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First person singular: Montserrat Roig and the essay
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FIRST PERSON SINGULAR: MONTSERRAT ROIG AND THE ESSAY

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Joseph Epstein's description of the essay as «a pair of baggy pants into which nearly anyone and anything can fit» (quoted in Allan 145) highlights the difficulty of defining this literary form. Various critics have expressed a lingering uneasiness about where it belongs (Joeres and Mittman 12). Perched precariously between fiction and non-fiction, something of a stepchild in comparison with the novel, theater, and poetry, it has been termed an invisible genre, an anti-genre, and a non-genre. It has had many fathers, including a host of canonical writers: Montaigne, Bacon, Addison and Steele, Johnson, Lamb, Hazlitt, Emerson, Stevenson, Chesterton, James, Mann, Forster, Eliot, and the list goes on and on. It began as an elitist form used by gentlemen to communicate with their literate, empowered, white, predominantly male peers. Those who wrote essays as well as those who read them were privileged in terms of background and position, and they enjoyed the luxury of leisure (Joeres 151). Only in the past century have a number of women begun to claim the essay as a form of their own. Why, we may ask, have they turned to this genre? Perhaps its otherness, difference, marginality, and borderland status have appealed to women, long marked as other, different, and marginal. Perhaps they have found that the bolt of cloth that traditionally has been cut into baggy trousers can just as well be fashioned into a comfortable, loose-fitting skirt.

The essay has encompassed a variety of forms: epistle, journal, diary, portrait, sketch, journalistic article, and scholarly treatise. Despite the difficulty of defining it, some broad distinctions among different types of essay have been made. If the formal essay is marked by seriousness of purpose, logical organization, and length, the informal essay is characterized by «the personal element (self-revelation, individual tastes and experiences, confidential manner), humor, graceful style, rambling structure, unconventionality or novelty of theme, freshness of form, freedom from stiffness and affectation, incomplete or tentative treatment of topic» (Thrall, Hibbard, and Holman 183). The personal essay, cultivated by Montserrat Roig, is a subset of the informal one and situates the writer and her (his) vision at center stage. «Unlike the formal essay, it depends less on airtight reasoning than on style and personality, what Elizabeth Hardwick called 'the soloist's personal signature flowing through the text'» (Lopate xxiv). The per-

sonal essayist reaches out, makes contact, initiates a dialogue, and establishes an intimate relationship with the reader: «a friendship if you will, based on identification, understanding, testiness, and companionship» (Lopate XXIII).

One of the difficulties confronting the female author is that of establishing her authority as a writing-speaking subject. How does she prove her credentials? In the case of Roig, who grew up in l'Eixample district of Barcelona and was part of an intensely Catalan family, Catalan was spoken at home, and her parents taught her to read and write the language as well. After she graduated from the University of Barcelona, she pursued a career in journalism and rapidly established her literary and linguistic credentials, becoming a well-known and respected figure.¹ Although the majority of her books have been translated into Castilian and her novels have been best sellers in both languages, Roig wrote in her mother tongue whenever possible. Doing so represented an effort to recuperate a language, *her* language, whose public use had been banned during the Franco era.² Her immediate audience was made up fellow Catalans and, more specifically, fellow *barcelonins*, readers of *El Món*, *Avui*, *La Vanguardia*, *El Periódico*, *El País*, and viewers of her television interviews. She shared with them a common history and tradition, and in the last essay she wrote she addressed them as *germans*. The question of language is closely related to that of voice, and in fiction and essay alike Roig gave voice to those

¹ For an overview of Roig's writing, see Catherine G. Bellver's «Montserrat Roig: A Feminine Perspective and a Journalistic Slant», *Feminine Concerns in Contemporary Spanish Fiction by Women*, ed. Roberto C. Manteiga, Carolyn Galerstein, and Kathleen McNerney (Potomac, MD: Scripta Humanistica, 1988), 152-68 and «Montserrat Roig and the Creation of Gynocentric Reality», *Women Writers of Contemporary Spain: Exiles in the Homeland*, ed. Joan L. Brown (Newark: U of Delaware P, 1991), 217-39, and Geraldine Cleary Nichols's «Montserrat Roig (1946-1991)», *Spanish Women Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical Source Book*, ed. Linda Gould Levine, Ellen Engelson Marson, and Gloria Feiman Woldman (Westport, CT: Greenwood P, 1993), 429-40. Janet Pérez's «Spanish Women Writers and the Essay», *Siglo XXI/20th Century 4* (1986-87): 43-54 provides an excellent introduction to the work of Spanish women essayists. José Luis Gómez-Martínez's *Teoría del ensayo* (México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1992) and Mary Lee Bretz's *Voices, Silences, and Echoes: A Theory of the Essay and the Critical Reception of Naturalism in Spain* (London: Tamesis, 1992) provide additional background material.

² Roig declares in *Digues que m'estimes encara que sigui mentida* that «Amb els anys he descobert... que les llengües ens trien... Si em pregunten per què escric en català, se m'acuden tres raons: primer, perquè és la meua llengua: segon, perquè és una llengua literària; i, tercer, escric en català perquè em dona la gana. La meua és una llengua que em serveix» (28). Several pages later she adds: «Amics de bona fe em volen convèncer que sóc bilingüe. Més aviat diria que esquizofrènic, malalta de llengües. Escric en castellà i en sóc una; escric en català i en sóc una altra. Però potser sóc més jo quan enraono la llengua dels meus, quan n'elegeixo la parla» (34). Roig specifically associates the use of Catalan with the figure of her grandmother and the emotion of love.

who had long been marginalized and silenced. Her 1982 novel, *L'òpera quotidiana*, to cite one example, focused attention upon a variety of voices through the storytelling of its characters.

The overlapping of essay and novel that we find in Roig's writing is nothing new. Ian Watt (51) has argued that the periodical essays of Addison and Steele helped prepare the way for the novel, and a number of writers have included essayistic sections in their novels. Roig incorporates material from her *Els catalans als camps nazis* in *L'hora violeta*, and many of her journalistic articles make use of fictional techniques. According to Phillip Lopate, all good essayists utilize storytelling devices: descriptions of character and place, incident, dialogue, and conflict (XXXVIII), and this is certainly true of Roig, whose novels and essays nourish one another. My concern here is not with her book-length testimonial texts — *Rafael Vidiella, l'aventura de la revolució* (1974), *Els catalans als camps nazis* (1977), and *Mi viaje al bloqueo* (1982), works that Cristina Dupláa considers testimonial novels³ — but with shorter pieces. I propose to examine her last two books: *Un pensament de sal, un pessic de pebre: Dietari obert 1990-1991* (1992) and *Digues que m'estimes encara que sigui mentida: Sobre el plaer solitari d'escriure i el vici compartit de llegir* (1991). The first is a collection of articles that appeared in the newspaper *Avui* between September 1990 and November 1991, the last of which was published the day before Roig died. The topics are diverse, ranging from the figure of Lluís Companys to that of «aquesta falsa dona anomenada Madonna» (59), from terrorist bombings, sexual abuse, and the intolerance of a group of mothers who don't want their offspring to have to share a classroom with gypsy children, to the mundane need to buy a new toilet. There are certain unifying threads, the most notable being Roig's lifelong commitments to social justice, to Barcelona and Catalunya, to feminism, and to literature.

The part of departure for the essays varies: a book or article she has read, a piece of music she has been listening to, a movie she has seen, a television program she has watched, a piece of news. The Gulf War fills her with moral outrage, as does the fate of *els desapareguts* in Argentina and that of street urchins murdered by death squads in Brazil. Roig denounces injustices and abuses of power, wherever they occur, on occasion scolds her compatriots for their insensitivity, and when necessary raps them on the knuckles. Some of the columns are miniature stories, like the one (147-49) about the sweet revenge of Fàtima, a Moroccan servant who discovers that the reason the omelettes she is served look so anemic is that the nameless *senyora* for whom

³ Dupláa is currently engaged in an analysis of the recovery of historical memory as a continuing concern in Roig's writing.

she works is feeding the egg yolks to her pet dog. Roig frequently recounts personal details which may or may not be authentic. We should bear in mind that the narrative «I» of an essay is not necessarily identical to the «I» of its author, and the «I» that speaks in the pages of *Avui* cannot be equated with that of Montserrat Roig, who has constructed a persona and presented a fictionalized version of herself. But references to her apartment, her sons, her cat, a program she is listening to on Catalunya Ràdio or to a sleepless night create the impression that she is chatting with us and being completely open. In her 15 May 1991 column (298-99) she recalls a bit of advice given her by Josep Pla: «Senyoreta, procuri d'escriure com si escrivís una carta a la seva mare.» She adds with a wry smile: «Es un consell que he procurat de seguir. Encara que, això, depèn de la mare de cadascú. O cadascú té la mare que es mereix? Bé, deixem les mares i tornem a la poesia.» Roig has taken Pla's advice to heart, eschewing baroque complexities and dazzling pyrotechnics in favor of clarity, conciseness, comprehensibility, and a tone that is both conversational and confessional. Ideally, daughters converse frankly and intimately with their mothers, and that conversing can be done orally or in writing that resembles speech.

I would like to examine briefly the 16 November 1990 column (86-88), because it illustrates so well the strategies Roig employs. Entitled «Té queixals, la història,» it is motivated by a letter sent to *Avui* by a foreigner in the Quatre Camins prison. Lutz Ingo Wielhe complains that a tooth has been bothering him for two years but he has not yet been seen by a dentist. The prisoner acknowledges that society has the right to deprive him of his freedom but he didn't know that it had a right to torture him. Nor, comments Roig, did she. This, clearly, is a sensitive matter. «Es delicat perquè jo, ara mateix, tinc mal de queixal. . . . Em fa mal el queixal i això em posa de mal humor. Se l'ha carregada la Koixka, la gata, que no en té cap culpa. I això que no tinc els meus fills a mà.» The foreign prisoner, obviously, has reason to «treure foc pels queixals,» because when you have a toothache, you feel that your brains are being gnawed away:

No sé si m'explico: vull dir que si et fa mal el queixal, tot et fa mal. Com si et toquessin el voraviu de la personalitat. Amb mal de queixal no es pot dir missa com Déu mana, ni brodar un discurs parlamentari, ni dir t'estimo tal com ho diuen al cinema. Hi ha alguns crítics, per exemple, que deuen escriure les crítiques amb mal de queixal. I aquesta qüestió, els escriptors, de vegades poc comprensius, no solem tenir-la en compte. Un disbarat.

There are scads of dentists in the world, «Però Déu dona faves a qui no té queixals.» At the end of his letter Lutz Ingo Wielhe hints that if they don't cure his toothache, he'll take his life. «I això sí que no.»

Surely there is a dentist out there who would be willing to help, and especially now, «ara que monsenyor Carles ens diu que s'acosta el Dia de Germanor.» For her part, the only thing the columnist can do is beg the prisoner to be patient and pray to Santa Apol·lònia, whose teeth were pulled out one by one without benefit of anesthesia. Roig then quotes a prayer she has come across: «Santa Apol·lònia / tinc mal de queixal / ara me'n fa, / ara no me'n fa / Doncs de què et queixes, / tros d'animal?» And she closes with a question for her readers: «Com podrem apariar aquest país, si tractem els presos com els romans ho feren amb Santa Apol·lònia?»

Roig has artfully personalized the situation she relates by referring to her own possibly imaginary toothache, her cat, and her children. She speaks directly to her readers, all of whom presumably have at one time suffered from an aching tooth and therefore can identify with the plight of poor Lutz. Her mention of monsenyor Carles's recent exhortation establishes a further connection with her readers' world. And lastly, she uses colloquial language, popular expressions, word play, humor, and exaggeration for comic effect. Something as supposedly insignificant as an aching tooth serves as the pretext for a humorous but pointed reminder about the need for more humanitarian, civilized treatment of prisoners. Instead of preaching to and possibly alienating her audience, Roig has administered to it a dose of tasty medicine. As the title *Un pensament de sal, un pessic de pebre* implies, she often seasons her writing with a dash of salt and a pinch of pepper.

Equally deft is her repetition of the refrain «I no vull fer demagògia» in the essay «Els nens del Brasil, sense fer demagògia» (150-51). The details of the «cleansing» of the streets of Rio de Janeiro are so horrifying as to need no editorializing. Roig's tight-lipped restraint is far more effective than loud wails of anguish or lashings of sentimentality would have been. Sarcasm is the weapon she wields in «La bellesa per a qui la treballa» (205-06). How in the world, she wonders, could we have let the Gulf War overshadow an event of such monumental transcendence as the fortieth birthday of Isabel Preysler? If the doll-like Isabel has had to adhere to a rigorous regimen and stay in bed until 11:00 every morning in order to preserve her porcelain complexion, others have had to make similar sacrifices. Roig reminds us in «Quatre consells per casar-vos amb un milionari» (153-54) that the much-married Tita Cervera and others of her ilk have scaled the summits of matrimonial success only after arduous efforts. If you want to make a profitable match, you must learn to dress suggestively, cultivate an air of mystery, «i posar-lo, al milionari, en tensió. Es allò que el vulgar en diu 'fer una mica l'escalfabraguetes', i amb perdó.» The vulgarism nearly cuts gold diggers down to size.

The daily publication of the *Avui* articles encourages the sensation

that columnist and readers are engaged in an ongoing dialogue. Each new installment is a reencounter of old friends, and Roig's «writing to the moment»⁴ gives many of her columns a special timeliness. The situation is different with respect to the essays of *Digues que m'estimes encara que sigui mentida*. Immediately apparent is a difference in length. Not bound by the spatial constraints imposed by periodical publication, individual sections of *Digues que m'estimes* vary from 1_ to 12 pages in length. As Roig explains in the foreword, *aquests papers* (7) are the result of notes she has been jotting down ever since she began writing fiction and also of the frustration she has felt when interviewers have asked her about everything except her craft. *Digues que m'estimes* is thus a compendium of years of reflection and a distillation of the experience of a woman who is *una escriptora*, not just *una dona que escriu*. We have seen in *Un pensament de sal* that Roig knows how to attract and hold an audience, and she applies here some of the same strategies: direct address, conversational tone, use of anecdotes and humor. She begins by declaring herself to be largely self-educated, despite her university degree, and emphasizes that the book we hold in our hands is not an erudite piece of literary criticism or theory. Rather, it is an unpretentious, very personal work by an undisciplined, voracious, and enthusiastic reader who considers herself an apprentice writer. The self-deprecating tone of the foreword and the familiar form of address are reassuring. What lies ahead is not a dry, weighty tome but an informal visit to and journey through what Roig calls her *pàtries*: the books she has read, the life she is still learning to live, and the city where she was born and, within a year, will die.

The essays of the first half of *Digues que m'estimes* range over a variety of topics, from Roig's childhood memories to the current linguistic debate over the use of Catalan and her relationship to her language. Of interest to me here are Roig's reflections on literature and fictive craft, both her own and that of other writers, be they Catalan, French, Italian, Russian, or English, male or female. She reminds us that we are all narrators, even though in some cases our narrating may consist of nothing more than the recounting to a neighbor of last night's television movie. Although most of the stories we tell never assume written form, good storytellers are aware of the need to seduce their listeners-readers. The idea of life as narration and narration as seduction evokes the figures of Scheherazade and several of her modern descendants, Carmen Martín Gaité and Carme Riera in particular.⁵

⁴ Samuel Richardson uses this phrase, apropos of familiar letters, to refer to the near simultaneity of the act of writing and the event or emotion described.

⁵ *Apuntes sobre la narración, el amor y la mentira*, the subtitle of Martín Gaité's *El cuento de nunca acabar* (1983), could also have served as subtitle for *Digues que m'estimes*.

The essay «Les coses mai no van ser així» explores a much-debated topic, that of the autobiographical nature of writing, especially writing by women. Roig's position, suggested by the essay's title and the epigraph from Oscar Wilde—«El plaer superior en literatura és fer real allò que no existeix» (45)—is summed up by the observation that literature is nourished by life but never copies it: the novelist observes, remembers, and imagines. She selects and manipulates her memories. By way of example, Roig recalls the inner patio where she played as a child and the aroma of a lemon tree that later became linked in her mind with Gabriel Ferrater's poem «In memoriam» and the smell of autumn in the postwar era. Years later in *El temps de les cireres* the lemon tree serves as a symbol of lost childhood, when Natàlia Miralpeix returns to Barcelona after a twelve-year absence and finds that the tree that used to grow in her aunt Patrícia's garden has disappeared, taking with it Natàlia's childhood. Although Roig does not make the connection, the fragrance of another tree and another literary self-portrait (Machado's «Retrato») linger in the background: «Mi infancia son recuerdos de un patio de Sevilla, / y un huerto claro donde madura el limonero.» Lived experience and recollections of it intertwine with literary experience to create a new reality that is the product of both ingredients and their transmutation.

Why does Roig write? She offers various reasons: initially, so that her father would pay attention to her; next, so that others would listen to her; then, out of a desire to put in order a world she did not understand; later, simply because she wanted to—and perhaps because like Johnny Guitar she wanted to be told she was loved, even if it was a lie. Writing, she concludes, is «plaer i privilegi. I, si volem, revenja. O miracle. Tant se val. Perquè sempre hi haurà un altre ésser, escindit i perplex, que ens llegirà i, en llegir-nos, farà una obra més gran, quasi perfecta, una obra diferent. I aleshores comença el plaer del lector i s'acaba la nostra feina» (58).

The vastness of Roig's own reading, hinted at in the foreword, is corroborated by the number of writers she cites. The following list is far from exhaustive: Shakespeare, Stevenson, Joyce, and Graham Greene; Flaubert, Gérard de Nerval, Rimbaud, and Antonin Artaud; Pirandello, Elias Canetti, Ionesco, Walter Benjamin, Thomas Bernhard, Dostoievski, and Nabokov; Ernesto Sábato, Octavio Paz, Vargas Llosa, and García Márquez; Narcís Oller, Salvador Espriu, Josep Pla, Gabriel Ferrater, Carles Riba, Pere Calders, and Joan Fuster. And, to borrow a notorious phrase from Hawthorne that, I suspect, would have amused Roig, there is «a damned mob of scribbling women»: Santa Teresa, Sor Juana, Madame de Staël, Emily Brontë, Virginia Woolf, Jean Rhys, Doris Lessing, Marguerite Duras, Marguerite Yourcenar, Rosa Chacel, Christa Wolf, Víctor Català

(Caterina Albert), Clementina Arderiu, Maria Aurèlia Capmany, Mercè Rodoreda, Isabel-Clara Simó, and Carme Riera. It is with the last group that Roig feels a special affinity. She identifies with those who write as women, telling stories, listening to voices that usually go unheard, seizing language and becoming speaking subjects, and reading otherwise both themselves and male-generated tales about Eve, Delilah and Pandora.⁶ Roig mentions the 1981 *Quimera* article in which Marta Traba called attention to the relationship of much feminine writing to oral literature. The features that Traba enumerated—sensitivity to one's audience and desire to communicate with it, reliance upon memory as a means of rescuing events and preserving them from oblivion, the importance of repetition and dialogue—are traits of Roig's own novels. Women, she declares, now have a tradition of their own and a place from which to write, «la terra d'ella» or *Herland*.⁷

One of the most provocative essays of *Dignes que m'estimes* is «Del 'ja no' a l' 'encara no.'» The opening sentence is arresting: «Una vegada vaig trepitjar uns ulls de dona» (80). The eyes, part of an ancient Armenian mosaic, were those of a woman who from her position on the ground looked up at the world and saw perpendicular, elongated, distorted figures. Roig comments that all eyes think they behold reality, and the window she sees from the room where she is now writing is no more real than the window seen by the ant that at this very moment is disappearing into a hole. This vignette creates for us a vivid image of a woman seated in a room of her own, remembering, writing, and looking out upon the world. It reminds us of Martín Gaité's *Desde la ventana: Enfoque femenino de la literatura española* (1987), the cover of which is adorned by a recreation of Dalí's *Muchacha en la ventana*. Roig's references to eyes and windows introduce the theme of vision. The gaze that is of special interest to her is *la mirada bòrnia* of the woman writer who looks inward and hears her own voice but also looks outward and thus enjoys a form of double vision:

[L]'única manera de no tornar-nos boges és aprendre a mirar en dues direccions divergents al mateix temps. Però més que la mirada guenya, o la de cua d'ull, m'agrada la mirada bòrnia. Això vol dir que, en un ull, hi duem un pedaç, i això ens permet seguir mirant cap endintre, escoltar la nostra veu, la no expressada o no admesa com la Gran Veu, la dels Sacerdots que regeixen els cànons a seguir, tant a la crítica com a les universitats, mentre que l'altre ull

⁶ Roig does not discuss the question of *l'écriture féminine*, alleging that «la tesi de la diferència és veritat i falsa alhora» (76) and that it would be easy to list male authors who write in a «feminine» manner and vice versa.

⁷ Roig here (79) quotes Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, who in turn are quoting Charlotte Perkins Gilman.

mira cap enfora, vola lliure, activament, sense ulleres fosques, ni càmeres, ni binocles. L'ull que mira cap enfora s'ha escapat del tema, ensopit, redundant, de la dona. L'altre, passa comptes. No podem ocultar que «encara» duem un pedaç. (80-81)

No longer, Roig affirms, are women limited to watching from behind curtained windows.⁸ Their field of vision has widened, but too many of them are still passive viewers of a world that reaches them mediated by a television set. They can make their gaze an active one, however, if they remember that they also see with the eyes of the mind, with the eyes of memory, «memòria de la que ha estat escrita, de la que ha estat parlada» (105).

The final section of the book, «De finestres, balcons i galeries,» continues the theme of vision, now focused upon Barcelona as a geographical and literary space. Roig traces the history of the city and the life of women who have lived there, women who from windows, balconies, and glass-enclosed galleries have observed the world around them with «una mirada que volia volar» (155). Her sensitive and moving recreation of the city and its inhabitants over the course of time is reminiscent of Azorín's «Una ciudad y un balcón» and is comparably poetic.

In response to the question of what motivates Roig to choose the essay as a vehicle of expression, I suggest several explanations: it is a written form that resembles speech, that invites dialogue and initiates discussion, that emphasizes the particular and concrete and focuses upon personal, daily existence, that foregrounds the process of connecting with an audience and sharing opinions with it (see Joeres and Mittman 18-20). It serves Roig as a public forum for her private views, and as a feminist she recognized the need to end the split between public and private life. It is through the medium of the essay that Roig presents her gendered perspective on literature and the art of narration and persuades her readers of the importance and delights of two of her passions: the solitary pleasure of writing and the shared vice of reading.

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⁸ Roig's «espíar darrere la cortina» (89) reminds us of the title of Martín Gaité's first novel: *Entre visillos* (1958).

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