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Josep Carner



Josep Carner, a Century of Catalan Culture

Jaume Subirana (Universitat Oberta de Catalunya)

Barcelona 1884 - Brussels 1970. Poet, journalist, playwright and translator

Josep Carner was born in Barcelona in 1884. He wrote his first poem at the age of twelve, and received his first poetry prize at fourteen. As a supporter of the Spanish Republic, he went into exile in Mexico, where he taught from 1939 to 1945. On his return to Europe, he became a member of the Catalan government in exile and taught at the Free University in Brussels, where he spent his last twenty-five years. The work of Carner is that of a genius of a language. Even though Carner mainly wrote poetry (he was dubbed 'The Prince of Poets'), his prose was also of outstanding quality, especially in short stories and plays, as well as in numerous translations. Of his translation of Dickens' *The Pickwick Papers*, it has even been said that it 'improves on' the original. Carner supplies a hitherto-unknown flexibility to the Catalan language, and enriches it by incorporating into it colloquial and cultivated linguistic registers.

The life of Josep Carner i Puig-Oriol embraces a passionate period of literature and, in more general terms, of the culture and history of Catalonia. Carner was born in the heyday of [Modernism](#) but was still able to experience the maturity of many men (and also the impetus) of the Catalan cultural [Renaissance](#) while growing up with the urban-based cultural movement of [noucentisme](#), which he came to represent. He was involved with the work of the Mancomunitat [created in 1914 to bring together the four Catalan regional administrations - translator], opted for a diplomatic career as a consul in a peculiar kind of distancing that made him a lucid observer of the Primo de Rivera dictatorship and the dynamics that, in the 1930s, led the country into civil war, chose [exile](#) in Mexico, returned to a Europe that was being reconstructed after the nightmare of the Second World War and eventually settled in Brussels, the city that became the core of Europeanism in the 1950s.

From Dandy to Poet of Noucentism Carner made a dazzling debut. At the age of twelve he was already beginning to write for a range of literary publications, by eighteen he had a Law degree and, at twenty, an Arts degree, at twenty-two he triumphed with his third collection of poems, at twenty-six he was awarded the title of Master in the Art of Poetry (*mestre en gai saber*) and, at twenty-seven, joined the Philological Centre of the Institut d'Estudis Catalans ... This precocity, his extraverted character, the dashing style of dress of his youth, a proverbial gift of the gab and a certain predilection for practical jokes made him a turn-of-the-century Barcelona "personality", a well-known and conspicuous, but not always celebrated, character (suffice to recall an episode like that of his expulsion from the Ateneu [Atheneum] of Barcelona).

Little by little, the progressive abandonment of the explosive aesthetics of his early years permitted some of Carner's essential facets to become increasingly clear: his extraordinary linguistic abilities, his great capacity for work and his ability to generate and organise cultural projects. Hence, Carner wrote and published a book of poems that would come to be regarded as emblematic of [noucentisme](#),

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Els fruits saborosos (Delicious Fruits, 1906), while also progressively cultivating Catholic Catalan nationalist circles through his friendships (with [Jaume Bofill i Mates](#) and Emili Vallès), and was director of some of the most influential reviews of the time, (*Catalunya* and *Empori*) in which he installed his friends. He discovered Mallorca and became the bridgehead of the authors of the so-called Mallorcan School in Barcelona, created around himself the Cal-ligueneia group, went to Madrid to obtain his doctorate and dazzled the regulars at the Atheneum there... Besides, his acquaintance with the President of both the Barcelona County Council and the Mancomunitat, Enric Prat de la Riba (for whom he always professed admiration) gave him access, in 1902, to *La Veu de Catalunya*, the newspaper of moderate Catalan nationalism. Some years later, it would situate him in the newly-created Institute of Catalan Studies (1911) and at the head of the publishing house Editorial Catalana, founded in 1917 under the sponsorship of the Catalan nationalist party Lliga Regionalista as an ambitious cultural project that included a number of collections (Biblioteca Literària, Biblioteca Catalana), reviews (*D'Ací i d'Allà*) and the Enciclopèdia Catalana (of which the director was Josep Pugés, while Carner was the literary director until he left for Genoa in 1921).

At the Institut d'Estudis Catalans, Carner worked closely with the philologist Pompeu Fabra (whom he championed) and established contacts with such writers and philologists as Antoni M. Alcover, Lluís Segalà, Frederic Clascar, [Àngel Guimerà](#) and [Joan Maragall](#). Moreover, through *La Veu* he met the financier and politician Francesc Cambó (it is said that Cambó dictated the newspaper's editorials to Carner for years) and others whose names have become glorified in today's perspective: [Eugeni d'Ors](#), [Guerau de Liost](#), [Josep M. de Sagarra](#)... Hence, in a few years, the young man from Barcelona, of a more or less cultured family of skilled workers, came to be situated at the epicentre of Catalan literary life and recognised as one of the prime creators of his time.

A Professional of Culture Carner's career over the first two decades of the century exemplifies the efforts of a particular segment of Catalan intellectual circles to become professionals of their own culture. If being Catalan - apart from the country that this represented - meant going beyond a state of affection, of sentimental ties, of livelihood, then it required a language that was fit for generalised use and literary cultivation and also a team of people who would take on the project as if it were their own and who would do everything they could to see it through, whatever the consequences.

Thus, for years, Carner was writing a heap of articles, notes and poems every day at *La Veu*... (which partially explains his penchant for pseudonyms), directed the Editorial Catalana, translated some of the major Western writers (from La Fontaine to Dickens, and from Anderson to Mark Twain), while also writing his rich and multifaceted poetry that was both accessible and of high quality. From this period are two outstanding and very different volumes that were both published in 1914: *Auques i ventalls* (Picture Books and Fans) and *La paraula en el vent* (The Word in the Wind). This poetry imbibes of Baudelaire, Ronsard and Leopardi (and, subsequently, of [Ausiàs March](#)), but is at once specifically Carner's, and it was read and appreciated until it became customary to refer to him as the "prince of poets".

Yet the desire to professionalize Catalan culture (like the noucentista project of "civilising" the country) encountered many obstacles. In this sense, the article entitled "Bastir-se un clos" (Put up a Fence, 1928) is paradigmatic. It begins, "I have decided to put up a fence. I mean, I have taken the decision to defend a property. Our literature, still in its adolescence, needs to be taken in hand in order to defend its interests, which have been too neglected until now in a milieu of abusive familiarity, neglect and misunderstood idealism". Carner concludes, "Put up a fence. It is better than wandering through the wilderness, and even than respecting the anachronistic system of tribal communal property".

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In 1915, Carner had married Carmen de Ossa, who was from Chile, and they would soon have two children, Anna Maria and Josep. By his early thirties, Carner was a famous writer and a well-known figure of Catalan culture, but his professional situation was not yet in keeping with the heights of his fame. In 1917, Prat de la Riba, the man who might have been able to remedy his situation, died. Then, Carner's progressive distancing from the project and political evolution of the Lliga, and the difficult social climate of the Barcelona of lockouts and street killings, also added to his discouragement about the uncertain economic situation he had suffered for many years. In 1920, Carner presented for public examinations for the consular corps in Madrid, which he passed without much difficulty. In March 1921 he left Catalonia with his family to establish their new residence in Genoa where he had been appointed Spanish vice-consul.

Expatriation: Work and Myth Carner's career as a consul would take him from Genoa to Costa Rica, Le Havre, Hendaya, Beirut, Brussels and Paris, with a brief intermediate stay in Madrid. Far from Catalonia, where he would frequently return for brief stays that were hailed in the press, Carner continued his task as a brilliant columnist (in the Catalanised *La Publicitat* after 1928 and in the Madrid publication *El Sol*), and neither was there any respite in his poetic work. After the extensive compilation of an anthology of amorous poetry entitled *La inútil ofrena* (Useless Offering, 1924), his next work *El cor quiet* (The Quiet Heart, 1925) represented a change of direction, showing that if it is true - as asserted by [Gabriel Ferrater](#) - that Carner had started going backwards, writing poetry of a kind that Catalan literature had not had for three centuries, perhaps it was mainly so that he could go deeper into the long dialogue with himself more freely in this than in the rest of his work. This long dialogue was accentuated by the continuous revision to which Carner, from very early on until the end of his career, submitted his entire poetic oeuvre.

When the Spanish Civil War broke out, Carner was one of the few diplomats to remain true to the Republic. This meant that his previously voluntary absence from the country would become obligatory in 1939. With his second wife, the Belgian teacher and literary critic Émilie Noulet (Carmen de Ossa had died in Lebanon in 1935), he went into exile, first to Mexico (from 1939 to 1945, where he taught at the Colegio de Méjico) and then to Belgium. In Brussels, Carner worked as a university lecturer without abandoning a certain role of authority among the Catalan community of the diaspora (in 1945 he was nominated by President Irla as a minister of the Generalitat Government in exile, he worked in preparing the literary competition [Jocs Florals](#) and in re-launching the review *Revista de Catalunya*, etc.), and joined (as a member of the executive council of the European Society of Culture, for example) the network of continental intellectuals who, in the Cold War milieu, spoke out for freedom, dialogue and the then-nascent Europeanism.

It was during his [exile](#) that two books were born, which would ensure that Josep Carner, still more than the major writer he already was, would become an essential name for the poetry of the century. The first was the long allegorical narrative poem *Nabí* (1941), where the biblical figure of Jonas becomes the interpreter of a Carner who is devastated (by the deaths of [Guerau](#), his father, his first wife, by the Civil War and exile and the outbreak of the Second World War) and tempted by impatience and rage at his destiny. The second is *Poesia* (Poetry, 1957), in which he selects, revises and reorganises his poetic oeuvre, adding an impressive section called "Absència" (Absence). Furthermore, in these years a number of books were published in French, English and Italian... translations.

However, from a strictly literary standpoint, for Catalan letters within the country, Carner was the great absent figure for many years, an unquestionable myth, perhaps, but in any case far away. Although by the 1920s his image had been fixed by the label (honourable but historical) of "prince of poets", in

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the context of the resistance and the timid cultural recovery of the 1950s and 1960s, Carner's work is more a historical phenomenon than a real reference point. It was only thanks to the impetus of the publisher [Josep M. Cruzet](#) (of [Editorial Selecta](#)) and the fidelity of his friends and readers from before the war (such as [Marià Manent](#)) and members of the new generation (like [Joan Fuster](#) or the brothers [Gabriel Ferrater](#) and [Joan Ferrater](#)) that Carner's work was re-published, re-read and reassessed along with his figure, which was used to promote a candidature for what was hoped to be the first Catalan Nobel Prize (1962), and received with great mass-media fanfare during his fleeting return to Catalonia only a few months before his death in 1970.

The sum of Carner's literary work - collections of poems, prose, journalism, theatre, translations - together with his cultural and intellectual activities and his civic and political commitment over more than half a century, constitute the image of a man who has not yet been fully portrayed, although all this makes it possible to speak of him as one of the great literary "homenots" (to use Josep Pla's term, meaning "big man") of our times, and as a Catalan and European intellectual in the most classical, most modern and most contemporary senses of the word.

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A selection of texts

Text

 **WEB: Magisteri Teatre-Mag Poesia**

A considerable number of poems and a proposed Carner anthology for schools.

<http://www.mallorcaweb.com/Mag-Teatre/carner/index.html>

 **WEB: Carner Compared with Verlaine**

Two serenades, one by Paul Verlaine and the other by Carner.

http://www.upf.es/materials/fhuma/oller/generes/tema4/exemples/verlaine_seren.htm

 **WEB: Selection of Catalan Poetry**

Reproduces twenty poems, sixteen taken from *Poesia* (Poetry) (1957). Two of the poems ("El més vell del poble" and "Porta d'hostal") with English translations.

<http://www.uoc.edu/lletra/especials/folch/carner.htm>

 **WEB: Nabí in English**

Information on the English edition of *Nabí* (2003), translated by Joan Gili and published by Anvil Press Poetry.

http://www.inpressbooks.co.uk/nabi_josep_carner_i0499.aspx

 **WEB: Poems by Josep Carner**

Two poems in Catalan and translated into German.

<http://www.jbeilharz.de/katalan/frameset.htm>

 **WEB: Catalan Poetry of Yesterday and Today**

Eleven poems, including: "Retorn a Catalunya", "Plany en la fi de Guerau de Liost" and "Bèlgica".

<http://www.llibreweb.com/lipmic/Poecat/carner.htm>

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 **WEB: Three Poems in Spanish**

Translations into Spanish: "Muerte de la ardilla", "Salmo de la cautividad" and "Bélgica".
<http://www.llibreweb.com/lipmic/Pluricat/esp/Carner.htm>

 **WEB: Deu rondalles de Jesús infant**

In 1904 Carner published these stories about the life of Jesus through the eyes of different animals.
<http://www.xtec.es/~malons22/personal/carnerjesusinfant.htm>

 **WEB: Children's Poems**

Nine poems by Carner based on children's songs, published in *En Patufet*.
<http://www.xtec.es/~malons22/patufet/carner.htm>

Bio-bibliography

Biography

 **WEB: In Wikipedia**

Biography, works and links on the author in the free encyclopaedia.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Josep_Carner

 **WEB: The author in the Catalan Encyclopaedia**

<http://www.grec.cat/cgi-bin/hecangcl2.pgm?&USUARI=&SESSIO=&NDCHEC=0015193&PGMORI=E>

 **WEB: Member of the IEC**

Josep Carner, a permanent member of the Institut d'Estudis Catalans (Institute of Catalan Studies).
<http://apmembres2.iec.cat/detall.aspx?pkMembrePLE=212>

Bibliography

 **WEB: Works in the Biblioteca de Catalunya**

http://cataleg.bnc.cat/search*eng/?searchtype=a&searcharg=Carner+Josep+1884&sortdropdown=-&searchscope=13&searchscope2=13&SORT=D

 **WEB: The author in The European Library**

<http://search.theeuropeanlibrary.org/portal/en/search/%28%22creator%22+all+%22carner+josep%22%29.query>

 **WEB: The author in the Congress Library (US)**

<http://catalog.loc.gov/cgi-bin/Pwebrecon.cgi?DB=local&PAGE=First>

 **WEB: The author in the COPAC Catalogue (UK)**

<http://copac.ac.uk/search?&au=Josep+Carner>

 **WEB: The author in the Gutenberg Project**

<http://www.gutenberg.org/browse/authors/c#a7107>

Comments on the author

Criticism

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WEB: Website of the AELC

Biography, information, publications.

http://www.escritors.cat/autors/carnerj/pagina.php?id_sec=2184



WEB: Josep Carner on the Lletra website in Catalan

Including more resources and reading suggestions.

<http://www.uoc.edu/lletra/noms/jcarner/index.html>



WEB: On *Nabí*

LletrA page devoted to this work by Josep Carner.

<https://lletra.uoc.edu/ca/obra/nabi-1941/>



WEB: One of the "Dotze mestres" [Twelve masters]

LletrA page on this work by Maurici Serrahima.

<https://lletra.uoc.edu/ca/obra/dotze-mestres-1972/>



WEB: Josep Carner

Writer's page in the space "Cataluña desde los trópicos. Las letras catalanas del exilio en México" [Catalonia from the Tropics. Catalan Literature in Exile in Mexico].

<http://lletra.uoc.edu/exili/esp/noms/jcarner/index.html>



WEB: Carner in exile

LletrA page devoted to this topic.

<https://lletra.uoc.edu/ca/tema/exili/>



WEB: Josep Carner in the City of Barcelona Literary Corpus

Biography, links and a transcription of articles on Carner.

http://www.ducros.cat/corpus/index.php?command=show_news&news_id=386



WEB: Música de poetes

Josep Carner's poems in this site of literature and music.

<http://www.musicadepoetes.cat/app/musicadepoetes/servlet/org.uoc.lletra.musicaDePoetes.Poeta?autor=65>

Miscellaneous



WEB: Songs by Carner

Reference to two poems by Carner set to music (by Eduard Toldrà, Joan Manuel Serrat and Ovidi Montllor).

<http://www.cancioneros.com/aa.php?NM=335>



WEB: Four Songs

Four songs based on poems by Carner "Aquest camí tan fi..." ("This Path so Fine..."), "Cançoneta incerta" ("Uncertain Little Song"), "Canticel" ("Song") and "Per una vela..." ("With a Sail"), with a link to the composers who set them to music (Mompou and Rodrigo).

<http://www.recmusic.org/lieder/c/carner/>

Comments



WEB: On *La paraula en el vent* (The Word in the Wind)

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Paper by Enric Mallorquí Ruscadella (UAB) on this book of poems of 1914.

<http://www.hottopos.com/rih5/enric.htm>

 **WEB: Els fruits saborosos**

Proposals for reading and working on Biblionet, the interactive guide of Catalan literature.

<http://www.xtec.es/~Irius1/carner/contenedor.htm>

 **WEB: Carner in his Belgian Exile**

Article by Jaume Subirana in *JOCS*: "L'exili d'un mite: notes biogràfiques sobre Josep Carner a Bèlgica" (The Exile of a Myth: Biographical Notes on Josep Carner in Belgium).

<http://www.uoc.edu/jocs/3/articles/subirana7/index.html>

 **PDF: "The Works of Dickens by Josep Carner...**

... and the Critics)." Article by Marcel Ortín (UPF) in the review *Quaderns*, num., 7 (2002) on Carner's translations of Dickens.

<http://ddd.uab.es/pub/quaderns/11385790n7p121.pdf>

 **WEB: "Josep Carner i el Tirant lo Blanch"**

Article by Anton M. Espadaler published in *Catalan Review*, which may be consulted at the BVJLV.

<http://www.luisvives.com/FichaObra.html?Ref=11207&portal=1>

The author 2.0

 **WEB: Carner, in Twitter**

<https://lletra.uoc.eduhttps://twitter.com/JosepCarner>
