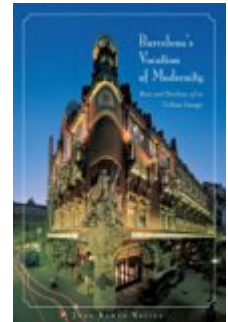


**Joan Ramon Resina.** *Barcelona's Vocation of Modernity: Rise and Decline of an Urban Image.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008. x + 272 pp. \$60.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8047-5832-1.



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It is surely naïve to think that a city is the conglomeration of its buildings, streets, parks, monuments, and natural elements contained in a politically delimited area. Surely the city's inhabitants must be part of what we call a "city," for indeed within every city, and identified with it, are people and networks of people and interests that shape and change both the physical entity of the city and its image, or even, to use a term favored by Joan Ramon Resina, its "after-image." Particularly, folks who in vulgar parlance are called "movers and shakers" (the title of a section in Resina's first chapter) are essential whenever we speak of any city. Yet, those folks, as well as the inhabitants as a whole, keep changing as they connect and reconnect, mature, grow old, and make room for others when they die. If this is true, we must conclude that a city is a difficult, ever-changing subject of study. Just as a language is not the sum of its words as listed in a dictionary or a religion is not just what we can gather from a catechism or a mythology treatise, a city grammar must be an evolving discipline. Like language and

religion, a city is a living thing (well, most cities, actually), and by the same token any grammar applied to it will be as indecisive as the grammar of a living language, and the city itself will remain ultimately ungraspable and indefinable. As opposed to a nation, a city is not quite held together by the usual bonds of state, with its pomp, symbols, bureaucracy, and armed forces.

The title of Resina's intelligent, detailed, and original book, *Barcelona's Vocation of Modernity*, suggests an active role for the city: Barcelona must be a subject, the subject of its own development, if it is capable of having a vocation, even a vocation for something like modernity, which is as undefinable as it is inevitable (for we all evolve and no consensus has emerged among scholars to determine the temporal parameters of the modern). Resina wisely stays clear from attempting a strict definition of "modernity" and seems happy to simply assume that the modern is a phenomenon connatural with recent times. Otherwise, Resina is also ambiguous, or noncommittal, as to whether Barcelona should be seen as a subject of

its own fate or at least development, or as an object on which human forces project their actions.

Resina's book takes his readers on a study of Barcelona from the middle of the nineteenth century (1848, the creation of the first railroad in the Iberian Peninsula uniting Barcelona with the town of Mataró to its north) to the curious festival called "Fòrum Universal de les Cultures" of 2004. The first six of his seven chapters center each on the work of a writer who became a witness to the growth--to the "vocation of modernity"--of Barcelona, although the thirteen pages of the book's index testify to the greater wealth of referencing beyond the clustering figures in each chapter.

Chapter 1, "The Bourgeois City," discusses the period when "Barcelona was waking from centuries of slumber in the shadow of a decadent civilization" (p. 41). The brunt of the Spanish colonial empire was lost by the end of the 1820s and after that the Spanish lion was closer to the taxidermist than to the jungle. Catalonia, and its head, Barcelona, awoke from the imperial slumber toward economic and social renovation. This awakening took the paradoxical form of embracing the modern (industrialism, capitalism, Europeanism) and, at the same time, striving to recover a supposedly glorious medieval past of troubadour poetry and the long-neglected Catalan language. All change, of course, holds its perils, and the writer in the second half of the nineteenth century who chronicled the growth pains of his country--meaning Catalonia--in a number of novels was Narcís Oller. As Resina puts it: "Oller projected the transformation of Barcelona through a central character [Gil Foix in the novel *La febre d'or* (1890-92)] who embodied the energy and ambition of a social group" (p. 34). Thus, Barcelona became what the chapter's title states, a bourgeois city, and turned its gaze--that of its most dynamic citizens--toward the north, making the city, as another section terms it, "a Paris of the South" (p. 41).

The physical expansion of the city brought about by its new character is examined in chapter 2. This covers the time Barcelona saw the greatest growth in construction and urbanism as well as the erection of its now iconic buildings, such as the Sagrada Família Church by Antoni Gaudí and, in general, the urban grid known locally as Eixample (=amplification) with its many art nouveau buildings, the style locals call *modernisme*; it was also the period with most frequent social tensions, culminating in the failed revolt that came to be known as "the tragic week" of July 1909. But the hero of this chapter, Eugeni d'Ors, is a man who decried *modernisme* and indeed went on to create an opposing movement, giving it the name *noucentisme* (from *noucents* meaning "nine hundred," for the new century). Resina's reevaluation of this writer is notable in itself. Ors imagined a new kind of society led by "Civiltat" or "Civility" (Ors's capitalization), and a movement from, as Resina puts it, community to society ("From Gemeinschaft to Gesellschaft" is the title of one section). Ors's platonic disconnection with the whole of society, and not just the bourgeoisie, for all his brilliance and noble intentions, would, as Resina states, "rapidly gravitate toward and contribute to fascist philosophy" (p. 85). The chapter ends with a reference to a paradox that Resina explores in chapter 3, the fact that by creating a bourgeois, ideal city, the forces acting on Barcelona (here seen supremely as inanimate, passive objects) would create a lumpen space, what Resina calls in Spanish "*bajos fondos*" or "slums," which ultimately "shaped Barcelona's image" (p. 92).

"Like Moths to a Lamp," chapter 3, surveys a number of novels written by foreigners who visited Barcelona, and, through their "discovery" of its seedy side, its *bajos fondos*, gave Barcelona "its identity ... through an authorizing look" (p. 93). Henri de Montherlant and perhaps Jean Genet are among other, mostly French, writers the star witnesses of the period, the moment in which the ideal city envisioned by Ors and the urban plan-

ners begins to crumble. This chapter is followed by the fourth one, “A Sojourn with the Dead,” covering the decisive period of the Spanish war (1936-39), which, with the ensuing dictatorship of General Francisco Franco, administered the coup de grace to the Catalan dreams of a great capital city serving as head of a region with its own Catalan identity. In other words, we have here the seeds of the Castilianization of Barcelona. The writer whom Resina puts at the center of chapter 4 is the novelist Mercè Rodoreda, and, in particular, her most studied novel, *La Plaça del Diamant* (translated twice to English as *The Pigeon Girl* [1967] and *The Time of the Doves* [1981]). Rodoreda wrote from exile, thus she makes an excellent segue to the foreign writers discussed in the previous chapter, but she wrote in Catalan, an “exilic language” as the title of one of this chapter’s sections puts it. The chapter is titled “A Sojourn with the Dead” as if to emphasize that the de-Catalanization of Barcelona was not achieved without a considerable shedding of blood.

The writer at the center of chapter 5, Juan Marsé, is a Catalan but writes in Spanish and, furthermore, polemizes against the efforts by post-Franco Catalans to take steps to preserve their language and indeed the historical integrity of Catalonia. Resina here turns from a scholar mostly observing phenomena to one also taking issue with his subject matter, and, in particular, with Marsé’s thinking. Resina clearly sees the de-Catalanization of Barcelona as a sinister development and cries out against the pervasive rhetoric that, mimicking the defense of the unregulated market by some economists, would want to see the city’s bilingualism (in fact, its diglossia) as perfectly innocent. Here, Resina puts his cards on the table and cries out against Marsé and other giddy components of the Foro Babel, a group that opposes efforts to maintain Catalan in the educational system. (And this reviewer should also reveal his card: I also see the transformation of Barcelona into a Spanish rather than Catalan city as a regrettable development and one that is far from being

spontaneous for all the laissez-faire protestations of the Foro Babel members. As one of the references Resina quotes, such development amounts to an “internal colonization” [p. 178].)

Chapter 6, “The City of Eternal Returns,” is a meditation on historical writing about Barcelona, centered on the 1986 novel, written in Spanish, *La ciudad de los prodigios* by Eduardo Mendoza. The previous chapter, “The Divided City and the Divided Self,” discussing the crossing or convergence of language and psyche, made reference to the theories of Jacques Lacan. This sixth chapter, covering the period immediately following the death of Franco, finds Barcelona “structurally unhinged, architecturally disgraced, socially torn apart, and culturally split” (p. 179). Resina again resorts to the two Lacanian orders of self-perception: the imaginary and the symbolic, and applies the concepts to Mendoza’s novel. In this chapter, Resina explores the city as a psychoanalyst would explore a patient, dissecting such elements as language, desire, relationship to authority (the Father, the “other”), and the import of capital. As with the other chapters, Resina here studies not only a writer but also something much larger: the overall order, or system, in which writer, writing, subject matter, and the real world both depicted within the novel and overflowing it begin to make sense. This is Resina’s ambitious plan for his book and here we can see his mettle as a scholar.

The eighth and final chapter, subtitled “The After-Image of Barcelona’s Modernity,” brings us to the present day, or at any rate to 2004. Here, Resina centers more on policies and policymakers than on any one central literary figure. The place of the litmus writer of all preceding chapters is taken perhaps by long-time city mayor Pasqual Maragall, but mostly this concluding chapter is a polemic against the political forces that have turned Barcelona into a kind of theme park of its past self and into the shell where the current globalized--and so, deracinated--mentality has set shop, “one of those post-modern spaces that

spawn neither identity nor relations” (p. 231). And so, sounding a melancholy note, Resina ends his essay, referring to “the after-image of a people divested of their history, language, and sensory culture and the repertoire of related concepts—stripped, that is, of their *raison d’être* as people” (p. 232).

A melancholy, disenchanting statement ends this phenomenal book, which is an original analysis of about a century and a half of Barcelona’s history. Its eight chapters are preceded by a brief, if dense, introduction, “The City as Social Form,” which, for my taste, though perhaps inevitably, are the least vibrant pages of *Barcelona’s Vocation of Modernity*. The introduction is a reflection on what kind of an approach is the proper way to study a city. It is also a defense of Resina’s methods, and mainly his privileging of literature for the approach to his subject matter.

I confess that I am much less conversant than Resina on the wealth of theory that has been written in the past fifty years or so and that has profoundly changed the nature of literary studies. It has made literary scholarship not only more reflective, or self-reflective, but also more relevant to other disciplines, which is a welcome development. And yet, I must express my disappointment at the prose that Resina’s book exemplifies and that seems to be quite typical of today’s literary scholarship. In *Barcelona’s Vocation of Modernity*, the prose is dense with widespread reference and deep theoretical meditation. Unfortunately, this density runs the risk of becoming opacity. A sentence such as “Place may be experienced as non-place by the skimming tourist gaze that blocks out everyday relations and even native bodies” is not entirely atypical here and asks any reader whose lights are no brighter than mine to take a few minutes to disentangle its sense (p. 94). It is perhaps necessary, to present as complex a study as Resina’s, to give each paragraph such weight. Or, perhaps not. As a reader, I yearn for more direct exposition. In any case, here it is. The

book is written. It calls for an effort, but the rewards in insight onto the matter amply compensate the effort.

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