

# Introduction

## Montserrat Abelló: A Life in Verse

*Words  
become tangled  
in my hands.*

Montserrat Abelló, 'Words'

In her diaries the poet Sylvia Plath wrote: "I want to write because I have the urge to excel in one medium of translation and expression of life. I can't be satisfied with the colossal job of merely living." Montserrat Abelló, poet, reader, admirer and translator of Plath into Catalan, endorses this vigorous declaration when she tells us that she writes from a love of life and the necessity to survive. Abelló has lived, and lives, intensely and has continued to write tirelessly to the present day. For her, writing means translating life into words and, in effect, the lines from the poem 'Words' that head this introduction not only express succinctly the link between life and the act of creation that runs through all her work, but also the control she exercises over those irrefutable words, almost physically held in their relationship to the image of the body.

Montserrat Abelló (Tarragona, 1918) is one of the most prominent poets of contemporary Catalan literature. Always restless, rebellious and committed to the Catalan language and feminist writing, her attitude to the world around her is frank, sincere and lucid. As a small child she lived in London, where she learned English, which many years later

allowed her to teach and translate. In 1935, she began studies in the Arts Faculty of the University of Barcelona and during the Spanish Civil War she interpreted for the international brigades in that city. When the Francoist victory of 1939 presaged a future of atrocious dictatorship, Abelló took the decision to accompany her father and leave for an uncertain exile, a journey that led first to Paris, then again to London and finally to Chile, at the beginning of World War II. It is almost a surprise to hear her comment that her experience of exile in Latin America was neither painful nor traumatic, but only rather too long. She was there for twenty-one years during which she began a new life. Amongst the group of Catalan exiles, she met her future husband. It was in that context that her artistic leanings burgeoned and she began to translate and write poetry. Yet it was not until the birth of her third child, affected by Down's syndrome, that she discovered her own voice and began to write according to her own instincts. But this Catalan woman was far from her own country and her activity as a writer was clandestine, carried out patiently in complete silence.

The family's long-awaited return to Catalonia took place in 1960, to Barcelona where Abelló still lives. Three years later, she made her first appearance as a poet with the publication of *Vida diària (Everyday Life)* (1963), with a prologue by Joan Oliver. Her long career in poetry continued with the publication of various volumes which were gathered together in 2002 in *Al cor de les paraules. Obra poètica (1963-2002)* (*At the Heart of Words. Poetical Works, 1963-2002*). Her dedication to literature and poetry has been rightly recognised with the most prestigious Catalan literary and cultural awards throughout her professional and artistic career. Even so, Montserrat Abelló, now aged ninety-five, has not stopped writing poetry and publishing, and continues to channel her tremendous creative energy into translation. The ambitious anthology, *Cares a la finestra. 20 dones poetes de parla anglesa del segle XX (Faces at the Window. 20 English-Speaking Women Poets of the 20th Century)* (1993) collects and translates the poems of twenty women writing in English, such as Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Alice Walker and Margaret Atwood, previously unpublished in Catalan.

The present Catalan-English bilingual edition, with self-translations by Abelló, also opens a window for the English-speaking reader, one which illuminates the most constant facet of the writer's life and poetry, that of love. This collection of fifty captivating pieces embraces a polychrome universe of experiences of love in the life of the writer throughout her career dedicated to words. It must be emphasised that nothing in the poetry of Montserrat Abelló is gratuitous. Methodical, meticulous and orderly, she checks every word and every detail, even the number of poems in these pages, which, in fact, coincides with the five decades she has been writing. An appraisal of her poetic work shows that the theme of love appears continually like a thread that the poet subtly unravels, volume after volume, and with which she weaves a slanting, single-themed, but rich and heterogeneous whole, composed of intertwining views, sentiments and experiences of love in all its forms. The result is an invitation to the innermost hideaway of a spider. Montserrat Abelló, fully conscious of this love motif, decided, in 2010, to bring together pieces published between 1963 and 2010 under the title, *Poemes d'Amor. Antologia (Love Poems. An Anthology)*.

The fifty poems in this collection have been selected from the Catalan anthology and have been organised chronologically in order of publication of the respective volumes. Needless to say, this book has been made possible by the enthusiasm and stubborn energy of Montserrat Abelló, but it is also thanks to the London publisher, Clive Boutle and his belief in translation and firm conviction that literature in minority languages, such as Catalan, should reach a wider readership. A number of other people have contributed in various ways, providing suggestions and comments and by reading the manuscript, in particular Dr Jordi Larios, Anna Barlow and Sheila Waldeck. Special thanks are due to Dr Helena Buffery, who agreed to write the preface.

*Fifty Love Poems* constitutes a tapestry of intimacy and love made up of poems that are often impressively spare, their only adornment being diaphanous and decisive language. At the heart of the poet's literary creed are the force of words and their internal music, which, accompanied by a form of

expression totally free of rhetoric, lend coherence to her writing. It is an existential, evocative and atemporal poetry in which we can find references to solitude, silence, tenderness, a consciousness of the feminine condition, to longing, to the body and even to writing, all of them emerging from a powerful sentiment of love. Abelló shows herself to be an expert interpreter of reality, with its infinity of nuances and registers of love, and uses her poetic voice to revisit scenes of affection, at times contradictory, that extend from despondency at the absence of the love of those no longer present to the maddest, most erotic and carnal love expressed in references to lips, hands, skin or eyes, and even to love in old age, as in the poem 'By the red island'.

Most surely, Montserrat Abelló is a writer difficult to classify, who has made her own way from the very beginning, leaving aside established canons. It is said that she took a long time to take up her pen, and it is true that her discretion and her desire for transparency and authenticity in her poetry have been the hallmarks of a career that has been measured and unhurried. However that may be, the poet in her saw it clearly: 'If I had to choose / I would remain with my pen / in my hand. Never again alone'. Nor has Abelló been in a hurry to become known abroad, in a language that, in addition to Catalan, she considers her own. But today, at a crucial moment when Catalonia and Catalan culture are opening up to Europe, her love poems are now available to us in English. The reader will discover a unique, transparent voice, perhaps new but never intrusive, only visiting briefly. As an expression of her maturity and of a theme that is central to literature, her poems bring us close to the most introspective, intimate and even trivial details that lead us to what is universal, viewed from a free, modern standpoint. For, as the poet reminds us in the final poem, with lines that are as piercing as they are necessary: 'When love is missing / what will remain?' A poet and her indispensable poetry.

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