Barcelona, “capital of a nation without a state”, as Manuel Vázquez Montalbán pointed out in the pages of this book, became known to the world in 1992 thanks to the Olympic Games that, overnight, took it out of the long lethargy to which it had been subjected by the dictatorship of Francisco Franco. In a decade, Barcelona advanced a century. But the history of Barcelona did not start then, of course. Nor did it start when the president of the International Olympic Committee announced, six years earlier, that the city had been awarded the celebration of the greatest global sport spectacle.

In the prelude to those Olympic Games, following a tradition of local and foreign chroniclers that went back several centuries, one of the most popular Barcelonan writers, raised in the humblest of neighbourhoods and from a family defeated in the Civil War, wanted to explain that story, often tragic, sometimes epic: a summary of the many social changes experienced since its foundation by the Romans; a story that also summarized many of humanity’s social struggles.

In 1987, Montalbán (1939-2003), journalist, poet, essayist, polemicist, novelist, creator of the famous detective Pepe Carvalho and pioneer of the so-called Mediterranean crime novel before it was even labelled as such, wrote and published his particular and personal chronicle about Barcelona. It was critical but also passionate, full of light, but also full of shadow.

Barcelona City Council is now reissuing the English version of the text, which first appeared in 1992, the same year the great sporting event began. The text, revised and annotated and with a final epilogue by one of the top world specialists in Montalbán’s works, is accompanied by magnificent illustrations by Pau Gasol Valls. Indeed, it is both an enormous history lesson and an excellent tourist guide of the city. A walk of more than 2000 years, deep and rich in anecdotes, it goes far beyond the summaries of the conventional tourist guides with which visitors arrive in the capital of Catalonia. It is without doubt the definitive history of the most stunning city in the Mediterranean and one of the best in the world to live in and enjoy.
Barcelonañas
Manuel Vázquez Montalbán
Translated by Andy Robinson
Contents
In a book-interview published in spring 1996, Manuel Vázquez Montalbán was asked the following question: ‘What feeling do you get when you wander the streets of the El Raval district nowadays?’ Many years ago, Montalbán had found a spot to live and write which was suitably distant from the heart of the city where he was born. That journey from south to north completed over nigh on four decades of life illustrated a social and economic ascent, accompanied by acclaim for his intellectual acumen. Had he forgotten his roots?

Montalbán’s answer to the question implied the very opposite as he acknowledged that he did have a genetic bond to El Raval that was impossible to break; however, just like the historian by profession that Edward H. Carr talked about, he too had decided to settle in a far-flung, high spot in order to gain a better view and to understand and be better able to explain his city in an understandable way, not necessarily with greater objectivity. In any event, the ties were cultural, identifying with a social and urban tradition of struggle and battle for assertion; of recovery from what was eradicated in 1939, and what had also been dealt harsh blows beforehand in earlier processes of emancipation.

‘On many days I feel like a duck returning to water,’ Montalbán acknowledged, alluding to the streets and squares where he’d spent his childhood. He was talking in no uncertain terms about his neighbourhood, whilst however also referring to the city as a whole. Indeed, rightly or wrongly the Barri Xino represented all the cities that fit in Barcelona which he had in mind and held close to his heart: the splendour of the Palau Güell to the dignified poverty of Carrer de la Cadena, Carrer de Sant Rafael or the more run-down, lumpen Carrer d’en Robador. It is with good reason that at the end of Barcelona he wrote that ‘Whichever route you choose [around the city] it should lead finally to the Rambla.’

More than three decades after the publication of his chronicle on the many towns that overlap in time and space, one on top of the other, and which converge on the GPS coordinates we refer to as Barcelona, there is no doubt in my mind that he would still say the same thing: that all roads lead to the Rambla, albeit with many more tourists and cruise-goers than in 1987; with gutted, destroyed, homogenized, sanitized and airBnBenized surroundings, whose character in any event has been lost for good but which will not be mourned eternally. The traces of everything that is there no longer remain in the newspaper and photographic archives, in the memories etched in the stones and
in the minds of the citizens, and in a number of texts written by traditional chroniclers/photographers who use pen and paper. Indeed, beyond any doubt Manuel Vázquez Montalbán was exceptional among them; with a word, a sentence and an irony that always conjured up a smile, with words that often painted as much if not more than a thousand pictures. All of this is what Barcelonas portrays; hence, it is vital that it is re-published.

Moreover, reading it will make it possible to regain an insight into a willingly scarcely read Montalbán that, by that time in the midst of anaesthetizing Pujolism, offered a comprehensive account of the catalogue of grievances of the city and Catalonia in the face of the setbacks of history; a past in which the city had to face artillery fire from Montjuïc or the bullets of gunmen from the employers’ representatives. With both sides intent on putting an end to the yearning of the ‘Rose of Fire’, which rebelled systematically in the face of the fate imposed upon it, fighting fire with more fire if necessary.

The English edition that the reader has in his or her hands is not an exact and complete translation of the text published in Spanish in 1987. The author, according to the translator, removed from the text those parts he deemed unnecessary for anyone who was approaching knowledge of the city for the first time. An attempt was made to promote the agility of reading, though at some point the profound scholarship of the story was sacrificed. Otherwise, this new English edition includes too the foreword to the first one, from 1992, published five years after the original. Montalban’s analysis allows him to embolden his prophetic vision of post-Olympic-Games Barcelona. Today his words are still valid. The reader will also find it incorporates a host of notes which, if he or she wishes, will help to place social, political, cultural or historical references which can at times be overly arcane or contextual. The map of trails has also been revised, since over the past three decades Barcelona has witnessed vast, profound changes.

Indeed, the duck is returning to water in order to help regain and preserve everything Barcelona has built. It was vital for Montalbán to do this at the close of the previous millennium and now as we approach the third decade in the twenty-first century, it is right to vindicate him. At the time, the change that was knocking on Barcelona’s doors came in the shape of the Olympic rings: patterns of transformation, granted; but corsets of social consensus that could prove detrimental to the constantly essential dissidence. At the present
time we are undergoing new forms of turmoil – some of them domestic and others global – and all in all there is no way of knowing how things will turn out, just as we did not know in the past, although shortly after, in 1992, Montalbán already seemed to know it. In any event, what remains is the essential perspective of Manuel Vázquez Montalbán on the Barcelonas of the past, and which should lay the foundations for the Barcelonas of the future.

QUIM ARANDA
THE RISKS OF THE CITY AS A MARKET
Maybe there is something about the English which compels European authors to write prefaces especially for them. Perhaps their insularity gives every continental a complex about his or her own capacity to communicate. Whatever the reason, the fact is that the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset wrote a preface to the English edition of his ambiguous philosophical and historical study *La Rebelión de las Masas*, in which he justified the politics of non-intervention in the Spanish Civil War. My preface appeals for the contrary. Please do intervene in the Spanish war being waged right now, a war sustained by a frantic desire for growth for growth's sake, whatever the cost. Even if the cost turns out to be the destruction of the landscape. A measure of this conflict is contemporary Barcelona, a focus of international attention thanks to the 1992 Olympics, which have determined the city’s latest development to a far greater extent than any rational consideration of its needs.

Those English travellers who have already visited or intend to visit Barcelona should be aware that not one, but several cities are contained within its municipal boundaries, and that nearly all of them have been radically transformed under the impact of the Olympics. The dialectic between the old and the new which I have charted throughout Barcelona’s history in this book has been resolved by the imposition of the inevitable. This often happens. In the final stages of the contest between the old and the new, the inevitable slips through unnoticed.

The Olympic city will do its best to make up for the backwardness that has disgraced Barcelona, Catalonia and Spain throughout the twentieth century. As I write, the city is gripped by nervousness about the progress of preparations for the Games. But please, stay calm. By the time you arrive, all the essential props of an Olympic spectacle will be in place and few will bother even to ask whether the spectacle is itself necessary. The city has been turned into a vast building site. For four years, construction works have put Barcelona’s citizens into a feverish state, somewhere between expectation and bewilderment. To host the Games, cities must modernize their sporting facilities, hotels and infrastructure for spectators, sportspeople and journalists, providing everything for the four-week circus. But what comes after? Debts and a set of buildings of dubious usefulness.
Of course, this is true of all Olympics, but in Barcelona, after a forty-year state of emergency imposed by Francoism, the Games mean a lot more. The Barcelona Olympics provide the opportunity to catch up on the backlog and shake off the extended apathy inherited from the post-Civil War period, twenty years of poverty and twenty more of speculative abuse.

Suddenly, as if some unearthly force had been unleashed, the city floor has parted for the installation of telephone cables and gas pipes. But the infrastructural work seems quite uncoordinated. One ditch randomly follows another as if some celestial VIP had lost something beneath the earth and were hell-bent on finding it. Following the ditches, further destruction has cleared the way for ring roads and tunnels which will take the city beyond its apparently impenetrable boundaries, hurling it out towards surrounding towns which are preparing themselves gingerly for the approaching metropolis.

The Olympic Village has been built on the sea front in Poblenou, pioneering the city’s northward expansion towards the Mediterranean resorts on the Maresme and Costa Brava. The Village will transform the landscape of Barcelona’s industrial revolution, committing to the bulldozer both Catalonia’s Manchester, the concentration of nineteenth-century capital in the decrepit textile factories of Poblenou, and its utopian socialist tradition, ironically preserved in the name of the Village itself. The Village has been named Nova Icaria after Etienne Cabet’s experimental, libertarian communities in the nascent United States of America which attracted considerable support among the working class of nineteenth-century Poblenou. Oriol Bohigas, the Catalan architect whose influence on the Olympic urban plan has been enormous, called the Olympic Village project ‘a homage to the utopian socialism of the nineteenth century’.

The Village was built on land expropriated by the municipal authorities and leased to private developers by the council-controlled company Nova Icaria Ltd. Most of the six thousand flats which comprise the project have already been sold on the open market, fetching prices of up to 40 million pesetas (£240,000). None has been subsidized, despite promises to the contrary when the project was first made public in 1986. The fate of Etienne Cabet has proved portentous. Having crossed the Atlantic with a group of mainly French and Catalan idealists, he was sold down the Mississippi river by an American property developer; the land he had bought to found his utopian community turned out to be arid semi-desert.
A century and a half later, on the rubble of demolished factories and warehouses, a spectacular upper-middle-class residential city has grown around fragile working-class communities in Poblenou and huge islands of deprivation like La Mina, a high-rise gypsy estate which is threateningly close to the new Village. Meanwhile, as Barcelona’s most well-heeled citizens attend the auction of the Olympic Village and prepare to move in when the Games are over, the municipal bulldozer razes blocks in the old city, both in the degraded Barri Xino and the more dignified streets of El Raval.

The whole city has been transformed and it won’t be long before many of its inhabitants realize that a large chunk of their memory, half head, half heart, has been lopped off. We are assured that the result will be the complete modernization of Barcelona, making good half a century of underdevelopment, evident since the 1930s when the Republican Macià plan, sponsored by Le Corbusier, provided the last rational urban blueprint for the city. This is the optimistic view of the relentless destruction and construction which we are witnessing.

But there are critical, pessimistic interpretations, too. Could it not be that, under the pretext of the Olympics, a city council with minimal economic resources, controlled by a left that was paralysed by the challenge, has handed over management of this immense surge of urban growth to private initiative? Has it not turned what might have been a model of democratic urban expansion into a speculative frenzy, determined by the ‘city as market’ model which posits urban development as a process tailor-made to benefit the wealthiest social classes?

A malicious reading of the Olympic-inspired urban plan would see the tunnels bored through the Collserola mountain range to the northwest of the city as the supply lines to a new speculative residential frontier in towns like Sant Cugat, whose population has multiplied in recent years as foreign capital has moved into the high-tech industrial and business parks located there. In this perspective, the ring roads and city-centre car parks have more to do with the civilization of the automobile than with the recovery of the city for the pedestrian, an essential feature of the project’s purported philosophical underpinnings.

The apparent ‘remodelling’ of old Barcelona will simply be a means to gentrify the inner city, flattening districts which time and poverty have already partially demolished. The present economically impoverished community will soon be replaced with a new middle class,
keen to conquer the centre and south of the city, following the installation of central heating and security guards, without which it is difficult to feel comfortably hegemonic.

The Olympic Village will be a tiny middle-class outpost in hostile territory and will inevitably herald the exodus of the present population of Poblenou by increasing ground rent in the area. Old factories and their surroundings are already being snapped up for subsequent redefinition and reuse. In coming years, who will defend the retention of industrial space or working-class housing next to Barcelona's Malibu?

In Olympic Barcelona, the critics of Francoist town planning have become the managers of Olympic urban development, and the neighbourhood associations which led the struggles against speculation in the 1960s and 1970s have been disbanded. The city is critically disarmed. Conservative realism is the prevailing ideology and the pragmatists have won the day. Contests between the critic and the pragmatist are always loaded in favour of the latter. The work of the pragmatist, after all, is on permanent display while the opinions of the critic collect dust on library shelves.

In the future, Barcelonans will stroll around the Olympic Ring on Montjuïc hill and admire its new architecture. The refurbished Olympic stadium which, in its original form, would have staged Barcelona's anti-Nazi Popular Olympics in July 1936 had Franco's coup not interrupted the opening ceremony, will have regained its façade if not its spirit. Japanese architect Arata Isozaki's oriental temple cum indoor sports hall, the Sant Jordi Palace, will in all likelihood be used by Barcelona basketball club, a new addition to Josep Lluís Núñez's property empire. Few will wonder if it all might not have been handled differently. The same attitude will prevail towards the Olympic Village, the ring roads, the telecommunications towers and the redevelopment of the old barrios. For the citizen of the future, a meaningful assessment of the old and the new, of conservation and improvement, will be impossible.

At the moment, the city has no time to assess what has happened. It is barely aware of itself. As elections approach, Barcelona conserves not the slightest memory of past losses. It has stood by and watched as the old seafood restaurants on La Barceloneta beach are pulled down, with a fatalism more appropriate to the Francoist years. But central power is central power. Not a single demonstration has been
held. The isolation of the small restaurant owners is a perfect example of the lack of solidarity which typifies the Olympic city.

With the same fatalistic attitude, the old port will be redeveloped, its previous commercial activity reduced to merely commercial space, appealing to well-informed investors but a far cry from the original plan in which the old wharfs were to be handed over to the public. A hideous symbol of the revised port project will be US architect I.M. Pei’s new international business centre, which will add twenty-storey offices to Barcelona’s hitherto low-rise skyline. Previous campaigns against speculation in defence of the port, or of those parks threatened by property developers intent on building more hotels, have been forgotten. The Barcelonan sees so much happening in the Olympic city that nothing really seems to matter. Economic power, both local and foreign, exploited this bewilderment in the battle for the rationalization of the property market. After the death of Franco, many developers and builders who had made their fortunes under the corrupt regime of Francoist Mayor Porcioles were panic-stricken as they tried to gauge the convictions of the new authorities. In the 1960s Porcioles had allowed wild speculation to throw up a circle of high-rise dormitory estates on the city periphery. The speculators wondered whether democracy would make them pay for their past sins. They soon realized that the primary concern of most socialist mayors was not to appear so radical as to inhibit capitalist investment, however speculative.

The Games have had a tireless promoter in the person of Josep Antoni Samaranch, the Catalan president of the International Olympic Committee, one of the factotums of ‘Porciolist’ town planning whose inside knowledge of the Barcelona property market has reinforced his authority as Olympic pope. The battles between Samaranch and the confused array of committees and individuals who have taken charge of the organization of the Games and the urban growth they have generated have often looked like scenes from Hamlet. Public Works Minister Josep Borrell’s acknowledgement that bribes have become an accepted method of granting construction contracts throughout the Spanish state is cause for particular concern in a city where the temptations seem irresistible.

Barcelona’s politicians have sacrificed the ethical obligations of their office under the pressure of completing the preparations on time. They stand accused of having wasted the first opportunity in the history of this city to put a model of democratic growth into prac-
tice, based on the objective needs of its inhabitants. Where are the state-subsidized houses? Where are the social policies which might have begun to erase the inequalities between North and South which can be found in the same city? Where is the commitment to infrastructure and cultural diversity as opposed to pretentious overspending? Who has rationalized the ‘market city’?

But one cannot list this inventory of suspicion and dissatisfaction without being consumed by a terrible fear of making a complete fool of oneself. Any doubts about the project will be gone with the wind when the city realizes it was all inevitable and therefore justified. When the future Olympic Village ends up as a radial centre for the redevelopment and gentrification of mile after mile of working-class housing, nobody will ask whether things might have been different. For today’s residents, forced to abandon their homes to make way for the developers, the message will be quite clear. The most inevitable of all things is that which is already complete.

Foreign visitors and Barcelonans will take walks in the opulent shade of the Olympic Village along jetties built into a sea which has hitherto been spurned and polluted. They will admire the new Barcelona, carefully rebuilt in the most distinguished areas, patched up in the periphery, the result of a grand operation in which minimal social provision has been combined with maximum pomp and ceremony. It only remains to be seen whether this vast investment has been a straightforward exercise in self-interest by the real-estate and construction companies or whether, in fact, it will be of some use to the city after the year 2000. It is now generally recognized that Ricardo Bofill’s extension to the airport, a project designed to adapt classical aesthetics to twenty-first-century functional imperatives, is simply far too small. Bofill’s airport may be beautiful but it is a beautiful, undersized dinosaur. May all those Olympic ornaments not eventually turn out to be exquisite dinosaurs?

We shall return to this question in the year 2092.

MANUEL VÁZQUEZ MONTALBÁN

1991
TRANSLATOR’S NOTE
Manuel Vázquez Montalbán was heard to remark at the 1991 Frankfurt Book Fair that he longed for the day when Catalan was fully recognized in literary circles so that he could continue writing in Castilian without feeling guilty. Bearing this in mind, in the English edition of Barcelonas I have rendered all street and personal names in Catalan, though I translated the book from Montalbán’s mother tongue, Castilian.

Some words proved untranslatable. Among them is modernisme, which on no account should be understood as Catalan (or worse still, Spanish) for modernism. Whatever modernism is, it is not modernisme, although the latter may well be a branch of the former. By modernisme Montalbán means the artistic school which appeared in Catalonia towards the end of the nineteenth century and whose most celebrated representatives were the architects Josep Maria Jujol, Lluís Domènech i Muntaner, Puig i Cadafalch and, though he detested the label, Antoni Gaudí. Sister movements emerged – Arts and Crafts in Britain; Art Nouveau in France; Secessionism in Austria – but none of these seemed an appropriate translation. Buildings inspired by Bauhaus and the Modern Movement, like Mies van der Rohe’s pavilion on Montjuïc, are referred to in Barcelonas as rationalist.

Modernisme’s successor, the noucentista school, also defies translation. Noucentisme describes what Montalbán considers to be a conservative revival of classical aesthetic norms, staged between 1910 and 1930. Eugeni D’Ors, the Catalan philosopher whose ambition to refound Rome in Catalonia was drastically revised at the start of the Spanish Civil War when he became a Falangist, was the movement’s greatest mind. It was D’Ors who conceived the female emblem of a mythologized neoclassical Barcelona, La Ben Plantada, a perfect woman and another headache for this translator as readers will discover on reaching Chapter 4.

Barcelona’s grid plan of streets, the Eixample, also seemed best left in Catalan. Eixample literally means extension, in Barcelona’s case the extension of the city beyond its medieval walls planned in accordance with Ildefons Cerdà’s mid-nineteenth-century blueprint, the Cerdà plan.

Finally, I have not dared touch seny, a psychological and existential quality which is said to distinguish the Catalans from the Spanish
TRANSLATOR’S NOTE

and from the rest of the world. If the claim seems outrageous it is nevertheless substantiated by the problems that seny poses to translators across the world. The nearest approximation in English seems to be ‘profound common sense’ but as Montalbán explains in Chapter 2 there is far more to seny than meets the non-Catalan eye.

ANDY ROBINSON

October 1991
From the Hills