and-unionist-groups-pursue-colour-yellow>.

¹⁸ Quiroga and Molina, "National Deadlock. Hot Nationalism, Dual Identities and Catalan Independence (2008-2019)", 10.

¹⁹ Macia Serra i Serra. 2021. *Politics in Catalonia* Girona, Catalonia: University of Girona, (October 19).

²⁰ Marc Pons. 2017. "The four Catalan republics: 1641, 1873, 1931 and 1934." *El Nacional.cat*, September 24. Accessed November 2021. https://www.elnacional.cat/en/culture/four-catalan-republics-marc-pons_194937_102.html.

²¹ Quiroga and Molina, "National Deadlock. Hot Nationalism, Dual Identities and Catalan Independence (2008-2019)," 3;

Joan Ferges Gifra. 2021. *Catalan Secessionist Movement 2010-Present* Girona, Catalonia: University of Girona, (October 19).

²² John Robert Etherington. 2010. "Nationalism, National Identity and Territory: Jacint Verdaguer and the Catalan *Renaixença*." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 1814-1832. doi: 10.1080/01419871003789887, 2.

consecration of Catalonia's land and traditional ways of life as the "bones" of the Catalan identity.²³ Notable participants included the poet Jacint Verdaguer and the architect Antoni Gaudí.

Two: the Civil War and the Franco years. A Nationalist-led military coup in 1936 overthrew the Second Republic of Spain, triggering a civil war. The Nationalists were a right-wing alliance; their opposition, the Republicans, were an alliance of antifascists. At the time, Catalonia was strongly leftist, so very few people aligned with the Nationalists. Those who did generally cared less about the Nationalists' ideology and more about dispelling the anarchist and socialist groups gaining traction in Catalonia.²⁴

When the Nationalists came to power, newly-appointed head of state Francisco Franco *did* dispel anarchist and socialist groups—but he also set about systematically destroying Catalonia: purging educators and public sector employees, murdering thousands of civilians, and banning the Catalan language from public and official use.^{25v} By Franco's design, awards for Castilian Spanish literature were given in Barcelona.²⁶ To me, there's something insidious about that: it's not just the replacement of the Catalan language with Castilian but a concerted *concentration* of Castilian, as though to root it in Catalonia more deeply.²⁷ Literature and the other arts were censored in various ways and often of the basis of morality; under such strained conditions, no word from the dictatorship was good word.²⁸

Franco's dictatorship lasted 36 years, ending with his death in 1975.

Three: the 2008 Financial Crisis. Now a democracy, Spain reestablished the Catalan regional government and granted Catalonia the autonomy to create social policies and revitalize the Catalan language, among other things.^{29vi} When the disaster that is predatory lending practices came to light

²³ Etherington, "Nationalism, National Identity and Territory: Jacint Verdaguer and the Catalan Renaixença," 14.

²⁴ Serra i Serra, *Politics in Catalonia*;

Casilda Güell. 2004. *The Failure of Catalanist Opposition to Franco (1939-1950)*. Council Superior Scientific Research;

George Orwell. 1980. "Chapter Five." *Homage to Catalonia*. 2nd. San Diego, California: Harcourt, Inc.

²⁵ Jordi Cornellà-Detrell. 2011. *Literature as a Response to Cultural and Political Repression in Franco's Catalonia*. Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2.

²⁶ Stewart King. 2006. "Catalan Literature(s) in Post-Colonial Context." *Romance Studies* 24 (3): 253-264. doi:10.1179/174581506x147650, 257.

²⁷ Antoni Martí Monterde. 2013. "Interliterariness and the Literary Field: Catalan Literature and Literatures in Catalonia." In *Iberian Modalities: A Relational Approach to the Study of Culture in the Iberian Peninsula*, edited by Joan Ramon Resina, 62-80. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 70.

²⁸ Carme Arenas, Simona Skrabec, and Sarah Yandell. 2006. *Catalan Literature and Translation in a Globalized World*. Barcelona: Ramon Llull Institute, 95;

Howard Becker. 2008. *Art Worlds*. 25th Anniversary Edition. Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 185.

²⁹ Villarroya, Anna. 2012. "Cultural policies and national identity in Catalonia." *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 18 (1): 31-45. Accessed November 2021. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10286632.2011.567330?casa_token=pnf0Qm MPUAAAAA:yUN VSSxxRyAcb_6klQ0Gwg6vvidv9WW6EujmU3fBdPVxA-SQntaSumbzv_Z_vrKen1SBLci_l-hdg; 2021. "The contemporary Government of Catalonia (20th and 21st centuries)." *Generalitat de Catalunya*. June 8. Accessed November 2021. [https://web.gencat.cat/en/generalitat/historia/generalitat-contemporania/#bloc4;](https://web.gencat.cat/en/generalitat/historia/generalitat-contemporania/#bloc4)

in 2008, Spain sank deep into a recession. The state imposed austerity measures that worsened the situation so much that dozens of articles have been written about it since.^{30vii}

Why would these three events drive an independence referendum? They wouldn't, on their own. Alejandro Quiroga and Fernando Molina say events like these are strung together by an overarching narrative of dispossession, loss, and resilience in Catalan nationalism.³¹ Take the Catalan language. Time and again, the argument runs, Spain has banned Catalan to suppress Catalan identity and culture. Just look at the War of Succession. Look at Franco. When Spain wants Catalonia to be less Catalan, it takes away the language. Yet despite Spain's efforts, the Catalan language survives.

Dispossession: the forceful removal of the Catalan language. Loss: the loss and potential loss of culture and identity. Resilience: the continued survival of the language—and therefore the continued survival of the identity. Catalonia is a nation always fighting absorption by Spain's imperial central government. Catalonia is a nation that has not forgotten Spain's past actions.

The Catalan language may form an important part of the argument, but it's not the only part. After all, Spain did not react to the financial crisis by banning the Catalan language, but the financial crisis lent the argument of dispossession new strength: *Espanya ens roba*. Spain robs us. Catalonia is Spain's wealthiest region, making up about 20% of Spain's GDP.³² The taxes Spain collects there circle back in certain ways—for example, in funding the police force—but Catalonia's taxes are also redistributed to other parts of Spain. When the financial crisis hit, Spain imposed austerity measures on public services. Catalonia's government *also* imposed austerity measures in education, health, and social services, but the Catalan president presented them “as the inevitable result of an unfair situation in which Catalonia gave the state more than it received”.^{33viii} *Espanya ens roba*. It's clear cut. *They rob us*.

So, when the Catalan independence movement began in the 2000s, Catalonia's grievances with the Spanish state were numerous and recent enough to still taste bitter.^{34ix} It's little wonder the supporters flocked to the movement like people pressing in to support a *castellet*.

³² Cavero, Gonzalo. 2013. *The True Cost of Austerity and Inequality: The Spain Case Study*. Cowley: Oxfam International. Accessed 2021 November .

<https://oxfamlibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/301384/cs-true-cost-austerity-inequality-spain-120913-en.pdf;jsessionid=5E2F43111D9E7DA2381B9CAA94B8FCB?sequence=111>;
 Sebastián Royo. 2020. "From Boom to Bust: The Economic Crisis in Spain 2008–2013." *Nature Public Health Emergency Collection*. Accessed November 2021. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7320871/>;
 ACN. 2018. "Unemployment in Catalonia drops to lowest level since crisis began." *Catalan News*, April 26. Accessed November 2021. <https://www.catalannews.com/business/item/unemployment-in-catalonia-drops-to-lowest-level-since-crisis-began>.

³¹ Alejandro Quiroga and Fernando Molina. 2020. "National Deadlock. Hot Nationalism, Dual Identities and Catalan Independence (2008-2019)." *Genealogy* 4 (15): 2-16, 3. doi:10.3390/genealogy4010015.

³² Carlos de las Heras-Pedrosa, Carlos, Carmen Jambrino-Maldonado, Patricia P. Iglesias-Sánchez, and Elena Millán-Celis. 2020. "Populism and Independence Movements in Europe: The Catalan-Spanish Case." *Social Sciences* 9 (35): 2-20. doi:10.3390/socsci9040035, 2.

³³ Quiroga and Molina, "National Deadlock. Hot Nationalism, Dual Identities and Catalan Independence (2008-2019)", 10.

³⁴ 2018. *Dos Catalunyaes*. Directed by Álvaro Longoria and Gerardo Olivares. Accessed August 2021.

To my surprise, Pla spent years in Girona at boarding school. I am as pleased to learn we've visited the same city as I would be to learn we had a mutual friend. It's an odd feeling, considering how little I know Girona. I'm even more surprised by how Pla writes about Girona: he goes back to visit, driven by "waves of primitive sentimentality" he is unable to resist.³⁵ He admits to having "a lasting obsession with the city".³⁶ He rarely speaks so highly of a place.

His love of Girona makes sense to me, though. It only takes a few days in Girona for us American students to fall in love. One student suggested Girona might be her favorite city in Spain mere hours after we'd arrived, during our tour of the city.

I find myself struck by how different Pla's Girona is from our Girona. We obsess over what's most visible to us: the witch of Girona, protruding horizontally from an outer wall of the Cathedral, forever screaming and coughing out rainwater; the size of the Roman-laid stones in the city wall, gone pillow-shaped with erosion; the teal water pooled inside the Arab baths. Pla, however, writes Girona like the back of his hand. There are street names everywhere—Carrer del Progrés, Pont de Pedra, plaça de l'Oli, Cort Reial—and sometimes there are not any street names, just other landmarks: "the tobacconists at the crossroads".³⁷ *What is that supposed to tell me?* I want to ask, though in truth, it doesn't matter. He's more interested in characterizing the two old women who run a boarding house than talking about the cathedral, which he only mentions to say that its bells are chiming. I want to stitch my Girona over his, admire their similarities and differences, but all I see are differences. The two feel completely incompatible.

So, I leave Pla to his nostalgic reminiscences and ponder the striking beauty of the Girona I've seen, cobbled streets arcing gently between neatly-trimmed shrubs and trees, streets as placid as the quiet sky, the stone of the buildings catching the corner of the sun and sparkling ever so slightly. My thoughts snag, as ever, on the flags and ribbons adorning the city. I remember the graffiti. It's only fitting that Pla should write a different Girona than me. He was nearly a native, and I am a tourist in a different era: post-Franco, Catalonia seized by the question of whether to stay with Spain or strike out on its own.

³⁵ Pla, *The Gray Notebook*, 550.

³⁶ Pla, *The Gray Notebook*, 453.

³⁷ Pla, *The Gray Notebook*, 557.

II.

*Our history is that of a frontier people, with a frontier that has been historically contentious and, consequently, we are a people who are used to being on the defensive. That is why we are adaptable rather than dogmatic . . . our character [is] a creation of history.*³⁸

—The Gray Notebook

*Josep Pla had a notable role as the 10th spy in the Francoist services of the SIFNE during the Civil War in France, as revealed by the study Espías de Franco.*³⁹

— Carles Geli, *El País*

Josep Pla introduces himself in *The Gray Notebook* as a person who has just turned 21.

(It's important to note here that *The Gray Notebook* was not really written by a 21-year-old; instead, it's more a "true synthesis of *all* of Josep Pla's production . . . a rearranged, expanded, and thoroughly rewritten version of the urtext [emphasis added]," as researcher Xavier Pla describes it.⁴⁰ *The Gray Notebook* smudges the line between fiction and nonfiction in that sense. We can return to this point later, though; for the moment, let's allow Pla to introduce the character of his 21-year-old self.)

He's living with his parents at home in Palafrugell, a village on the coast. He has a brother, about his age, and two sisters he mentions so infrequently that it takes me nearly 200 pages to realize there are *two* of them at all. When he finally includes their names, I pause midway through flipping a page, caught: Maria and Rosa. Pla has named and described each parent, many uncles, the occasional aunt, and grandparents. *Do your sisters warrant such little attention?* I wonder, less surprised by their absence than I am disappointed.

Pla should be at the University of Barcelona, studying, but he's not there because "there is so much influenza about that they've had to shut the university". I laugh when I read that line. It's not funny—he's writing in 1918, during the Spanish flu pandemic, and it does not take a discerning mind to predict that there will be several funerals in this book. But the timing is so serendipitous, I think, given that *we* are in the middle of a pandemic that teases us with dwindling caseloads only to stack them up once more. (The day I write this is the day after the Omicron variant is identified; will there be so much Covid about that they'll have to shut the university? Again?) But Pla takes his pandemic with what I interpret as a dry sense of humor, if only because that's how I've tried to deal with our pandemic: "Now, finally, it's a real joy to live in Catalonia. That's unanimous. Everybody agrees. Inevitably we all have, have had, or will have influenza."⁴¹

I remember going to a book reading a few years ago and listening to Téa Obreht, a writer with graceful hands, describe the forces driving her work. She was born in Yugoslavia. *It's like a game*

³⁸ Pla, *The Gray Notebook*, 613.

³⁹ Carles Geli. 2014. "A more counterrevolutionary Josep Pla." *El País*, September 16. Accessed November 2021. https://elpais.com/ccaa/2014/09/15/catalunya/1410814626_307621.html.

⁴⁰ Pla, "The Diaries of Josep Pla: Reflections on the Personal Diary, Draft Diary and Elaborated Diary", 131; Ramon, *Josep Pla: Seeing the World in the Form of Articles*, 18.

⁴¹ Pla, *The Gray Notebook*, 16.

of whac-a-mole, she said, *I write and write about this idea of countries that have dissolved, and every time I try to move past that theme it pops up somewhere else and I write about it again.*

I'd never played whac-a-mole, but I knew what she was describing instantly. Pla would, too, if he had had the cultural context. Writers cultivate long-term obsessions, themes that arise again and again throughout their work. My main whac-a-mole is the concept of home. One of the things that is fascinating to me, reading *The Gray Notebook*, is getting to see Pla muse on his obsessions, furthering, widening, reiterating them over the course of two years and a lifetime. Writing itself pops out of the gameboard more often than not. Catalonia, too. Memory bares a grin when you least expect it. These obsessions are tied together by his worldview, which he describes with a single sentence: "If I could create another world, it would be a world like this."⁴² Pla always stives for rationality in his choices and writing, and he sees little value in imagining other worlds.⁴³

To that end, Pla thinks literature is all about "restraint, focus, and precision. What carpenters call working on the detail. Extracting from the shapeless mass of life the graceful or dramatic line of a melody, the vivid profile of a human life, a form. In short, it is a struggle against excess and the infinite."⁴⁴ Where some writers see writing as a way to invoke other worlds or potential futures, Pla's writing is rooted in the past and present: intended to clarify our perceptions of the world we live in.⁴⁵ I recognize much of this approach. For me, too, the world becomes clearer on paper; filtering life's multitudinous details through the sieve of writing can leave something meaningful and pointed in its wake. In this spirit, Pla describes *The Gray Notebook* as an attempt at depicting his memories "without filigrees, stripped of any heroic tone."⁴⁶ That the language he considers stripped of filigree and heroic tone is still *beautiful* is part of the enchantment.

Color, for example. It's possible this is a result of translation, but I hope not: Pla describes Catalonia in a remarkable amount of purple. The sea is "purple edged beneath the hermitage terrace."⁴⁷ In Barcelona, "I go into the cathedral. Inside, with the low sky and light filtered by rain, it's a pale purple, like lilac."⁴⁸ Or an April afternoon:

These Lenten days are diamond bright. The year approaches adolescence without turbulence or tumefaction. Every day is brighter and more open. Beneath white afternoon clouds, the landscape stretches and sprawls under the sun as if recovering from a long bout of delirium. It is an intense landscape, without clutter or clatter: the pure sod of life. It is a primitive landscape jagged in its outlines.

In the immediate foreground, the land presents a simple palette of colors. The moist, pale purple Lenten wind darkens the green of the small, restless allotments and fluffs the mother-of-pearl field of rye, adds a touch of smoke to the lees of fallow land and warmth to a luridly yellow turnip field. Asparagus grows on

⁴² Pla, *The Gray Notebook*, 254.

⁴³ Pla, *The Gray Notebook*, 9 and 33.

⁴⁴ Pla, *The Gray Notebook*, 339.

⁴⁵ Ramon, *Josep Pla: Seeing the World in the Form of Articles*, 79. Pla, *The Gray Notebook*, xii.

⁴⁶ Pla, *The Gray Notebook*, 356 and 575.

⁴⁷ Pla, *The Gray Notebook*, 254.

⁴⁸ Pla, *The Gray Notebook*, 333.

the wayside and watercress blooms on irrigation channels. The far country is drawn sharp and delicate; the mountains on the horizon, foreshadowed and pale, seem mountains of melancholy. At such times the infinite oppresses.

Twilight and a violet vapor shroud all. Now everything seems vaguely spongy; at times the senses liven up, then depression descends and spirits dip. Now it's a delight to light a fire of dry grass in some corner and let your thought drift away on the bluish smoke. The land is full of acid smells that cleanse the head.⁴⁹

The Gray Notebook is full of such vivid descriptions of the landscape, the sea (which he once calls “indescribable” but goes on to describe more than a dozen times), the villages and cities, and the people, of course:

The civil guards lead a young lad in hand-cuffs down carrer Estret. He is swarthy, skinny, with a beautifully combed forelock. Slung over his shoulder is a sackful of rabbits and hens that are moving around. When they walk past us, a woman next to me exclaims, mouth wide open, “What a shock! He seemed so honest.”⁵⁰

Between his place writing and his depictions of people, the margins of my copy of *The Gray Notebook* fill up; *try writing a scene like this sometime*, I note after the scene with the swarthy lad. *Practice capturing a scene in a few sentences*. I can't keep up with all the writing exercises I want to try.

Pla writes about Catalonia constantly and sometimes with fond criticism, calling *sardanas* at a festival in Palafrugell “the supreme expression of our country's unsophisticated spirit” and referring to Catalan as “this poverty-stricken language”.⁵¹ There is also a good deal of humor and care in his portrayals. In one interaction, he describes that a young man he meets on a stroll “will meet the same fate as a good number of individuals in our country: Chattering away he will lose his voice, and when he tries to say something, it will be pure hot air.”⁵² Later, though, he will investigate a stereotype that people in Northern Catalonia are “passionate to the point of blindness” by reflecting that: “It must be because we are so ancient historically (the country gives the impression that it's very old and has been trampled over by all kinds of people), and this has left us with an irresistible tendency to systematically distrust ourselves . . . [we] are perhaps the least conventional and most individualistic area within . . . the ‘linguistic area’.”⁵³ History and memory are forever vital to Pla's portraiture of Catalonia, “as real to me as present time”.⁵⁴ I wonder how it feels to dwell on the past as he does; I think I would be forever afraid of loss.

No matter how much Pla discusses the “foolishness” of Catalonia's people or institutions, he never hesitates to claim Catalonia. Instead, he sees himself as part of it: recalling the young man

⁴⁹ Pla, *The Gray Notebook*, 443-444.

⁵⁰ Pla, *The Gray Notebook*, 17.

⁵¹ Bush, “The Gray Notebook by Josep Pla,” 60. Pla, *The Gray Notebook*, 117 and 188.

⁵² Pla, *The Gray Notebook*, 38.

⁵³ Pla, *The Gray Notebook*, 613.

⁵⁴ Pla, *The Gray Notebook*, 87.

from the stroll, he writes, “But, after a moment’s reflection and summary soul-searching I wonder if I have any reason to believe that I am any different from this typical young man.”⁵⁵

When Pla isn’t writing, reflecting, or despairing he inhabits cafés with his friends. Or he crunches for exams for his law degree, even though he hates everything about law and never intends to use the degree, to his own consternation and his parents’ great expense. Money is something he discusses with the frustrated intensity of a person who’s never had income but is achingly aware of how expensive life is. “When I think how I’ve now spent more than five years in this establishment, I cannot avoid harping on the enormous sacrifices my family has had to make to enable me to study at a university.”⁵⁶ He agonizes over the uncertainty of his future in sudden bursts, and these are moments where I feel like I will encounter him in the corridors of an academic building sometime, both of us eyeing the clock and trying not to think about what comes after graduation.

I write in my notes, *I shouldn’t be so surprised that a college student in 1910s Spain is similar to college students today.*

But I am surprised. And as I continue to read, I’m struck by his approachability again and again—and then he writes about young women, and all that falls to pieces.

I write in my notes: *Women are nowhere and everywhere in this book, and Pla never knows what to make of them. It is, frankly, exhausting.* Whether it’s intentional or not, Pla’s way of writing about women reflects his discomfort around both the conceptual idea of them and their physical presence. At one point, he writes, “Space is like a woman: obtuse and impenetrable.”⁵⁷ What does he mean by *obtuse*? Every time I reread the sentence I try to understand what he means, but I’m still not sure. He also writes this scene:

On the road, I meet Adela, the girl from the lighthouse. She is more fun and more scrumptious than ever. She walks towards me hoping for a good laugh. I try to caress her, but suddenly she sees something peculiar in my expression, turns pale, struggles nervously, and takes off like a rocket. Then I feel depressed by the alcohol and remorseful because of all the violence.⁵⁸

My eyes always stutter over the word *violence*, but Pla offers no explanation for its use. So, I wonder: what’s left out of the opaque description of Adela’s nervous struggles? I picture flailing elbows and hands that grip too hard, and I don’t want to picture more.

Adela never receives a voice; most of the women Pla mentions do not. But Adela receives a name and a description of her actions (as meager as it is) when many of Pla’s young women never do. I find that grants her an unusual level of presence. I wish that made me feel better, but instead, I just leave his other accounts of women feeling estranged by women’s lack of solidity and unable to comprehend Pla’s incomprehension of them. I’m only halfway through the book when I read about Adela, and I write in my notes: *Normally, I like to let writers present their complete work before I cast*

⁵⁵ Pla, *The Gray Notebook*, 38.

⁵⁶ Pla, *The Gray Notebook*, 329.

⁵⁷ Pla, *The Gray Notebook*, 300.

⁵⁸ Pla, *The Gray Notebook*, 300.

judgements on their character—even in nonfiction there is character growth. Pla is really pushing me on this point, though. In 300 pages, he has never once written a scene in which he treated a woman well. I'm still hesitant to cast judgement so early in this story, particularly because it was a different time, and these behaviors were perhaps not seen as unusual. However. 300 pages is a lot of pages.

Girona is a beautiful city. Barcelona is also beautiful. But where the old city of Girona's beauty feels concentrated, like a jewel, dense and polished, Barcelona feels like a forest, also dense but penetrable, a certain quality of sprawl. We have a weekend to experience it. One evening, walking back from Park Güell, the reedy sound of an oboe coaxes us through the cobbled streets of the Gothic Quarter; we emerge in front of the Cathedral, spires disappearing into the dark. Not just an oboe—or shawm, as I would learn later—but a whole brass band done up in suits and ties, playing a *sardana* for four circles of dancers. The dancers are casually dressed, as though they just stumbled into this, hands raised and clasped, lightfooting through the steps. As the melody of the *sardana* swells on the shawm, I think I hear the dancers' voices bolstering the music on a bone-deep hum.

When the *sardanas* disband, we drift another two blocks into the Gothic Quarter, only to stop on the sidewalks as a parade marches through, some people dressed as royalty, some as grimacing monsters. At least two marching bands accompanied the dancers. I exchange raised eyebrows with a friend—everyone not in costume is dressed in yellow.

Walking back from the parade, I think about Pla's Barcelona. He returned there once the flu subsided; his life there takes up nearly half of *The Gray Notebook*. Pla's Barcelona consisted of the Rambla and lottery ticket hawkers and “the blind man's violin playing a tune somewhere”.⁵⁹ These are all things that are still so characteristic of the city—I gave all my coins to street musicians over the course of the day and always curbed my gaze from the green lottery booths.

There's a moment of perfect irony in Pla's account, too: describing the Canaletes area of Barcelona, he says that “I dislike only one thing in this prosperous, endearing cityscape: the yellow of the trams. Yellow is the color of lunatics.”⁶⁰ I have to hold back a laugh, thinking about it. If only he knew! What would he say if he saw what yellow means in Catalonia today?

For our last morning in Barcelona, we go for a sailing trip around the coast in a little boat called the *Marab*. The owner is an older man in waterproof pants (fly forgetfully unzipped) and sunglasses with a beetle-orange tint. He tells us tales about the Catalan coast with the flair of someone who has spent a lot of time alone at sea, waiting to show off to other people.

Someone asks him what he thinks of the idea of Catalan independence.

“I don't like that term, ‘independence,’” he says, rubbing his beard. “Independence is the Spanish way of looking at it, like Catalonia is a part of Spain that's trying to leave. Catalonia is not a part of Spain; Catalonia is its own nation, and Spain is occupying it. Catalonia just wants to end the occupation.”

⁵⁹ Pla, *The Gray Notebook*, 418.

⁶⁰ Pla, *The Gray Notebook*, 493.

While I read *The Gray Notebook*, I find myself wearing away at a question: what is it, exactly, that makes Pla's works some of "the most colorful and unusual works in modern literature", as the *New York Times Review of Books* said?⁶¹ I find myself agreeing with what Pla writes near the start of *The Gray Notebook*, seemingly torn from a fit of doubt: "Why do I make these literary judgements? What right do I have to make literary judgements when I know next to nothing about anything?"⁶²

I don't know if I have the right to make literary judgements or *who* has that right or why they do, exactly, but the very least I can do is speak with someone who has studied Josep Pla far longer than I have.

I meet with Xavier Pla on a Zoom call one day in November.⁶³ Xavier Pla is a professor at the University of Girona, where he teaches literature and literature theory.⁶⁴ He clicks into the call from his office, framed by bookshelves, dressed smartly in a black sweater shot through with white threads. It matches his hair.

I ask him how he became interested in Josep Pla's work.

"Oh!" He tilts his head in a shrug. "Well. It was a long time ago. I started reading *The Gray Notebook*, and it was a kind of fascinating world that this journal opened to me, no? And then I started reading some short texts by Josep Pla on the Costa Brava—the life of the sailors and the fishers at the beginning of the 20th century. And, well. Then I tried to read all his work, but he wrote a lot, *a lot* a lot—it's, well. It's a pleasure to read this Catalan literature, the Catalan language."

Xavier Pla made it his life's work. He's the person whose name comes up most when I enter a search for scholarly articles, talks, chapters about Josep Pla. When he responded to my request for an interview, I spent an hour trying to write an email back to him, unable to find the words I needed through my excitement.

In one article, Xavier Pla asserts that *The Gray Notebook* is such a striking piece of literature because of the brilliance of its presentation: that of a diary written by a young man on the cusp of independence. Diaries have certain connotations, after all. They're usually focused on and around the writer's life, seen as a private space for honest introspection and description. They're fragmentary, broken up by dated entries.⁶⁵ And, as a reflection of life, they don't always feature tidy narrative arcs. I nod even as I mark up the article with a highlighter. I keep a journal, like so many writers; I write down events, ideas, and feelings so that time does not distort them. The process is more akin to a squirrel burying nuts than to a strict archival process: just because I wrote something doesn't mean I'll remember *where* I wrote it or *why*. Still, once in a while, I find something in my journals that becomes fodder for an essay or a story. I find Xavier Pla's definition of diaries fitting.

As I mentioned earlier, though, *The Gray Notebook* was not really written by a 21-year-old. Nor is it just a diary. Xavier Pla denotes it as a "synthesis of all of Josep Pla's production", a piece of

⁶¹ Bush, "Back Cover."

⁶² Pla, *The Gray Notebook*, 72.

⁶³ Xavier Pla, interview by Caya Greenspan-Layman. 2021. *Interview About Josep Pla* (November 30).

⁶⁴ "Xavier Pla." *Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona*. Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona. Accessed November 2021. <https://www.cccb.org/es/participantes/ficha/xavier-pla/26719>.

⁶⁵ Xavier Pla. 1999. "The Diaries of Josep Pla: Reflections on the Personal Diary, Draft Diary and Elaborated Diary." In *Marginal Voices, Marginal Forms: Diaries in European Literature and History*, by Rachael Langford and Russell West, 126-135. Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 128.

literature created to frame Pla's entire body of work.⁶⁶ Pla compiled *The Gray Notebook* throughout his life, revising the original journal, adding new writing, and splicing in writings from other works until he published it at age 69.

The diary format allowed Pla to put on a mask that Xavier Pla says he employed often: denying that he is a writer (just a journalist) and insisting that he is only relating details of his life, a "witty country gentleman".⁶⁷ Essentially, *The Gray Notebook* is Josep Pla "producing literature while pretending that he was not doing it at all".⁶⁸

The Gray Notebook creates a very convincing illusion of just being a diary, since its pages are filled with portraits of ordinary individuals in Catalan villages and cities, conversations held over aperitifs or coffee, sprawling landscapes. Ordinary things. Nor is *relevance to the plot* a guiding stricture for what scenes are included in the book; people come and go, events pass, and very rarely do events mentioned early in the book come back to haunt it later. Any "plot" the book exhibits appears only in a couple convenient coincidences, like the fact that the book begins on Pla's 21st birthday and ends the day before he leaves for Paris for his first significant job in journalism. And Pla's unerring devotion to reality and writing without frills and lace, which is articulated so many times throughout *The Gray Notebook*, makes it hard to imagine he's ever telling anything but the truth.

This appearance of not trying, of just writing "whatever happens—simply to pass the time—come what may", allows Pla to camouflage the literary tools that he uses, creating such a sense of effortlessness that you feel you're reading a portrayal of the real world.⁶⁹ But "Josep Pla's mirror does not reflect reality, does not reproduce it. If anything, it acts 'as if' it did," Xavier Pla writes.⁷⁰ Other scholars agree, writing that the insertion of a fictional structure and fleshed-out materials into the book skews it from pure autobiography and into an unusual liminal space between fiction and nonfiction, where it exists as something of "a 'false' diary and a 'true' novel".⁷¹

It's gratifying to see scholars agree with my own assessment. I noted it in the margins perhaps a dozen times: *how does Pla know this?* How is it, exactly, that Josep Pla writes scenes of his grandparents' lives that even his *parents* weren't alive to witness? How is it that he depicts a conversation between two older men, word for word, when they're in the privacy of a home? Short of eavesdropping, there's just no way he would be able to know what happened, much less retell a conversation word for word. Realizing this made me realize, also, how *tidy* it is for the book to fit the timeframe that it does, beginning on his 21st birthday and capturing one year at home and one year in Barcelona. Too tidy. I added, alongside my annotated questions: *I suspect fictionalization.*

I say this not to disapprove of Pla's fictionalization; it's common for nonfiction writers to fictionalize their work in minute ways, just enough to seam together raw narrative edges. I'm doing it a little right now (no one needs to know how much trouble I had finding a copy of *The Gray Notebook* in English). Pla's fictionalization is worth remarking upon because it's wonderfully subtle and disarming.

⁶⁶ Ramon, *Josep Pla: Seeing the World in the Form of Articles*, 131 and 42.

⁶⁷ Pla, "The Diaries of Josep Pla: Reflections on the Personal Diary, Draft Diary and Elaborated Diary," 130.

⁶⁸ Pla, "The Diaries of Josep Pla: Reflections on the Personal Diary, Draft Diary and Elaborated Diary," 131.

⁶⁹ Pla, "The Diaries of Josep Pla: Reflections on the Personal Diary, Draft Diary and Elaborated Diary," 131.

⁷⁰ Ramon, *Josep Pla: Seeing the World in the Form of Articles*, 89.

⁷¹ Ramon, *Josep Pla: Seeing the World in the Form of Articles*, 87.

The unique positioning of *The Gray Notebook* isn't the only aspect of Pla's work that makes it special, though. He's praised for a writing style that developed out of his "determination to produce a record of the world as he experienced it."⁷² His writing conjures "the presence of a country, its towns and villages, its people, orography, climate, landscapes, and flavours" with a clarity that is "uncanny" given that by the time he published, "many of these things were lost or disappearing".⁷³ And in his journalism, Pla is praised for his dexterous portrayal of Europe from two perspectives: "His personal viewpoint, in which the superimposition of memories, experiences and interpretations are translated into images imbued with sensuality; and secondly, the historical perspective, with constant references to the political and economic situation, social conditions and the arts."⁷⁴

These are only some of the traits that make Pla's work notable on the international literary stage. But my first few minutes talking with Xavier Pla is a striking reminder that Pla's work is important, first and foremost, to Catalonia.

"I don't know how to express," he says, then continues slowly, "It's *easy* for us to read, and it's a pleasure to read the words, metaphors, and images in Catalan."

I have never regretted reading translations of books before—certainly not the way I regret it in this moment. But I'm starting to recognize that even reading the original, I wouldn't understand exactly what Josep Pla means to Catalonia. There's something Xavier Pla is implying that lies beyond my grasp. I press on with the next question, hoping whatever it is will come to light.

I thought Barcelona would be less, well, *Catalan* when we arrived for our weekend there, simply because Barcelona is 1.62 million people to Girona's 100,260 people. It's an international city, too, receiving its fair share of migrants, international workers, and students, alongside millions of tourists. These things don't dilute culture in the sense of destroying personality—rather, they collage a startling bouquet of cultures in the space of a single city—but they do make it so the "native" culture is only one flower in the mix.

I don't really see this in Barcelona, certainly because I'm only there for three days; instead, I'm struck by the *sardanas* in the street and the traditional Catalan clothing in storefronts. I wonder, though, if Barcelona is an exception to the rule: if Catalan-ness is concentrated here alongside the tourist shops and high-end boutiques. It is the capital of Catalonia, and recent photos reveal protest after protest swathing the streets in yellow, yellow, yellow.

I am in no position to say.

I am reminded of another snapshot of Pla's Barcelona. Barcelona has a history of protest.

Barcelona is remarkable tonight. Everything has been plunged into darkness. It is so astonishing it is literally beyond words. The silence is what's most striking—the deep,

⁷² Ramon, *Josep Pla: Seeing the World in the Form of Articles*, 36.

⁷³ Ramon, *Josep Pla: Seeing the World in the Form of Articles*, 43.

⁷⁴ Cristina Badosa. 2006. "Josep Pla." *Visat*. October. Accessed November 2021. <http://www.visat.cat/traduccion-literatura-catalana/eng/autor/9/josep-pla.html>.

deep silence. You can hear neither the distant wail of vessels setting sail nor distant trains. Nothing at all. It's like living under the heaviest slab of lead.⁷⁵

It's just one of the strikes that happens there while Pla is in school. Two months later, he describes a general strike which lasts for eight days—brought on by employers not abiding by the agreement arranged at the end of an earlier strike.⁷⁶ “It's as if the city is a huge, dark, entangled skein of wool,” he writes. “There are no streetlights tonight so you can see the stars.”⁷⁷

George Orwell, in his *Homage to Catalonia*, describes these strikes as a “revolutionary atmosphere” in Barcelona, nurtured mainly by anarchists in the working class.⁷⁸ Pla would deny the presence of a revolutionary atmosphere, even though he writes of anarchists in the street, military occupation of Barcelona, and a growing “fear of the poor” in brief, often uncontextualized spurts.⁷⁹ (He takes a surprisingly neutral political stance throughout most of *The Gray Notebook*, I think, considering how much his reputation came to be defined by his politics later in life. He usually acts as though he is just passing along what he's heard, and I struggle to separate his voice from the mix.)

I try to imagine Barcelona snuffed out, streets empty of people except the occasional pair of civil guards strolling by. I try to picture being able to see the stars. Barcelona has more than doubled its size since 1919. Nonetheless. It sounds almost unbearable, like the swampy stillness of a long siege. I can't picture it. The streets are too vibrant, eddying with more people than I've seen in one place since the start of the pandemic. In the Gothic Quarter, light and chatter stain the streets gold, even when we walk back to our hostel late at night.

Stillness does sound beyond words.

⁷⁵ Pla, *The Gray Notebook*, 364.

⁷⁶ Pla, *The Gray Notebook*, 418.

⁷⁷ Pla, *The Gray Notebook*, 419.

⁷⁸ Orwell, “Chapter Five.”

⁷⁹ Pla, *The Gray Notebook*, 521 and 271.

III.

*“You aren’t a real convinced noucentista. I don’t think you know enough to be one and the way you are certainly doesn’t incline you to be that way. . . . You must break with rhetoric, precious subtlety, verbosity, with highfalutin literature. When you read what you have written, you don’t even like it yourself. If you ever published it, who would like it apart from the four friends who belong to your clique? Believe me. Forget the cliques. Don’t write with your mind on what you have read: follow your own temperament.”*⁸⁰

—The Gray Notebook, *Alexandre Plana advising Josep Pla*

*Pla’s flirtation with Francoism and opposition to Catalan independence meant he was to become a persona non grata as far as the Spanish Left and Catalan nationalists were concerned when they participated in the transition to democracy.*⁸¹

—Peter Bush, translator

Where exactly does a writer slot into the question of independence when he wasn’t around to see the independence movement in the first place? Recall the narrative of dispossession—that Spain has historically banned the Catalan language to suppress its identity and heritage. That when Spain wants Catalonia to be less Catalan, it takes away the language. Yet despite Spain’s best efforts, the Catalan language still survives.

Many scholars argue that language can be a crucial premise for nationalism. A. W. Orridge states: “Language has been by far the most common basis of autonomist Nationalisms in Europe.”⁸² Benedict Anderson coined the term “linguistic nationalism” to describe the communities that develop around minority languages which are discouraged by the states they are a part of.⁸³ And Kathryn Cramer agrees: “Certainly, in Spain, it is primarily language that differentiates one region from another, and the role of language in demarcating regional identity must not, in this case, be underestimated.”⁸⁴ I’ve seen this linguistic importance with three nations umbrellaed by Spain’s borders: Galician in Galicia, Basque in Basque Country, and—of course—Catalan in Catalonia. Whenever I see so much as a street sign written in one of these languages, my eyes snag on it a moment longer than normal, firmly reminded of where I am. With the Catalan language forming the basis of nationalism and identity, it is unsurprising that the survival of the language has been a priority for Catalan politicians and intelligentsia, not to mention those whose mother tongue is Catalan.⁸⁵ And who better to preserve the language than writers, the people whose use of language is a profession? Not just any writers, though—literary writers. During the *Renaixença*, it was decided that one way to preserve Catalan was to imbue it with high culture, through literature. This kicked

⁸⁰ Pla, *The Gray Notebook*, 606-607.

⁸¹ Bush, “The Gray Notebook by Josep Pla”, 60.

⁸² Kathryn Cramer. 2000. “Introduction.” *Language, the Novelist, and National Identity in Post-Franco Catalonia*. Milton Park: Routledge.

⁸³ Marc Sanjaume i Calvet. 2016. “Anderson and the Imagined Nation.” *DEBATS Annual Review* 1, 68.

⁸⁴ Cramer, “Introduction.”

⁸⁵ Cornellà-Detrell, *Literature as a Response to Cultural and Political Repression in Franco’s Catalonia*, 4.

off literary movements that tried to answer questions still on the minds of writers and critics today: what defines Catalan literature and what is its purpose?

One of these movements was the *noucentisme* movement, which “valued above all intelligence, elegance, classicism and irony”.⁸⁶ These traits required an emotional distance from subject matter that left the style “ornate and inflated” and saturated with symbolism.⁸⁷ Part of this involved the complete rejection of rural spaces as places of creativity; *noucentisme* was concentrated in Barcelona and other urban centers. The movement is now described as Catalan writers trying to find an appropriate narrative voice for a language without the support of a vast literary tradition like, say, that of France. But *noucentisme* is not remembered particularly fondly—besides calling the writing style ornate and inflated, scholars characterize it as an “affected literary language riddled with archaisms” that did Catalan literature—and the Catalan identity—no real service.⁸⁸ (There are exceptions, most notably the poets Jacint Verdaguer and Josep Carner.)^x

Noucentisme fell out of style in the early 20th century. At that time, a linguist named Pompeu Fabra essentially reformed the Catalan language, campaigning to standardize grammar and spellings. One of his books went on to become a dictionary for the standardized Catalan language.⁸⁹ A new wave of writers swept the circuits, asking *what makes Catalan literature Catalan?* and finding *noucentisme*’s answer lacking. They changed tactics, taking a leaf out of journalism’s book: the new Catalan literature would be direct, clear, and conversational.

Perhaps it’s starting to make sense where Pla fits in.

By the start of the Civil War, the Catalan language and identity were knotted together so tightly that “writing in Catalan had taken on a significance far beyond the exercise of creative talents.”⁹⁰ Catalan literature acted as a way of expanding the Catalan language’s possibilities, pushing it forward, while writers simultaneously safeguarded the region’s cultural heritage by virtue of writing in Catalan and about Catalonia.⁹¹ So, when Franco won the war, he did everything in his power to disrupt the production of Catalan literature. Intellectuals and writers were exiled, imprisoned, or executed. Damaging myths were spread about the Catalan language: that it was an “artificial means of expression” Pomeu Fabra had fabricated; that, in fact, Catalan “bore little resemblance to any natural language” at all.⁹²

When I read those words, I realize I didn’t understand the importance of Catalan-language literature until I understood what measures Franco thought were necessary to destroy it.

To read *The Gray Notebook* is to read a thorough denunciation of *noucentisme*. Pla rarely refers to *noucentisme* by name, but consider Pla’s thoughts on Jacint Verdaguer, which appear only 30 pages into the English translation:

⁸⁶ Cornellà-Detrell, *Literature as a Response to Cultural and Political Repression in Franco's Catalonia*, 11.

⁸⁷ Cornellà-Detrell, *Literature as a Response to Cultural and Political Repression in Franco's Catalonia*, 11.

⁸⁸ Cornellà-Detrell, *Literature as a Response to Cultural and Political Repression in Franco's Catalonia*, 7.

⁸⁹ Cornellà-Detrell, *Literature as a Response to Cultural and Political Repression in Franco's Catalonia*, 4.

⁹⁰ Cramer, “Chapter One.”

⁹¹ Cornellà-Detrell, *Literature as a Response to Cultural and Political Repression in Franco's Catalonia*, 3.

⁹² Cornellà-Detrell, *Literature as a Response to Cultural and Political Repression in Franco's Catalonia*, 32.

So far I have been unable to finish a single canto from *L'Atlàntida* or *Canigó*. I am almost ashamed to admit this . . . I make another effort. I will try once more. I sink my teeth in . . . but I can't swallow the cake. . . . I understand that these pages represent something grand and imposing and literature must contain such hulks just as great palaces require vast, ornate fireplaces that don't give off any heat, along with tapestries on their walls. I also understand my sensibility is sorely at fault. But I can do no more. What a feeling of emptiness! What a flood of rhetoric completely disconnected from genuine, human life! These grandiose, sonorous stanzas kill my interest and curiosity dead.

I once heard someone say with a sigh: "Oh, the mysticism, the mystical poetry of Verdaguer!"

But please tell me what connection there is between mysticism and this country of small farmers, greenhorn merchants, and industrialists. And please tell me what Verdaguer was up to when he linked us, through mysticism, to what is an intrinsically alien way of writing.⁹³

Later, Pla cuts his criticisms with praise for Verdaguer's ability to mold a language "thoughtlessly preserved by country folk" into "a new form of poetic expression", no matter Pla's personal distaste for the style.⁹⁴ Usually Pla is not this kind to *noucentiste* writers, and he is certainly not kind to *noucentisme* itself:

A Catalan language that lacks literary form, that is poor, inflexible, ossified, lexically restricted, riddled with corruptions, bone-dry, and marked by an orthographical anarchy that the country's intellectual elite continues to defend, a language developing in a sprawling, chaotic city, to the indifference of a large swatch of the population. . . .⁹⁵

Noucentisme may have been an attempt to further the Catalan language and culture, but the things that *noucentisme* ended up being—elegant and overly symbolic, a showcase of intellect and irony, an urban-inspired literature—fell flat for Pla: *What connection is there between mysticism and this country?* If he asks that of Jacint Verdaguer, a writer he ended up respecting, how strongly must he have disagreed with the ideas of the Barcelona intelligentsia who perpetuated *noucentisme*?

One could say it comes down to a difference of values, even in pursuit of a similar goal. Where the intelligentsia and elites who supported *noucentisme* saw that sort of symbolic, urban, high culture literature as the Catalan language's best chance at survival, Pla was more inclined to a literature that feels close to home, based in the perceptions of human senses and no-frills language. "One must write as one speaks," he insists, "as if one were writing for one's spinster aunt."⁹⁶

⁹³ Pla, *The Gray Notebook*, 32.

⁹⁴ Pla, *The Gray Notebook*, 62.

⁹⁵ Pla, *The Gray Notebook*, 61.

⁹⁶ Ramon, *Josep Pla: Seeing the World in the Form of Articles*, 79.

Essentially, you write clearly, so that you write a literature for *everyone*, not just the elites. It comes as no surprise that he was quite taken with Pompeu Fabra's book, *Catalan Grammar*. "How beautiful a grammar that is clear, simple, precise, and understandable!"⁹⁷ In a very real sense, Pla's work combats the idea that rural areas are unimportant in cultural production, consumption, and preservation—a theme that would follow him throughout his life. And Pla didn't feel that writing a literature for everyone was solely his responsibility: he concludes that Catalan writers have a collective responsibility "to create a literature for everyone, for the minority and the majority, with the highest dignity, underscoring the simplicity with which it is always possible to write a language, to go near the people".⁹⁸ To me, it seems that noucentisme, in its overwrought symbolism, had lost the pulse of the Catalan language—Pla's nearness to the people fed off the richness of everyday language and constructed that into living, breathing writing.

So, Pla was an active member of the cohort of writers which reacted against *noucentisme* during the 1920s. He's credited as one of, if not the most, important writers of 20th century Catalan literature, whose work has been a model for Catalan writers ever since.⁹⁹ Ramon states that Pla was well-equipped to spearhead this movement because of where his "genius" lay: "in overcoming the tendency to run after inflated words that contain nothing. He tried hard and often succeeded in recreating an object, a conversation, an event, a situation along with its circumstances, knowing that it was the circumstances that gave the quality of 'presentness' to the object."¹⁰⁰ *Overcoming the tendency to run after words that mean nothing*. It reminds me of the detail work I try to do in later drafts, rolling each word around my tongue like a marble, feeling for imperfections. Complex words are too often spiky or scarred; they repel other words, no matter how I want them to string together. In those moments, it comes down to my ego or the essay's wellbeing. It can sting a little to make that choice.

Why did Pla choose journalism, though? He writes more than once that journalism was "not a good profession" and "unhappy enough", for all that it forces him to "face things head-on and describe them clearly and simply".¹⁰¹ Ramon explains that Pla had very few options besides journalism. "In Spain generally and in Barcelona in particular, the press became early on the one and only alternative to the university chair."¹⁰² The university chair represented *noucentisme*, so that was not an option, and Pla, who would have preferred to pursue "creative writing", did not find the prospect financially viable.¹⁰³ (A century later, every young writer I know feels the same way about the prospect of a literary career. *It's too risky. I'll be broke. My parents won't support it.* We are all like the young Pla, obsessed with and frustrated by the omnipotence of money. If only we lived in a world without it.) Hence, Pla started his career in journalism. In the 1920s alone, he wrote about French society in Paris, the inflation-stricken middle class of Germany, Mussolini's March on Rome, politics in Portugal and Madrid, and a visit to the USSR.¹⁰⁴ It's rumored that he interviewed Hitler at some

⁹⁷ Pla, *The Gray Notebook*, 256.

⁹⁸ Ramon, *Josep Pla: Seeing the World in the Form of Articles*, 10.

⁹⁹ Pla, *Interview about Josep Pla*; Bush, "The Gray Notebook by Josep Pla," 60.

¹⁰⁰ Ramon, *Josep Pla: Seeing the World in the Form of Articles*, 12.

¹⁰¹ Pla, *The Gray Notebook*, 486. Ramon, *Josep Pla: Seeing the World in the Form of Articles*, 10.

¹⁰² Ramon, *Josep Pla: Seeing the World in the Form of Articles*, 10.

¹⁰³ Ramon, *Josep Pla: Seeing the World in the Form of Articles*, 3.

¹⁰⁴ Ramon, *Josep Pla: Seeing the World in the Form of Articles*, xvii.

point, but rumors about Pla's life abound, and for what little it's worth, *I* have not been able to locate confirmation of this.¹⁰⁵

In the introduction to a book he published in 1967, *Life Embitters*, Pla writes, "This is a book of narrative literature, the kind I would have liked to write, if I hadn't been completely taken up reporting the news. . . . It is an open question whether I would have had any talent to bring to bring to such narrative [and] I don't know if I have been successful. I can't offer any guarantees. They are purely and simply attempts. . ." ¹⁰⁶

Don't be taken in by such false modesty. Pla may have spent most of his life in journalism, but he knew *exactly* what he was doing when he wrote *Life Embitters*.^{107xi} It's not such a stretch to argue that he knew what he was doing to Catalan literature, too.¹⁰⁸

If language is important to nationalism, and literature is the chosen tool to preserve the language, it stands to reason that literature is also important to nationalism. "Literature has an important role in the construction of national identities, elaborating fictions that articulate collective values," Patricio and Pecourt say.¹⁰⁹ Their statement refers solely to the content of the writing, but in Catalonia, where the language and the nation are inextricable, literature written in Catalan acts as a tangible manifestation of the nation's distinctiveness.¹¹⁰ Put more simply: writing in Catalan is political. And as such, the role of creative writing in the "survival of Catalonia's cultural distinctiveness" has led to the major debate surrounding Catalan literature: what defines Catalan literature, and what is its purpose?¹¹¹

What defines Catalan literature? Many say that *the* defining feature of Catalan literature is the Catalan language: "It is [the Catalan language's] continued existence which makes possible a Catalan literature definable as such, and separated in linguistic terms from other Hispanic literatures with which it shares geographical territory,"¹¹² Cramer writes.

In our conversation, Xavier Pla agrees, his tone firm with the certainty of long consideration. "For me, Catalan literature is written in Catalan. Catalan *culture* is bilingual—Catalan and Spanish. But for me, the main point of the literature is the language, so the literature has to be written in Catalan." He chuckles a little, drily, "But during some long periods of the history of Catalonia, our language was banned. People had to write in Spanish. So, what can you do?"¹¹³

¹⁰⁵ Marta Lasalas. 2020. "Ponsatí: 'It's a bit scary to see the Catalan Parliament so spineless'." *El Nacional.cat*, February 17. Accessed November 2021. https://www.elnacional.cat/en/politics/ponsati-scary-to-see-catalan-parliament-spineless_470700_102.html.

¹⁰⁶ Josep Pla. 2015. *Life Embitters*. Translated by Peter Bush. Brooklyn, New York: Archipelago, 7 and 9.

¹⁰⁷ Ramon, *Josep Pla: Seeing the World in the Form of Articles*, 17-18.

¹⁰⁸ Ramon, *Josep Pla: Seeing the World in the Form of Articles*, 46;

Pla, "The Diaries of Josep Pla: Reflections on the Personal Diary, Draft Diary and Elaborated Diary," 130.

¹⁰⁹ Patricio and Pecourt, "The writer's contest: manifestos and literary struggle in Catalonia (2014–2020)," 1 and 2.

¹¹⁰ Cramer, "Introduction."

¹¹¹ Cornellà-Detrell, *Literature as a Response to Cultural and Political Repression in Franco's Catalonia*, 4.

¹¹² Cramer, "Introduction."

¹¹³ Pla, *Interview about Josep Pla*.

Catalan writers working under the Franco dictatorship, like Pla, and during other periods when Catalan was banned are given more leeway on this point, even if a few brave souls published in Catalan anyway. But now, the specter of globalization looms over minority languages like some sticky-fingered monster, and Catalonia has rallied Catalan literature as an indispensable tool for protecting the Catalan language once again. “The risk of globalization is the homogenization of languages and cultures. We have to accept that the relationship between the local and the global is difficult for minority cultures and languages, and we have fought a lot to maintain our small culture. We have this anxiety about what will happen in the future with our language,” Xavier Pla tells me.

“Is there anxiety about the survival of the Catalan culture as well as the language?” I ask.

Pla pauses. “Yes—yes, yes. They are parallel.” His tone says this is the most natural thing in the world. I think that, coming from a culture where the future is secure and the language so large that I could live my whole life without even *learning* another language, I don’t understand how basic a connection this is for Catalans.

The idea that culture, language, and literature are inextricable from each other isn’t new or unique to Pla’s perspective. It was a main point of the *Renaixença*.¹¹⁴ This just goes to show how strong the idea is—and hints at how long Catalonia has been worried about losing its language.^{115xii}

People do maintain opposing positions regarding the language of Catalan literature, arguing that language should not be the only criteria for inclusion in Catalan literary circles; after all, Catalan society *is* bilingual, and there is a tradition of Castilian literature being produced in Catalonia. If Catalan writers wrote in Castilian (or other major languages, for that matter), their work would achieve wider circulation more easily, without the need to translate it. This could, arguably, increase awareness of Catalonia, understanding of Catalonia’s political and cultural goals, and empathy with the Catalan people.

These are all reasonable arguments, and personally, I would be interested in seeing more Catalan literature appear in American bookstores—which *might* be more easily carried out if those books were written in Castilian. And the wider audience that Castilian caters to might make a writing career more financially feasible for individual writers, too, which is a major source of anxiety for many.

Another argument comes from Marti, who points out that *because* Catalan culture is bilingual, writers should not automatically be assigned identities based on the language they write in: “We must be very clear that the act of writing in Castilian does not convert a writer automatically into part of Spanish literature . . . in the same way today nobody has anything to say about a Catalan writer who, when he writes in Castilian, does not feel Spanish.”¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ Cramerí, “Chapter One.”

¹¹⁵ King, “Catalan Literature(s) in Post-Colonial Context,” 258-259.

¹¹⁶ Marti, “Interliterariness and the Literary Field: Catalan Literature and Literatures in Catalonia,” 75.

To be clear, I do not feel it's my place to make a call about this, seeing as I am neither Catalan nor a literary scholar, but I will say that there are some convincing counterarguments to the idea that Catalan literature shouldn't have to be written in Catalan:

The argument for a writer's personal identity determining their literary classification makes the situation much more complex and perhaps unanswerable, though a good number of people would argue that writers who identify as Catalan would—or should—know that the identity of “Catalan writer” comes with a certain, historically-grounded responsibility to the language.

Regarding the argument of the accessibility of literature written in Castilian, the truth is, literature can be—and is—translated. Otherwise, I wouldn't have had the opportunity to read *The Gray Notebook*. This is not just a private venture, either: the Catalan regional government has created initiatives like the Ramon Llull Institute to promote the translation and publication of Catalan literature, as well as to provide grants and other opportunities to Catalan writers.

The final counterargument lies in the statistics the publishing industry has produced. There have been ideas that translating Catalan into Spanish or English would act as a “bridge”, prompting translations into other languages as awareness of Catalan writers increased. Even though this seems logical, it has not materialized, as further translations have remained few and far between.¹¹⁷ Perhaps Catalan literature originally written in Spanish would have more luck receiving translations—but it seems unlikely.

In reading these arguments, I can almost see the structures of thought that have perpetuated these debates for more than a century. It's like looking at a family tree—arguments birth other arguments, counterarguments, and counter-counterarguments, on and on. It's still growing. We can't see the end yet.

Here's one thing to say about the Catalan independence movement: the question of independence is immensely complex, and in the months leading up to the 2017 referendum, it was divisive and *extremely* pressing. So, it's not surprising that it drew all sorts of people into the sphere of public political debate. Such was the case for writers. Many writers who had previously refrained from political debate began adding their voices to the conversation surrounding the issue of independence. Patricio and Pecourt attribute this to growing political polarization; it spread throughout society and spilled into literary circles in Spain and Catalonia.

Writers, bolstered by the prestige of their craft, have a certain ability to step into the public sphere as intellectuals. There, they can respond to issues they see as affecting their field—and in the case of the independence movement, writers' mobilization appeared mainly in the form of manifestos: one such manifesto declared that “on October 1st. writers will vote” and included the signatures of 898 people, anonymized in order to show unity.¹¹⁸ And manifestos weren't the only course of action. One writer who supported the independence

¹¹⁷ Arenas and Skrabec. *Catalan Literature and Translation in a Globalized World*, 77.

¹¹⁸ Patricio and Pecourt, "The writer's contest: manifestos and literary struggle in Catalonia (2014–2020)," 3.

movement, Jaume Cabré, used his international fame to speak to the German and French media about the independence movement.¹¹⁹ Another writer, the Nobel-winning Mario Vargas Llosa, called Catalan nationalism a “toxic ideology” in the Spanish news and led an anti-independence protest in Barcelona.¹²⁰

Whether these writers made any striking difference on the public’s political views has not been measured, and Patricio and Pecourt point out that writers did not bring many new ideas to the discussion; they mostly responded to the discourse already present in the field.¹²¹ Still, this shows that writers hold a particular position in Catalonia, likely due in part to their historical status as the protectors of the Catalan language. Their voices will at least be acknowledged if they choose to speak.

Because of writers’ importance in Catalonia, it isn’t very surprising that it is not just living writers who were mobilized for or against the independence movement.

I think that, when I emailed Xavier Pla to request an interview, I touched a nerve by placing Josep Pla’s name in proximity with the words “Catalan independence movement”. On our Zoom call, one of the first things he says, voice firm, is, “It is not useful to speculate about what Josep Pla would say about the independence movement. How can we know? Pla lived in another historical moment when the independence movement was very, *very* small. So, he wasn’t independentist because no one was independentist. You can’t make any claims about that without manipulating his work.”¹²²

¹¹⁹ Patricio and Pecourt, "The writer’s contest: manifestos and literary struggle in Catalonia (2014–2020)," 7.

¹²⁰ Patricio and Pecourt, "The writer’s contest: manifestos and literary struggle in Catalonia (2014–2020)," 10.

¹²¹ Patricio and Pecourt, "The writer’s contest: manifestos and literary struggle in Catalonia (2014–2020)," 14.

¹²² Pla, *Interview about Josep Pla*.

IV.

*My God, what a situation exists in this country, in Barcelona! It isn't a revolutionary situation; no revolution is being called for. I don't think anyone believes the foundations of present-day society are threatened. The bourgeoisie isn't afraid of revolution and the gunmen have never thought they were carrying through any kind of revolution. It is just that anarchists have taken possession of the streets and are brandishing pistols. Their presence is so visible, so defiant, that many people find this situation entirely natural. We cannot seem to escape this impasse: tyranny or anarchy. It is a situation that is not easily understood even by people like us who are eyewitnesses to the events as they unfold.*¹²³

—The Gray Notebook

*For political and ideological reasons, he is the most controversial of Catalan writers, in particular for his supposed links with the fascist side in the Spanish civil war. As a result of this, after 1969, the juries repeatedly refused to concede him the Award of Honour in Catalan letters.*¹²⁴

—M. Rosa Ruiz González for *Associació d'Escriptors en Llengua Catalana*

I very rarely dislike Pla's work. Sometimes, though, I dislike Pla *quite* thoroughly:

On my way back, I see a magnificent adolescent girl skipping with some kids by the walls around the gasometers. Tall, lovely, full, soft legs, large eyelashes over big black eyes, shapely, sheer nylons. She jumps cheekily, without a care in the world. Thirteen years old? Fourteen? Firm, prominent buttocks, a loose dress, firm breasts flopping under her clothes, hair gathered behind her head. Her body is so full of grace against that awful landscape. When she jumps, she bares a round, wonderfully smooth knee. I think: Either you have to eat more or women won't . . . feel hunger. Temptation fades.¹²⁵

Since the scene with Adela, I have often skimmed the sections where Pla writes about women. Skim, I decided, so I don't waste time being annoyed by blatant observation of women's bodies and dry comments on women's "tendencies". I reached this decision for two reasons: first, what today is called misogyny was likely not considered to be a big deal when Pla was writing. Secondly, Pla's misogyny isn't going anywhere: *The Gray Notebook* is published as the author saw fit, and the author has died. Nothing short of someone else revising the book would remove it. Which raises the question, *should* an original work be altered just to remove something seen as unsavory in the light of today's morality?

Something about that doesn't sit right with me.

Nonetheless, Pla's misogyny is something I cannot reconcile. I scribble in my notes: *What do you do when there's been a change of morality since the time at which someone was writing? It is so predatory for a 22-*

¹²³ Pla, *The Gray Notebook*, 521-522.

¹²⁴ Ruiz, "Josep Pla, 1897-1981."

¹²⁵ Pla, *The Gray Notebook*, 422-423.

year-old man to write about a 14-year-old girl's body in such painstaking detail, and I am very tempted to just put this book down.

Moments like this, I stop trying to learn from Pla. There's nothing to learn here.

It would not be unreasonable to say that questions regarding the arts—their purpose, their creation, their motivations—are more or less always on my mind. I started thinking about them when I was a teenager and noticed that all the audience members at my orchestra concerts had gray hair. Then I wondered what consumption of the arts means, and what happens to art when people stop consuming it.

I've been pondering one question in particular since my initial investigation revealed that Josep Pla may have had a brief infatuation with fascism: what do you do when great art is created by bad people? The phrasing oversimplifies the question, of course, but the issue the question gets at is so enormous and jumbled that no one has found a solution people can agree on. Some say that art should stand totally apart from the artist, so the artist's morality has nothing to do with anything. Others say that art created by immoral artists should not be supported because it spreads a message that it's alright to do immoral things.

It's quite a topic of discussion because there are so very many artists who have done very bad things. Particularly recently, with the Me Too movement's lengthening list of sexual assault and harassment allegations against powerful men. I've noticed that, mixed in with the gossip and outrage surrounding each newly revealed allegation, there's some quiet disappointment—people who feel genuinely hurt that someone they looked up to would do something so reprehensible. It has made me turn a wary eye towards the living artists I admire, wondering if and when one will let me down.

There are a lot of canonized artists whose personal histories are questionable at least and often downright disturbing—like Pablo Picasso and Richard Wagner, both also known for their misogyny. But I think that with living artists, the question of whether or not to separate the art from the artist is more pressing, since consumption of their art usually translates to financial support for the artist. With dead artists, the concern is mainly about morality.

I read an interview with a professor at University College Dublin, Clare Hayes-Brady, and she pulls the rug right out from under the immoral artist question: “For me, it's a false dichotomy because this question presupposes we should want our artists to be virtuous, and that we should expect morality and ethical behavior from artists. I don't understand why we expect that or why we should expect that.”¹²⁶

She says this because she thinks that when someone's work was important in or to a particular cultural moment, it warrants study, regardless of the artist's actions—sometimes, the artist is only reflecting what society's particular moral issues are in that moment. For her, the real issue only arises under particular circumstances: “The issue here is not just ‘Is this artist monstrous?’ but ‘Is this work of art asking me as a reader to be complicit with the artist's monstrosity?’”¹²⁷

¹²⁶ Constance Grady. 2019. “What do we do when the art we love was created by a monster?” *Vox*. June 25. Accessed November 2021. <https://www.vox.com/culture/2018/10/11/17933686/me-too-separating-artist-johnny-depp-woody-allen-michael-jackson-louis-ck>.

¹²⁷ Grady, “What do we do when the art we love was created by a monster?”

This is a very valid viewpoint, I think, though I'm not convinced it accounts for every circumstance. It certainly doesn't address the value of boycotting living artists to make a point about acceptable behaviors. I also question the idea that artists can make art that is fully separate from their personal monstrosity; after all, doesn't art reflect the artist's perspective? It is true, however, that society expects every public figure to be a pillar of morality. This is unrealistic. History shows that these expectations are consistently not met.

I think about these questions all the time because my stances on them are still malleable. Hayes-Brady's interview doesn't give me a stance, either, but her views feed into my considerations, particularly when I think about the rashes of misogyny in *The Gray Notebook*—or the fact that I still can't find an explanation of Pla's politics. For all I know, he really *did* spy for Franco.

By the time I talk to Xavier Pla, the question of *what was Pla's actual political position?* has piled up behind my teeth for weeks. I don't necessarily expect him to have *the* answer, but I'm hoping he can explain help me put together some of the pieces.

"I've read very different accounts of how Pla related to the Franco dictatorship. I'm wondering how you would characterize that situation, because what I've seen is contradictory," I say.

Xavier Pla smiles. "How so?"

I can't help but laugh. "It ranges from Pla aligning with Franco almost by accident, not really supporting him, to Pla actively working in espionage for him. To me, at least, those seem like fairly different accounts, and I know it's complicated, but—"

"Espionage? We don't have proof of that," Xavier Pla scoffs. "I think that's a bad legend. But the situation is *not* black or white, it's not yes or no, it's kind of gray. We have to be aware of *when* we're judging his opinions, because Pla wrote for sixty years, from the 20s to the 80s, so he had a lot of evolutions and contradictions. He's a journalist, and he has an interest in history and economics, sociology—all the topics—so there are two main sides. There's the Catalanist, and there's the conservative."¹²⁸

"What do you mean by Catalanist?" I ask.

"He's, hmm—someone who thinks that Catalonia has to achieve a kind of autonomous political system. The main center of Pla's reflection is Catalonia and Catalan politics, and the questions are always: who will survive the Catalan culture? Who will survive the Catalan language? And what would be the best way to organize Spain to preserve Catalan? This was an obsession for him."

I raise my eyebrows.

Pla continues, explaining that Josep Pla envisioned a Catalonia that was still a part of Spain, but a part that had a high level of autonomy. "He was a pragmatist, and he thought that the people of Catalonia were too romantic about solving their political problems with Spain. He didn't think it would be as easy as they thought. He tried to tell them that, but some people didn't like to hear it. That's why he supported the Nationalists when so many Catalans were Republicans."

¹²⁸ Pla, *Interview about Josep Pla*.

It's just like our lecturer in Girona had explained: the 20% of Catalans who supported Franco largely did so because they saw it as an opportunity to scrub out leftism in the regional government; Franco's complete abolishment of the regional government and Catalonia's autonomy came as an unwelcome surprise.

Xavier Pla sums it up with a wave of his hands. "So, Pla was a winner of the Spanish Civil War as a *conservative*. But as a *Catalan writer*, he lost the war because the Catalan language was no longer allowed. When he distanced himself from the Franco regime in the 40s and 50s, Francoist thinkers didn't like him, and Republican thinkers didn't like him because he had supported Franco at all."

Finally, I think. *I'm finally starting to understand*. I understand Pla's concerns about the difficulty of solving Catalonia's problems with Spain—it seems like that's a concern in the independence movement today, too—but the decision to take an "anything but socialism" stance is not one I can agree with. I ask Xavier Pla how people think of Josep Pla today, and he nods.

"In the 70s and 80s, a lot of people thought Pla wasn't useful to read because of all this. But now there is a wide consensus: Pla is very important for Catalans, that he is the most important Catalan writer of the 20th century, and *yes*, he had these political contradictions. We know it, but we accept it. So, his books are still published, and a lot of students read his work in high school and in the universities. I think that the political polemics are more minor now than they were 20 years ago."

I process that approach for a moment, then phrase my last question as carefully as I can, using words he used earlier in the interview to try to get this right. "Do you think people have manipulated Josep Pla's name or work because of the independence movement?"

Xavier Pla doesn't hesitate. "Yes. On both sides. There are readers and critics who try to interpret his work one way or another."

In one article I read, Clara Ponsatí, a pro-independence Catalan exile and member of the European Parliament, criticized Spain's history of intolerance, noting that even Hitler admired Spain's expulsion of the Jews: "These are [Josep] Pla's words, not mine."¹²⁹ In another article, Josep Cuní, a Catalan reporter, said he didn't support the 2017 referendum because of how it was carried out, stating that a botched and messy attempt at independence has no future: "Like Pla used to say, 'You go ahead and do whatever you like in life, but above all, never make a fool of yourself.'"¹³⁰

They're only brief mentions, but brief mentions are enough to cast the speaker as intellectuals, readers who know the work of one of Catalonia's most precious writers. It gives them power.^{xiii}

Xavier Pla must rub his temples when he sees these sorts of things.

¹²⁹ Lasalas, "Ponsatí: "It's a bit scary to see the Catalan Parliament so spineless"."

¹³⁰ Íñigo Domínguez. 2017. "A referendum in Catalonia? Yes, but not like this." *El País*, September 19. Accessed November 2021.

https://english.elpais.com/elpais/2017/09/18/inenglish/1505749273_924248.html.

Hearing Xavier Pla's opinion on Josep Pla's politics and Catalonia's general acceptance of Pla's controversies makes me revise my question: what do you do when great art is created by a morally complicated person? It is not my place to clear Josep Pla on his politics—if Catalans can accept his work and his politics side by side, that is their prerogative, and all the better for it. Given what literature in the Catalan language means to Catalonia, it would be a great loss to cut Pla out of their literary canon.

On a personal level, though, I still cannot reconcile Pla's portrayals of women. Perhaps he was perfectly respectful to women in real life; I can't say. One could make the argument that Pla only wrote what he wrote about women because he was doing so in the privacy of his journal—but as someone who uses journals to record private thoughts and feelings, I *still* find that problematic. That sort of attitude, even kept quiet, will roar out sometime or other, hurting people along the way. Either way, the older Pla who published *The Gray Notebook* knew perfectly well that his portrayals of women would be public, and he portrayed them as such anyway. I don't want to haphazardly apply today's moral standards to a man who published this book more than 50 years ago; however, to borrow Hayes-Brady's position, I do not want to participate in Pla's views of women as contained in *The Gray Notebook*—or see other people participate in them.

It is ironic that, in the midst of all these thoughts, Pla decides to contribute his two cents on the matter. I am in a public library when I come across it, and I yank at the binding of *The Gray Notebook* until it bares the words a little more plainly, lean my elbows on my desk, and read:

Of course, it would be wonderful if the history of culture didn't harbor scoundrels. It would be ideal, splendid. But the fact remains that humanity's efforts to eliminate and do without this kind of person have been unsuccessful, nearly futile. . . . Sometimes these men are very talented. Herein lies the drama. The love of truth can coexist with the most repulsive personal greed. Freedom of thought and broad-mindedness can prosper in a cruel temperament; the basest form of hypocrisy in the most gifted individual; the most prized social graces in a highly dangerous individual; poetic intuition or the art of objectivity in a monster of perversity. . . . If we want to feel we are alive and kicking, we must have recourse to reading about the virtues, sores, and lesions of others.¹³¹

I reread it, then lean back and stare at the ceiling, cream with gilded flowers and bare-bulb chandeliers. I pinch my lips shut. Laughter here would be far more disruptive than the person coughing a few desks away or even the person typing hard enough to break their keyboard in the back.

It's moments like this where I wonder who I'm reading. Is the 21-year-old Pla so astute? I can picture the older Pla rereading these thoughts at his battered writing desk, himself considered something of a scoundrel, and nodding minutely at the irony of having written his own future while so inexperienced. Or did the older Pla, infusing his old notebooks with the rich and the bitter of a

¹³¹ Pla, *The Gray Notebook*, 282-283.

lifetime's experience, light a cigarette and reflect on society's desire for artists to be moral? He would address it if he found it unrealistic. He had no patience for idealism.

I blink at the ceiling until violet spots glow across the backs of my eyelids where the chandeliers are. Pla's words free up a new perspective for me. It's not *permission* to see him as a mixed character—no artist can control how they're perceived once their work is aired before the public, and I do not need permission to have an opinion.

No, it's simultaneously more forceful and gentler than permission. As though, in his acceptance of the improbability of pure artists, he demands to be recognized for who he is—and at the same time, he casts judgement on himself, so readers need not hesitate to do the same. *We must have recourse to reading about the virtues, sores, and lesions of others.* I think it would be too generous to assume Pla considered misogyny one of his sores or lesions, but still, his words invite us to look at that problem head-on, without flinching.

His own words demystify him, and it's welcome.

I reopen the book and find where I left off.

I reach the end of *The Gray Notebook* on the 20th of November. I've been reading for a few hours, now, and my mind has twined itself into the pages the way it does with any absorbing literature. *The Gray Notebook's* last entry is almost dismissive in its brevity, the tone of someone leaving behind their “years of apprenticeship”, as Badosa puts it:¹³²

15 November. Make preparations for my journey. My passport will be ready tomorrow. A messenger will bring my set of sweaters and the money to buy an overcoat and a suitcase. Alexandre Plana and I will go shopping in the afternoon. The suitcase is particularly important.

I go to Paris the day after tomorrow.¹³³

In the bewildered moment between the end of the book and me reclaiming myself from its pages, I think, *Oh, the 15th was days ago—he must be in Paris by now.*

Then I remember we're separated by 102 years as well as five days, if one even relies on the dates in *The Gray Notebook*. I let the book close in my lap and scrub my eyes. What does it say that the text felt so near, so relaxed, that I believed for a moment it was written a few days ago? I am a little bereft at the thought that I will not be accompanying him on his travels.

Josep Pla would go to Paris and, later, to Italy, Germany, England, the US, and elsewhere, traveling extensively throughout his life. He acquired some remarkable friends—Salvador Dalí and Jaume Vicens i Vives, to name but two—and a lot of enemies, including most of the Catalan left. He would “retire” from Barcelona to rural Catalonia soon after Franco's accession in 1939.¹³⁴ His family's house in Llofriu, a tawny stone affair with arched windows, would be home for the rest of

¹³² Badosa, "Josep Pla."

¹³³ Pla, *The Gray Notebook*, 638.

¹³⁴ Bush, “The Gray Notebook by Josep Pla,” 61.

his life.^{135xiv} Rural life suited his writing; by the time Pla died in 1981, he had produced 47 volumes that totaled to more than 30,000 pages of writing.¹³⁶

Towards the end of *The Gray Notebook*, he writes: “In quantitative terms, this notebook is assuming extraordinary proportions. When these papers are published—if they ever are—how will readers react, that is, if they find readers with time on their hands? I only ask one thing of this hypothetical reader: I ask him to read it slowly and calmly.”¹³⁷

That’s a lot to ask of a reader, I think, especially so late in the book, once their opinions are formed already. But I find that when I close the book for the final time, it lingers in my mind, overlaying itself on my memories and experiences of Catalonia, casting purple shadows across my thoughts. It adds itself to my bookshelf.

¹³⁵ Ramon, *Josep Pla: Seeing the World in the Form of Articles*, 150.

¹³⁶ Ramon, *Josep Pla: Seeing the World in the Form of Articles*, 150 and xviii.

¹³⁷ Pla, *The Gray Notebook*, 503.

Notes

ⁱ Bush writes that in addition to using *el país* to refer to Catalonia, Pla typically referred to Spain as “the peninsula” rather than by name.

ⁱⁱ The documentary *Dos Cataluñas* estimates 800-900 injuries; according to the Catalan News, Madrid’s official count is 300 injuries.

ⁱⁱⁱ Some of these imagined communities are constructed as “civic nationalism” via shared values—for instance, a group of people that believes in democracy and patriotism. Others are constructed as “ethnic nationalism” via inherited traits—race or language, for example.ⁱⁱⁱ These conceptions of nationalism are theoretical and potentially problematic. Tamir argues that Kohn’s conceptions of civic and ethnic nationalism are meant to “establish the moral supremacy of the West”, which is characterized as relying on civic nationalism, which is seen as a more advanced and civilized nationalism than ethnic nationalism, characterized as primarily used in the East and based on primordial traits rather than rational perspective. Additionally, these constructions of civic and ethnic nationalism are rarely tidy to apply in real situations; most nations exhibit both types. This is observable in Catalonia: Catalans share specific *traits* like the language, but they also *value* democracy.

^{iv} This is up from 22% in 2018 but still lower than pre-referendum levels of 29% in 2013, 2014, 2016, and 2017. Whereas the percentage of people identifying only as Spanish has remained fairly stable at 5%, with the exception of 2018, which was 8%.

^v It’s estimated that between the Civil War and the Franco regime, more than 250,000 civilians died—executed or subjected to concentration camps, imprisonment, and forced labor.

^{vi} According to Anna Villarroya, “50% of radio broadcasts must be done in Catalan, as well as 25% of music; Catalan must be the standard language used for written media.”

^{vii} Unemployment in Spain jumped from 11.3% in 2008 to 27% in 2012. In Catalonia, unemployment peaked at 24% in 2012.

^{viii} Quiroga and Molina argue that Spain’s austerity measures damaged not only its image, but also the Spanish identity: “seriously eroding a Spanish identity based on a concept of national solidarity created by the welfare state”.^{viii} Catalonia took advantage of this weakened identity to push the blame for Catalan austerity measures onto the Spanish state, lending credence to the argument that Spain was robbing Catalonia while strengthening Catalan identity.

^{ix} The documentary *Dos Cataluñas* argues that there have been eleven instances when Catalonia has wanted to leave Spain during their lengthy relationship. Others would argue that the *Renaixença* was the start of the independence movement.

^x Jacint Verdaguer was a poet and priest who was considered one of the founding members of *noucentisme* for his epic poems. Etherington writes that he is also considered the “crowning glory of the *Renaixença*” in literature. Josep Carner is referred to by many as the “Prince of Catalan Poets”, and he received eight nominations for the Nobel Prize in Literature throughout his career. Although Josep Pla expresses some reservations about their work, he also admires them both, primarily for their deftness with the Catalan language. Other *noncentiste* writers do not receive such respect from him.

^{xi} Journalism is typically not considered literature for one primary reason: journalism covers current events, and once those events are finished, the journalistic pieces written about them are considered expired. Literature, on the other hand, has to have a sort of “timeless” quality to be considered great; it maintains its relevance for years. Ramon argues that Pla’s journalism—which emphasized summoning a complete picture of the peoples, places, and times he was reporting on along with an element of personal commentary—stands the test of time, therefore allowing it to fall in the realm of literature even though it is journalism.

^{xii} There is also a post-colonial argument to the use of Catalan in Catalan literature, according to King, where the argument goes that language can be used as a form of subjugation, as with Castilian under Franco (and other Spanish leaders). As such, the language of the oppressor cannot adequately represent the experiences of the oppressed. This argument comes from Kenyan novelist Ngugi wa Thiong’o to represent the situation in nations with very clear colonial histories; in Catalonia, this history is questionable, so this argument is not, perhaps, *the* main argument used.

^{xiii} One review written by British author Alan Riding states this about the independence movement: “Pla is once more a figure of controversy, ignored by nationalist purists because he never endorsed Catalan independence and held in esteem by writers and intellectuals who fear that obsessive nationalism is isolating Catalonia from the rest of Spain. . . .” This is an interesting argument and likely holds some truth; Xavier Pla claims Catalonia has accepted Pla’s political controversies, but that is a blanket statement that likely does not apply to *all* Catalans. However, Riding’s depiction, for all that he positions himself as a neutral third party, manipulates Pla’s image by portraying his work as on the side of anti-independence. He also fails to account for the fact that proponents of independence utilize Pla’s work for their goals, as well; perhaps some “national purists” do ignore Pla’s work, but it is too much to imply that everyone who is pro-independence does so.

^{xiv} Pla grew up in Palafrugell, where his family’s primary home was; although they were not wealthy, they also owned a home in Llofriu because that is where their farmlands lay.

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