

## David Rosenthal's *Tirant lo Blanc* turns 30

### La traducció del *Tirant lo Blanc* de David Rosenthal, 30 anys després

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**Abstract:** The groundbreaking English language translation of *Tirant lo Blanc* by New York poet and academic David Rosenthal remains dominant three decades after its initial, and celebrated, release. Rosenthal's controversially fluid and concise rendering of the Valencian classic survived a serious challenge 20 years ago by a more literal version from a well-meaning amateur translator and journeyman academic backed by a leading U.S.-based Catalan scholar. The article reviews the controversy and compares the two versions, adding comments from some of the key critics.

**Keywords:** *Tirant lo Blanc*; David Rosenthal; translation catalan-english; medieval catalan literature

**Resum:** La traducció capdavantera a l'anglès del *Tirant lo Blanc*, feta pel poeta i erudit de Nova York, David Rosenthal, continua mantenint la seua importància, tres dècades després de publicar-se. La polèmica versió dúctil i concisa de Rosenthal del clàssic valencià, ha sobreviscut el desafiament seriós, de fa vint anys, de la versió més literal d'un benintencionat traductor amateur i acadèmic oficial, recolzat per un destacat erudit català establert als Estats Units. L'article revisa la polèmica i compara les dues versions, tot afegint els comentaris d'alguns dels crítics més importants.

**Paraules clau:** *Tirant lo Blanc*; David Rosenthal; traducció català-anglès; literatura catalana medieval

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Thirty years ago an extremely unlikely book captured the attention the American reading public and its critical arbiters: David Rosenthal's daring translation of Joanot Martorell's *Tirant lo Blanc*. The book was odd in its very design, with its chivalrous yet ruthless eponymous hero pursuing 600-pages of unlikely adventures from Wales to Byzantium, butchering opponents with Homeric aplomb and then seducing a young princess with the help of a voyeuristic handmaiden more suited for a short story from Anaïs Nin. And it was written in almost a pastiche of styles, by turns pedantic and terse, wildly imaginative (a Muslim invasion of England?) and then very grounded in late Medieval history and politics.

It was a lot to ask of a nation famously ambivalent about historical subjects (as Gore Vidal, that recently departed bard of historical fiction, frequently complained) in general and translations in particular. For decades the percentage of books published in the United States in any category that are translations has hovered in the low single digits. Yet accolades and interviews followed on the heels of its publication. There were glowing reviews in the New York Times and Times of London, among many others. The Philadelphia Inquirer even headlined its books section with the *Tirant* review.

The thirtieth anniversary has gone by quietly. The translator died tragically in 1992 at age 46 from pancreatic cancer.<sup>1</sup> There are no special re-editions or announcements from Schocken, now an imprint of the publishing giant Knopf Doubleday. But the book remains in its catalog and is widely available, whether from the ubiquitous bookseller Amazon, including as a \$13 Kindle download, or from more than 700 academic libraries in North America alone. «It's the version that's on my bookshelf,» Harvard-affiliated translator and hispanist Karen Bishop told me recently.

The story of Rosenthal's epic translation began about a decade earlier when the poet and university instructor (he had a Ph.D. in comparative literature) visited and fell in love with Barcelona.<sup>2</sup> At age 37, the quintessentially New York poet and jazz enthusiast decided to move to Spain and teach himself Catalan and Spanish. He quickly began to integrate his new passion into his writing life. «I intended to study and translate only poetry,» Rosenthal told the New York Times Herbert Mitgang in 1983, just before publication of his *Tirant*. «Inevitably, I got involved in the political scene because the poets writing in Catalan were under siege and some of my friends were jailed in Madrid. Had Catalan culture been encouraged, this novel might have been translated into other languages long before now.»<sup>3</sup>

What specifically inspired Rosenthal's project of literary resuscitation were two ground breaking essays by the Peruvian novelist (and a contemporaneous sojourner in Barcelona) Mario Vargas

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1 The death was announced in the New York Times on Nov. 4, 1992, by his father, the famous poet Max Rosenthal.

2 Prior to his trip, in 1971, to Barcelona, Rosenthal had earned a degree in comparative literature from the City University of New York and taught exclusively at colleges in and around the City.

3 One assumes his contemporary Mario Vargas Llosa would not share this conclusion.

Llosa, later published as the book *Carta de batalla por Tirant lo Blanc*, which argued for the Valencian classic's key role in the early development of European literature and culture. Rosenthal undertook to translate lengthy excerpts of *Tirant*, which he subsequently published in 1981 with detailed explanatory passages in the medieval journal «Allegorica». He was brought to Schocken a little later by a new editor at the publishing house, Emile Capouya, who had edited Rosenthal as a poet and literary journalist at *The Nation* and who was aware of the writer's successful translation of Mercè Rodoreda's classic *La plaça del diamant* (*The time of the doves* in Rosenthal's English version) in 1980.<sup>4</sup>

After the novel's widely publicized debut, there were three reprintings from publisher Schocken Books in the first year and Rosenthal netted a still impressive \$110,000 in domestic and British paperback and hardcover rights. A paperback reprint edition was made in 1996 by Johns Hopkins University Press. And there things would have remained had not Professor Josep M. Solà-Solé of the Catholic University of America (Washington D.C.) accidentally discovered a translation of *Tirant* previous to Rosenthal's, which everyone on both sides of the Atlantic assumed was the first complete English version.

### 1. An Unheralded Predecessor

A full decade before Rosenthal's Englishing of the Valencian masterpiece, an obscure Ph.D. candidate in English at Auburn University undertook the translation as his dissertation.<sup>5</sup> It took C. Raymond La Fontaine two years to complete, in 1974, and ran 1,500 pages. As with all dissertations in the United States, it was registered with the University Microfilm International in Ann Arbor, where it was utterly forgotten. Until Solà-Solé found a citation of it on a CD-ROM during routine library research. The scholar of Semitic languages at CUA's Center for Catalan Studies – he died in 2003 – was astonished to learn that a complete translation of the novel had been undertaken, and in the decidedly non-Hispanic state of Alabama. «Could this possibly be true, or had I somehow landed in a story by Borges replete with imaginary biographies,» he related later.<sup>6</sup>

After ordering the three volumes of the translation, Solà-Solé was impressed with their fidelity to the original, especially when compared with the celebrated *Tirant* of Rosenthal. Where Rosenthal's work was some 15 percent shorter than the original, La Fontaine's ran an extra 5 percent, «explainable by the normal labor of attaining an accurate translation,» the professor insisted.<sup>7</sup> All that was omitted were the pages of Petrarchan-derived lectures from the Moorish King Abdallah

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4 In the 1970s, Rosenthal wrote poetry and occasional reportage («Letter from Barcelona») for the influential left-wing journal.

5 Curt Wittlin wrote in *Els Marges* that he believed Vargas Llosa's *Carta de batalla* had prompted La Fontaine's advisor, Thomas Wright, to suggest the dissertation project. The Peruvian writer's essays «...fomentaren un gran interès pel Tirant dins dels cercles acadèmics nord americans...»

6 From Solà-Solé's introduction to La Fontaine's *Tirant*.

7 This is not a commonly held view among literary translators, however.

Solomon to *Tirant*. Otherwise, Solà-Solé found a deeply faithful translation, right down to the original's rambling dialogues. «He respected the spirit of the original work and sought to make no concessions to the modern sensibility, maintaining in the sexual scenes the kind of modesty and simple insinuation which, notwithstanding Martorell's daring, characterizes a medieval text.»

Solà-Solé tracked down La Fontaine, the New York born child of Puerto Rican immigrants<sup>8</sup>, in Texas, where he worked as a television producer and investigative journalist after leaving academia. Solà-Solé wrote that La Fontaine was mystified by the Catalan professor's keen interest in publishing his dissertation some 16 years after its completion and burial in the vaults of UMI. The newly minted Ph.D. author had tried to publish it in the mid-1970s but found only vanity presses or university publishing houses that required handsome subsidies up front willing to do so. The professor advised La Fontaine that his efforts had perhaps been «untimely; that 1974 (a year still marked by Franco's hostility toward Catalan culture) was not 1984 and much less 1990, the five hundredth anniversary of the publication, in Valencia, of *Tirant lo Blanc*.»

Times being different, Solà-Solé was able to find an excellent international publisher (Peter Lang) and a handful of grants from U.S., Catalan and Valencian institutions to underwrite the editing and relaunching of this more faithful *Tirant*. It was respectfully received but no best seller.

## 2. Explaining Themselves

At the end of his Translator's Foreword, which contains the usual timeline of historical data and an encapsulation of the story, Rosenthal devotes a few scant lines to his translational strategy. He makes clear that chose to fashion a *Tirant* for modern English readers and «to avoid the false archaisms that used to mar many renderings of medieval texts.» And then he goes a step further. «In addition, I have eliminated as many redundancies as possible, both to make the book more readable and *in the belief that Martorell might have done the same, had he lived to complete the project.*» (Italics mine.)<sup>9</sup>

Solà-Solé, in his own preface to La Fontaine's version, is deeply skeptical of Rosenthal's reasoning. «Why Rosenthal believes Martorell was interested in economy of language, or that he might not simply have added more words to his «project» had he but world enough and time, is –unfortunately – not explained.»

La Fontaine, in his own brief Translator's note (written at the time of the thesis' composition) admits however to struggling as much with the rambling and often ceremonious original. «While Martorell is frequently terse and direct, especially when speaking in his own voice, the speeches he puts into the mouths of characters can be rendered in a rhetorical sprawl approaching incomprehensibility.»

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8 His parents were of French and Spanish extraction.

9 In this his intentions perhaps resemble those of Jorge Luis Borges, who can be seen subtly standardizing William Faulkner's famously idiosyncratic prose style in his celebrated translations.

Echoing Rosenthal, La Fontaine says he tried to «minimize» the syntactical extravagance of the Catalan original «by eliminating tautologies and formulaic verbiage wherever reasonably possible.» But La Fontaine insists that he retained as much of the foreignness of Martorell's five century old work as possible. «His sense of expression and timing, his metaphors and rhetorical strategies, occasionally his wordiness and repetition – his 'faults' by modern standards – all contribute to a singular picture of his mind and world he portrays.»<sup>10</sup> The translator believes you cannot extract only the elements pleasing to modern readers without losing the totality of the work, any more than one could or should airbrush out period details from a sepia-toned photograph of your grandparents. «The gestalt of the past cannot be selectively 'modernized'.» Indeed, the narrative section of his *Tirant* runs another 200 pages over Rosenthal's.

### 3. The Experts Weigh In

The renowned Catalanist and academic Curt Wittlin made a short but surprisingly detailed comparison and evaluation of the two *Tirants* in the pages of *Els Marges* in 1995, just as the modest controversy was brewing. Wittlin observed, via a series of side-by-side parsings of lexical choices, that at times both translators seem «not to be always understanding the original text well, especially if in difficult passages they could find no aid in the old Castilian translation.»<sup>11</sup> The Swiss-Canadian academic was particularly troubled by the large number of calques in the La Fontaine version, especially with regard to troponyms or Martorell's metaphorical use of proper names. For example, where La Fontaine refers to «the Widow Reposada» and «the Lord Vilesermes», Rosenthal writes «the Easy Widow» and «Lord Barrentowns.»

«Is it conceivable that a translation of *Tirant* could please both academics and the general public?» Wittlin asks near the conclusion. «It would be tough.»<sup>12</sup> That Rosenthal's translation achieved such a remarkable level of public success could be, like the 1990s hit album of Gregorian chant from the monks of Santo Domingo de Silos, a passing fancy. «I believe that Rosenthal knew the secret of how to speak to his generation. But to attract the interest of future generations will require new literary translations.»<sup>13</sup>

So does that leave to the La Fontaine version the field of a «study translation»? Not according to Wittlin. «It's a pity that the publication of La Fontaine's old translation thesis was not used as an

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10 In his 1995 book on literary translation, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*, Lawrence Venuti argues for a commitment to preserving and transmitting the «foreignness» of the original into the translation. Most translators, particularly in popular literature, aim at «domestication», its opposite.

11 «...els dos traductors no entenen sempre bé el text original, sobretot si en passatges difícils no van trobar ajuda e l'antiga traducció castellana.»

12 «És concebible una traducció del *Tirant* que satisfés alhora els universitaris i el públic general? Ho veig difícil.»

13 «Crec que Rosenthal sabia el secret com parlar a la seva generació. Per atreure l'interès de generacions futures caldrà noves traduccions literàries.»

opportunity to rigorously revise it,» he wrote in *Els Marges*.<sup>14</sup> What is lacking is precisely the fidelity the earlier translator abandoned when he tightened up the dialogues, as Rosenthal would do more effectively a decade later.<sup>15</sup> And if Rosenthal's *Tirant* sometimes gives one the impression «of a bunch of 'hippies' transplanted magically to medieval world», La Fontaine's workmanlike prose and multiple mistakes are not a worthy counterpoint, he believes.

Arthur Terry, the esteemed English Hispanist, writing in *Medium Aevum* on occasion of the reissue of Rosenthal's *Tirant* in 1998 was more generous to both translators. If Rosenthal was perhaps «overkeen to see *Tirant* as an ancestor of the modern novel and hence play down the novel's very distinctive blend of realism and formality» in his translator's preface, Terry nonetheless sees it as «faithful to the original and attractive to the modern reader.» Meanwhile, serious scholars should consult the «much less readable» but more literal La Fontaine version. «Neither of these translators is a medievalist,» Terry added, «and this accounts for a number of discrepancies in their versions; however, there is no doubt that Rosenthal has provided a very fluent text which it would be hard to fault.»

#### 4. Dueling *Tirants*

To make a clear but telling comparison between the two translations, I will present a short selection from late in the book, when *Tirant* frees his cousin Diaphebus from the Turks in Trebizond. First is the Valencian Catalan original, followed by my own nearly literal translation:

No em comporta la sang ni l'amor que en veure la vostra persona los meus ulls puguen retenir aquelles llàgremes que lo meu piadós cor plorar no cessa. Gran alteració i moviment de dolor m'ha portat la vostra presència, per los manifestos senyals de tristor, treballs i afany que en vostra cara se demostren, los quals, puix per mi ab tanta virtut i paciència los heu sostenguts, humilment vos demane me vullau perdoar.

Now here would be an extremely faithful, nearly «de verbo in verbum» rendering:

Neither blood nor love allows my eyes upon seeing you to retain those tears that my faithful heart weeps without end. Your presence has brought me a great shock and transiting to woe, for your features demonstrate the manifest signs of sadness, hardship and worry, which with much virtue and patience you have borne on my behalf, so humbly I ask that you willingly pardon me.

In La Fontaine's rendering:

I cannot help crying at the signs of misery, suffering and anxiety which are revealed on your face, and humbly implore you to pardon me for the hardships which you have endured on my account with such virtue and patience.

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14 «És de doldre que no s'hagi aprofitat la publicació del al vella traducció-tesi de La Fontaine per a fer-ne una revisió rigorosa.»

15 «Encara que traduir literalment no vol dir traduir mot a mot,» Wittlin clarifies, «una traducció literal ha de permetre estudis tant de conjunt com d'estil.»

In Rosenthal's version:

My eyes cannot help weeping at what they behold, nor can my heart keep from mourning your woeful aspect. Since you suffered for my sake, I humbly apologize...»

The qualities that made Rosenthal's translation a major public success – the clear, elegant language, the concision, the lyricism – are simply lacking in La Fontaine's workmanlike rendering.

## 5. Final Word

As mentioned above, Rosenthal's *Tirant* is readily and economically available to English speaking readers in a number of convenient formats. La Fontaine's is not. It was dropped by Peter Lang and copies can now only be purchased for upwards of \$100 from out-of-print booksellers. . His controversial 1996 book, with his wife Mary, on the assassination of John F. Kennedy – *Oswald Talked: The New Evidence in the JFK Assassination* – remains in print, however. And according to Amazon the latter book has sold four times as many copies (it ranks around 1 millionth among the best sellers of the website, as compared to his *Tirant*, which lags well behind 4 millionth).

Recently I had the opportunity to chat via telephone with Kathleen McNerney, the noted American hispanist and academic (now retired) who specializes in Catalan literature. Her book of critical essays *Tirant Lo Blanc Revisted* was published just before the Rosenthal translation debuted. Professor McNerney defended her old, long-deceased friend's decision to here and there perhaps improve upon original as it has been handed down through the centuries. She cited later research from Rafael Alemany Ferrer (University of Alacant) that reinforces Rosenthal's hunch that Martí Joan de Galba, the nobleman to whom Martorell had given his drafts of *Tirant* in repayment of a debt, edited in various rhetorical pedantries to the final published version of the book. «But who's to say he was right, really,» she admitted.

What Rosenthal wanted most to do was to revive interest in the long lost, and for English-speaking readers never discovered, classic of world literature. So he suppressed the dull, formulaic dialogues and made a *Tirant* for modern readers. «He was very good it. Yes, I like it very much.»

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