

La Torre de Dalt

I spent the last days of the summer in a literary residency at La Torre de Dalt, in Catalunya; a beautiful medieval building, a little palace of marble floors, elaborate dark mirrors and vaulted ceilings, on the first slopes of the hills above Girona. La Torre looks down on a landscape that is both benign and intensely occupied - vineyards, fields of sun-flowers, clanking flocks of milking sheep. Beyond the detailed foreground, swathes of pale terrain recede towards the Mediterranean.

Dedicated readers spend a week here, discussing books, meeting authors: in the heat of the day round shaded tables by the swimming pool; at night, lit by the resin-scented flames of pine logs crackling in the fire-place. The murmur of conversation, runs of laughter, the story-telling, the sense of isolation and seclusion, all evoke elusive literary resonances: *The Mabinogion*, *The Thousand and One Nights*; but most of all, suddenly remembered, Boccaccio.

In the terrible year of 1348 the Black Death is choking the streets of Florence with rotting corpses. Boccaccio's little band of friends, women with beautiful names - *Fiametta, Filomena, Emilia* - escape the contagion of the city and shut themselves up in a palace in the countryside, "*with a goodly and great courtyard in its midst, and galleries and bedchambers, each in itself most fair and adorned and notable with jocund paintings, with lawns and grassplots round about and gardens and wells of deep water, and cellars full of wines of price.*" Here they beat back death, passing the days in story-telling, elaborated narratives of love and intrigue: the hundred tales of the *Decameron*.

The life so short, the craft so long to learn; I am back in Britain where the newspapers predict, with morbid enthusiasm, the plague-years of an imminent Tory government.