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Josep M. Folch i Torres



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Quite apart from his literary merit, the case of Josep Maria Folch i Torres (Barcelona 1880-1950) is worthy of study because of his complexity and the divergence between the

mass reception of a literary oeuvre and the critical judgement of the intellectuals of the day. In popular terms, as we shall see, Folch was successful to an extent never again achieved by any other writer in the Catalan language. He was literally able to “live from the pen” even though, from 1924 onwards, he was virtually proscribed in intellectual and circles and among the literary toffs. After 1910, Folch i Torres was the guiding spirit of the children’s weekly *En Patufet* and, with him, the magazine came to have a print run of 65,000 copies with 325,000 readers each week. His popular success – it would seem that his monthly novels that appeared in the “Biblioteca Patufet” (Patufet Library) went into print runs of between 20,000 and 40,000 copies – consisted basically in discovering what would nowadays be called a new niche in the market (which is to say a readership that had never previously read anything else) and firing it with enthusiasm. Thus he became the first mass-audience Catalan writer.

Josep M. Folch i Torres: From Early Days to Modernist Writer (1880-1910)

Folch i Torres was born into a well-to-do family that was soon to have serious economic problems. From a very early age he had to work and this fact – as more than one critic (for example Sales) has recalled, comparing him with Dickens – turned out to be helpful in his future literary career.

The awakening of his literary affinities came when he was still an adolescent. He published several poems and presented some of his juvenilia for a number of prizes. His made his debut in published poetry with “Lo primer bes” (First Kiss), which was published in the magazine *L’Aureneta* in 1897. This was followed in 1898 with “Pobre xicot!” (Poor Boy!). With a group of friends he produced a magazine, *Lo Conceller*, and another poem “La Nisu” (Nisu) appeared in *La Renaixença*. By January 1899 he was intensely engaged in his literary activity. He published short stories with a certain regularity, won literary competitions, was named director of *L’Atlàntida* (a publication of literary and political leanings), and wrote for *La Renaixença* and *Joventut*. His political awareness was activated in parallel with these literary beginnings and his writings in the publications of the day gradually took on an increasingly fiery nationalist tone. Indeed, on 11 September 1901, he was detained at the statue of Rafael Casanova during an event in homage to the Catalan patriot and spent three days in prison. Between 22 November 1901 and 14 March 1902 he wrote eight articles of manifest political commitment for *La Renaixença*. The time had come when he could write full time since he began to work for *La Veu de Catalunya* in the summer of 1901, while also continuing to write for other publications and translating into Spanish. In the [Jocs Florals](#) literary competition of 1903 he presented “Antònia” and received the first Honourable Mention and, in the same year, he also won the Víctor Català Cup. The following year he won all the prizes (the Cup and the three honourable mentions) in the Jocs Florals.

1904 was to be the year of Folch’s affirmation as both writer and intellectual. He won first prize in the [L’Avenç](#) competition with the book *Lària* and began to write for the weekly *La Tralla*, of which he was

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to end up as director, whereupon he gave the publication a more resolute working-class and nationalist impetus. *Lària*, a work that is aesthetically between realism and [modernism](#), is considered to be the first novel of his mature period. His nationalist stance in the magazine became even more adamant in 1905, which led to a series of fines and the confiscation of several issues. In the autumn of that year, he published several articles, one of them against Lerroux, "Tu ets el Judes!" (You Are the Judas!), under the pseudonym of *Folytor*. He was called to declare in court on a number of occasions until the government finally suspended various publications (*La Tralla*, *Cu-Cut!*, etc.). In December, with a trial pending – for political reasons – he was informed that the sentence could be much harsher than he suspected. On Christmas Day 1905 he fled across the border to France, to Perpignan. His exile was to last three years. During this period he was writing as a correspondent of *El Poble Català* while also reading classical and French authors, writing articles for the press and producing literary pieces, which he presented for different prizes in Catalonia. He returned to Barcelona in August 1908.

Thenceforth, his production might be described as "modernist", not so much for its aesthetics as for its themes. Folch i Torres was moving between realism and [modernism](#) or, if one prefers, he took from modernism the aspects that interested him. These included rural matters, the individual's confrontation with extreme situations and morbid characters. However, he also dealt with other questions shunned by the modernists, for example the situation of the workers, the mass and the individual, inequalities caused by lack of education, et cetera. His body of work for adults, which is deemed to be modernist, consists of *Lària* (1904), *Aigua avall* ("Water Below", 1907), *Anímiques* ("Moods", 1908), *L'ànima en camí* ("The Soul on the Way", 1908) and *Joan Endal* (1909). With these works, Folch displays his narrative talents and the psychological depth of his characters, who act naturally, with profound sentiments bordering on naturalist aesthetics and veering close to determinism. Folch, however, always rescues individualism, the driving force of will power, and the determination of spirit of his characters.

All the literary critics of the day recognised in this first period of Folch the literary solidity of his work, comparing it with that of [Víctor Català](#) or of any other leading modernist writer, although Folch never partook of the "tremendismo" that characterised, for example, the work of Prudenci Bertrana.

Folch i Torres, Children's Writer (1910-1938)

What was probably to be the most decisive event in Folch's life transpired in 1910 when the editor of *En Patufet* –Josep Baguñà– commissioned him to write a children's novel that was to be published in instalments distributed with the magazine each week. Hence *En Massagan* ("Toobig") was born. The weekly *En Patufet* (1904-1938) had been founded in 1904 by Josep Aladern and Aureli Capmany with the aim of "encouraging boys and girls (...) to read in Catalan", as was stated in the presentation of the first issue. It was acquired in 1905 by the publisher Josep Baguñà i Martra (1870-1942).

Thenceforth, and until the end of the Spanish Civil War, Josep M. Folch i Torres abandoned literature for adults to throw himself into an intense engagement with full-time writing for children and young people. This fact, this total change of direction, can be attributed to any one of a number of circumstances, or perhaps the sum of them all. First, was his immediate success, and there's nothing better for a writer than an enthusiastic response from readers, together with the economic improvement that this entailed (and let us not forget that Folch had a large family). Second, also influential were the demise of modernism and the crisis of the modernist novel, which was now so harshly criticised by the noucentistes (members of the early twentieth-century politico-cultural movement in the service of bourgeois reformism). Third, exile and his return to the hostile, aggressive

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atmosphere of Barcelona had matured him. Fourth, were the events of Tragic Week in the summer of 1909, which deeply wounded him as both nationalist and practising Catholic. All this, together with the insistence of the publisher who kept demanding more and more work, more diversification and more commitment to *En Patufet*, ensured that Folch became fully identified with this new facet. Folch's change of course is also partly due to the noucentista influence permeating the media and cultural reviews and he adopted a certain attitude but not the aesthetics of the movement. Folch responded to this civilising crusade in the name of civility ushered in by the [noucentistes](#) by making it his own. Folch's change, then, is partly due to the public response yet, on the basis of this response, he forged his own, personal mission: to reach the working classes of the society and engage in the cultural endeavour of teaching the unlettered how to read, thus creating an unprecedented addiction to reading in Catalan. There is one final reason, though, and this could well be the most important one: Folch's need to instruct –to moralise– through reading.

After 1910 Folch i Torres' output is impressive. Every week he handed in an instalment of a novel for children and/or young people. The work was later re-bound and incorporated as one of the volumes of the "La Biblioteca Patufet" ("The Patufet Library") collection. He was director of the weekly and wrote short pieces that appeared in the publication under different pseudonyms ("Marruixa", "Pastallunes", "Jim-Fit", etc.). In 1915 he introduced the famous "Pàgines viscudes" ("Lived Pages") illustrated by Junceda, and this was to become the most popular section of the magazine. This was also the time that he started writing for the stage and every year he premiered a play for children. In 1924, he began a new collection of monthly novels, "La Biblioteca Gentil", of romantic –which is to say sentimental– fiction for the female public.

What was it about Folch i Torres' works that was so attractive to the public? It would seem to be the combination of a simple, clear approach, a treatment of conflict that was appropriate for the age of his readers, a happy ending, very often humorous though gentle, not at all contrived in its comicalness and based on wordplay. His tender treatment of his characters, the situations of apotheosis in which the imaginary could intervene –an imaginary based on folklore or invented elements– and the surprise effect facilitated, on the one hand, the possibility of reader-character identification and, on the other, laughter at ingenuous and evidently impossible situations.

Josep Maria Folch i Torres' total production consists – as far as one knows with any certainty – of 50 adventure novels ("Biblioteca Patufet"), 48 romantic novels ("Biblioteca Gentil"), 51 plays and more than 1,200 "Pàgines viscudes", besides short stories and a range of pieces that appeared in the pages of *En Patufet*.

As one might have predicted, Folch i Torres' popular success gave rise to an "anti-Folch-i-Torres" trend among the critics and literati of the country. In their newspaper columns, lectures, articles, and so on, they disparaged his work and even pronounced it unhealthy. Intellectuals and other highbrow personalities of the day joined the fray in different senses, lambasting the sentimentality of his romantic novels and the extraordinary productivity of his pen, which afforded another reason for casting aspersions on the literary quality of his work. The diatribe was kept alive for many years, almost to the present day, despite the fact that everyone recognises the merit of the prodigious cultural endeavour that Folch engaged in over the first three decades of the twentieth century. What is lacking now is deeper literary study of his work.

The Silence of Folch i Torres (1938-1950)

With the upheaval of the Civil War and the subsequent crackdown on the Catalan language, Folch i

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Torres had no chance of continuing with his labours. He made a few attempts to write in Spanish and took part in some cultural programmes on the radio. However, he was too dispirited to continue.

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A selection of texts

Text



WEB: Manuscript of *Odi de fera: drama en tres actes y en prosa*

(The Wild Beast's Loathing: A Prose Drama in Three Acts). In the Digital Library of the Ateneu barcelonès.

<http://biblioteca.ateneubcn.org:8080/ateneu/ca/consulta/registro.cmd?id=5804540>



WEB: Lived Pages

Three cover pages, a prologue and the first published page of *Pàgines viscudes*.

<http://www.xtec.es/~malons22/personal/paginesviscudes.htm>



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WEB: Josep M. Folch i Torres on WorldCat

http://www.worldcat.org/search?q=au%3AFolch+i+Torres&dblist=638&fq=ap%3A%22folch+i+torres%2C+josep+maria%22&qt=facet_ap%3A

Bio-bibliography

Biography



WEB: The author in the Catalan Encyclopaedia

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Bibliography



WEB: Works in the Biblioteca de Catalunya

<http://cataleg.bnc.cat/search~S13?/aFolch+i+Torres/afolch+i+torres/1%2C15%2C984%2CB/exact&F=afolch+i+torres+josep+maria+1880+1950&1%2C719%2C>



WEB: The author in The European Library

<http://search.theeuropeanlibrary.org/portal/en/search/%28%22josep+maria+folch+i+torres%22%29.q>
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WEB: The author in the COPAC Catalogue (UK)

<http://copac.ac.uk/search?&au=folch+i+torres%2C+josep+&sort-order=ti%2C-date>



WEB: Articles by the author

In Traces, the database of Catalan language and literature.

http://traces.uab.cat/search?ln=en&p=folch+i+torres%2C+josep+m.&f=author&action_search=Search&c=Traces+%3A+base+de+dades+de+llengua+i+literatura+catalanes&sf=&so=d&rm=&rg=10&sc=1&of=hb



WEB: Articles about the author

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Comments on the author

Criticism



WEB: AELC Website

This page of the Association of Catalan Language Writers (AELC) offers biographical information, with general comments and references to his plays, translations and the “Biblioteca en Patufet” and “Biblioteca Gentil” collections. Offers access to available works.

http://www.escriptors.cat/autors/folchitorresjm/pagina.php?id_sec=852

Didactic proposals