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Storytelling and Playacting in Montserrat Roig's L'Òpera quotidiana

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STORYTELLING AND PLAYACTING
IN MONTSERRAT ROIG'S
L'ÒPERA QUOTIDIANA

KATHLEEN M. GLENN

El hombre, o cuenta lo que ha vivido, o cuenta lo que ha presenciado, o cuenta lo que le han contado, o cuenta lo que ha soñado.

CARMEN MARTÍN GAITE,
El cuento de nunca acabar

The question of whether there exists a specifically feminine literature has been discussed at length and with passion. Some insist that there are only two kinds of literature, that which is well written and that which is not, and the difference between the two does not depend on the sex of the author. Others maintain that literature by women can be differentiated from that by men on the basis of language, theme, and tone.¹ The authors of a paper presented during the Cuartas Jornadas de Investigación Interdisciplinaria (see Romero et al.) found that narratives by women in the decade of the 1970s shared certain characteristics. One of the most common was the adoption of a retrospective stance. Exploration of the past and an autobiographical or pseudo-autobiographical orientation were related to a search for identity and a desire to understand the present. Domestic environments prevailed, and action was likely to be set in inner, private space rather than in the outer, public world. Female characters were the central figures of the narratives examined, and although many of them no longer believed in the Prince Charming myth, they still were in love with the idea of love and longed for a

¹ There are, of course, significant differences among individual authors. Nonetheless, and for a variety of reasons —historical, sociocultural experiential— certain themes, techniques, and stylistic features tend to recur in fiction by women.

grand passion that would fill and fulfill their lives. Various psychologists have confirmed the centrality for women of relationships. Nancy Chodorow has emphasized the importance to female identity of a sense of connection to others, and Carol Gilligan concurs, noting that whereas men focus on professional achievement, women stress personal attachments.

The issue of the specificity of literature by women and feminine discourse has also been discussed by Carme Riera, one of the writers studied by Romero and her co-authors. In «Femenino singular: Literatura de mujer», she points to self-analysis, a return to childhood, and the exploration of family relations as major thematic concerns and draws attention to the frequent portrayal of a closed world. According to Riera, literature by women «tiende a mostrar rasgos cómplices con otras mujeres» (33). In her own fiction Riera is careful to cultivate a bond of complicity with her readers. Argentinean writer Marta Traba emphasizes the relationship of texts by women to «las estructuras de la oralidad, sus repeticiones, los remates precisos y los cortes aclaratorios que explican las historias» (11). Traba argues that the features of oral literature are characteristic of much feminine literature: sensibility to one's audience and desire to communicate with it, reliance upon memory as a means of rescuing events and preserving them from oblivion, and the importance of repetition and dialogue. These traits are evident in Montserrat Roig's *L'òpera quotidiana* (1982). The following pages examine the role of orality and use of operatic form in the storytelling and playacting that constitute the essence of the novel.

Although Walter Ong would take issue with the phrase «oral literature», his discussion of orality is pertinent to *L'òpera*. He points out that thought and expression in oral culture tend to be additive rather than subordinative, redundant or copious («repetition of the just-said keeps both speaker and hearer surely on the track»), and empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced (37-46). Orality fosters a communal sense and interplay between speaker and audience (136, 137); sound incorporates while sight (print) isolates. Inasmuch as «the writer's audience is always a fiction» —one of

Ong's better-known pronouncements— writing is more agonizing an activity than is oral presentation to a real audience. Writing, he declares, «is always a kind of imitation talking» (102). Boccaccio and Chaucer (both of whom drew on popular anecdotes, fabliaux, and folk tales, i.e., the oral tradition) used the device of the frame story and storytelling to encourage readers of the *Decameron* and *The Canterbury Tales* to pretend they were part of the listening company in the hills of Fiesole or on the road to Canterbury (103). Roig's readers, too, are cast in the role of listeners, and the telling and reception—or lack of reception— of stories is foregrounded in her novel.

L'òpera quotidiana is composed of three melodic lines. Horaci Duc relates his history to his landlady, Patricia Miralpeix, and Senyora Altafulla tells hers to her servant and companion Mari Cruz, who is paid to listen to her employer. Mari Cruz in turn recounts her experiences to an unidentified plural «you», as does Patricia in the prelude to the novel, «L'obertura de la senyora Patricia Miralpeix». Third-person narration, omniscient or filtered through the consciousness of Mari Cruz, also centers on mistress and servant. Since Mari Cruz cleans once a week for Patricia, she links the two houses and becomes caught up in both stories. Ultimately she confuses Colonel Saura of Altafulla's tale with Horaci. Thus we have three love stories (that of Altafulla and Saura, that of Horaci and his wife María, that of Mari Cruz and Horaci) set in three different periods (the pre-civil war and war years, the early postwar era, the present) and seen from different angles. The structural fragmentation of the novel and the constant shifts in perspective, with individual segments ranging from one to eight pages in length, are reminiscent of Roig's trilogy (*Ramona, adéu, El temps de les cireres*, and *L'hora violeta*). Each melodic line, however, develops in more or less chronological order, and subsequent segments pick up where previous ones left off, repeating the final words (64 and 69, 178 and 181, 189 and 191) or answering a question posed (67 and 69). At other times the juxtaposition of two characters' words shows the degree to which they misread or fail to comprehend each other (126, 127, and 128). The various speakers figuratively reach out to their listeners in

an effort to make contact and awaken interest. This is first seen in the Overture, where Patricia's discourse is punctuated by phrases such as «Potser vostès em comprendran», «no creuen?», «no sé si m'entenen», «Com els deia», and «Veuran», that call for a response. The impression of orality is strengthened by the colloquial nature of her language and its richness of figurative expression: «marxar a l'altre barri», «fer malves», and «no dir ni ase ni bèstia». Carme Arnau has described Rodoreda's prose as «escriptura parlada» (14), and the phrase is applicable to Roig's *L'òpera*, as it is to many of Riera's stories. In a conversation with Isabel-Clara Simó, Roig compared writing novels to establishing an intimate relationship («de tu a tu») with the reader, and this is precisely what the use of direct address does in the 1982 novel. Significantly, Roig went on to speak of writer and reader as individuals «presos en soledat» (44).

Despite her characters' search for a friendly ear, communication is limited. *L'òpera* has in fact been described as «a series of dramatic monologues that remind us of an interview, in which one party speaks endlessly but no true communication takes place because both parties do not share mutual feelings» (Bellver 164). There may be a fleeting physical union, as when Horaci and Mari Cruz make love, moments later she speaks of their being worlds apart. While Horaci and Senyora Altafulla have a specific interlocutor, Patricia (in the Overture) and Mari Cruz do not. All want someone to listen to them, and most are haunted by the fear of solitude. Patricia, for instance, decides to take in a boarder not only because she is poor but because she has outlived all her friends and her days are long and empty. She fears that she will end up talking to the walls, and Horaci at one juncture voices the same fear. All the characters, whether they are in the company of another person or by themselves, telling stories or figuratively singing their hearts out, are fundamentally alone. They are unable or unwilling to accept themselves and their lives as they are. Literature, opera, and historical accounts that glorify patriotic martyrs have colored their view of the world and provide the models for the roles in which they visualize themselves. Their «recollections» are less a recovery of the past than a fantastic recreation of it.

Horaci Duc dominates his breakfast conversations with Senyora Miralpeix. Her interventions are largely restricted to an occasional comment, a question, an assurance that he is not shocking her, and an offer of more toast and marmalade. The situation is a familiar one: a man holds forth while a woman listens. During these breakfasts Horaci dramatizes his story by casting it in the form of a Romantic drama and himself in the role of victim/hero pursued by adverse fate. His narrative speaks of love of country and of a woman, jealousy, betrayal, and patriarchal values. He does not comprehend why neither the kitten he adopted nor his wife Maria liked being confined to the apartment that for him was «un paradís tancat» (70). Both creatures, in his view, are his exclusive property, and he destroys both. The cat's meowing like a person crying for freedom infuriates him, and so he throws her into a tub of lye and then finishes her off with a broom.² Maria, who also wants to be independent, apparently dies when he fails to warn her of an oncoming train.³ For Horaci, his wife is the embodiment of «l'enigma de l'ésser femení» (35), and he wants to control her destiny. In his words, she is «una joia en brut, i jo em sentia com l'escultor que pot modelar una obra d'art de la terra primitiva» (36); later he refers to her as «el meu trofeu» (74) and «argila pura» (109).⁴ She is an object, a jewel to be polished by a skilled craftsman, a lump of clay to be molded by a sculptor. She is raw, inert,

² The parallel between the cat and Maria is reminiscent of Rodoreda's use of a female cat as symbol of Aloma's fate in the novel of the same name. Mari Cruz's scream at the end of *L'òpera* is comparable to Natàlia's in *La plaça del Diamant*, and Mari Cruz brings to mind the character Cecília in *El carrer de les Camèlies*. On several occasions Roig has acknowledged her admiration for and indebtedness to Rodoreda. See Nichols 148-149.

³ There is some ambiguity as to whether the train actually killed Maria or whether she left her husband, Horaci's depicting himself as a murderer may be a way of not facing the reality of that rejection and of making himself seem more decisive than he is.

⁴ The segment that follows the «terra primitiva» remark contains a delightful spoof of the creation myth and phallocentrism. Mari Cruz is unimpressed by el poeta dels fal·lus's claim that «el fal·lus és el Principi de totes les coses creades» (43).

primitive matter that he, a superior, godlike being, can turn into a living work of art. He is Pygmalion to her Galatea, and like Professor Higgins he will teach his illiterate xarnega (Cockney flower girl) to speak proper Catalan (English). Classical legends and creation myths, it is clear, die hard. Horaci explicitly compares Maria to Desdemona, Sleeping Beauty, and a queen, and implicitly to Eve, comparisons that make him the first Father, a king, a prince, and Othello. Horaci's sense of male superiority and his condescension toward the weaker sex are evident. Ironically, he proves to be the weak one and Maria the strong. On September 11 she distributes the political leaflets he was afraid to and secretly burned. In spite of all Horaci's talk of patriotism and honor, it is Maria who is willing to risk imprisonment and death in pursuit of freedom and justice for Catalunya. His confession to Patricia does not liberate him from his feelings of guilt, and near the end of the novel he concludes that words are useless.

If Horaci dramatizes his history so that it and he will assume heroic proportions, Senyora Altafulla sees her experience in terms of fiction, cinema, and the opera, and she invents a past that is in accord with her desires.⁵ Opera offers her the possibility of living another, more interesting life: «L'òpera et fa possible el somni» (189). Theatricality is the hallmark of Altafulla's existence. She has turned her bedroom into the stage upon which she performs and has decorated it with a huge portrait of Verdi, who for Mari Cruz is simply «El carrossa del barret de copa i la barba blanca» (52). Decked out in her faded, motheaten finery, Altafulla reclines on her bed, listens to recordings of her favorite opera, *La Traviata*, and reminisces about her youth. Mari Cruz is the unwilling and inattentive audience for the old woman's ramblings. Altafulla's fanciful recollections are dotted with admonitions and calls for attention: «Nena, no t'adormis» (82), «M'escoltes?» (95), «m'escoltes o t'has adormit?» (122). Altafulla portrays the love of her life, Colonel Saura, as tall and handsome, a

⁵ Roig has commented upon the way in which the cinema has romanticized male-female relations (Simó 21). Fiction and opera, as well, mythicize love.

valiant soldier, a perfect gentleman, and dreamily recalls the night when they stood atop a steep cliff while the sea raged beneath them and lightning flashed around them. The scene is straight out of *Wuthering Heights*, and Caterina compares herself to the protagonist of that novel —another Catherine— and to Merle Oberon, star of the film version. The extent to which Altafulla has invented this magnificent passion becomes obvious when we discover that Saura was a poor devil she used to make fun of.

The discrepancy between mistress and servant's perceptions and the lack of communication between the two is underscored by the sections of third-person narration that provide an external vision of them. They are «dues presències físiques que se sabien desconegudes» (68). While Altafulla talks, Mari Cruz pursues her own thoughts. The generational difference is apparent in Altafulla's reflection that wearing a single earring makes Mari Cruz look like a cannibal and in Mari Cruz's preference for the music of Janis Joplin not that of Verdi. One of the girl's duties is to talk to Altafulla's plants, and the words she is instructed to say are «Paraules tronades i cursis, segons la criada. Exquisides, segons la Vella» (50). This third-person narrative voice resembles that of nineteenth-century omniscient authors who comment on their characters and describe their abodes: «Això no obstant, i encara que la Mari Cruz no ho podia rumiar, si hem de ser justos amb la senyora Altafulla, la veritat és que hi [in her apartment] havia un latent desig d'harmonia, de retenció dels objectes bells que havien passat per les mans d'aquesta secretària jubilada ex mecanògrafa de la Pirelli» (53). The tone of wry amusement does not preclude affection for the characters. Operatic and dramatic metaphors abound in these sections, as characters exit, remarks are made «en *off*» (106), and various stages of Altafulla's recollections are described as the end of the first act and the culminating scene of the second, complete with intermission.

Mari Cruz, too, yearns for an audience to whom she can relate her story, and she confesses to being sick and tired of having people not pay attention to her. The one person who appears to listen is a transvestite who works the Rambla, an individual who is even more

of an outcast than is Mari Cruz. An illegitimate child who never knew her father and did not receive much schooling, a xarnega, and a servant, Mari Cruz suffers multiple types of marginalization. Her life is a series of confinements and enclosures in a school run by nuns, classroom the toolshed where the gardener used to fondle her, the room where Altafulla acts out her fantasies, and Mari Cruz's own tiny apartment. Her relationship to language is problematic, her speech slangy, and she is prone to appropriate words that appeal to her and to assign them an arbitrary meaning, as in the case of «vora-viu». One of her complaints is that she has no words of her own: «Ells [Altafulla, Horaci, Patricia] tenien les paraules... Es negaven a transmetre'm les paraules» (169). This sensation of being deprived of words is familiar to Catalans, long forbidden to use their own language. Like Horaci, who persists in calling her «Maria», and Altafulla, who confuses Saura and Verdi, Mari Cruz jumbles together what she has seen, heard, and dreamed, and the man she seeks in the final scenes of the novel is a composite of Horaci, Saura, Verdi, and the fathers of the other girls at the nuns' school.

Carmen Martín Gaité in *El cuento de nunca acabar*, a book that aspires to the status of an oral account, affirms that «el cuento es un pretexto para la compañía» (110) and compares narratives to a fabric woven by speaker and listener working together. Oral storyteller and writer alike long for an interlocutor who will follow their every word and collaborate in the creation of a narrative. None of the characters of *L'òpera quotidiana* finds such an interlocutor, none succeeds in slaking «la sed de narrar» (Martín Gaité *Búsqueda* 20), none breaks out of his or her solitude. At the novel's conclusion Senyora Altafulla is confined to a mental hospital and Horaci to a home for the aged. Mari Cruz, high on coca-cola laced with amphetamines, walks the streets searching for Horaci-Saura, and Patricia Miralpeix muses that the way things are going, it looks as if she's never going to die. Their potential auditors—the insane, the elderly, other drugged streetwalkers—are incapable of providing the mental and emotional stimulus necessary for a collaborative spinning of yarns or singing of duets.

Roig was an ardent opera buff with a special fondness for Mozart, Bellini, Donizetti, Verdi, Puccini, and Wagner's overtures. She has confessed that as a child she prayed that the Virgin would give her a good voice so that she might sing, and as an adult she was entranced by the passions, jealousies, impossible loves, and unsatisfied desires of her favorite operas (Vela del Campo 33). These same elements form the fabric of her fictional world and of her 1982 novel in particular.⁶ *L'òpera*, with its «Obertura», «Primera part», «Intermezzo», «Segona part», and «Cor», is structured like an opera and composed of duets, arias, cavatinas, and recitatives, roughly corresponding to dialogues, monologues, and passages that advance the plot. There are, nevertheless, differences. Whereas the operatic duet is «a composition for two performers... in which the interest is equally shared» (Rosenthal 113), Roig's literary duets, as we have seen, are lopsided, with one character dominating the conversation, or perhaps we should say that one «porta la veu cantant». Roig's arias, cavatinas, and recitatives more closely resemble their musical counterparts: (1) extended vocal solos which often are showcases for those who sing them (2), shorter and simpler solos, and (3) the declamatory portions of opera that are closest to natural speech.

The overture or instrumental prelude, especially as developed by Weber and Wagner, incorporates musical material from the opera itself and prepares the audience thematically and psychologically for what is to follow (Rosenthal 295). Roig's «L'obertura de la senyora Patrícia Miralpeix» follows this pattern. The initial sentence («A penes

⁶ The following declaration from *¿Tiempo de mujer?* (1980) reads like a description of *L'òpera quotidiana*: «Yo, lo que quisiera es escribir una novela del ochocientos, de aquéllas, pletóricas de pasiones, de odios, de rencores, de amores. De suicidios y asesinatos. O de vida vulgar y gris en una ciudad provinciana. Una "historia", en fin. Una historia, pues eso nos gusta mucho, a las mujeres. Igual que a los niños, nos gusta que nos cuenten historias. Una historia que se enrede con otras, que no se acabe nunca, como una espiral. Una historia que explique piezas de otra que se ha dejado a medio hacer como un rompecabezas. Esto es lo que me gusta a mí» (26).

si el vaig veure quan vaig obrir l'espiera» [11]) in which Patrícia narrates opening the peephole and peering through it at Horaci Duc portrays a woman shut in and looking out on the male world. Inside is set against outside, enclosure against freedom, and the contrasts reverberate throughout the novel. Patrícia's decision to take in a boarder sets the stage for a summer of breakfasts with Horaci and confessions. Allusions to the steadily diminishing jar of marmalade will mark the passage of time. Patrícia's mention of two books that her boarder has brought with him, Fabra's dictionary and Soldvila's *La Història de Catalunya*, introduce the theme of Horaci's love for his land and its language. His passion for nocturnal butterflies that are drawn to the light, even though it causes their death, foreshadows Maria's longing for independence and her demise. The overture is a fourteen-page solo that creates a vivid image of Senyora Miralpeix, familiar to readers of Roig's trilogy but in need of presentation to new readers. Roig has acknowledged her affection for Patrícia: «es incombustible, immortal, quizás por su sentido común. Es una mujer que ve pasar la historia, nunca ha sido protagonista de nada... Es un personaje tierno, en cierto sentido. Quizás porque es la que sueña menos» (Nichols 177). The character is reminiscent of Rodoreda's innocents. Patrícia's comments to «vostès» and her conversational tone create the illusion that she has stepped to the front of a stage, where she addresses her words to a live audience and tries to engage its attention. The overture thus initiates the impression of oral delivery that will prevail in subsequent segments. Remarks that hint at dire happenings are an attempt to pique interest and quiet the audience. The length of Patrícia's introduction allows latecomers to slip into their seats before the curtain rises, this being one of the original functions of an overture.

The intermezzo is a short, light entertainment performed between the acts of an opera. Roig's «Intermezzo» consists, in the main, of a comic account of a poor cousin's visit to Senyora Altafulla. *La Traviata* is a major intertext of this section, both topic of conversation and point of reference, in that Altafulla compares her gown and laugh to those of Maria Callas during a memorable per-

formance. Roig's concluding «Cor» fulfills one of the traditional functions of the chorus, that of commenting on the action and summing it up.

The relationship between opera and daily life, suggested by the novel's title, is highlighted in a preliminary quotation from a book on music appreciation.⁷ Its author asserts that in a number of operas, including *La Traviata*, there is a perfect balance between diverse elements that, when taken separately, may seem conventional and even trivial but when considered within the context of the work as a whole assume meaning and importance. Similarly, the ingredients of Roig's novel —the details of the everyday existence of ordinary people, their frustrations, and their resort to fantasy in order to escape a reality they find unsatisfying— are commonplace and of no great consequence, and yet the total composition is meaningful. The individual voices combine to form a melody that speaks of basic human needs and emotions. None of the characters is resigned to being an extra, simply a member of the chorus. Mari Cruz searches for a father/lover who will give her a sense of belonging and a tale of her own; Altafulla stages her life; Horaci dramatizes him. All attempt to ennoble their humdrum existence and compensate for its emptiness. Playacting is essential, whether it take the form of inventing a grand passion worthy of treatment by Verdi or adopting the persona of the Romantic hero who is a victim of fate. Even if their stories are neither unique nor momentous, they are nonetheless tragic. The second epigraph, from Graham Greene's *Els nostre homes a l'Havana*, complements the first and reminds us of the significance of that which seems insignificant: «No puc creure en res més gran que una casa, ni en res més ampli que un ésser humà».

Roig has focused in previous novels on the underside of history and the countersaga of women's lives. Figures long deemed marginal and incidental have been allowed to speak up and speak out. In her 1982 novel a series of outsiders and castoffs —a xarnega, a dotty dowager, an elderly innocent, a despicable and self-despising coward— are

⁷ See Campillo for a discussion of the opera-life analogy.

given a voice. These no-accounts tell stories and sing songs that strike a sympathetic chord. *L'òpera quotidiana* is a polyphonic text in which various melodies blend and the sounds of other texts — operatic, fictional, cinematic, and historical— resonate.

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