

# MERCÈ RODOREDÀ

MERCÈ RODOREDÀ'S NOVELS CAN BE DESCRIBED AS POETIC IN THE SAME WAY THAT, IN 1923, PAUL VALÉRY DEFINED THIS KIND OF FICTION AS OPPOSITION TO POETRY: A NOVEL OF DISCOVERY OF INTERIOR WORLDS, OF FEELINGS OF SURPRISE BEFORE A UNIVERSE NOT YET WORN DOWN BY CLICHES.

MONTSERRAT PALAU BARCELONA UNIVERSITY

**I**n the field of twentieth century Catalan literature, *La plaça del Diamant* (1962), by Mercè Rodoreda (1909-1982), is an indisputable best-seller, one of the most widely circulated novels, both in the different editions that have been printed and in the later film and television versions. In the sixties, after this publishing success, this Catalan writer resumed the work which had been interrupted by the war and exile, and, surrounded by a general tendency towards realism, contributed a different approach, minimizing historical facts while at the same time universalizing her work.

Mercè Rodoreda, considered a post-Joycean because of her continuous interior monologue, built her fiction on an intellectual perception of reality, thus doing away with the pathos identified with the nineteenth century and the Modernist movement, and reducing it to the level of intellectually condensed pettiness, attenuating tragedy in the task of expression. Not for nothing did she form part of the *Grup de Sabadell*, who in the thirties coincided with the aesthetic ideas of the Italians, in particular the *Novecentismo* of Massimo Bottemelli. But Mercè Rodoreda went further. Her fiction—wholly undramatic—plays the intellectual game through the personalization and the originality of the period between the wars using a combination of stylistic lyricism and behavioural description.



This lyricism is one of the main characteristics of her style, the key to her entire production. Mercè Rodoreda's novels can be described as poetic in the same way that, in 1923, Paul Valéry defined this type of fiction as opposition to poetry: a novel of discovery of interior worlds, of feelings of surprise before a universe not yet worn down by clichés. Like the impressionist novels of Virginia Woolf, it tends towards subjects of little importance, simply seeing life from the point of view of sensibility, through a simple everyday plot. She opts for subjectivist techniques and the objects of her narrative are human relations and the difficulties which these bring to communication, something which is in fact the central topic of a large part of contemporary twentieth century literature. Like Woolf, Stein or the Oxford school, she gives great importance to the ephemeral, and the most everyday thing, the smallest instant, becomes the axis of truth, between eternity and oblivion.

Her work can be classified in two main blocks. In the first are the early novels, the *bildungsroman*. *Aloma* (1938, reed. 1968), *La plaça del Diamant* (1962) and *El carrer de les Camèlies* constitute an initial nucleus which is characterized by the initiation of the heroine to life through—negative—sexual experience which leads her to an adulthood that does away with all illusions. Learning leads to a nostalgia for childhood at the same time as disenchantment caused by the increas-





ingly bitter reality. The shock of the child-adult transition combines with the problems of women doomed to a grey existence without any future, with only the hope of financial security at any price, since love either doesn't exist or else is disgusting. Amongst these heroines, the Natàlia/Colometa of *La plaça del Diamant* stands out because of her historical-epic projection and her remarkable ability to come out on top.

However, the details and the descriptions in these novels give a poetic background that produce a first —and commonly held— impression of a gentle and sentimental work, not to say "rosy", but which, after a close study, seeing the distance from reality which the narrator always imposes, present a picture of cruelty and pessimism. On the other hand, close attention to the details, objects and symbols reveals the influence of the *nouveau roman*, in the effect of the story told through the behaviour of its characters, and the link with the north American behaviourist novel, an evident style in many of her short stories. The central point is the myth of learning in trivial, everyday situations, because for Mercè Rodoreda life is trivial and her novels are

a dehumanization of the human adventure.

In the second block, dipping into only the most interesting work, although all her literary production is remarkable, *Mirall trencat* (1974) brings together all her earlier themes, techniques and resources and opens new horizons because it is the novel of maturity, of disenchantment, of the feeling of tragedy at the consummation of the decadence of a world which has gone and can no longer return. It is the novel of old age, and the preoccupations of the heroines of the earlier period acquire the breadth of a portrait of the human condition and in this way they become universal. Decadence is inevitable, and in *Mirall trencat* not one of the characters mourns his tragic destiny, rather, a host of voices gives us a varied and multiple viewpoint that shows us, with greater intensity, that life is banal and only death remains as an absolute value, based on a symbolist concept of art and life.

The writer's style also gains in maturity. Building a cheap novel round a family history is not enough; there is a need to create at the same time a meditation on the passage of time. The details become subtle and symbolic. A subtlety like that of

the mirror —a female instrument— that plays with meaning and message. The cracked mirror of past time, the mirror that reflects the passage of time in the happy world of the family. But also Stendhal's mirror, conceiving the details as one of the most important parts of the novel. Life, like the novel, is a mirror, mute witness to the passage of time. A mirror that reflects life in fragments —like the narrative technique—, a mirror with different functions or forms. But a mirror, after all is said and done, that hides reality, the reality that is nothing but a dream. For this reason, when the object-mirror is broken, the decay of the family becomes obvious, but at the same time, it allows a mythical distance because the novel then becomes the dream, that which the author desires. Mercè Rodoreda chooses the myth and the nostalgia of the past, because the future is imposed by force, though the present, because of the grey, adult life it implies, is also unacceptable. With everyday themes, characters, locations and arguments she manages to create a very particular universe by applying her theory: "All novels are conventional. The beauty lies in making them seem otherwise".



*La plaça del Diamant*

MERCÈ RODOREDÀ

**J**ulieta came to the cake shop especially to tell me that before raffling the flowers they were going to raffle coffee pots; that she had already seen them: beautiful, white, with a picture of an orange, cut in two halves, with the pips showing. I didn't feel like dancing, I didn't even feel like going out because I'd spent the day selling sweets, and the tips of my fingers hurt from tightening so many golden strings and tying so many knots and bows. Also, because I knew Julieta, who lost all track of time at night and didn't care if she slept or not. But she made me go along whether I wanted or not, because that's the way I was, always worrying if someone wanted something and I had to say no. I was dressed in white from head to toe: starched dress and petticoat, shoes like drops of milk, the white paste ear-rings, three round bracelets that matched the ear-rings and a white purse that Julieta said was made of oilcloth, with a clasp like a golden sea-shell.

When we got to the square, the musicians were already playing. The ceiling was decorated with paper flowers and chains of all colours: a length of chain, then a length of flowers. There were flowers with light-bulbs in them and the whole ceiling looked like an upside down umbrella because the ends of the chains were tied higher than in the middle where they all came together. My petticoat elastic, which I had had a job threading with a knitting needle that wouldn't go through, fastened with a little button and a little cotton hook, was too tight. I must already have had a red mark round my waist, but as soon as the breath was out of my mouth the elastic was tormenting me again. The bandstand had asparagus plant all round it like a balustrade and the asparagus plant was decorated with paper flowers tied on with thin wire. And the musicians sweating and in shirt-sleeves. My mother dead years before and not able to give me any advice and my father married to another woman. My father married to another woman and me without my mother who only lived to look after me. My father married and me so young and all alone at the *Plaça del Diamant*, waiting for them to raffle coffee pots, and Julieta shouting to make herself heard over the music, don't sit down or you'll get all creased up!, and before my eyes the light-bulbs dressed as flowers and the little paper-chains stuck together with flour and water paste and everybody happy, and while I was day-dreaming a voice in my ear said, shall we dance? (...)

Translated by Andrew Langdon-Davies