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***The Link in Consciousness : Time and Community in Rodoreda's  
La plaça del Diamant***  
**Joan Ramon Resina**

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THE LINK IN CONSCIOUSNESS:  
TIME AND COMMUNITY IN RODOREDA'S  
*LA PLAÇA DEL DIAMANT*

JOAN RAMON RESINA

Mercè Rodoreda may yet become the one exception to the rule of silence imposed on Catalan authors in American academia. The absence of these authors from an environment that by and large prides itself on the coherence of its disciplines is striking. Heidegger's paradigmatic question: «Why is there something rather than nothing?» can be turned around, just as metaphysics can easily revert into politics: Why is there nothing here of Catalan culture rather than something, at least something of its by now important contribution to twentieth-century art and literature? Let us not be vague about it: it is not by disembodiment the question and referring in to the impersonal structures of academia that we will understand the abnormality of the vacuum created around Catalan culture. It is, after all, departments of Iberian languages (known generally as departments of Spanish and Portuguese) and departments of Romance Languages and of Comparative Literature that have a stake in the status of Catalan literature. Whether or not this literature is deemed an integral part of Romance language studies or of Peninsular Hispanic literatures is the specialist's affair, and it cannot be passed onto the judgment or misjudgment of uninformed administrative personnel. The indifference and at times active resistance to the acknowledgement of Catalan literature as an object of study speaks loudly about the epistemological foundations of the specialist's discourse.

While poetry courses continue to be taught in these departments without mention of Salvador Espriu and J.V. Foix, and graduate students go on to obtain their Ph. D. diplomas without acquaintance with the prose of Eugeni d'Ors (even that part of it produced in Spanish) or Llorenç Villalonga, a quite different fate

may be in store for Mercè Rodoreda. Not only her master novel, *La plaça del Diamant* appeared in American translation (by David Rosenthal, retitled *The Time of the Doves*, New York, 1980) when a British one existed since 1967, but a volume of short stories has made its way too into the American press, and an incipient flux of critical essays by informed scholars testifies to a still limited but certain response to the unusual qualities of her writing. This moderate rise in the novelist's fortunes among American critics does not warrant expectations of a change in the status of Catalan literature in the United States. Attention to Rodoreda's works has come almost exclusively from feminist criticism, for reasons that have little to do with a genuine interest in the position of her work within the culture that produced it. By appropriating it as an illustration of feminist tenets, such critics have in fact substituted one hermeneutic ground for another, displacing the work from its geopolitical and historical coordinates to engraft it into a heterogeneous cultural and social movement that poses as universal.<sup>1</sup>

This tendency can be found even in critics who are otherwise knowledgeable about the peculiar conditions of Catalan culture, and of their bearing on Rodoreda's (as well as on any other Catalan author's) work. After noting Rodoreda's assertion that her sympathy for the Spanish Republic originated in that which is most inherent to Catalans, namely, nationalism, and that «perhaps the most primordial» of her aims in writing novels was to honor the Catalan language, Geraldine Nichols finds it possible to sidestep the author's insistent identification with a well-defined historical community in order to stress an aspect of her work that is at best debatable. Asserting that «Rodoreda conceived of *all* adult life as a form of exile» (my italics), she goes on to affirm that

<sup>1</sup> Speaking of the response of American feminist criticism to Spanish women novelists, Linda Chown notes that «it has not always fully recognized the cultural tradition in which these novels were conceived. It tends to consider the novels as aesthetic products independent of cultural traditions or to evaluate them in accordance with American feminist values» (Chown, 91).



«all of Rodoreda's major novels» focus almost exclusively on Eve and her postlapsarian sufferings. This aspectual concentration depends on a selective hierarchy of Rodoreda's *oeuvre*, where a major work like *Jardí vora el mar* and an ambitious if finally unsuccessful one like *Quanta, quanta guerra...* (both novels featuring male protagonists), have been neglected for the benefit of a critical thesis. The notion that «expatriation is also portrayed as a female» or as «a feminizing experience of loss», so that «The expatriates, male or female, live out Eve's curse, that is, the fall into gender and generation» (Nichols, 407), promotes a mythification of experience whereby the fate of novelistic characters loses representational value for historical beings and functions as the symbol of an archetype.

Such interpretative strategies effect a deterritorialization of the text, which at first sight could be contemplated as constituting Rodoreda's contribution to a minor literature. The term «minor literature» has, of course, no derogatory sense in this context. I employ it according to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's definition, with a slight distinction. I depart from them in that I do not reserve the term for the literature produced by a minority within a major language, but follow their major definitional condition: that language be affected by a high degree of deterritorialization (Deleuze, 29). It is not because her novels legitimize feminist dogmas that they can be said to manifest a deterritorialization of language (in other words, not because they represent a marginal minority of speakers), but rather, by the fact that her language has been previously deterritorialized her narrative standpoint gathers the full force of a political statement. In this respect, her consciousness of a «duty» (rather than her inclination or ease) to write in Catalan (Porcel, 233), thus limiting her readership and her impact on the international scene, places Rodoreda alongside other authors of her generation, whose effort to shore up the nation's dissolution under the pressure of an ethnophobic foreign regime was lucidly applied to the preservation of language. It is not surprising that, a decade after the publication of *La*

*plaça del Diamant* (1962), when the days of social testimony were over and the fantastic had gathered full force, Rodoreda would, while deemphasizing the realism of her novel, continue to acknowledge in her prologue to *Mirall Trencat* (1974) the situational characteristics of creative work:

Per altra banda el meu temps històric m'interessa d'una manera molt relativa. L'he viscut massa. En *La plaça del Diamant* el dono sense haver-me proposat de donar-lo. Una novella és, també, un acte màgic. Reflecteix el que l'autor porta a dintre sense que gairebé sàpiga que va carregat amb tant de llast (Rodoreda, 1974, 18)

The political, hence collective, dimension of this novel stems, paradoxically, from the author's faithfulness to individual experience. The choice of idiom and the reattachment of proscribed words to the objects of communal experience heightens the consciousness of communal loss, the postlapsarian condition of a nation that had momentarily lost the possibility of representation. In this view, myth is not the goal of the novelist's endeavor, rather it is a systemic sign order (a linguistic one) inscribing in an ideal register an experience that can be documented in its most terrifying or banal details.

The endeavor to recapture the linguistic identity of objects involves nothing less than the attempt to reterritorialize language, to return to the community its power of speech. That is why, finally, the author's *artistic* intentions are ideologically irrelevant. As Deleuze and Guattari shrewdly point out, another characteristic of minor literatures is that in them everything is political. If in «major» literatures the individual problem interlocks with other individual affairs in a social medium that is simply the ground of their manifestation, the case is different in minor literatures, where the social space is so constrained that it becomes inseparable from the individual. The latter is traversed by politics. His very existence, his mode of speech, his every action and survival are contaminated by a communal existence as precarious as the lives drawn from it. In the absence or reductive conditions



of their social ground, individuals lead an apparently presuppositionless existence: those assumptions that determine their identity are denied visibility; those that are visible are unshareable though they may determine their conduct. In their lives ground and figure merge, as the disappearance of a collective sociopolitical scene recognizable as their own entails the reemergence of the struggle for being in individual and everyday affairs. In these conditions, literary discourse, independently of the author's avowed intentions, becomes a collective enterprise. Deleuze and Guattari's observations could have been made with the recent Catalan experience in mind. These authors note that since the national consciousness is often inactive in the external life and always on the way to disintegration, literature is charged with the function of collective enunciation: «c'est la littérature qui produit une solidarité active, malgré le scepticisme» (Deleuze, 31).

That Rodoreda's *La plaça del Diamant* could pass muster the scrutiny of a literary jury and be acclaimed by the public (Sales, 16) points not so much to the incapacity of that jury and the expertise of the public at large as to the fact that a jury always operates on misleading assumptions about the excellence of certain conventions, while the public, in this case, responded solidarily to what it perceived as the articulation of hitherto unformulated and for that reason disquieting experiences in which all had a share. The author herself has hinted at the importance of certain experiences that, far from being encased in the individual memory, lock a human group inside a historical circle which no action, not even a creative one, will transcend:

Al voltant de la gent de la meua època hi ha una intensa circulació de sang i de morts. Per culpa d'aquesta gran circulació de tragèdia, en les meues novel·les, potser alguna vegada involuntàriament, poc o molt, la guerra hi surt (Rodoreda, 1980, 14)

Certainly, the unprecedented success (in Catalan literature) of this novel is not independent of literary technique and linguistic ability. At the root of Rodoreda's later insistence on the difficul-

ties involved in writing it one can perceive the author's concern with the possibility that her work be considered the spontaneous and naive product of collective existence:

No he escrit mai res de tan alambinat com *La plaça del Diamant*. Res de menys real, de més rebuscat. La sensació de cosa viva la dóna la naturalitat, la claredat d'estil. Una novel·la són paraules (Rodoreda, 1974, 20)

But the masterly construction of this representation of Catalan life in historical time elicits the reader's enthusiastic response because the material out of which the text was shaped is recognizably the stuff of collective existence.

The language employed differs noticeably from the literary Catalan used by other writers of her generation; it is a speech that, while shedding the barbarisms common in spontaneous usage, reflects the vocabulary and even the grammatical competence of the working and low-middle classes, metropolitan and provincial, of pre-World War II Catalan society. As Josep-Miquel Sobré pointed out in his linguistic study of the novel, the author has not tried to register the particular dialect of the Barcelona neighborhood where the action takes place, but has produced a popular idiomatic tone intelligible to the whole Catalan linguistic area (Sobré, 365). Language is the medium of collective life. Its determination by speech (to employ the Saussurean opposition between the two systems) suffices to produce the situational conditions of narrative: time, locality, point of view. Characters can exist in and by language, and be defined within that collective system by their particular syntagmatic intersections with the paradigms of the system. The way they appropriate the system and articulate its possibilities becomes their best definition, and permits the author to do away with traditional physical and psychological descriptions (Arnau, 132). Just as individual speech always refers to the larger system of language, individuality in this novel is a particular determination effected on a community by point of view. The individual and the collective are indistinguishable; or rather, the individual is the exclusive access to the collective,



which cannot be grasped outside its epistemological determinations. The narrator's voice, a highly individualized, socially and generically marked voice, ranges over the spectrum of voices thus becoming the medium for their resonance. Her voice takes on the status of discourse, it becomes a systematic configuration vis à vis the voices that can in this way be momentarily foregrounded as intensities or points of resistance in the verbal continuum.

The chilly or at best indifferent reception of this novel by the Spanish-speaking population is doubtless related to a basic lack of reference. Cut off from its linguistic bedrock and from the experience of alienated existence unique to Catalan society in the post-Civil War decades, this novel may indeed suffer a reduction in the spirit of naturalism or be received as a modern instance of Spanish *costumbrismo*. The invisibility of the horror of historical experience to those who did not suffer from it or went through it without sustaining equal losses makes it possible to project the individual lives onto an utterly irrelevant social background, thus rendering these lives inconsequential for the collective consciousness. This mishandled reception forces the question of whether the novel's preeminent position within a minor literature will sustain the disappearance of the public that shared the author's experience, as well as the ravages of economic development on the scene of the story. While the square continues to appear like a box with the sky for a lid, and while there are people left who, like Quimet and Natàlia, have used a string to open a street door from an upper story; while the joy of reattaching the representation of one's daily existence to that very existence by means of language is still fresh in the collective memory, the inner pulse of Rodoreda's novel will not slacken. But if the premise of shareability is accepted, one must inquire whether historical oblivion is indeed the force that threatens to convert the work into «major» literature, disactivating its enunciatory value for the collective consciousness.

Rodoreda's later insistence on the magical quality of novels should not alter the fact that in *La plaça del Diamant* she intended



a parallelism between literary style and everyday experience. The quotation from Meredith at the head of the novel, «My dear, these things are life», suggests that much; but beyond allusion, the quotation indicates the conversational tone that will sustain the narrative discourse. Preference for orality has long standing with Mercè Rodoreda. It is a stylistic choice fraught with ethical connotations. Early in her career as a writer, we find her ironizing the conventions of written discourse in an attitude that will span the long years of silence and reemerge in her later period. Replying to Delfi Dalmau, she asserts: «he de començar per enraonar escrivint, o escriure fent veure que enraono, i el mot "distingit" m'hauria fet tancar la boca o, el que és igual, encallar la ploma» (Dalmau, 12). The disappearance of the narrative frame, as Sobré indicated, collapses the distance between narrator and reader, dismantling the convention of the implicit narrator (Sobré, 374). The artistic process is clearly oriented toward effacing the novelistic structure, bringing the first person narrator into close contact with the reader. As in Meredith's quotation, the familiar tone establishes from the beginning the status of the reader on the same level as that of the character. Familiarity is taken for granted, and therefore established as a premise of reception. The oral quality of the narrator's discourse aids in promoting the impression of a frank conversational exchange, while the colloquial and even popular character of her speech, far from lulling the reader into a relaxed consumeristic reception, stresses by contrast the misery that can be contained in the reassuring conventionalities of expression or in the unglamorous futility of ordinary experience.

In this respect, my view is the opposite from Sobré's, as the contrast between the colloquialism of Rodoreda's style and the language of most Catalan novels fosters the very opposite of a defamiliarization effect (Sobré, 373, n. 20). But I have spoken of an effort to reterritorialize language, and one may perceive in this effort a critical moment when things and words are seen, perhaps for the first time, and at any rate with unusual intensity, to have been pulled apart. It is at this moment, precisely when the recons-

titution of the link is about to take place, and just before familiarization sinks the surrounding world into banality, that objects appear strange to us, as something long ago forgotten that is suddenly thrust upon one's memory. The objects in question are commonplace, and it is important to insist that what privileges them to our attention is, aside from their recognition as things seen in the past, the fact that they are regained for us through the medium of a specific language with unusual existential resonances for several generations of readers. A milder approach to this experience is known to anyone who, after a period of linguistic deprivation, such as occurs in exile or emigration, hears familiar words applied to an indifferent object. Reality is then highlighted and the object perceived as if for the first time. At that moment, by a chance intersection of language and material reality the object has entered the subjective world.

«Un escritor que todavía sabe cómo se llaman las cosas tiene salvada la mitad del alma, y Mercè Rodoreda lo sabía a placer en su lengua materna», wrote Gabriel García Márquez (6). Things are the vehicle of the psychic life; they are simultaneously the goal of our actions and the transmitters of emotions that become objective in their external attachments. The critic, at his or her own risk, may well extrapolate a certain philosophy from the novelist's concrete rendering of experience. Rodoreda's business is a different one: «Direu, la filosofia és necessària: què fóra el món si ella no existia? Doncs jo crec que fóra tal com és ara» (Dalmau, 47). Abstraction, in other words, is superstructural; immediacy belongs to people, objects, places, events; and each of these is situated in time and has a location, which is to say that knowledge and identity are one and the same. To know is to identify, to discover objects in the sphere of *ara*, the unrepeatable occasion that binds perception to the categories (linguistic, temporal, social, generic, geographical, political, economic, etc.) comprised by the novelist in the word *món*. That is why, while sharing his perception of the importance of circumstantial accidents in Natàlia's story, I cannot agree with Gene Forrest's assumption that the au-



thor «atestigua al individuó universal y su circunstancia más bien que una realidad histórica localizada» (Forrest, 17). Objects are repositories of history, that is why they are not merely introduced, but assumed into the text with utmost precision. The awning that covers the square is like an inverted umbrella, «perquè els acabaments de les tires estaven lligats més enlaire que no pas el mig, on totes s'ajuntaven». And the band holding Natàlia's petticoat, like everything else, has its particular history: «La cinta dels enagos, que havia patit molt per passar-la amb una agulla de ganxo que no volia passar, cordada amb un botonet i una nanseta de fil, m'estrenyia» (Rodoreda, 1983, 20).

If the detailed perception of things can at times give the impression that Natàlia is a passive character (Forrest, 18), this is due to the effacing of the objectified subject from her perceptions. It is, on the one hand, the effect of a literary technique that she shares with characters in stream-of-consciousness novels, and particularly with those framing-characters that provide the mental space for the *nouveau roman*. If reality appears of necessity in a mental ambience, the character's foremost activity will be to structure sensory data, which will never impose itself upon a totally passive mind. Detailed description in the New Novel is not a denial of the novelist's claim to invent rather than transcribe. Alain Robbe-Grillet stressed the fact that the proliferation of objects in his novels did not exclude the human being to whom they appear: «Même si l'on trouve beaucoup d'objets, et décrits avec minutie, il y a toujours et d'abord le regard qui les voit, la pensée qui les revoit, la passion qui les déforme» (Robbe-Grillet, 147). Rodoreda departs from New Novel conventions in that, far from reminding the reader that he or she is in the land of fiction, she finds it necessary to call attention to the fact that language and life are not polarities and that fiction may, after all, be the means by which life can rise to consciousness. The result is, however, that the subject appears as a space invaded by the world.<sup>2</sup> Much

<sup>2</sup> Ricardo Quinones had already observed, in relation to the transparency of



has been made of Natàlia's apparent docility to experience, particularly in the light of her domination by her first husband. This impression has led to aberrant readings, where docility has suggested a feeling of inferiority and this, in turn, has been psychoanalyzed as guilt.<sup>3</sup> This docility, however, is illusory. As the author reminds the reader in her 1982 prologue to the twenty-sixth edition, «a *La plaça del Diamant* no solament hi ha coses; hi ha sobre-tot el personatge de la Colometa» (8). She relates to things, humanizes them and is in turn given meaning by them, historicized by her attachment to their transitory character.

Gene Forrest has perceived very clearly the temporal function of things in Rodoreda's work. His intuition of this technique deserves quotation:

Por un lado, las cosas se eternizan como postes hincados firmemente en el desplomo [*sic*] transicional del tiempo. A estos postes recurre Natalia cuando se quiere asegurar de la permanencia y seguridad de la existencia (21). (...) Pero esta permanencia de las cosas, su repetido aparecer y reaparecer, testimonia irónicamente la transición del individuo; o sea, el fluir fatal del tiempo (22)

Things are certainly time's harbingers, but not so much on account of their resistance to time as for the reason that they are marked by it. In this novel things age, they carry the patina of the period in which they appeared, and while persisting they suffer from the contrast with newer things that signal a new epoch. Perhaps the clearest instance of the deterioration of things is the lengthy description of the bourgeois house where Natàlia is employed as a cleaning woman. The wardrobe is eaten up by wood-worm; the mirror set in another wardrobe is spotted; the glass on the bookcase is broken. On the ironing board a sheet displays the

modern characters, that «the internalization of experience that seems so dominant in Modernist literature is a device for liberation outwards, permitting an opening out onto the many facets of the world» (105).

<sup>3</sup> This is the forced interpretation of Loreto Busquets, who traces guilt to sexual desire in Natàlia's subconscious.

burn made by the iron; the bathroom walls are covered with the sediment left by moisture from drips. The bathtub tiles are cracked and the drain does not work because it is below the street gutter (105-7). The old, pretentious bathtub, which the family calls Nero's tub, is certainly a symbol of an ancient order superseded by the call for renewal sounded by the Republic.

Things may cease to be available or they can be discarded, and their disappearance marks the transition from one period to another. Shortages indicate the acceleration of time, that outspeeds the production and distribution of things: «*va venir el que va venir, com una cosa que havia de ser molt curta. De moment ens vam quedar sense gas*» (141). Cintet's experience of loss centers on the lack of chinaware plates and a porcelain cup for his coffee (156). But things can also enunciate time's irreversibility by their inability to remain in use. Certain objects are too steeped in temporality, too immersed in human meaning to persist in their original instrumental relation to the subject. Just as the war changes people («*veia un altre Cintet, i vaig pensar que la guerra canviava els homes*») (156), it can alter their ordinary relation to things. Unexpectedly, a bourgeois mansion can become the scene for the one romantic night in the life of a working class woman:

*I que ella, sense la revolució, pobra i treballadora com era, no hauria tingut mai una nit de ric i d'amor com la que va tenir. Passi el que passi, tota la vida tindrè aquella nit! amb la por i tot i les fulles i les hores i la lluna ratllada i el meu xicot...* (162)

But if war can provide the unusual, it can also take away the ordinary, the very identity of things and people. The decomposition of the ordinary scene, begun with the gas and water restrictions, progresses to the disappearance of personal possessions. The mattresses Quimet carries away to the front are the beginning of the expoliation that will leave the household with little else besides the funnel, an appropriate image for the gradual narrowing of reality as objects vanish and the bodies of the children wither away. The war is, in fact, seen as an effort to maintain the

meaningful relation of people to things, an effort to preserve the ordinary identifications. Mateu, who has sustained perhaps the heaviest loss among the characters, as the war has alienated the wife he adores, lucidly observes that a private loss, while shattering the individual's image of himself, does not threaten identity because it leaves unscathed the order of things. Reality is a collective construction, evolved in time and subject to dissolution by the imposition of an alien temporality:

em va dir, no hi ha més remei, hi ha aquesta cosa amb la Griselda, però encara hi ha una cosa més grossa al damunt de tot això, perquè és una cosa de tots i si perdem ens esborraran del mapa (150)

A historical period is dissolving under the pressure of a radically different legitimization of historical reality. Visible as a collective tragedy that Cintet wishes one could simply learn from books (156), the dissolution of a particular history (scratched out even from books) is lived at the individual level as an incapacity to categorize experience accurately in temporal or even spatial terms. As Carme Arnau has pointed out, the detailed specification of personal events in the pre-war of the novel hazes into inconcreteness and vagueness with respect to time and place:

l'anècdota personal s'esborra davant una realitat externa més dramàtica (la situació conflictiva de l'Àfrica, el viatge a Cartagena de Mateu [*sic*], l'anada al front d'Aragó de Quimet...) (141)

Things constitute being. Natàlia, whose married life has been largely confined to the home, compares her inner upheaval to an interior turned upside down as if in the midst of a moving operation:

A la nit, si em despertava, tenia tots els dintres com una casa quan vénen els homes de la conductora i ho treuen tot de lloc. Així estava jo per dintre: amb armaris al rebedor i cadires de potes enlaire i tasses per terra a punt d'embolicar amb paper i ficar en una capsa amb palla i el somier i el llit desfet contra la paret i tot desordenat (174)



Her inner life registers the same evacuation that takes place at the level of national existence. It is the time of exile for those who leave as well as for those who stay; the cold that sweeps the last papers to be printed in Catalan for many years finds its way to the core of her being:

*I van començar a marxar. L'adroguer de sota deïa: mira, mira, tants diaris i tants cartells... apa... apa... a córrer món. I l'últim dia feia vent i feia fred i el vent feia volar els papers esquinçats que omplien els carrers de taques blanques. I el fred a dins del cor era un fred que no s'acabava mai (176)*

It is therefore appropriate that when she really moves out to marry Antoni, she will insist on the total renovation of her objects. Nothing can stride the two epochs of her life, for the preservation of flotsam from the wreck of her past would ballast her new personality with old, incapacitating identifications. «I un dia li vaig dir que jo encara que fos pobra era delicada de sentiments i que més m'estimaria no portar a la casa nova ni una trista cosa de la casa vella: ni roba» (211).

The transition from the personal to the collective, from the everyday to the historical, is lived as an increase in suffering. To Mateu's minimization of his personal anguish («hi ha una cosa més grossa al damunt de tot això, perquè és una cosa de tots») corresponds Natàlia's perception of two clear gradations in her experience of time as pain. There is the early period of betrothal and first years of married life, which she calls a period «amb maldecaps petits» (90). It is the period characteristically emphasized by those critics bent on reducing social reality and narrative constructions to the black-and-white pattern of gender domination, in which heroines are invariably victimized by male oppressors and by a social structure that threatens or negates altogether what is sometimes called «the world of women». But then comes the time of «big headaches», as her point of view is enlarged to focus on events that transcend her personal misery.

This amplification of scope should not be understood as conveying a denial of the fact that the narrator's point of view is

strictly individual, and as such inevitably gendered. Natàlia's vision is steeped in her femininity, as much as in her social and national identity. It would be wrong to account for her almost absolute indifference to the larger ideological issues by assuming her naiveté to be the product of a narrow intelligence (Porcel, 235). Rodoreda herself supported her character against such charges:

Veure el món amb ulls d'infant, en un constant meravellament, no és pas ser beneït sinó tot el contrari; a més, la Colometa fa el que ha de fer dintre de la seva situació en la vida i fer el que s'ha de fer i res més demostra un talent natural digne de tots els respectes (1983, 7)

Such a stand is a refreshing reminder that, contrary to the generalized opinion of American feminist criticism, unable to break through the American (and not universally masculine) competitive valorization of the individual, human worth and fulfillment are not contingent on either social advancement or the display of intellectual fireworks. While it is impossible to agree with Mercè Clarasó that «Intellectually Colometa must be listed with the babes and sucklings» (150), her explanation of Rodoreda's choice of this character to center the novel's point of view is pertinent. The character's unsophisticated perception of the impact of the Civil War on the everyday existence of ordinary people allows the author

to make an unvoiced comment on the whole tragic business. Colometa's inability to see the point of any of it can be taken, on the surface, as springing from her own limitations; but it can also be taken as Rodoreda's way of saying the same thing, that the pointlessness is inherent in the situation itself (*ibid.*)

Ultimately, however, Natàlia's unsophisticated rendering of events is related to the immediacy the author wished to evoke in the reader. Only at the level of raw perception and simple emotions (often evoked by idiomatic expressions and even popular superstitions) can Natàlia's experience constitute the meeting place of collective experience. The reader can identify with her vision of life because its elements constitute primary elements in shared experience.

Ordinary emotions are recognized as such through the medium of ordinary, populist language. In every page, phrases like «aquell patir de veure'ls sortir amb la moto», or «I deia que ningú no podia saber les ballades que li costava i les que li costaria aquell ball a la plaça del Diamant» (Rodoreda, 1983, 94) engage the reader in the spontaneous feelings that constitute the ground of collective interaction. These phrases are not so much the manifestation of an uncritical or unintelligent mind as the automatic recourse to the expressive forms available (and largely imposed) to the members of a community. Natàlia's naiveté is in fact nothing but the withholding of the intellectual analysis that plays such a small role in the daily business of ordinary experience. Because reflection is always secondary to perception, it entails the alteration of the past by the perspective gained from later experience. This foundational reference that used to privilege the traditional narrator's point of view is undermined in the modern novel for the benefit of immediacy and fidelity to experience. As Louise Bertrand shrewdly noticed, «le récit ne voit pas le triomphe du "je" narrateur, c'est-à-dire le "je" de l'héroïne sur son passé» (267). The past can be rescued in all its vital tremor because the narrator's present is not allowed to categorize what was lived. And this is again a political, as well as an epistemological decision, since the past that was abolished by the Civil War could not be subsumed by the categories offered by the ensuing temporality. The impossibility of finding a narrative vantage point outside of history makes the preservation of the experienced past the more necessary if ideological categories and their reductionism are to remain themselves historical, that is to say, if they are not to preempt the future. The intention to incise the past, to preserve the personal, lived version of it as opposed to the abstract, disembodied past recorded in historical studies is thematized in the novel. Drawn by insistent memories, Natàlia revisits the apartment in *carrer* Montseny where her earlier life had run out, and on finding that she no longer has access to it, very intently inscribes her name on the door with the point of a knife. Only this act of ins-



cription in and from one's being can guarantee permanence. If it can also be read as a liberating action by which the hold of the past is broken (literally cut out), inscription is, nonetheless, avowal and preservation. By such means, the experienced past takes precedence over the interpreted, objectified past, the past that seems dead because it has been detached from the experience of those who lived it. Rodoreda was conscious of her choice: «Si hagüés volgut parlar deliberadament del meu temps històric hauria escrit una crònica. N'hi ha de molt bones. Però no he nascut per limitar-me a parlar de fets concrets» (1974, 18).

The inability to establish satisfactory connections and to dispose of experience aesthetically in a consistent order that may be valid outside the relative frugality of novelistic conditions is, in fact, considered by the author to be the common feature between herself and her character: «en necessitar un personatge central per a una novella vaig triar la Colometa que només té de semblant a mi el fet de sentir-se perduda al mig del món» (*ibid.*, 7). The novelist's territory lies in the intensification of experience by means of language, and the relevance of the experience thus conveyed is determined by reference to her guiding purpose. Hence she can allow herself to ironize intellectual pretensions:

Els escriptors de la meua generació érem, en general, una mica rucs; no crec, per exemple, que n'hi hagi cap que sàpiga grec ni que pugui parlar mitja hora seguida de Hegel sense dir enormes disbarats. Però, i entre nosaltres sigui dit, tampoc no crec, en principi, que ens faci cap falta (Porcel, 232)

A word is in order to justify the assertion that Natàlia's vision is steeped in her femininity. It is not, after all, a necessary inference that a female character should evidence female psychology, as feminist critics ceaselessly remind us with respect to characters drawn by masculine authors. Emphasis has been placed in the foregoing analysis on the continuity between the narrator and external reality, typified by her interest in things. As Nancy Chodorow has found in her study of gender-role formation, in being raised primarily by a parent of the same gender, «girls come to ex-

perience themselves as less differentiated than boys, as more continuous with and related to the external object-world as well» (167). It seems, therefore, that Natàlia's concern with attachment is firmly rooted in the traits that constitute the recent findings of women psychology. Whereas men search for their identity primarily in individuation and their priorities reflect the autonomous sphere of work, «women's development lies in its recognition of the continuing importance of attachment in the human life cycle» (Gilligan, 23). While Quimet is anxious to preserve the privacy of his working space («amb la botiga no t'hi fiquis»), Natàlia's spontaneous gesture is to establish symbolic contact with her husband's projection in the work dimension: «i perquè vaig tocar el bastonet que hi havia a dintre va dir tot picant-me la mà, apa, apa, no emboliquem!» (59). Her femininity not only makes her responsive to the concrete aspects of reality, but is also behind the capacity for empathy that makes her conscious mind throb with the existence and suffering of others.

*La plaça del Diamant* is a novel concerned with connections, with their frustration and reestablishment. Natàlia first presents herself in the exhaustion of a day's work at tying golden string, an occupation that will become symbolic when later she remembers it as the most pleasurable part of her job at the pastry shop. The collective unity that will be broken with the war and exile is enacted in the popular dance at the square, where colored paper strips linked by means of flour and water paste symbolize the fragility of popular happiness. The syntagmatic juxtaposition of both elements requires this interpretation: «i les cadenetes enganxades amb pasta d'aigua i farina i tothom content» (20). The word «content(s)» is here a privileged term that will recur as the last word of the novel when another meaningful connection has been established, referring us back to this time before loss and separation. The novel is not cyclical as has been suggested by some critic, because history does not admit repetition. But language, as precarious as flour and water paste, can establish connections between past and present, can transmit the image and feeling of a

life which was interrupted by a different, hostile temporality. Connections, however, are difficult to make, as Natàlia experiences when trying to replace the rubber band in her petticoat, and then they can be painful and end up breaking. Anxiety is always aroused by such breakdowns, whether it be the shame for the loss of her petticoat (23), the inner turmoil caused by breaking up with her fiancé (27), her husband's death (173-4), or Mateu's execution in the middle of a square, undoing the happiness in communal existence originally associated with this public space (176).

The post-war period shows Natàlia longing for an impossible connection. It is no longer a question of public celebration in the old neighborhood squares. Antoni's capacity to relate physically to his wife has been destroyed by the war. Likewise, the community no longer has a visible existence. The old places are still there, but they are inhabited by a different spirit, they have been placed under a different order. People have either disappeared or been changed out of recognition, things are and are not themselves. Natàlia registers this impression common to exiles in view of the old familiar places from which history tore them. When she meets Quimet's apprentice she cannot match the present image with her memory: «i jo, vinga no conèixer-lo tot i saber que el coneixia» (184-5). Conversely, things can still be haunted by the past, and recognition in the midst of new circumstances will somehow defeat the forces working for oblivion. Although Natàlia insists on the total renewal of her clothes and objects before marrying Antoni, the bedspread that will cover the couple is an exact replica of the one she had in her first marriage (197).

Her longing is best illustrated by her interest in the seashell, inside of which she can hear the flow and ebb of the waves, an image of the reversibility of time in memory. The word «gemecs» applied to the noise of the waves identifies the source of her interest. Time's motion, the rush of memories, is made of pain and quiet whimpers. That is why, unselfconsciously, she fulfils the impossible condition of the seashell: to contain all the wailings of life:



Aquell cargol que havia pogut ficar-se tots els gemecs del mar a dintre, per mi era més que una persona. Mai cap persona no podria viure amb aquell anar i venir de les onades ficat a dins (197)

After her daughter's wedding, during which Natàlia's pearl necklace comes apart as another epoch in her life is cancelled, she drops a pearl into the seashell «perquè fes companyia al mar» (244). Joining two separate things is some sort of consolation for her (McNerney, 302). The consolation comes, however, from the nature of the things that are joined. As the seashell is the origin of the pearl, Natàlia's longing is to reestablish a connection with the source of her being.

It is during this night of her daughter's wedding, while Rita will be establishing the physical bond with her husband, that Natàlia feels her separateness. She will rush through empty streets with a knife, which the author has identified as a sexual symbol (1983, 8), to inscribe her name on the closed door of the old apartment. The connection can only be reestablished symbolically, however, and on her return to her bed in the early morning, she reconciles herself to her loss by yet one more symbolic gesture. A physical bond can also be established with her husband, if only a protective one. Twining her legs around his, she clings to his body, and places her finger inside his navel, «perquè no se'm buidés tot ell per allí...» (252). This action substitutes symbolically for the marital relation; but it is also a maternal gesture, as if she tried to connect the separate object of her newly discovered affection with the lonely sea of her consciousness. It is a reterritorializing gesture: it draws the splintered objects into their source in unified consciousness. To the community annihilated by the war corresponds an invisible community shaped by empathy and by the capacity to reconnect by symbolic means. This is, of course, the function of Rodoreda's novel as minor literature, and it explains the author's sense of duty to write in her language in spite of the isolation that such a choice entailed in exilic conditions. Earth and sky, the original elements in ancient cosmologies, are joined

in a *hieros gamos* by means of consciousness, symbolized, as in Genesis 1: 2, by the image of the agitated waters. When Natàlia thinks that the puddles in the park will each contain the sky, and thinks of chirping birds bathing in the water and mixing the sky with mud, the word «Contents...» follows, as in the first chapter, an image of connection (253). The maiming effect of the war on the original community has been followed by the experience of loss and separateness. Natàlia's discovery (and Rodoreda's statement) is, however, that unification can be reestablished in consciousness through the awareness of interiority. Placing her cheek on Antoni's back, Natàlia feels the life still contained within his maimed body: «i era com si sentís viure tot el que tenia a dintre, que també era ell: el cor primer de tot i la freixura i el fetge, tot negat amb suc i sang» (252). Her protecting action to stop that life from running out through the navel, acquires full signification as she realizes that the continuity of life, even when interiorized and invisible, can awaken the wrath of the destroyer. Salvaging interiority by her symbolic gesture, Natàlia realizes that continuity, as well as love, can, perhaps, stand the force of hostile powers: «Perquè cap bruixa dolenta no me'l xuclés pel melic i no em deixés sense Antoni...» (252).

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