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Foreword

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FOREWORD

Born in Barcelona in 1908, Mercè Rodoreda never attended school because her family decided that «she could be harmed there since she learnt things too fast».¹ In fact, the family's precarious financial situation was to blame for her lack of formal education. This lack, like so many others in Rodoreda's life, proved a blessing for her artistically. Rodoreda's precocious talent, like that of García Márquez, her well-known admirer, was nourished by the magical world of her grandfather's stories. As she puts it: «De petita vivia meravellada» (As a child my life was a constant wonder).² This childhood world full of wonders soon became the nightmarish world of adulthood and violence. Rodoreda's arranged marriage to her uncle Joan took place the day she turned twenty and marked the beginning of a life-long conflict with the opposite sex which occupies the very core of Rodoreda's fiction.

Beyond the individual conflict of a sensitive woman trapped in the net of a conventional and unsatisfactory marriage, Rodoreda also underwent the historical conflicts of the Spanish Civil War and World War II. Before 1936, the year of Franco's uprising against the legally established government of the Spanish Republic, Rodoreda had managed to publish five novels and numerous short stories in several Catalan periodicals of the time. This astonishing output had made of Rodoreda the most promising young voice in Catalan narrative. The war brought a sharp end to her brief success, as she became a political exile, along with many other Catalan and Spanish refugees. David Rosenthal, Rodore-

¹ See Montserrat Casals, «El *Rosebud* de Mercè Rodoreda» in this same issue.

² Mercè Rodoreda, «Pròleg» to *Quanta, quanta guerra*, Barcelona, Club Editor, 1981, 20.

da's American translator, aptly summarizes the significance of those years of exile:

Catalans were on the losing side in the Spanish Civil War, and immediately afterwards were forbidden to speak their language outside the home. For writers like Rodoreda, who did not reestablish her residence in Spain until 1979, the fate of Catalan was a matter of artistic survival. A writer's native language is normally his or her only medium of expression. If a language dies or is killed, then the writer also dies. Thus, as with many Catalan authors, her personal story is of a kind of death followed by a recent and partial rebirth.³

As Rosenthal's statement suggests, Rodoreda's personal survival owes a great deal to her stubborn will to write and to write in Catalan.⁴ Her works, moreover, reiterate once and again the archetypal journey to one's own hell, that «voyage au bout de la nuit» whose historical reality Rodoreda suffered during the dramatic years of the German occupation of France. Rodoreda's unclenching faithfulness to Catalan and the Catalan cause together with the centrality of exile in her work constitute the historical backbone of a production that powerfully portrays an experience which is both individual and universal.

It is precisely Rodoreda's universality that we are celebrating in this monographic issue of *Catalan Review*. *La plaça del Diamant* (*The Time of the Doves*), her masterpiece, has become the most widely read modern Catalan novel. García Márquez hailed it as «the most beautiful novel published in Spain since the Civil War».⁵ It has already been translated into thirteen languages. Rodoreda's entire work, moreover, was awarded the «Premi d'Honor de les Lletres Catalanes», the utmost distinction for a Catalan writer, in 1980, three years before her death. She is the only woman ever to

³ David Rosenthal, «Translator's Note», in Mercè Rodoreda, *The Time of the Doves*, New York, Taplinger, 1980, 8.

⁴ See Mercè Rodoreda, *Cartes a l'Anna Murià. 1939-1956*, Barcelona, La Sal, 1985, 51.

⁵ See Rosenthal, «Translator's Foreword», in Mercè Rodoreda, *My Christina & Other Stories*, Port Townsend, Greywolf Press, 1984, VII.

achieve such a recognition. The recent release of the American paperback edition of *The Time of the Doves* is a good index of her reputation abroad.

Rodoreda's work, as is the case with all true classics, runs the risk of a fixed canonical interpretation. Fortunately, with the recent publication of her correspondence with Anna Murià, whose deeply felt and insightful evocation of Rodoreda's life is a very important contribution to the contents of this issue, has revealed many unknown facets of a rich and troublesome personality. Rodoreda's emotional life is no longer a complete mystery. Her passionate affair with Joan Prat, «Armand Obiols», and the incessant pain and torture which it entailed, has already been the source of several studies and has brought about a general reassessment of Rodoreda's entire corpus. In the context of the English speaking world, such a reassessment may be compared in part to that undergone by Virginia Woolf as a result of public access to her archives and the subsequent disclosure of her numerous activities in the social and political arena. Jane Marcus's feminist and neo-Marxist rereading is indicative of this direction. In Rodoreda's case, it was through the scholarly attention of American researchers that a feminist reappraisal of her fiction was first attempted. Authors like Francis Wyers, Kathleen McNerney or Geraldine Nichols pioneered this direction.

It was this direction that was the focus of «New Feminist Perspectives on Mercè Rodoreda», the special panel that I chaired on behalf of the North American Catalan Society (NACS) at the Modern Languages Conference in San Francisco, 1987. The four papers read at that session, «Flowers at the North Pole: Mercè Rodoreda and the Female Imagination in Exile», «The Process of Becoming: Engendering the Subject in Mercè Rodoreda and Virginia Woolf», «The Witches' Touch: Towards a Poetics of Double Articulation in Rodoreda», and «Writers, Wantons, Witches: Woman and the Expression of Desire in Rodoreda», have been published almost unchanged in this issue, in an attempt to capture that special moment in the American feminist rereading of

Rodoreda's work. The title and intent of that session has partially made its way into this special issue: «New Perspectives on Mercè Rodoreda».

What, then, are these new perspectives? Broadly summarized, they might be characterized by three general approaches: feminist, psychoanalytical and comparative. «New Perspectives on Mercè Rodoreda» thus shares in the current debates of mainstream criticism. These general debates, in the context of this issue, have taken the form of divergent discourses ranging from the rejection of the entire feminist approach on the grounds of its lack of historicity – Joan Ramon Resina's brilliantly argued position – to contrasting psychoanalytical interpretations of Rodoreda's work as a reinforcement of Oedipal patriarchal structures or as an expression of pre-Oedipal maternal drives. Taken in its entirety, the purpose of this special issue of *Catalan Review* is to provide a critical platform which may stimulate further debate and inquiry into the value of Mercè Rodoreda's extraordinary literary achievement.

The issue opens on a personal note with Anna Murià's «Mercè o la vida dolorosa», a moving remembrance of Rodoreda, as writer and friend, written by an exceptional woman whose commitment to Catalan literature is akin to that of Rodoreda herself. Montserrat Casals' contribution, similarly, consists of the first results of her biographical study of Mercè Rodoreda. It reveals some facts that will shed more light onto the almost entirely unknown private life of the writer. The English translation of «La Salamandra» («The Salamander») which follows has been included to provide the reader with a significant example of Rodoreda's fiction. It is to be hoped, too, that the graphic materials which conclude this section will contribute to a better understanding both of Rodoreda in her human dimension and the plurality of her interests and artistic talent.

We then move on to the critical part of the journal. Arranged alphabetically, the articles in this section offer a wide scope of methodologies while contributing to the general goal of present-

ing new and different views about the author. Jane Albrecht and Patricia Lunn's study, for instance, deals with the importance of the linguistic devices at work in Rodoreda's *La plaça del Diamant*, and particularly her use of the case role played by the narrator that emphasizes the shift from passive to active in Natàlia's role as a speaking subject. Carme Arnau's article reworks a chapter from her forthcoming book *Literatura i esoterisme*. It deals with the symbolic importance of the alchemical components in *Quanta, quanta guerra* while proving Rodoreda's attraction for the cabalistic and mystical movement of the Rose and the Cross. Emilie Bergmann's essay retakes the Lacanian notion of woman as being culturally and linguistically constituted as Other in order to analyze Rodoreda's work as paradigmatic of women's writing in a condition of exile and absence. Loreto Busquets expands her former psychoanalytical inquiry of *La plaça del Diamant* to encompass all of Rodoreda's later novels with the premise that the unconscious determines both their thematic and their formal structure. Mona Fayad's work is a comparative analysis of the narrative processes by which the subject is engendered in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and Rodoreda's *La plaça del Diamant*. One of Rodoreda's critical givens, her affinity with Virginia Woolf, is thus put to the scrutiny by a comparatist. Kathleen M. Glenn's study concentrates on *La meua Cristina i altres contes* to emphasize the emerging voices of women under the different disguises and metamorphosis of this important transitional work in Rodoreda's canon.

Another comparative approach is provided by Giuseppe Grilli, who analyzes the theme of evil and its attraction for Rodoreda from the vantage point of Céline, another writer tantalized by the dark side of the self. My own article uses Kristeva, Irigaray and Mary Daly to argue the supplemental quality of Rodoreda's text and her constant return to the Mother, and emphasizes the originality of her double articulation of the symbolic and semiotic components of the literary sign. Geraldine Nichols sets out to establish a feminist taxonomy of the Rodoredian heroines divid-

ed into innocent victims and/or triumphant survivors who are capable of inscribing their desiring subjects in the body of history and writing. Janet Pérez, using «The Salamander», singles out metamorphosis as the Rodoredian device to express anger and protest for the unfair situation of (Catalan) women in a male dominated world. Her analysis is comparatist inside the Catalan tradition and contains a study of Maria Antònia Oliver's «Vegetal» and «Muller qui cerca spill». Joaquim Poch and M. Conxa Planas present another psychoanalytical approach to Rodoreda's text that is grounded on her revelations in the correspondence to Anna Murià mentioned above. Their conclusion is that Rodoreda's work may be seen as a compulsive repetition to recreate her own story in order to recover her personal stability. Rodoreda's symbolic figurations, according to this study, reshape constantly the two essential drives of the libido torn between eros and thanatos.

Grounded on the critical discourse of Deleuze and Gattari and their analysis of «minor» literatures, Joan Ramon Resina's essay sets itself against what he terms the feminist reductive discourse vis a vis Rodoreda's work in order to vindicate its ideological aspect that aims to «reterritorialize the lost language of a community». Maria Roca Mussons contributes still another analysis of *La plaça del Diamant* that underscores the passage of initiation that Natàlia undergoes from the initial unconscious leap forward of the dance to her final emergence in the outcry of her return to the site of the original motion. Following Thass-Thienemann, Roca Mussons emphasizes the subtle workings of Rodoreda's craft and the role of the unconscious in the symbolic construction of the novel. Alejandro Varderi's article is a Bachelardian analysis of the significant figures in Rodoreda's domestic imagery. His study takes the reader from Rodoreda's many gardens into the objects that form the microcosm of her symbolic spaces inside the house showing the delicate richness of the inner walls of Rodoreda's literary shell.

Mercè Rodoreda's work is proof of how strong a voice from a

«minor» literature may sound in the general concert of literary voices around the world. With her voice, moreover, Catalan literature has offered the world one of the most subtle, rich and powerful examples of the historical emergence of woman as a speaking subject. These two elements together, undoubtedly, constitute Rodoreda's most precious legacy. This issue of *Catalan Review* would like to pay her homage while bearing witness to that remarkable achievement.

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