

**University of Szeged Doctoral School of History
Programme on Contemporary and Comparative History**

**HISTORY AND MEMORY
IN THE MYTH OF MEQUINENSA**

**History reflected in Jesús Moncada's novel The Towpath
(1870–1970)**

PhD Dissertation

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I. THE RESEARCH TOPIC

My dissertation is a historical analysis of a Catalan-Aragonian literary oeuvre, more specifically, Jesús Moncada's most famous novel, *The towpath* (*Camí de sirga*, Barcelona, Magrana, 1988). This interdisciplinary experiment at the borderline of history and literature tries to answer the question to what extent literature can be regarded as history and how we can rely on it as a possible source for historical science. *The towpath* is suitable for historical analysis due to its content (local history), its genre (memory novel) and its reception (Catalan identity). The questions it highlights concern the relationship of history and memory, truth and fiction, language and identity by showing an unknown part of contemporary Catalan history from a special point of view, through which we can have a glimpse of the whole.

II. HISTORIOGRAPHIC AREAS OF THE RESEARCH

As a consequence to the "linguistic turn" of history the kinship of literature and history has become a topic much discussed that put narrative and philosophy of history into the forefront of historical research. Paul Ricoeur and Hayden White agreed that narrative language was decisive in the constitution of the historical field. According to Reinhart Koselleck, historical facts are constituted by the fictionalisation of reality, while reality itself is over, and plotting is obviously a literary operation in history writing too. Since narrative forms do not inherently contain the pursuit for referentiality, White's dynamic structuralism threatened with the relativization of truth. In order to defend the referentiality of the historical field, Paul Ricoeur drew into the system the mnemonic capacity of human beings ontologically connected with history. According to Ricoeur, it is personal experience and memory that connect historical discourse with reality. Memory enables us not only to preserve our relationship with the past, but it also makes clear the dynamics of the experience field and the expectation horizon. Ricoeur considered the witness to be the key figure in history, who can validate the relationship between past and present, as his memory itself is the subject

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of history. The role of historians, in turn, is to differentiate between various testimonies and explain why it is impossible to write global history that would destroy irreconcilable contradictions between different perspectives.

Jesús Moncada (Mequinensa, 1941–Barcelona, 2005) is one of the most prominent creators of contemporary Catalan literature. His name denotes the literary myth by him created, the mythic chronicle of his hometown at the Aragon-Catalan border, sunken in the depths of a reservoir in the course of Spain's modernization process. Jesús Moncada's oeuvre has been praised by linguists, literary scholars and critics in Catalonia, but no one has yet intended an analysis of his works from a historical point of view, though the richness of historical content of his works is often remarked. The prologue of *The towpath* claims that the fabric of the novel "is woven from events taken from the last century in the life of the ancient town of Mequinensa, particularly those that sealed its fate from 1957 onwards." However, the writer makes it clear that he had no intention to write a history of those events in the usual sense of the word. This means that he didn't turn to the archives to base his research on documents. He was driven by the curiosity of an anthropologist-ethnographer-historian, and he collected the histories of the still living narrative tradition of his town. His authentic interest for the history of the community was increased by the construction of the hydroelectric power plant, which made it obvious to him that his hometown, along with the millennial river culture, his childhood and adolescent world had been condemned to death. He himself defined the novel as a "mnemonic exercise" or defense against death. This fictional testimony helps cope with the traumatic home loss and it is able to preserve more than the specific fate of Mequinensa, it encompasses the memory of all the other places of similar destiny. The "myth of Mequinena" is a *locus memoriae* that symbolises a loss, it is the dark side of the successful hydroelectric power plant construction project of Spanish economy. During my research, I haven't found official data concerning the number of settlements that had been destroyed due to water reservoir constructions in Spain, the estimations make their number around 500. Julio Llamazares, a Spanish writer is also from a flooded settlement, Vegamian in León, and he has also written his novel of memory therapy, where he considers the expulsion of the population as a consequence of reservoir constructions as the 20th century version of the Jews' expulsion.

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The towpath, as well as the whole Moncada oeuvre is written in a minority language of a special co-official status, thus the historical analysis of the novel enables the researcher to theorize about the identity of a stateless nation, from a very specific and rarely considered view: the dual identity of Catalans in Aragon. The famous Catalan historian of international reputation, Jaume Vicens Vives claimed in the 1950s that the task of a historian was to help the community to formulate its national identity, to which literature also provides important assistance. In Catalonia, the progressive momentum of historiography of the 1960s and the 1970s was intimately linked to the wish for socio-political reforms and democratic transformation. The cultivation of Catalan language, literature, and history were movements backed by civil society against the dictatorship characterised by the *Una Grande y Libre* slogan, the modern Barcelona history school led by Vicens Vives stressed the importance of studying the recent past, which had public impact too. The death of Franco and the democratic transition created a new situation in which Catalan historians were able to write national history to strengthen the narrative identity of the community. The controversy of Catalan historians' between 1982 and 1984 was around the definition of the task of a historian in the society: is the scientific objectivity of history compatible with the role it generally plays in the national education since the age of nation states, that is forging a national myth. The historians stated that there were no nations without reference points and symbols, and while the myths of Spanish history (Reconquista, Catholic kings, Conquest of America) were deeply rooted in public awareness, the elements of the Catalan myth (Guifré el Pelòs, Jaume I el Conqueridor, 11th of September 1714) have not yet been assumed. Therefore, rejecting myths as non-scientific concepts means something different for an identity that is to be built up and for the already well established one. Historians also mentioned the case of Occitania as an example of the threat that great nations, not capable of forging their own state may disappear from the stage of history.

Jesús Moncada did not identify with the images of the national history established in public consciousness due to the indoctrination during the dictatorship of Franco. He believed that history taught in school did not bear a resemblance to what actually happened, and national history completely omitted historical fields that were of no interest from the central point of view, such as the history of Catalonia, or that of the

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Franja de Ponent. The *Franja* is a territory in Aragon, a strip along the Catalan border, inhabitants of which speak Catalan. It is one of the smallest parts of the *Països Catalans* (Catalonia, Valencia, the Balearic Islands, Northern Catalonia, Franja, Andorra, Alguer), the periphery of the peripheral Catalonia, where the birthplace of Jesús Moncada, Mequinensa is situated. The *Països Catalans* is a utopian, idealistic concept that – while based on real linguistic, ethnic and cultural foundations – contrasts with another, very important element of national loyalty: the reality of political and administrative space. The awareness of a wider Catalan cultural space and belonging together, however, has been present in Catalan history. The drafts of Catalonia's autonomous constitutions in 1932 and in 1978 both attempted to establish the legal bases of a possible federation, which was ultimately left out of the final version in both occasions. Moncada's works are written in normative Catalan, but the native language of the writer is a special local variant of the western Catalan dialect, the *mequinensà*. Although this is the mother tongue of approximately 95% of Mequinensa's population, the Aragonian education system allows only one hour per week for the optional subject of Catalan language. In Aragon the official language, thus the language of education and administration is Spanish. The bilingual population living in the state of diglossia uses its mother tongue only for autochthon communication.

After the fall of Franco's dictatorship and due to political and social transformations, Spanish national mythology ceased to be valid as a scientific basis for national coherence. Spanish contemporary history – the recent past with the trauma of the Civil War – has been broken into separate stories, the threads of which cannot be woven together into one seamless whole. The different narrative traditions represent different memory groups that are divided on national basis, or on a basis whether they inherited Republican or Nationalist memory traditions. Moncada's novels can all be included in the category of memory novel, which is a significant genre in post-dictatorial Spanish and Catalan literature. This genre refers to novels dealing with the issue of Spanish Civil War and dictatorship after almost 40 years of unilateral memory policy of the regime that hit the defeated by the *damnatio memoriae*, and converted the memory of the winners into official state memory. Memory novels are written by second or third generation writers who don't have direct experience of war and hard dictatorship, whose historical interpretation is closely related to examining the relationship between

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memory and reality. They are part of a tradition through the experience of their parents and grandparents, and this condition is reflected by their views even in the absence of personal encounters. The traumatic memory of the Civil War still divides Spanish society, because first the Franco regime and then the 'Pact of Forgetting' of the democratic transition continued to silence the memory of the victims and did not condemn the crimes. The Amnesty Act of 1977 freed political prisoners but gave impunity for the captors. 40 years later the Spanish socialist government enacted the Historical Memory Law that sought to provide a legal framework for the rehabilitation of Republican memory. Catalonia was the only autonomy that prepared its own Historical Memory Law at the same time as the central government, and this law elaborated a completely different legitimacy base built on a history with different reference points than its Spanish counterpart. In Catalan literature we can detect the genre of the historical novel in the course of the democratic transition. Its authors attempted to project the so far ignored picture of Catalan national history by portraying its episodes in literary form.

III. THE AIM, SOURCES AND METHOD OF THE RESEARCH

The starting point and primary source of the dissertation is *The towpath*, which I considered as a historical representation in literary form. Fiction can not be claimed as having reality reference, but the literary knowledge and the linguistic memory of the author, his phronesis and his being part of the local narrative tradition, and also the basic condition of his novel writing = memory therapy provide a sufficient basis, for regarding this novel as a potential source of relevant historical information to the analysis. Jesús Moncada inherited the talent of story telling, he was part of the current that preserved the ever changing repository of Mequinensa's collective memory. He was born into it, and he also experienced its disappearance. He registered the same change as Pierre Nora's memory research in the 1980-s: the living tradition disappeared and it was replaced by commemoration acts centered on the *loci memoriae* considered to contain the essence of the community's past. The myth of Mequinensa is in fact the collective historical memory of a small community embracing hundred years, recorded in literary form by Moncada as Homer of the river Ebro. This myth attempts to portray

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the past of Mequinensa and the tragedy of its eradication through the mosaic of personal memories that intends to give the most trustworthy testimony of what happened in reality. Taking into consideration the author's intention, I assume that Moncada's striving to portray the reality is an activity guided by the intent to discover the truth. Apart from the novel, I used three groups of primary sources:

1. The Moncada legacy

I was authorised to work with the material of the Moncada Family Archive by the author's sister Rosa Maria Moncada in the autumn of 2012, in the spring of 2013 and again in the autumn of 2015, when I was able to pursue my research in Barcelona thanks to the scholarships of the Catalan Culture Institute IRLI (Institut Ramon Llull). In the autumn of 2017 the legacy was incorporated to the Humanities Library of the Autonomous University of Barcelona, thus making it easier for researchers to access it. The part of the legacy that can claim the interest of historians can be divided into three groups:

- a) newspaper articles preserved by the writer's father, José Moncada Moncada (Mayor of Mequinensa between 1954 and 1958, president of the Housing Co-operative from 1969), original documents related to the reservoir and the new town constructions, personal documents;
- b) writings, research notes of Jesús Moncada, oral history interviews with the elderly of Mequinensa, his correspondance with his translators and readers, copies of documents collected from archives that served for his novels;
- c) articles and press releases published in the Spanish, Catalan and international press on Moncada and his oeuvre, other publications, speeches, announcements and the last will of the writer. There are 714 items in this group, which, in contrast to the other disorderly parts of the legacy, was classified and preserved in digital form by the family already in 2015. This digitalized database has provided me with a lot of information since it was made available to me in electronic form, that compensated for the shortness of time *in situ*.

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2. Oral history

Personal conversations, correspondence with Jesús Moncada's sister, Rosa Maria Moncada, his first publisher, Carles-Jordi Guardiola, with his friend and fellow writer, Hèctor Moret, with the Mayor of Mequinensa, Magda Godià, with the editor of the Mequinensa monograph, Jordi Estruga and with the co-author of the monograph, Andrés Coso. The use of Oral History as a source material is indispensable for contemporary history research, since witnesses of the recent past are still alive, and the stories they tell, provide a multifaceted knowledge of any researched topic. I include in this category, besides my own interviews, radio and television interviews made with Jesús Moncada that are available on the Web site *Espais literaris de Jesús Moncada* (literary sites of Jesús Moncada), as well as interviews made by the author with the elderly of Mequinensa that I had found in the Moncada legacy. They are valuable sources for the age of the writer, and also for the age of the novel.

3. Other works by Jesús Moncada, works of contemporary Catalan and Spanish literature.

I consider *The towpath* to be a historical document that is interesting for analysis not only by its social-historical context. On the basis of the abundant (mostly Spanish, Catalan, Aragonian and French) press material, I reviewed the reception of the Moncada oeuvre, which I called an *external* analysis, and as a result, I could place the author and his work in the socio-political context of the time. By processing the data of the Moncada family archive concerning the writer's life, I completed a basic research, since the first monograph on Jesús Moncada was published by a Catalan literary historian (Marc Biosca i Llahí, *Jesús Moncada, mosaic de vida*, Lleida, Pagès Editors, October 2017) while I was finalizing my dissertation. In the external analysis I sought to answer the following questions: in what sense and to what extent Jesús Moncada's work contributes to the identity building of the narrower and broader Catalan community, whether the Moncada literary oeuvre plays a role in the articulation of unknown or silent histories in public consciousness, or whether Moncada novels can be considered as remedies or accessories for historical memory.

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Internal analysis can also be applied to the novel. We can compare the myth of Mequinensa with the historical monograph of the town, and also with the memories conserved in the oral history interviews made by Moncada and with the testimonies of mequinensans today, so in some cases it is possible to examine the interrelation of truth, fact, memory and fiction. Also, we can compare the historical facts that are displayed and emphasised in the monograph and in the novel, we can observe the way they are represented. This way it is possible to see which facts are more relevant in which narrative or whether certain facts are omitted or ignored whereas other sources make sure their existence. This comparative analysis enables us to perceive the results of different memory works focusing on different expectations, and motivated by different settings.

In the course of the *internal* analysis of the novel I focused first at the semantic reading – the naive reading as Umberto Eco puts it – of the text as a professional literary translator would do. Naive reading in this sense means observing the depicted historical universe on the basis of the following questions: What facts, persons, historical events, geographic and ethnographical motifs appear in the novel? What did the writer think worthy to be captured? What is the point of view of the writer who captures them, what tradition of thought he belongs to? Answering these questions can show the historical reference points of a peripheral area. We can observe the characteristics of the writer's vision of history and memory: What is the novel's moral and emotional universe like? What is the historical memory conserved by the defeated of the Civil War in this small Aragonian Catalan city like? What mechanisms shape the self-image of a small town community?

One of the possibilities of *internal* reading is to observe which rhetorical mechanisms display the writer's message? What does he try to communicate through the form itself and not by the content? Although there have been several attempts to elaborate an adequate method for the historical reading of novel literature, we have no established methodology yet. Documentary reductionism is to be avoided, but unveiling the writer's presentism could be an important element to detect since the image of history depicted in the novel may reflect the social, historical and political context of the writing (1971–2005). Actually, as Moncada says, writers always describe their own life story in some way.

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Narration and interest in the individual event, in mentality and in anthropological thinking returned in the field of scientific historiography in the 1970s. Experimental genres emerged, which openly insert fictitious details to historical reconstruction, tell a story backwards or show the same event from various points of view. Microhistory enlarged the field of searching for truth with themes previously considered to be marginal, its form has changed and moved towards literature. Personal involvement in the research topic has become an important element of a new trend in historiography called *unconventional history* that considers it appropriate to approximate literature and history and to rehabilitate emotions and empathy in history. It uses alternative approaches, and it considers literary works among its sources. In this widening historical field, I consider the hermeneutical school of *Practice (as) Research* method to be followed. Doing a research by this method essentially means that we gain access to knowledge, to new questions or new perspectives through art practice. As a method of research it applies the step-by-step method that builds theory on previous personal experience gained from practice, and always returns to the experience as it is advised by Husserl's phenomenology. To me, this previous artistic experience came from translating *The towpath* to Hungarian. Decoding and interpreting the original text in a different code-system which is my mother tongue, I translated a world to which Hungarian readers couldn't have had access because of the language barrier. In fact this creation is very similar to the work of the historian: the translator's ethic forbids any divergence from the original meaning, the same way as historians have to stick to the facts that really happened. However, translation experience showed me that there are almost always more than one linguistically correct versions due to the wide connotation field of each word, and our choice is influenced by various extra-linguistic factors like our previous knowledge, cultural, national background, moral or ideological attitude.

IV. STRUCTURE OF DISSERTATION

The dissertation is divided into four chapters, and an attachment section that contains a short Encyclopedia of Catalan culture connected with the life and writings of Jesús Moncada, and a section of pictures, photos and maps that help visualise the unknown universe of Mequinensa. At the end of this section we find the list of sources and the bibliography.

The *Introduction* chapter gives the framework of the analysis, that is the triangle of literature-history-memory, introduces the genre of memory novels in Spain, and demonstrates with the help of the data found in the Moncada family archives how much the press, the literary criticism and readers (including historians) appreciated the historical aspects of Moncada's works. It gives an outline of the historiographical background, describes the method of research, and gives the framework of Spanish history of the period reflected in the novel.

The *Jesús Moncada and Mequinensa* chapter contains the chronicle of the writer's life career and its broader context with special attention to the situation of Catalan language and literature during the dictatorship and the democratic transition, and to the linguistic, social and political situation of the *Franja de Ponent* in the same era. The documents and press materials found in the family archive were of great use for the elaboration of these subsections. This chapter portrays the 100 years of Mequinensa's history in the light of the city's history monograph. I have dedicated an entire subsection to the broader context of the hydroelectric power plant constructions in Spain and also to the self-image of the left-wing city as the community prefers to denote the main characteristics of the town. This chapter is the *external* analysis of the novel.

The *Camí de sirga - The towpath* chapter is the *internal* analysis of the novel. It states the importance of the title and of the novel (both rebuilding a lost part of Catalan memory), it shows the writer's philosophy of history and the close relationship between space and memory in the light of contemporary memories and literary works. Analysis of the special time structure of Moncada's "total novel" and of his flash-back technique shows that they describe not only local history but local tragedy too. It shows

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how the novel creates a new place on the mental map of the Catalans. Analysis of the novel's "memory geography" shows the main reference points of the Ebro-universe, its economic, commercial, spiritual bonds, legends, and crafts. A separate subchapter is dedicated to the social memory of the reservoir construction and the city's struggle to preserve its community. Another subchapter deals with Mequinensa's historical memory: the erased memory of the republican dead of the civil war and the retaliatory character of the Franco system. The novel highlights the division in the memory of the city along the classical dividing line between the two Spains, which is reflected in the cafe-casino dichotomy. Moncada builds the Republican memory of Mequinensa around the historical figure of the leader of the miners who was murdered during the miners' strike in the 1920s. He becomes the martyr's and thus the main reference point of this memory line. His mythicized figure interpretes the characteristics of Spanish political life: illiteracy of the masses and their exclusion from politics, violence, impatience and events of the civil war in the community of the city. There are no references in this novel, and in none of the Moncada novels to separate Catalan-Spanish national memories. The novel describes the Church as an ally of power, a monolithic institution, unable to change. The atrocities committed against it are displayed, with heathen serenity or in an impassible tone. The world emerging from the novel is Barcelona-centered and the Catalan provincial capital, Lleida has more presence than Saragossa.

The *Summary: History in Literature* chapter contains the summary of the research. *The towpath* clearly preserves the republican memory of an unknown small town of miners and sailors of the Ebro. Moncada wrote the story of the so far ignored, the story of "non- Spain" that was transmitted in the oral tradition in a language incomprehensible to general public. This story was left out of all the socialization and indoctrination schemes of the age. Moncada's heroes, rural workers and their martyrs did not appear neither in historical nor in literary works. It was Jesús Moncada, the writer who made the first step to write the "history" of the *Franja*, and he himself was surprised when he realised that Catalans discovered the Ebro thanks to his novel. In 1981, when the first Moncada work was published, it was an astonishing fact that a writer from the *Franja* would appear and write in Catalan. From then on, however, there were no writers from the *Franja* who would not do so. The surprisingly big

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success of the novel proves that narrower and wider communities need identity-determining stories. Based on the testimony of the Moncada archive, the myth of Mequinensa offers an alternative literary memory not only to those affected by the sorrows Mequinensa and other submerged settlements had to suffer, but also to any reader from the Ebro-region, of from the interior of Catalonia, or to those touched by emigration syndrome or to the bearers of Republican memory.

V. NEW SCIENTIFIC RESULTS

The scientific novelty of the dissertation lies in the selection of the research topic itself. The creator of the Mequinensa myth has composed an extraordinary and historically important testimony. Analyzing the collective memory of the city recorded in fictional form, I could employ a new source material in historical research which enriches the core corpus of memory research in Spain. The research reveals the destiny of a small town by the river Ebro, that disappeared due to hydroelectric power plant construction, to which the novel is a unique guide thanks to the writer's involvement. This is why this singular literary testimony can draw attention to the dark side of the successful Spanish economic history, that changed the life of hundreds of thousands.

The interdisciplinary approach to analyse a writer's legacy and oeuvre from a historical point of view is also a novelty. In the case of the myth of Mequinensa it is obvious that memory is the link between history and literature, since the city's historical monograph often refers to the collective memory to complete the very deficient records of the local archives, while Moncada's works openly rely on collective memory. Moncada's statements about this premodern, small-community, collective memory and its operations are consistent with Halbwachs's theses. Compliments and cooperation requests from historians found in the Moncada legacy prove that the oral tradition collected and compiled in Moncada's novels, is considered to be a remedy for the hiatuses and lack of documents for the period of communicative memory. The novel is a testimony of Catalan linguistic memory too.

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The *Practice as Research* method, applied to the elaboration of this interdisciplinary subject at the frontier of history, literature and linguistics, is also a novelty. As a translator of the novel, first I entered the art creation process from the linguistic-literary side to discover the history and the tradition of an Aragonian-Catalan culture encoded in Catalan literary language and Catalan historical background. This previous experience gave me a special insight and helped formulate my questions and build up the framework to the analysis of this experimental and unconventional microhistory research.

From the comparison of the local history monograph and the novel, I concluded that Moncada's view is solidary with that of his left-wing hometown, therefore the priest murdered during the Civil War appears only as a short reference, and the other priest struggling for the rights of the city in the early 1970s is completely ignored in the novel. The writer, who often draws attention on the legend-making mechanisms of the city and unveils its temptation to create a narrative of self-victimization to interpret history, leaves out this episode from the novel, which proves that none of the stories may contain the totality of the past reality, not even Moncada's total novel.

Without Jesús Moncada's novels, this area would still be completely unknown to the educated public, and the data of publishment of local history monographs on Mequinensa suggest that the interest of local historians for their town was also inflamed by the novels and their success. The myth of Mequinensa broadened the sight of Catalan readers, provided a set of arguments and turned to be a point of reference in matters like hydroelectric power plants' construction, depopulation of the countryside, local history of Mequinensa or Catalan literary language. Jesús Moncada is considered to be an important intellectual representative of his hometown, of the *Franja*, of interior-Catalonia regarded as a marginal region, and even of Aragon.

Despite Spain's actual constitutional plurality, the historical conditioning of centralization and homogenisation causes peripheral literatures to be regarded as uninteresting or secondary. This is supported by the interview questions made by Spanish media concerning Moncada's literary language that reveal a basic incomprehension of the majority regarding the fact that someone wants to use Catalan as a language of creation. It is not considered to be the source of cultural richness but

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rather as a step-back to an outdated level. Anyone who considers legal regulations alone and does not know the real language situation of the *Països Catalans* might believe that Spanish language is in need of protection in Catalonia. However, it is the native language of the province that is more vulnerable despite the statutory regulations, due to demographic and sociolinguistic factors.

VI. FURTHER RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES

The study of the history-building intentions in Catalan literature after the Franco dictatorship. What periods of history are depicted in the contemporary Catalan historic novel? Is there a correlation between the themes of Catalan historiography and literature? Are they complementary or contradictory narratives? Is there a general tendency of stateless nations to write history in literary form? Is this type of history related to myth-making even in the postmodern era?