

Joan Fuster

DICTIONARY FOR THE IDLE

Translated from the Catalan

by

Dominic Keown, Sally Anne Kitts, John-Pau Rubiés,
Max Wheeler, Judith Willis and Alan Yates

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CONTENTS

Preface			7
Introduction			11
Accomplice	13	Metaphysics	72
Avarice	13	Money	75
Beauty	17	Nationalism	75
Chair	17	Novels	80
Characterology	20	Order	84
Charlatan	20	Pardon	86
Clocks and Watches	21	People	89
Conviction	23	Plagiarism	90
Cowardliness	23	Politics	97
Cynicism	24	Pride	97
Defect	24	Quixotism	98
Doing	24	Reading	101
Dying	24	Regret	104
Egoism	25	Savages	105
Epitaph	25	Scepticism	108
Ethics	25	Servility	109
Fate	32	Sex	109
Fatuousness	37	Silence	127
Flâner	37	Stupidity	127
Freedom	39	Temperance	130
Hell	42	Thought	134
Humiliation	44	Time	134
Ideas	44	To Be	134
Indignation	44	Uxoricide	134
Intellectual	46	Vengeance	134
Interest	54	Vice	136
Justice	55	War	140
Love	63	Wickedness	141
Man	68	Xenophobia	141
Mediterranean	68	Zero	142
Mendacity	72		

PREFACE

Joan Fuster was born in Sueca in the province of Valencia in 1922. His literary output, as prolific as it is profound, has tended to fall into two basic categories. Fuster, the specialist historian, has concentrated primarily on the culture and identity of the modern-day Valencian Autonomous Community (the provinces of Alacant, Castelló and Valencia). Additionally, as an essayist, he has produced a series of intriguing studies on a variety of themes poignantly relevant to contemporary western society and which may be typified by his *Dictionary for the Idle*. The magnitude of Fuster's achievement, however, is best appreciated within his own ethos. In Valencia he is considered not so much as an author as a 'phenomenon', though the non-specialist English reader may require some background information to grasp the full significance of the epithet.

Historically speaking, as an integral part of the Crown of Aragon, the Kingdom of Valencia was not only a thriving expansionist power but also rich in literature and the arts. The startlingly impressive poetry of Ausiàs March and the chivalresque masterpiece *Tirant lo Blanc* (both now available in English translation) imbued the Catalan vernacular with considerable cultural prestige internationally. However, the geopolitical union of Spain under the Catholic Monarchs—and the inevitable linguistic unification that this implied—saw the eastern seaboard subsumed into the greater Spanish context which, under the centralist dominance of Castile, brought about a long process of political and cultural decadence on the periphery.

Despite the *Renaixança*, a somewhat stillborn Romantic reawakening of national creative consciousness which was interrupted by the Civil War, the Castilianization of literature which had begun in the sixteenth century continued well into the modern period. In the dark night of Franco's rule the language of Castile was imposed even more exclusively throughout the centralized state, though it is paradoxically during this period that the first significant attempts at literary revival appear, albeit clandestinely. In these circumstances, when his native

Catalan was reduced to little more than a patois or folkloric accessory, it is truly remarkable that Fuster not only refused to abandon it but also achieved international acclaim for the excellence of his scholarship in the 'minority' medium.

In the systematic stifling of the periphery began to be questioned with the establishment of democracy in Spain in 1977 and the accompanying recognition of ethnic rights inherent in the autonomous system. However, Fuster's vision of the linguistic, cultural and historic unity of Catalan-speaking regions of Valencia, Majorca and Catalonia provides a coherent platform for aspirations for national *rapprochement* on a more extensive scale; an attitude which has given rise to polemic—ongoing in Valencia today—and has provoked a violent response from reactionary elements among the local population.

In his less academic writings Fuster has been no less outstanding. For the eminent Catalan intellectual Josep Maria Castellet he is 'Quite simply the best there is; top of the class of our post-war generation'. Castellet is also accurate in his view that 'Fuster is an anachronism in our age. He belongs to the secular line of moralists and free thinkers.' His *Dictionary for the Idle*, with the acknowledged influence of Montaigne, Voltaire and Huxley, is exemplary in this respect. Here, with his customary brand of radical humanism, Fuster considers a series of ethical issues facing the modern world. Though conscious of the responsibility of the committed intellectual his approach is never clinical or removed but personal and intimate, drawing on a wealth of involvement which has experienced at first hand the Republic, Civil War, famine and fascist repression, Cold War and Marshall Plan, along with the eventual opening up of Spain to the international community.

The work itself may be some thirty years old but the fundamental questions remain hauntingly relevant today as we approach the threshold of a new millennium. The ethical implications of scientific progress are acutely immediate in a society still grappling vainly with the moral dilemmas posed by *in vitro* fertilization, cloning, and embryo experimentation. Fuster puts to the test basic tenets of jurisprudence, and standard assumptions about crime and punishment, topics of startling actuality in our western society which is witnessing an increasing reintroduction of the death penalty. The author likewise jolts us from our complacency about the female condition. We see

how little our perception and evocation of woman's lot has really altered, and this despite the subsequent influence of the feminist movement.

Not all, however, is momentous and serious. The aphorisms and anecdotes are pithy, revealing and genuinely amusing, though by no means the sole purveyors of the basic human warmth which inhabits these pages. Fuster displays that ingenuous curiosity and inquisitiveness which is capable of affording the most remarkable insights into the nature of society. Initially capricious musings about objects as ordinary and everyday as a chair or a nose (in this case Cleopatra's) are the starting point in a process which removes veil after veil of bias and prejudice to provide a fresh, unblinkered way of broaching the issues concerned.

Fuster is essentially a tireless exploder of myths and zealously guarded preconceptions. In this respect it would be accurate to describe him as a sceptic—but, paradoxically, a sceptic who refuses to lose faith in his community, its culture and ultimately humanity in general. His modest dismissal of himself as 'just an ordinary man in the street; a Catalan speaker from Sueca' reveals in a nutshell the relevance of his work to the individual in modern society yet also the complex enormity of the Fuster phenomenon in its context. Joan Fuster is Emeritus professor of Catalan at Valencia University.

Dominic Keown
September 1991

INTRODUCTION

From the very first line I want to undeceive you, the reader, as to the scope of the title of the book you have in your hands. It was not my intention (need I explain?) to compile a 'dictionary'. As on other occasions, I am merely gathering in one volume an incoherent series of writings, diverse in theme and unequal in length, which may be categorized within the modest yet elastic genre of the 'essay'. In *Figures de Temps (Figures of Time)* (Barcelona, 1957), and *Indagacions Possibles (Possible Inquiries)* (Mallorca, 1958), I cobbled together a little collection of aphoristic left-overs, in small sections which were relatively or remotely united in their content. In this case, neither of these procedures was open to me. The texts grouped in this volume date from many scattered periods, and only with some violence could they tolerate classification on the grounds of subject matter. It is for this reason, therefore, and with the aim of keeping at least the appearance of regularity, I opted for a third, more comfortable solution: to title each entry with a key word and then arrange them all in alphabetical order. This trick is not, of course, new in any way; rather it boasts of some illustrious precedents. So much the better. In any case, to vary slightly the nature of the 'dictionary', and in order to reduce any supposed ambitious resonance, I rounded off the name with an ironic indication of those for whom it is intended: 'the idle'. The reader should not take this too badly for when all is said and done it isn't really a lie, since when are we going to read, if not in a moment of idleness? What is more, although professional writers may affirm that the aspirations of literature are lofty and transcendental, there is no doubt it has another more vulgar and immediate aim: to fill the idle moments of hypothetical readers. At least, the type of literature I cultivate—subordinate, marginal, homespun literature—cannot embrace aspirations of any great haughtiness. What I include here are 'essays': nothing much, really. If, from time to time, they acquire an inflated, dogmatic aspect, it is not intentional: in fact they deal with everyday problems, my own at least, which are precisely those topics that would

crop up in a friendly chat between the reader and myself should we ever meet face to face. I hope something or other will be of interest. I myself will be happy if I don't spoil your moment of leisure, or bother you in any significant way.

Joan Fuster
Sueca, April 3, 1963