

T wo texts about Jaume Serra Hunter (1878-1943)

Josep Carner | Jordi Maragall

Jaume Serra Hunter was one of the most important Catalan philosophers of the first half of the 20th century. He occupied the Chair of Fundamental Logic at the University of Santiago and in 1913 he moved to the Chair of History of Philosophy at the University of Barcelona. With Tomàs Carreras Artau, professor of Ethics, and Pere Bosch Gimpera, professor of Archaeology, he took part in the reforms proposed and decided on in the Second Congress of Catalan Universities on the organization of humanities studies. Serra Hunter, was politically committed to catalanism and began his career in the Normal Studies of the Commonwealth –an institution set up by Prat de la Riba–; he wrote the articles on philosophy for the *Espasa Encyclopaedia* and took part in the founding of the Catalan Philosophy Society. During the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera, when the institutions of the Commonwealth were suppressed, Serra Hunter did not limit himself to his university teaching, but gave conferences and courses for cultural groups and clubs. He was named Head of the School of Philosophy and Letters within a few weeks of the Second Republic being announced, only to be appointed Rector of the University of Barcelona the following month – the first Rector to be democratically elected by the staff of the University. As Rector, his role in the negotiations with the Central Government for the autonomy of the university was fundamental, aided by Pere Bosch Gimpera i Pompeu Fabra. In 1931 he was the candidate for the *Partit Catalanista Republicà*, and vice-president of the Parliament of Catalonia. His replacement as rector was the professor Pere Bosch Gimpera. His influence as an intellectual was further enhanced by his occupation of these two posts. Among his publications, there are the two volumes of *Philosophy and Culture* (1930-1932), *Sòcrates* (1931), *Spinoza* (1933), *Sentit i valor de la nova filosofia* (1934) and *Figures i perspectives de la història del pensament* (1935)

At the end of the Spanish Civil War of 1936-1939, Serra fled to France and settled in Tolouse, in the Languedoc, together with other intellectuals. He was one of the five members of the first Catalan National Council, created in

1940 in France to carry out some of the functions of the exiled government, but when threatened by the German advance, he fled to Mexico, where he died in 1943, after falling ill on the long journey. Josep Carner wrote the prologue to the book *Thought and Life*, one of his unpublished works which was finally printed two years after his death. The articles by Jordi Maragall, collected in book form in 1985, are a good indication of the interest there is in rediscovering the work of this Catalan philosopher four decades later.

“Prologue” of the book *Thought and Life*¹ Josep Carner (1884-1970)

Jaume Serra Hunter was born in Manresa in 1878, of Catalan and Irish stock.

His noble head, with its romantic aspect of delicate, troubled youth, agile in both enthusiasm and indignation, is one of my earliest memories of the University of Barcelona. We were both assigned to the class where metaphysics was taught by the least metaphysical man in the world, a stolid fish merchant, and another where the Latin language and literature were taught by the bullfighting correspondent of the newspaper *Noticiero Universal*, who had been directly appointed to the job. When I met him, Serra Hunter was already over twenty years old: I was an insignificant figure, a child of fifteen, and the contrast between us, which seemed important at the time, was accentuated by his severe attitude, especially to ethics, and the energy of his ideals encased in his fragile frame. I can still remember his courteous manner, which was enhanced by our mutual love of Catalonia and its poetry. He lent me books, and I sometimes visited the small flat where his family lived. In those days, Serra Hunter wrote poetry on a daily basis, and had filled many notebooks. He was diligent and wise, and was studying Philosophy and Literature and Law at the university. We all knew that he was, and would always be, one of the best.

I saw him again a few years later, in Madrid, in a gloomy hostel. He had become a kind of obstinate indomitable contrarian come what may, who was lofty enough to remain independent of cultural gangsters and, with a heroism that the world knew nothing of, and would have condemned as wrong-headed, argued that his simplicity was the obstacle.

1 Jaume Serra Hunter, *El pensament i la vida. Estímul per a filosofar*, Mexico: Club del Llibre Català 1945, p. 9-14.

After passing through other universities, at the age of thirty-six, Serra Hunter was welcomed as the head of the recently inaugurated Philosophy Section of Barcelona University. Prat de la Riba's creation of new cultural institutions had infused much needed energy and ambition into official cultural policies. The atmosphere at the university had worsened since our student days when it was moribund and poorly equipped.

I would say that Serra Hunter was born to be a Head of Faculty. He had a passion for knowledge, which is the highest passion of all, and another for teaching, generous like no other. He was an exemplary figure for the purity of his dedication to the practice and habit of thinking. One clear indication of this can be seen in his priceless texts, the utter clarity of his written expression as he places categories and values within your grasp. He belongs to that unfortunately rare breed –the only one worthy of holding the University Chair– who are inspired by a living inner flame, like the Damascene convert, but who come to represent everything for their disciples. They are a breed quite unlike the mundane cherishers of their ideas, or those who reel off unchanging lists while eyeing their options of piling up bureaucratic privileges.

Serra Hunter lived in and for the purity of the chosen. I know full well that many of these drudges consider their lives to be practical, on the one hand because they get paid, and on the other because they eliminate all speculative induction, and that the arduous dedication of Serra Hunter is unworldly, to them no more than an obsession for leisured idealists. They are incapable of imagining that knowledge is the highest fruit of life, and that they are no more than hangers-on in one stage of the arduous and perilous ascension of humanity, and were it not for the heroic sacrifice of great thinkers, they would still be living in caves or in the tree tops. Nonetheless, it is a stimulus or a challenge for anyone, that in the face of so many wasted lives, so many corrupted by warm climates, there was one, in a corner of Barcelona who, in the strict asceticism of his youth had set a course for the pure worship of knowledge that would lead him in maturity to a rigorous sacrifice for culture and his homeland, two ideals that for Serra Hunter were a living unity, like so many other notable compatriots. Neither a place nor a language can fulfil their potential unless it is as authentic centres and examples of the universal.

When one's meditations and works are so demanding, those who are capable of such rare qualities remain untainted by the corruption of vanity, that hypersensitive self-obsession. They also avert another common vice – the impenetrable armour of egoism. Therein lies a lesson for many Catalans. Disciples and colleagues of Serra Hunter, as well as visitors from overseas all coincide in remembering his simple friendly cordiality, his generosity and eagerness to help: he did not accumulate things for his own sake, but to make a gift of it to all.

There was a profound connection in the arduous existence of a vital spirit in such a precarious body. In the days when Catalonia achieved a temporary and more or less desired recovery of its destiny, which was so soon to be turned back by the rapid degeneration of the Spanish Republic, and at the end of a period of reckless redress that has now been sunk for many years, Serra Hunter received public honours. He was a councillor of Barcelona, and president of the Cultural Commission. He was a member of the Catalan Parliament, where he rose to the presidency. At the same time, he was appointed Rector of the University. He did not, however, accept these honours as the culmination of his personal worth, but with dignity, as the fulfilment of his faith in Catalonia and the human spirit.

An even more splendid display of these qualities was the brilliant example he gave to all in his exile in Mexico, when he was ill and in dire poverty. It was there that, faced with the destruction and darkening of his world, he set about revising and renewing his philosophy studies. In contrast with the inanity and deviation of so many Catalans, he sustained his clear-sighted position as a patriot, and the instructiveness and vitality of his political writings from this time could stand as his testament. He spoke on behalf of the authentic Catalonia, that which was embodied in the younger Front Nacional, when he wrote: "If we believe them to have been overthrown (he was referring to the Republican Constitution and its statutes), we do so because we have seen that the problem of the national centres has not been resolved, and because we know that the Spanish parties, through war and the inner revolution of the Republican area, have moved backwards in their appreciation of the problem of Catalonia". We can see the key to our future in these lucid words. Catalonia is obliged to ascend.

Serra Hunter died in Cuernavaca on the 7th of December 1943. His remains lie in the valley of Mexico, where two white-capped mountains, two monuments of the New World hold vigil. His journey came to an end in exile, in what should have been no more than an interruption.

This great teacher of thought, champion of catalanism, as much ours as he was universal, a fearless defender of freedom and social justice, was convinced that after death he would pass through a great gateway beyond the stars. But he deserves to be assured another form of immortality in his homeland, so his name should be a spur to the love of knowledge in our finest tradition, in which the tree should be as deeply rooted in our soil as its crown is open to the four winds.

Jaume Serra Húnter² by Jordi Maragall (1911-1999)

I

I am happy to complete the task I set myself a fortnight ago in my last article in *Avui*. On the other hand, I agree with Fèlix Cucurrull's comments last week on the subject of the present, past and future. It is not pure romanticism to recall the past when we have been subjected to a forty-year process of cultural eradication which has removed all trace of the men and institutions that had, at one time, been at the forefront of Catalan culture. We need to find our roots, and to know all there is to know about Catalonia and its cultural, scientific, economic and artistic life. Not to engage in weepy chauvinism, but the contrary, to affirm our identity. It is unfortunate that the rest of Spain should know so little about Catalonia; it must be a priority that all who live and work here know about Catalonia.

He was known as Serra Hunter, without the "i" that Catalans use to separate their surnames. I remember him on one day in 1930, at the Ritz Hotel, at the head table in the banquet offered to Castilian intellectuals. He was sitting next to José Ortega y Gasset. Serra Hunter had to speak. We, his students, were pained to see him trapped in this situation. He was not, at that time, a public figure. He found the formality of the occasion discomforting and spoke little with the other people sitting at his table. When he began to speak I remember him saying: "*Fortune has seen to it that sitting on my left and right are two men who are symbols of Castilian culture...*" One of the men was, as I said, Ortega y Gasset. The other might have been Ramón Menéndez Pidal, I don't remember it that well. In any case, we were aware that Serra Hunter was not a man of the world, and that, sitting next to Ortega y Gasset, who most certainly was, he felt out of place.

I can say this with conviction because I had met Serra Hunter earlier, in 1925, when he taught French and Literature at my school, Col·legi de Sant Miquel. School children have always made fun of their teachers. When we were fourteen or fifteen, we had no idea that Serra Hunter was head of History of Philosophy at the University of Barcelona. We saw him as just another school teacher, possibly a little more glum and shabbily-dressed. He looked older than he was. He was a good teacher, with a hint of the indifference that is the mark

2 Jordi Maragall, *El que passa i els qui han passat*, Barcelona: Edicions 62, 1985, p. 105-109.

of a man who feels his situation is beneath him. We know now that at the same time he was giving classes at the Faculty and directing the Philosophy seminar that I mentioned in my last article. He was also writing the articles on Philosophy for the Encyclopaedia Espasa, but despite being engaged on all these jobs at the same time, life at his home was modest. Very modest indeed. His wife was a beautiful woman, the sister of the wife of the painter Ramon Casas, and they had two sons and three or four daughters, who were also beautiful. Teaching was poorly paid then, as it always has been. It must have been difficult making ends meet.

A few years later, in the year 1928-29, I was a student of his at the University. I had already realised, while still at school, who Jaume Serra Hunter was. Not because he told us, but because the other teachers told us about him: Ramon Roquer, Emili Planelles, Pep Vergés. The first two were students of his. However, it was not until Joaquim Xirau and Francesc Mirabent started their degree in Philosophy that we saw the greatness of the man. At that time, in 1928, Serra Hunter had been in charge of the History of Philosophy department for fourteen years, and had organized that semi-clandestine seminar, where a small nucleus of Catalan Philosophers was taking shape. I remember well the density and depth of his lessons. His lectures were a pleasure because of the immense amount of information he had, and his remarkable capacity to establish connections between the classical currents of Western thought. I can still remember the sentence he used when beginning his lecture on Leibniz: "*En tant que j'ai penché du côté de Spinoza...*"

With the autonomy of the School of Philosophy and Literature in 1931, he was appointed to teach the course on metaphysics. In that year we were able to see for ourselves Serra Hunter's allegiance to the Scottish school and its Catalan version which was founded in the first half of the 19th century by Ramon Martí d'Eixalà and continued above all by Llorens i Barba.

As a member of the Science Section of the Institut d'Estudis Catalans, presided by Pere Coromines, Serra Hunter appointed me to be the secretary-editor. There were three of us who benefited from this new impulse in the Science Section. Dr. Eduard Fontserè appointed Josep Gassiot, and Dr. August Pi i Sunyer appointed Jaume Raventós, who has recently been honoured for his research work at ICI in England. The new situation gave me much more contact with Serra Hunter. After having visited his humble quarters in carrer Còrsega, I now went to work some afternoons at his new residence in carrer Blanes 67. I helped him organize the enormous filing system that he had created when writing the Espasa encyclopaedia articles. The flat was larger, but a little darker. The family dog got to know me. The family's financial situation improved. He had given up the classes at my old school several years previously. Collections of his articles were being published (two volumes with the title *Philosophy and*

Culture) and a few monographs (*Socrates, Spinoza*). Although his education and mindset had been tempered by the shrewdness of conservative thought, he was a candidate for Esquerra Republicana in the elections to the Catalan Parliament, and for a time he was also vice-president.

Joan Roura-Parella, who was a lecturer at the School of Philosophy and Literature and Pedagogy in the Autonomous University at the time, spoke to me a few weeks ago about his meetings with Serra Hunter in his Mexican exile. He spoke very highly of him, stressing the extraordinary philosophical wisdom of Serra Hunter. That conversation brought him back to my memory, to see him once more a little stooped, his prominent nose and his tic of rubbing it now and again to breathe more easily. He was a likeable man with broad shoulders, who became nervous and agitated when impassioned. That is how I remember him at the Institute when the left won the elections for the second time in February 1936. On the short side, with a moustache and grey hair, glancing quickly around and walking with difficulty. He must have had some pain in his feet, because someone once told me that he had a pair of slippers at the Parliament for the days when he had to work there for long stretches. At home, however, he wore them all the time.

I am still not sure whether Jaume Serra Hunter was as great a gain for politics as he was a loss for philosophy. I tend to think that he had a remarkable knowledge of philosophy, and in a country where there are people prepared for all public responsibilities, Serra Hunter would have been better advised to remain at the University. In truth, he never really abandoned it, because he continued as Rector until the staff of the new Autonomous University appointed Pere Bosch i Gimpera. He did not stop giving classes except for a few days when his political duties forced him to. However, this late drift towards politics to some extent blurs our image of doctor Jaume Serra Hunter, Head of the Philosophy Department.

He died in Mexico. His oldest son died. Of his other children, Jordi was a notable student of our Institute-School, and his daughters settled in different places. None of them in Catalonia. We do not have enough information to talk more about this. We can talk about him and his thought. Students setting out on their doctoral thesis have a good subject here for a profound and well-documented piece of work. My account is no more than an emotional memory.

II

The article by Lluís M. de Puig in *Avui* a few days ago has moved me to speak about Jaume Serra Hunter again, as I did in these pages on the 27th October 1977. However, Lluís M. de Puig has set in motion an idea that could lead to

very positive results. My friend Olives, who has spent so many years on the problems of the book, called me to press for the release of some papers of Jaume Serra Hunter that would appear to be held at the University library. As regards the trunk with his original notes and files which is in Toulouse, I hardly need to add that I have begun the process of recovering them.

The situation is more or less as follows: Jaume Serra Húnter was hired by the Espasa publishing house to write all the philosophy articles for the Encyclopaedia, from ESP onwards. Serra Hunter did a magnificent job. This was the origin of his famous files with details of authors and themes in philosophy. When Serra Hunter appointed me as secretary-editor for the Science Section of the Institut d'Estudis Catalans, he asked me to collaborate on the organization of these files as well.

Serra Hunter's life was a hard one. There were his classes and the semi-clandestine seminar at the University, the articles for the Espasa Encyclopaedia, and then literature and French classes in schools. When the Republic came, and autonomy for the universities, he was able to give up some of these school classes and spend more time (besides his political activities) in collecting original material for the encyclopaedia which, after translating them into Catalan and rewriting them, he would publish as monographs on Socrates and Spinoza as well as the themes covered by the two volumes of *Philosophy and Culture*.

The trunk in Toulouse and the documents in the library probably contain these files and, possibly, sketches for the rewriting of some of these articles for another book. It would obviously be of great interest to recover them.

Nevertheless, these things must be properly done. First of all, we must contact the family of Serra Hunter (son, daughters and grandchildren), which I have done in the past and can do again. My friend Joan Roura-Parella, lecturer at Wesleyan University in Middletown (USA) already put me in contact once, and I am sure he will be happy to do so again.

Once we have the family's consent, we can rummage in the university library until we find the documents. As for Toulouse, I can ask my friend Alfons Serra Baldó, who teaches in the French city, to track down the trunk which Domènech de Bellmunt mentions, according to Lluís M. de Puig.

The whole project could be coordinated by the Catalan Philosophy Society, which is affiliated with the Institut d'Estudis Catalans (lest we forget, Serra Hunter, along with Ramon Turró and others, was a founder member) and promoted through the doctoral thesis on Jaume Serra Hunter by a young graduate.

We therefore have a feasible project which would lead to the recovery of the personality and work of this well-loved master of philosophy in Catalonia. If anyone has any further suggestions they will be most welcome.