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Joan Oliver (Pere Quart)



Joan Oliver
Josep Maria Ripoll

Sabadell, 1899 - Barcelona, 1986. Poet and playwright

Joan Oliver is a writer who is difficult to place from the generational standpoint. He was born in 1899 and hence is of the batch of [Riba](#), [Foix](#), [Sagarra](#) and [Salvat-Papasseit](#). He published his first book, a collection of short stories, in 1928 but did not become known as a poet until 1934, a circumstance that brings him closer, in chronological terms, to [Espriu](#), [Rosselló-Pòrcel](#) and [Vinyoli](#). Again, with his commitment to the Republican cause and subsequent exile, he reached his peak of fame in the 1960s through the points of contact in his work with what was known as "historic realism".

Attempts at classification aside, his work presents some very consistent features: a permanently critical stance regarding political power and social conformity, irony at times verging on sarcasm, a model of language as simple as it is depurated, and clear opposition to pretension and transcendentalism. With a background of [Noucentisme](#), the early twentieth-century politico-cultural movement in the service of bourgeois reformism, and the avant-garde, Oliver tended towards realism and political engagement after the Civil War, although by means of acerbic humour, an iconoclastic and frequently individualistic spirit and clearly articulated ethical assumptions. The latter, in influencing his poetry, worked in his favour in the 1960s but certainly worked against him thereafter, with the emergence of movements that were more interested in the autonomy of the literary fact *vis-à-vis* ideological contingencies.

From Bourgeois Origins to Commitment

Joan Oliver was born in 1899 into a well-known industrialist family of the Sabadell bourgeoisie. His paternal grandfather was one of the founders of the bank Caixa de Sabadell, while his maternal grandfather was a director of the influential employers' organisation Foment del Treball. Fourth of eleven siblings, of whom he was the only survivor, Joan Oliver was educated as a young gentleman, studied Law, travelled around Europe and, in 1919, formed what became known as the "Grup de Sabadell" [Sabadell Group], along with the novelist [Francesc Trabal](#) and the poet and critic Armand Obiols – the pseudonym of Joan Prat – and others. These writers produced a literature somewhere between cosmopolitan-leaning avant-garde iconoclasm and pure jesting of local flavour, which was somewhat along the lines of [Santiago Rusiñol](#)'s witticisms, for example. Their taste for absurd humour is manifest in the collective publication *L'any que ve* [Next Year], a compilation of jokes and absurdities, signed by Trabal although everyone took part. In 1923 they took over the newspaper *Diari de Sabadell*, of which Oliver became director and in which he published pieces using several pseudonyms (Feliu Camp de la Sang, Florentí Carvallà Cot and Joan Pendonista, Orella Dreta, among others). In 1925 they founded La Mirada, a remarkable publishing endeavour that was to bring out eighteen volumes plus loose pages by authors like [Carner](#) and Riba and, of course, themselves.

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Thus the Sabadell Group brought together avant-garde influences and more local humour and, in the domain of publishing, the Noucentista legacy of respect for rigour and a job well done.

Oliver also wrote for the mainstream publications of the time, including *La Veu de Catalunya*, *La Publicitat*, *Revista de Catalunya* and *Mirador*. He moved to Barcelona in 1926 and premiered his first play *Una mena d'orgull* [A Kind of Pride] in Sabadell. Years later he declared that his main literary aspiration at this point was to be a playwright. His first book to be published was a collection of short stories, *Una tragèdia a Lil·liput* [A Tragedy in Lilliput], which appeared in 1928. Yet it was not until 1934 that he made his debut as a poet, now at a slightly advanced age, and with the pseudonym he would employ thereafter for this genre – Pere Quart, a name he had previously used to sign articles against the Primo de Rivera dictatorship, compiled from the name he was given at baptism and the fact that he was the fourth child to be born in his family. The book of poems, *Les decapitacions* [The Decapitations] parodies both symbolism and the avant-garde movements, showing the budding signs of an intention that is at once humorous and critical and, in some cases, clearly ideological as, for example, in the poems alluding to Hitler or Mussolini.

The first great upheaval in the life of Joan Oliver and the ensuing changes in his literature came with the Civil War, during which he was deeply committed to the Republican side. He was appointed president of the Agrupació d'Escriptors de Catalunya [Association of Writers of Catalonia] – a branch of the socialist union UGT – and head of publications in the Ministry of Culture of the Generalitat [Catalan Government], and was also co-founder and head of publication of the Institució de les Lletres Catalanes [Institute of Catalan Letters]. Moreover, he wrote the words of the hymn of the Catalan People's Army, all of which shows a clear position of rupture with his well-to-do origins. If *Oda a Barcelona*, his ode to the nationalist, revolutionary city, reveals a turn in his poetic work towards free verse, a patently direct tone and the taking up of a decidedly committed position, his play *La fam* [Hunger] deals with the problems of revolution. Mobilised first and then reclaimed by the Catalan Ministry of Culture, he was in charge of evacuating intellectuals who took the side of the Republic. At the end of the war he went into exile in France, first at the Roissy-en-Brie castle, along with Trabal, [Rodoreda](#), [Calders](#), Obiols and others, and then in Saint-Cyr-sur-Morin, until later the same year, 1939, when he set sail for Buenos Aires, after which he settled in Santiago de Chile, where he was to live for eight years.

Exile and Homecoming

In Santiago de Chile, Oliver continued with his dual tasks as intellectual and fighter: he wrote for *Catalunya* a publication produced in Buenos Aires, and for *Germanor*, which was published in Chile. He would soon become director of the latter and he also founded, with [Xavier Benguerel](#), the collection "El Pi de les Tres Branques", publishing works ranging from Carles Riba's [Elegies de Bierville](#) [Bierville Elegies] through to his own *Saló de tardor* [Autumn Salon] (1947), a collection of melancholy poems, more internalised and of more serious and intimate tone than his earlier works. On his return to Catalonia in 1948, to an autarchic context that was very different from what he had known before the war and with the bitter experience of exile and having lost the social position he had once enjoyed, he was detained for two and a half months in the Model Prison of Barcelona. Three years later he was awarded – for his translation into Catalan of Molière's *Le Misanthrope* – the Prize of the President of the French Republic in the "Jocs Florals" literary competition in Paris. As director of the early stages of the collection "El Club dels Novel·listes", he worked intensively with the "Agrupació Dramàtica de Barcelona" [Barcelona Dramatic Association] as vice-president, author and translator, while also being employed, from 1957 to 1963, in the publishing house Montaner i Simón as chief editor of the Spanish version of the *Diccionario Literario Bompiani* [Bompiani Literary

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Dictionary].

This latter circumstance turned out to be important in Oliver's life and career since it was here that he met a number of university students, many of whom were eventually to become influential teachers and intellectuals – [Joaquim Molas](#), Antoni Comas, Francesc Noy, Sergi Beser – who valued him as a mentor and helped him to become recognised. Moreover, what was perhaps his most representative work appeared about this time, *Vacances pagades* [Paid Holidays] (1960), which links up with the so-called "historic realism" strand, advocated by Molas and [Castellet](#) in their 1963 study *Poesia catalana del segle XX* [Twentieth-century Catalan Poetry], in which they valued above all else an author's commitment to the historical and social realities of the country. In *Vacances pagades*, a sceptical work with touches of sarcasm and a style that verges on the conversational, Oliver reviews his life from the standpoint of his sixty years, combining this with criticisms of the consumer society and the Franco regime, while also intimating his own idiosyncratic brand of Christianity. Along with Salvador Espriu's *La pell de brau* [The Bull-hide], this work would come to be an emblem of Catalan poetry of the 1960s.

From Recognition to Marginalisation

Joan Oliver would thenceforth be a key figure in Catalan poetic circles as well as a permanent example of non-conformism. Detained and fined on a number of occasions for participating in mass protests against the Franco regime – in events like the constitution of the *Sindicat Democràtic d'Estudiants* [Democratic Students' Union] at the University of Barcelona, or the event in homage to doctor Jordi Rubió – he was awarded the [Catalan Letters Award of Honour](#) in 1970 and poured himself into poetry that was evermore corrosive and sceptical. At the same time he was moving closer to religion, although from a staunchly individualistic position in which he revered the figure of Christ as a revolutionary. Temperamental, critical of Spanish democracy after Franco's death and thus of most Catalan politicians, in favour of Catalan independence and, in his own words "an anarchist in the making", he was a prickly, uncomfortable character as may be seen in several complaints over his publicly-expressed opinions and his rejection of the *Creu de Sant Jordi* [Saint George Cross], which he was awarded by the Generalitat in 1982. In literary terms, however, he was relegated to a place that was almost reduced to the position of mere witness in a milieu in which other tendencies were more highly valued, for example experimentation derived from J. V. Foix or [Joan Brossa](#), the so-called "poetry of experience" in the wake of [Gabriel Ferrater](#), and even a certain harking back to Carner's formalism.

He died in Barcelona in 1986 and was buried in Sabadell, the city of his birth. His public activity and poetry have eclipsed both his fiction, which was sporadic and centred on the short story, and his more journalistic prose and his works for the stage. In his case, the latter genre, however, represents a laudable attempt to restore Catalan theatre, through which Oliver, addressing the wider public and with his usual scathing tone, attacked social conventions with plays like *Allò que tal vegada s'esdevingué* [What Maybe Happened] (1936) and *Ball robat* [Stolen Dance] (1956) both of which deal with the institution of the family as it is understood in bourgeois circles.

In general terms, Joan Oliver's work is notable for its critical stance, his frequently biting irony and his linguistic versatility as may be seen in his free adaptation of George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, in which the different linguistic registers are skilfully combined. All of this is based on a certain individualism that shuns intellectualism even as he is recurrently seeking answers to the great ethical dilemmas of his times.

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