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The Fall of Barcelona

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Imagining himself into the mind of a military engineer, Piñol (*Pandora in the Congo*, 2009, etc.) draws an epic tale from the 1714 Siege of Barcelona. Martí Zuviría, a Barcelona merchant's rambunctious son, is expelled from a French school and relegated to the tutelage of Sébastien Vauban, pre-eminent military engineer, to whom "battle was a rational sphere." After a rollicking, Tom Jones opening—Martí enjoys haystack romps with Vauban's daughter Jeanne—Piñol offers an as-told-to bloody chronicle of Bourbons and Castilians warring against Catalonians. France wants puppet Phillip V as king of a united Spain; opposing allies want Austria's Charles III on that throne. Fate places Martí at one of the "superb moments when life positions us in just the right place where morality and necessity converge," a perfect window for this minor historical figure to become Piñol's jaundiced observer of The War of Two Crowns. Machiavellian maneuvering aside, other real-life personages engrave the novel: "Voltaire, that insufferable dandy;" Don Antonio de Villarroel Peláez, "a son of Castile, embodying all that was good about that harsh land, sacrificing himself for Barcelona"; and James Fitz-James Berwick, King James' bastard, French marshal, boyish, buoyant, brilliant. Quixote-like, Martí seeks le Mystère, the mystical element at the legendary heart of military engineering, yet he's constantly confronted by his blood-enemy, Verboom, "the Antwerp butcher." Add Nan, a dwarf who wears a funnel for a cap, and Afán, a wily homeless boy, plus a love story between Martí and Amelis, a beautiful prostitute. Martí, too late realizing le Mystère is but "[t]ruths whose only reward is lucidity itself," lives on, burdened by choices made amid carnage, telling his transcriber, "let my treachery drain onto the pages." With extraordinarily gut-wrenching descriptions of bayonets, bloodshed and battle, and the terrors and tribulations inflicted upon besieged Barcelonians, Piñol makes real a tragedy that shaped Spain and Europe.