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Catalan Review is the premier international scholarly journal devoted to all aspects of Catalan culture. By Catalan culture is understood all manifestations of intellectual and artistic life produced in the Catalan language or in the geographical areas where Catalan is spoken. Catalan Review has been in publication since 1986.

Catalan Review és la primera revista internacional dedicada a tots els aspectes de la cultura catalana. Per la cultura catalana s'entén totes les manifestacions de la vida intel·lectual i artística produïda en llengua catalana o en les zones geogràfiques on es parla català. Catalan Review es publica des de 1986.

*The dialectic conception of life and reality in La plaça del diamante*

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**Catalan Review, Vol. V, number 2 (December, 1991), p. 79-88**

THE DIALECTIC CONCEPTION OF LIFE AND  
REALITY IN *LA PLAÇA DEL DIAMANT*:

The genesis of the active subject

PILAR FIGUERAS I DILME

The most recent criticism on *La Plaça del Diamant* insists on the psychoanalytical, feminist, symbolic and even pre-fantastic aspects of the work, and leaves to one side the always frequently mentioned realism of the novel. Semiological theory and Hegelian philosophy can offer us a new viewpoint from which to approach this realism and which will allow us to see what principles determine the fictitious reality created in *La Plaça*, in order to help us reinforce and go deeper into these recent interpretations of the work.

If we start from the theoretical basis that a novel is always an imitation of reality, or more specifically, of the process of creation of reality process, the author, through enunciation, or the narrator, can only imitate the three possibilities that man has in facing the world that surrounds him: first, attribute a meaning or subjective logic to the world, regardless of the social or objective meaning; second, abandon this subjective meaning and opt for an objective meaning which society, in general, attributes to it; and, thirdly, present an absurd or a senseless world where both the individual and society are incapable of attributing meaning to it.

In *La Plaça* Rodoreda chooses a subjective meaning, and as such the fictitious reality that develops is that which the work's protagonist, Natàlia, creates through her own recollections in first person. Natàlia recreates her life throughout the novel, its difficult evolution from her youth to maturity, reliving it in brief scenes or images.

We the readers experience her life in a very realistic manner. This is due to, on the one hand, the appropriateness of the aut-

hor's style, as Rodoreda was a master at knowing how to hide herself as a creator, letting the protagonist express herself in a very natural and direct way.<sup>1</sup> In addition, due to the nature and structure of life resulting from this expression, it is very similar to real life. I say similar because fictitious reality, or Natàlia's life, is presented to us in a dialectic and evolutive way, like life itself, and indeed, in a manner that is very close to Hegel's conception of Reality.

Natàlia's life is one of ups and downs, a life woven in internal relationships with, unions with and dependence on other lives (Parents, Pere, Quimet, Enriqueta, Antoni...). A life, then, inserted in a continuous weave or evolutive process, due to its nature and dialectic structure that, like real life, does not fit exactly. It is an internal contradiction between the material reality offered (being) and the human demands of totality, infinity, and the absolute (Thinking). As a result, the subjective meaning of the protagonist will develop, although it vacillates and at times is on the brink of touching the absurd, in that confrontation with the objective and subjective logic of others that form a part of her world.

On the whole, we can say that the evolution of Natàlia's life follows the course of a small spiral, using Hegelian terminology to describe the evolutive internal process of Reality. It is a spiral that begins with an open beginning (we do not know much about Natàlia's childhood) and finishes with an open ending (we do not see the death of the protagonist, nor are we sure of what her future will be like). But, between this open beginning and end we can observe three decisive stages in which there are advances in the protagonist's psychology, advances because earlier contradictions are solved, but at the same time a

<sup>1</sup> Rodoreda herself expresses these ideas in several interviews, and also in the prologue to *Mirall Trençat*. See: Montserrat Roig, «L'alè poètic de Merce Rodoreda.» *Personatges* pg. 170 (Barcelona: Ed. La Magrana, 1980); and Mercè Rodoreda, Prologue to *Mirall trençat*, pg. 13-17 (Barcelona: Ed. 62, 1983).

new imbalance is created that forces a new synthesis and which permits, in the last stage or end of the novel, the genesis of the active subject of the protagonist. Rodoreda symbolizes these three stages of the protagonist with the change in names Natàlia experiences, because, as she explains in the prologue to *Mirall trencat*, a change in name is equivalent to a metamorphosis or a spiritual transformation<sup>1</sup>. Thus, the protagonist, Natàlia, at the beginning becomes «la Colometa» when she meets and marries Quimet, and later is «la senyora», Natàlia when she marries Antoni. Three stages, then, that will mark her life's evolution.

The first of these stages, which, following Hegelian terminology, we will call the thesis stage, is where in an abstract way the problem of identity for the protagonist is observed. We deduce this stage from the thoughts and intuitions of the protagonist in the first five chapters, before she definitively enters into a new life, i.e., before her marriage to Quimet. Natàlia speaks to us in these chapters in notes or small details about her childhood, about her relationship with her parents, and about her present mood.

In fact, the novel begins destructured, because although the protagonist supposes an ideal moment of absolute identity with everything, specified in her childhood relationship with her mother, this ideality seems to end definitively with her mother's death. From that point forward, she feels alone, defenseless, empty, in fact much closer to the vegetable (she feels like a flower, chapter 1) and animal (her life, she says, is like a cat's, chapter 3) worlds, than to that of people, where for her incommunication reigns (with her father, her stepmother). As a result, she tells us «És que a mi em passava que no sabia ben bé per què era al món» (chapter 5).

The image, then, that is presented to us of Natàlia in these first five chapters is one of a young woman full of identity pro-

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 30.



blems, who has her past of an idealized childhood, and which as a result contrasts with her present reality, in which she feels empty, and with very few possibilities for her situation to change due to the atmosphere of incommunication surrounding her.

The second stage is the antithesis, or the true dialectic moment, in which the internal contradiction between the being and the thought of the protagonist are specifically observed. This stage covers most of the book, the time when she is married to Quimet, and her time as a widow, until she remarries (chapters 5-37).

At the dance in the Plaça del Diamant, after some brief moments of amazement, Natàlia is attracted to Quimet, that lively and dynamic young man who can solve her problems with internal contractions immediately. Quimet talks to her a lot, even though she does not understand him on many occasions. Above all, he immediately imposes a new identity on her. From the first moment they meet, Natàlia is «la Colometa», leaving behind the only tie of identity she had to her parents, her name. With this change in name a metamorphosis in her soul begins, because Natàlia stops being herself. Quimet imposes on her his dreams, his ideals, from the beginning (they are already symbolically present in her name), and Natàlia accepts them because she is empty, but her unconsciousness and her very nature seem to agree in foreshadowing her unfortunate future: «el merlot negre» («the black starling») they see in Güell Park; the sense of remorse or pity she felt for having left Pere; when Quimet kisses her for the first time, the sky clouds over, and she imagines our Lord closing himself inside a closet; the incursion of the mysterious Maria in Quimet's speech... (chapter 3).

The relationship between Quimet and Colometa, as is foreshadowed from the very beginning, becomes an unequal, oppressive relationship, in which Colometa placidly puts up with everything. Even though at times she escapes from this oppression, she searches for the solitary satisfaction in the small things that remind her of her childhood, flowers, and dolls. This lopsided

relationship becomes more acute as the novel progresses, and when the doves and the funnel arrive home together (chapter 12), Colometa, for the first time, begins to feel exploited (chapters 221-22).

We can suggest a half psychoanalytical, half Hegelian analysis of this change in attitude on the part of the protagonist. From the beginning Natàlia accepts the dreams that Quimet imposes on her because she feels that she has no identity. These dreams or ideals are symbolized by the name imposed, «Colometa», a word that is full of universal connotations as a symbol of freedom and peace. But, when Quimet brings home the dove(s) and the funnel together, for the first time the protagonist sees materialized what her relationship with Quimet really means: the doves, or symbol of what Quimet has filled her with, now materialized, exploit her, they prevent her from having her small amount of freedom. From this, the association with the funnel, since this symbol or ideal has been imposed on her, forced, directing the course of her life, in other words he makes her pass through the funnel. Soon, the connotation of *freedom* implicit in the symbol «Colometa» is contradicted by her immediate reality, i.e. the exploitation of the doves, as is its connotation of *peace*, because soon the Civil War breaks out and that will make her suffer (chapter 26). Faced with caring for the doves and the economic difficulties during the war, Colometa really sees that the balance between being and thinking, between reality and ideality, which she thought Quimet had provided her with, were not so. She goes back to suffering serious personality imbalances, in which her actions border on the world of the absurd, on a senseless world: the scene of the crisis and murder of the baby doves (chapters 22-25), and that of her and her children's death (chapters 34-35). The ties between both crises, as shown by her dream (chapter 24), are very close. The crisis of the killing of the baby doves can be interpreted as an interior rebellion against the imbalanced and contradictory materialization (object) with respect to her idealization (subject) imposed by Quimet. When the first

dove, the exteriorization or materialization of the dream or ideal imposed by Quimet, dies at the same time that he does, it also signifies the death of this exterior imposition (object). But, the ideality or identity continues to persist in Colometa's interior (subject). She continues to cling on to the only thing she has left, her interior world, inherited from Quimet, before falling into complete craziness. Therefore, everything she sees through her eyes and spirit, she sees influenced by the doves —she sees her children precisely like a mother dove would see hers («tenia dues boques obertes a casa, i no tenia res per omplir-les») (chapter 31). And when she decides to kill them so that they will no longer be hungry, she dreams what she had done before with the baby doves (chapter 24). In addition, when she considers how they must be killed, she thinks of the funnel, of burning their insides; an attack that is also unconsciously the identity and ideal that Quimet had filled her with. But at the same time she unconsciously rejects this imposed interior; it is the only thing she has, and she clings to it, hallucinating at the church, where she definitively falls into the irrational world, into the absurd, from which she can only leave by appealing to this interior, by imagining what a dove really is:

«I amunt, jo amunt, amunt, Colometa, vola, Colometa... Amb la cara com una taca blanca damunt del negre del dol... amunt, Colometa, que darrera teu hi ha tota la pena del món, desfes-te de la pena del món, Colometa. Corre de pressa ...vola amunt, escales amunt, cap el teu terrat, cap el teu colomar... vola Colometa. Vola, vola, amb els ulls rodonets i el bec amb els foradets per nas al capdamunt...» (chapter 35, a passage that is considered a precedent to the material metamorphosis that later Rodoreda characters will experience).

And finally, when she went home to the shop owner Antoni, to look for the hydrochloric acid, she unconsciously, again, goes to the owner that has been feeding her doves, he is "l'adroguer que tenia les veces millors," according to Quimet; he was, then,



the only person who could feed the mother-dove and her children.

The third state, or the synthesis, represents the overcoming of past contradictions. It is the positive stage, in which the object dissolves into the subject, and can thus become the active subject.

There is a new beginning for Natàlia and her children when the shop owner Antoni, who was so like Pere, offers her a job and thus the chance to rebuild herself little by little (chapter 38). When she gets married, her name changes again, and she no longer is «Colometa», she is «la Senyora Natàlia». The relationship she has with Antoni is very different from the one she had with Quimet. Antoni is physically and psychologically incapable of filling her («emplenar-la»), understanding the term with its sexual connotation (note that Quimet told his friends that Colometa «va plena» when she was pregnant) as well as its psychological connotation (Antoni has a more respectful nature, and is incapable of imposing upon her a new identity or ideal). Then, Antoni solves the problems of her immediate reality, primarily economic problems, but Natàlia continues with no solution to her interior problems. Her personal identity fluctuates between the past, inherited from Quimet (Rita reminds her of Quimet; she sees, now in an idealistic and positive way, Quimet's dream in building a tower-pigeon coup for the baby doves, the ladies in the park call her «la Senyora dels coloms») and a sense of emptiness, which she felt before living with Quimet, although all these feelings seem more spiritual (she goes back to incommunication and loneliness, and looks to isolate herself from other human beings, in order to feel closer to the plants and animals in the park, to feel like them, in union with material). This insecurity, this coming-and-going to the past, prevents her from consciously accepting the present reality that Antoni offers her. Natàlia is living, then, in an unaware state and does not value her existence (when Antoni expresses his happiness to her several times, he accepts her silence as a response because he believes



she is a woman of few words). But, during all this time, Natàlia continues with her interior conflicts which are preparing her for the definitive final crisis (chapter 49), in which she finally rids herself of the tyranny of the world imposed by Quimet.

The change in attitude represents, in fact, a recreation or rebirth, as is already noted in the prelude to the protagonist's dream, as she is now Eva, and she follows a different path from that of Adam or Quimet (chapter 44). Rita's wedding, and the fact that Toni becomes a soldier make her aware of the passing of time and of the conformity that this brings about in people (chapter 46). After these two initial steps, she is ready for the decisive step: she gets up one night, and half consciously, half unconsciously, she begins to «caminar per la seva vida vella», and leaves the name of Colometa, imposed by Quimet, printed (as if she were leaving a document) on the door of her former home. Then she goes to La Plaça del Diamant, where she met Quimet, and at that moment the houses in the square begin to shape an enormous funnel that is closing, and this causes her to scream, with the resulting expulsion: «de una mica de cosa de no-res, com un escarbat de saliva... i aquella mica de cosa de no-res que havia viscut tant de temps tancada a dintre, era la meva joventut que fugia amb un crit que no sabia ben bé què era... abandonament?» (chapter 49). This expulsion of the tyranny of her negative past (symbolized by the expulsion of what a long time ago she has swallowed with the help of a funnel) allows Natàlia to become an active and real subject that synthesizes the positive part of her past (the old people that help her after the scream symbolize her parents, according to Poch<sup>1</sup>; the birds she wanted to see, the doves Quimet idealized) with the also positive acceptance of her present. Therefore, for the first time, the protagonist acts (here there is a higher percentage of action verbs, as shown

<sup>1</sup> Taken from the psychoanalytical analysis done by Joaquim Poch in *Dona i psicoanàlisi a l'obra de Mercè Rodoreda* (Barcelona: P P U, 1987).

by Roca Mussons<sup>1</sup>), and she expresses her love for Antoni, she communicates with him, she gets up optimistic, alive, after —of course— a lot of rain has fallen (with all its symbolic value).

Natàlia comes to, then, her authentic existence; she becomes aware of her own being in this mature stage of her life, but this awareness seems to be so idealized, so spiritual (Antoni and Natàlia fall asleep *com àngels* like angels, the bird she wanted to see makes us think of an idealized dove that has lost its concreteness) that there is the danger that Natàlia has achieved her psychological equilibrium thanks to a complete flight from reality. This sort of interpretation would precisely be very much in tune with the later development of Rodoreda's narrative.<sup>2</sup>

The protagonist's spiral of life is also open-ended, because if the last stage seems to be optimistic, Natàlia's words give us sufficient reason to think that it is an optimism of a beginning stage, and that if her life goes on, she might again be faced with events that would place her equilibrium between reality and ideality in doubt, i.e., that would place the protagonist in another stage or level of the spiral.

It is this struggle-balance between reality and ideality, between object and subject, so masterly achieved by Rodoreda, that makes *La plaça del Diamant* such a universal and realistic novel.

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<sup>1</sup> See the linguistic-semantic analysis by Maria Roca Mussons, «Aspectes del sistema simbòlic a *La Plaça del Diamant*», Studies on Mercè Rodoreda, *Catalan Review* (NACS, n.º 2, vol. II, Dec. 1987).

<sup>2</sup> Carme Arnau claims that Rodoreda develops from a psychological realistic-symbolic narrative (*La plaça del Diamant* would be included here) to a more and more fantastic-mythical narrative; see Arnau's book *Introducció a la narrativa de Mercè Rodoreda* (Barcelona: Edicions 62, S.A., 1979).

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