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«Flowers at the North Pole» : Mercè Rodoreda and the Female Imagination in Exile
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«FLOWERS AT THE NORTH POLE»:
MERCÈ RODOREDA AND THE FEMALE IMAGINATION
IN EXILE

EMILIE BERGMANN

Geography is only one aspect of exile, not always the most important. The Uruguayan writer in exile, Cristina Peri-Rossi, has observed that the only true homeland may be language.¹ Mercè Rodoreda, in exile among non-Catalan speakers while Catalan as a written language was itself in exile during much of her productive life as a writer, described the impact of her linguistic isolation in an interview granted to the novelist Montserrat Roig and published in 1968: «Quasi no tinc amics allà [*a Ginebra*], i molt menys encara per parlar de literatura... i escriure en català a fora és com voler que floreixin flors al pol nord».² Geographical distance and intellectual isolation from her cultural roots had an important effect on the direction of Rodoreda's writing, a direction in which her work continued to develop even after her return to Catalonia.

As Carme Arnau points out in her study of Rodoreda's fiction,³ a clear progression can be observed from the early social realism of the 1930s to the stories in *La meua Cristina* (1967) and the novel *Mirall trencat* (1974), with their strong focus on the uncanny, the visionary, the supernatural, and the surreal. Rodoreda's fiction moves from the details of the external and social world of everyday life to that of interior realities of myth and imagination. The fantastic and imaginative aspect flourished and

¹ «Quizá la única patria verdadera sea la lengua y, en todo caso, no siempre coincide con el lugar geográfico en el que se nació», Cristina Peri Rossi, «¿Irse o quedarse», *El País*, June 21, 1984, 9-10.

² Montserrat Roig, «El aliento poético de Mercè Rodoreda», *Triunfo*, 28, 573 (9 September, 1973), cited in Carme Arnau, *Introducció a la narrativa de Mercè Rodoreda: El mite de la infantesa*, Barcelona, Edicions 62, 1982, 12.

³ Arnau, 12.

took new forms in the works published since the completion of Arnau's study in 1977: the lyrical and allegorical prose of *Viatges i flors* (1980), the hallucinatory narration of *Quanta, quanta guerra* (1980), the title story of *Semblava de seda* (1978), and the posthumous work *La mort i la primavera* (1984). This development can be studied as a response to the writer's cultural and geographic displacement, a challenge to political boundaries through the transgression of physical or cultural boundaries. Rodoreda's novels and short stories illustrate the evolution of this strategy of transgression as a response to geographic displacement. The strategies of geography and language in the work of the exiled writer Cristina Peri-Rossi offer an illuminating comparison to those of Rodoreda.

If, as Lacanian psychoanalytic theory explains, women are culturally and linguistically constituted as Other, women must write in a condition of exile and absence.⁴ What then, is the effect of these women writers' double exile, by political necessity and gender, experiencing the self as absent from language and experiencing homeland and native language as absence? In a deceptively simple poem, Peri-Rossi says, «Escribimos porque los objetos de los que queremos hablar / no están».⁵ She does not claim to create presence through writing. Readers of Rodoreda's best-known novel, *La Plaça del Diamant* note the authenticity and colloquial quality of the voice of the first-person narrator of that novel, but the achievement of that quality required a reclaiming and reshaping of language to the exigencies and dimensions of the imagined voice. Rodoreda describes the process of crafting Colometa's voice in her prologue to *Mirall trencat*:

Un autor no és Déu. No pot saber què passa per dintre de les seves criatures. Jo no puc dir sense que soni fals: «La Colometa estava desesperada perquè no donava

⁴ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, Paris, Seuil, 1966; Luce Irigaray, *Speculum de l'autre femme*, Paris, Minuit, 1974.

⁵ Cristina Peri-Rossi, *Linguística general*, [Barcelona?], Ediciones Prometeo, 1979, 14.

l'abast a netejar coloms.» (...) He de trobar una fórmula més rica, més expressiva, més detallada; (...) I perquè el lector vegi la desesperació de la Colometa em veig obligada a escriure: «I va ser aquell dia que vaig dir-me que s'havia acabat. Coloms, veces, abeuradors, menjadores, covadors, colomar i escala de paleta, tot a passeig!» (...) Tota novella és convencional. La gràcia consisteix a fer que no ho sembli. No he escrit mai res de tan alambinat com *La plaça del Diamant*. Res de menys real, de més rebuscat.⁶

Almost all of Rodoreda's fiction is narrated in the first person in a colloquial style imitative of spoken Catalan. The stylistic strategy discussed by Rodoreda in the «Pròleg» to *Mirall trencat* and identified by Arnau as «escriptura parlada» is more than a device to create the illusion of verisimilitude for the reader. Writing in imitation of spoken Catalan, while publication of written Catalan was suppressed, is a transposition of speech into the forbidden realm. The author herself points out the unreality of that created voice, «res de menys real». The crafting of a seamless illusion of consciousness, an interior monologue in which nothing is related that the narrator would not «know», is a focus of Rodoreda's work. In a letter to her friend Anna Murià, dated June 5, 1946, she discusses some recent stories and mentions three authors she admires: Steinbeck, Faulkner, and «el meu amor que és [*Katherine*] Mansfield».⁷ She mentions Faulkner again in the prologue to *Mirall trencat*, as well as Stendhal and Chekhov, masters of detail and psychological realism, but, in *Mirall trencat*, her epigraph from Laurence Sterne is an indication of her connection with self-conscious narrative strategies. Her reference to Katherine Mansfield in her letter to Anna Murià illuminates her use of stream-of-consciousness narration in her earliest stories. When Rodoreda's «first» novel, *Aloma* (1938) was reissued, she made only a few revisions, to correct occasional narrative inverosimilitude in which characters appeared to have impossible knowledge of other characters' inner motivations and thoughts. Her consis-

⁶ Mercè Rodoreda, *Mirall trencat*, Barcelona, Club dels Novel·listes, 1974, 19-20.

⁷ Mercè Rodoreda, *Cartes a l'Anna Murià*, Barcelona, La Sal, 1985, 73.

tent preoccupation with this kind of verosimilitude, however, did not preclude the intensification of elements of dream, hallucination, and the fantastic in her work. In an interview published after her death in 1983, she mentioned her fondness for Poe and Lovecraft as masters of the fantastic, in the context of her juxtaposition of hallucination and dream with realistic description.⁸

Rodoreda's fiction seems to serve as a mirror for the collective experience of the Civil War and the postwar period, but it is a vehicle for transforming that experience into myth, as the author acknowledges. It also presents a transformation of the author's individual experience. Rodoreda's novels are not autobiographical, as she made clear in an ironic response to a misguided reader, who,

(...) segur d'ell mateix, convençut que era molt intel·ligent i que havia descobert una gran veritat, em va preguntar si la Colometa era jo. En tots els meus personatges hi ha característiques meves, però cap dels meus personatges no és jo. Per altra banda el meu temps històric m'interessa d'una manera molt relativa. L'he viscut massa (...) Però no he nascut per limitar-me a parlar de fets concrets.⁹

Details related in interior monologue and action reveal profound feeling and confusion in the narration of Colometa's decision to leave her son Antoni in a camp for children. Colometa reveals no feeling of her own, but her desperation is powerfully communicated in her close observation of the battered, shaved heads of the other little boys, the reluctance her friend Julia says she would feel in Colometa's place, and the beads of sweat on the forehead of the nervous teacher to whom she turns over her son. Colometa projects her thoughts onto the teacher's consciousness, saying that she knew the teacher could see that Antoni was «com una flor». In an interview, Rodoreda's friend Anna Murià discusses a detail of Rodoreda's life that is reflected in this epi-

⁸ Juan Tébar, «Mercè Rodoreda siempre se sintió acompañada por las flores y sus criaturas literarias», *El País*, April 15, 1983, 28.

⁹ Rodoreda, *Mirall trencat*, 18.

sode. When Rodoreda left Barcelona for Paris and then Geneva in 1939, she left her son with her mother, having already separated from her husband. Anna Murià insists that Rodoreda never showed regret, never said she missed her son.¹⁰ And yet, this episode addresses the abandonment of a son by his mother, an act so culturally unacceptable that it must be read as an expression of wartime desperation. It does not answer questions about Rodoreda's own life, but it does enact the confrontation between the horrors of war and the most basic assumptions about motherhood. The seemingly natural contours of narrative voice in Rodoreda disguise significant discontinuities and absences that can be traced throughout Rodoreda's writing. As her narrative moves away from specific times and places in subsequent works, it moves toward the fantastic and simultaneously toward more complex, allegorical political significance.

Geographical displacement imposed change and disruption on Rodoreda's life, and its effects appear transformed in her fiction, but they also affected the very circumstances of producing and publishing her work. She made an early commitment to writing exclusively in Catalan, and was one of the very few writers who kept that commitment during and after the Civil War, when outlets for writing in Catalan became increasingly limited to journals, like *El Poble Català* and *La Nostra Revista*, published by the Catalan community in exile in Paris and Mexico. *La Plaça del Diamant* (1962) was completed after a long silence during which Rodoreda's struggle for survival left time only for occasional short stories. *La Plaça del Diamant* represents more than an author's return to writing novels; it is a work in which imagination and vision are in vital interaction with the concrete detail essential to realist narrative, an interaction that would evolve toward a predominance of the fantastic in Rodoreda's later work. In fact, in the prologue to the 1982 edition, Rodoreda says she intended the novel to be «kafkiana, molt kafkiana, absurda, és clar... un

¹⁰ Rodoreda, *Cartes*, 29-30.

malson de coloms», who would suffocate the protagonist.¹¹ *La Plaça del Diamant* seems far from Rodoreda's fantastic short stories of metamorphoses. The technique of continuous narration of retrospection without the implicit privilege of interpretation or recognition in this novel is, however, combined with elements of interior, subjectivized reality that suggest the possibilities of the visionary and the fantastic.

Colometa's hallucination in church is one example of this interior vision, presented as fact by the narrator, and explicable in terms of her extreme hunger and desperation. She sees «una muntanya de boletes damunt de l'altar», that later proliferate and glow with a blood-colored light, representing the souls of the war dead whose cries Natàlia assumes everyone else can hear. Again, as in the episode in which she leaves her son at the camp, Colometa's most intense inner experiences are expressed in terms of projection onto the consciousness of others. She interprets the gestures of the priest and of another woman as horrified reactions to what she sees. She confronts the «pena del món», and attempts to escape it in this passage («I amunt, jo amunt, amunt, Colometa»)¹² and through in her planned infanticide and suicide. This vision is not merely an isolated departure from everyday reality, but a part of Colometa's postwar consciousness, the transformation of her world. The hallucination in church, integrated into this interpretation of the novel, indicates the possibility of Rodoreda's later radical rupture with the realist tradition.

Common to both the seemingly «realist» narration of *La Plaça del Diamant* and the fantastic in Rodoreda's short stories is her unwavering commitment to the creation of verisimilitude in narrative voice. There are, in addition, common images whose value changes from «realistic» and rooted in historical circumstance, to fantastic in the most classical sense. For example, in «Una fulla de gerani blanc», the distortion of objects in the narra-

¹¹ Rodoreda, *La Plaça del Diamant*, Barcelona, Club Editor, 1984, 6.

¹² *Ibid.*, 118-120.

tor's world is symptomatic of the engulfing of everyday life by the unconscious. It is significant that it is the narrator's perception of the blue color of a street lamp that is meant to be symptomatic of his altered consciousness. The narrator claims to have caused the death of his wife and, obsessed with unacknowledged guilt, he says of the world he sees: «Vaig arribar a pensar que tot era blau, no perquè jo ho veïés blau, sinó perquè s'hi havia tornat».¹³ This passage provides a contextual transformation of one in *La Plaça del Diamant* in which the street lights are in fact blue because they have been painted that color to black out the city of Barcelona during the war. Colometa observes: «Tots els llums eren blaus. Semblava el país dels màgics i era bonic. Així que queia el dia tot era de color blau».¹⁴ The transparent illusion that transformed wartime anxiety into wonder in *La Plaça del Diamant*, but was still explicable by the laws of nature, becomes a classic element of the fantastic in «Una fulla de gerani blanc».

The potential for the fantastic and the allegorical seen in *La Plaça del Diamant* is realized in *La meva Cristina* and later works. The title story of *La meva Cristina* and that of the collection *Semblava de seda* are keys to the symbolism and allegory of other works by Rodoreda. In addition to writing as an exile in a forbidden language, Rodoreda's writing of strange transformations and visions proposes the question of the female imagination in the realm of the fantastic. Almost all Rodoreda's narrator-protagonists are female, and the few who are male are associated with the traditionally female qualities of change and renewal, or with the supernatural. Among the few first-person narrators who are not female in Rodoreda's fiction are the gardener living by the sea in *Jardí vora el mar*, the visionary moon-bound gentleman of «El senyor i la lluna», the traveler in *Viatges i flors*, the Jonah-like sailor of «La meva Cristina», and the young soldier of *Quanta, quanta guerra*, who wanders along mapless roads. Each of these male

¹³ Rodoreda, *Tots els contes*, Barcelona, Edicions 62, 1979, 248.

¹⁴ Rodoreda, *La Plaça del Diamant*, 106.

figures is closely linked with elements traditionally associated with the feminine: flowers, the sea, and the moon. Transformations and the power to create or evoke strange beauty or monstrous horror have strong gender associations in Rodoreda's fiction.

The freedom to create masks and monsters of any form or gender is exercised differently by women, for whom gender is a greater limitation in everyday life. The metamorphoses in Rodoreda's short stories are a liberation of word and desire into material form, an imaginative transgression of boundaries as immutable and everyday as the confines of gender and geography. Metamorphosis in the collection *La meva Cristina* is cast in the tradition of the female outcast as witch in two stories, «La salamandra» and «Una carta». In «La salamandra», the narrator is transformed into an amphibian as she is being burned for alleged witchcraft. The salamander, an animal who crosses habitat boundaries, is a figure for the exiled writer, living between but not in, two cultures, two languages, two elements. The narrator is not sure if she is still as completely human as her consciousness indicates, since she knows how to behave as an amphibian. She cannot decide whether she is on land or underwater. This is illustrated by her puzzled observation:

Tot i que no era morta, no hi havia res que fos viu del tot, i resava fort, perquè no sabia si encara era persona o si només era una bestiola, o si era mig persona i mig bestiola, i també resava per saber on era, perquè hi havia estones que em semblava que era a sota de l'aigua, i quan era a sota de l'aigua em semblava que era damunt la terra i no podia saber mai on era de debò.¹⁵

This passage can be read as an allegory of the displacement of the writer in exile, as Rodoreda described her own life in Geneva as utterly isolated. The salamander's loss of an appendage identified as a «maneta», can be read as symbolic of another absence, the inability of the author to write during her first years in exile,

¹⁵ Rodoreda, *Contes*, 241-242.

and then only short stories, until *Jardí vora el mar* and *La Plaça del Diamant* in 1962.

Other stories in *La meva Cristina* cross traditionally rigid boundaries with apparent ease, conveyed by the smooth surface of narrative voice. In «El riu i la barca», a perfectly smooth transition is created between the terrestrial and the aquatic. The metamorphosis is prefigured by a metaphor used by the narrator's mother: «Recordo la mamà, explicant, amb una mena de precipitació angoixosa que, de molt petit, quan em banyaven reia; i que quan m'escorrien l'esponja per sobre obria la boca com un peix». The narrator claims to have had an inexplicable thirst and a great love for fresh water. The story ends with the neutral, factual statement of the most improbable transformation and its ultimate reversal: «M'havia tornat peix. I ho vaig ser durant molts anys».¹⁶ The story «La sala de les nines» is reminiscent of traditional folktales in which dolls, inanimate representations of the human, come alive. This unlikely transformation is framed by a second level of narration in which an elderly gentleman writes to a priest, as if borrowing authority as well as protection from the pious recipient of the letter. He prefaces his tale with a meditation on the oneness of all being: «som una mica la ploma d'oca, som la taula i el tinter, som aquest glop de sol que va senyalant el temps sobre les rajoles del meu humil despatx dormitori saló racó de meditacions».¹⁷ Because the protagonist of the story is represented as obsessed far past the point of madness with his room full of dolls, and dies violently before the end of the tale, this story requires a narrator positioned at a safe and stable distance from the events he relates.

The title story of the collection *La meva Cristina* challenges the reader's disbelief in a sailor's story about being swallowed by a whale. The story's internal audience, the bureaucrats to whom the sailor must explain his case, are represented as unsympathetic

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 228, 230.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 205.

in their response. With its obvious levels of Biblical and political allegory, the story opens with an emergence from the extraordinary into the Kafkaesque world of forms the survivor must fill out in order to justify the existence he struggled for years to preserve. The bureaucrats mock him: «Tants d'anys has viscut a dins?... I com ho feies? em diuen. T'has de fer fer els papers».¹⁸ The narrator tells his fantastic tale of survival only after recruiting the sympathy of the reader with the negative example of the bureaucratic audience. The story ends with a kafkaesque image of metamorphosis: the sailor has a pearly coating on his skin, very difficult to remove. Instead of reestablishing his existence as just another man, he becomes known as «la perla». Like exiles who have undergone more than a geographical displacement, but rather an existential transformation, the sailor cannot return to dry land, his former element, or human civilization, because he carries with him the mineral layers of experience that define him as Other. His otherness exceeds the political boundaries that the bureaucrats could understand; the only relevant geographical distinctions are between land and sea. The transformation of this narrator is far more profound than the levels of existence registered by passports or government statistics.

Another diverging path the imagination takes in Rodoreda's work is the fantastic geography of *Viatges i flors* (1980) and *Quanta, quanta guerra* (1980). In *Viatges*, Rodoreda departs from representing the absent Barcelona which had changed in unknown ways during her exile. Instead, she imagines a series of nameless rural communities that endlessly repeat the same customs and appear on no map. The collective social environment in both *Viatges i flors* and *Quanta, quanta guerra* no longer refers directly to the experience of the Second Republic and the Civil War in Barcelona as it did in the novel she chose to call her «first», *Aloma* (1938) and in *La Plaça del Diamant* (1962). Instead, the social and physical environment of each town visited by the itinerant narra-

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 250.

tor of the *Viatges* bears a complex relationship with dream, myth, and the unconscious, mediated by the process of telling. The Civil War of *Quanta, quanta guerra* is, as Rodoreda points out in her prologue, not the war of artillery and technology, but an interiorized experience of disruption, displacement, and dead bodies in a rural setting that could be any European countryside during any period of conflict from the Hundred Years' War to the Second World War.

The development of Rodoreda's strategies of geographical fluidity can be productively compared to the blurring or erasure of geographical specificity in Cristina Peri-Rossi's *La nave de los locos* and stories such as «El viaje» from *Una pasión prohibida*. There are important differences between these two writers: Peri-Rossi has always written in the mode of the imaginary, the surreal, and the fantastic. Moreover, she is in exile in Barcelona, where a congenial linguistic home, enthusiastic readers, and outlets for her writing are close at hand. And yet, *La nave de los locos* and *Una pasión prohibida* are works that can illuminate Rodoreda's eventual response to exile: the erasure and transgression of boundaries and writing about nameless imaginary cities. Gender and age of characters change in significance in Rodoreda's fiction, and she departs from longterm practice by employing a male narrator in *Viatges* and a male protagonist in *Quanta, quanta guerra*. Peri-Rossi's characters in *La nave de los locos* transgress and confront boundaries of geography, gender, and age. The protagonist of *La nave de los locos* is an exile whose closest friend, while in a prison camp in an unspecified Latin American country, was aware of two mutually inaccessible worlds:

(...) sentía en su conciencia, todavía despierta, la existencia de dos mundos perfectamente paralelos, distantes y desconocidos entre sí, dos mundos (...) que se bastaban a sí mismos y que podían funcionar sin tener ningún contacto, como dos esferas girando eternamente en el silencio azul del espacio (...) era mejor olvidar que existían ambas plantas, olvidar la lengua común, aceptar Babel.¹⁹

¹⁹ Cristina Peri-Rossi, *La nave de los locos*, Barcelona, Seix Barral, 1984, 59-60.

Once released and in exile, the world he can experience at any given moment is necessarily incomplete, and he is haunted by his awareness of the other reality. The narrator-protagonist is fascinated with old maps showing nonexistent countries, reminders of the transience of our cultural concept of boundaries. Even the uniquely circular cosmography of the Creation Tapestry in Gerona, a repeated image in the novel, is incomplete and enigmatic in its meaning. Its sea creatures are hybrids with wings, defying the tapestry's tidily represented divisions of the created world into land, sea, and air. Like the hybrid creatures of the tapestry, several of Peri-Rossi's characters are transvestites or bisexuals, challenging traditional gender boundaries, none are paired with characters of their own age, and most are geographically displaced as tourists, expatriates, or exiles.

In the light of Peri-Rossi's treatment of exile, Rodoreda's episodic narratives in *Viatges i flors* are revealed as imaginative confrontations with gender and culture. The *Viatges* are a haphazard journey told in brief vignettes of the unchanging and irrational disruption of war in women's lives, doll-like lost girls suspended in time, old women whose sole function is knitting, rainbow-colored newborns whose spectrum fades to a single gender-identifying stripe, and men who hang themselves as a ritual of family life. Rodoreda's first «Viatge al poble dels guerrers» and Peri-Rossi's stories, «El puente» and «El patriotismo» expose the absurdities of patriotic symbols as mutually reversible. The following description of the flag of a departing army is repeated exactly upon their return in an identical cloud of dust in Rodoreda's description of the «poble dels guerrers»: «Vermella i blanca duia escrit amb lletres vermelles damunt del blanc i amb lletres blanques damunt del vermell, "Coratge", "Puresa"». ²⁰ Peri-Rossi's «El patriotismo» describes two flags representing two factions in a city: «la roja tiene un león bordado en el centro, y la negra tiene un águila roja en el ángulo superior izquierdo. Nadie sabe con certeza el ori-

²⁰ Rodoreda, *Viatges i flors*, Barcelona, Edicions 62, 1980, 7-8.

gen de estos símbolos, ni su significado...»²¹ In both stories, the flags themselves seem to generate the passion with which the groups waving them march into battle, but the passion is undermined by the narrators' monotonous and uncomprehending descriptions.

Both Rodoreda and Peri-Rossi, experiencing the painful realities of political boundaries and symbols, confront them and transform them by depriving them of their charged specificity. This is only one, and perhaps the most obvious, of the social implications of the imaginative in Rodoreda's work. There is a social resonance to Rodoreda's confrontation of the laws of physics in the short story collection *La meva Cristina*, published in 1967. The stories are of individual characters whose narrations of their lives can no longer be explained by predictable cause and effect. The narrators often declare their inability to understand what has happened or to classify it in everyday categories of animate and inanimate, death and life, self and other, land and sea, home turf and the moon. If, for the writer in exile, her language is her only home, these stories about the ways in which language can create reality are allegories of the writer's creation of a homeland in language, for her and her readers. This is particularly evident in «Una carta», as the reader wonders at the letter-writer's powers to change reality through her thoughts. This wonder is only superficially contradicted by the letter-writer's own professed terror at these same powers, and the imagined horror and sympathy of the imagined recipient, a doctor. The letter-writer is a mature woman with grown children, who believes her having thought of it caused her husband's fatal fall from a fig tree. She has a grandchild, implying that she, like the menopausal narrator of another story, «La sang», has reached that potentially dangerous, transforming stage in her life, when absence is the sexual signifier. The narrator's distance from her husband in «La sang», and her painful memory upon seeing the full-blown dahlias the two of them

²¹ Peri-Rossi, *Un pasión prohibida*, Barcelona, Seix Barral, 1986, 75.

once cultivated, is viewed from another angle in «Una carta». The letter-writer immerses herself in the sea to participate in the plenitude of the flowering apple tree of her imagination. She concludes by suggesting that she may be a witch, a self-image that is powerful and marginalizing. In writing to a person she positions as authoritative, her expressed fear emphasizes the marginalization, but her experience speaks for itself with a contradictory meaning. Like the metaliterary significance of the injured «maneta» of «La salamandra», the power of the letter-writer's thoughts is an allegory of the story-writer's power to create illusions.

In Rodoreda's short fiction word can become reality just as thought or mental image can produce the thing imagined. This occurs most dramatically in «El riu i la barca» and in «Una carta», in which the narrator believes her thoughts influence events, but it also occurs in «Semblava de seda», in which the wings metaphorically attributed to the wind become those of an angel with whom the narrator struggles. She speaks from the beginning of the story of «les ales del vent» and of «una ventada com un gran cop d'ala». Key to the vision of metamorphosis and to Rodoreda's imaginative transgressions of the boundaries of exile is this story published in *Els marges* in 1974 and excerpted at length in the prologue to *Mirall trencat*. The protagonist is an elderly, be-reaved seamstress whose narrative reliability is questionable. She does not remember in which year the events took place, and she describes a face she sees on the walls of her room, the face of the «mort que jo estimava», who is buried far from her present home. Like the sailor swallowed by a whale in «La meva Cristina», she encounters an extraordinary creature in the form of an angel, and her relationship with it is ambivalent and unresolved. It is terrifying, then comforting and finally imprisoning. Both narrator-protagonists are transformed by their contact with the monstrous and the supernatural.

If the poor and dispossessed can claim any land it is the earth in which they are buried, but even this is problematic for the

«mort que jo estimava» and the elderly mourner who cannot pay the train fare to visit his grave. Instead, she appropriates a stranger's grave in a cemetery near her home, thus defying the taboos surrounding burial and mourning of the dead. When she violates another taboo by staying after closing hours in the cemetery, her experience matches the fears that make law-abiding citizens avoid such places at night. The protagonist is a spiritual outlaw who sees the whole earth as the grave of her loved one, as a justification for appropriating a more accessible place. Like the narrator of «La sala de les nines», she claims the unity of all phenomena:

La cosa que pensava aturada al mig del camí era que la terra, encara que tingui colors diferents, a tot arreu del món és terra, i si tota la terra és igual, la del cementiri on m'havia ficat era la mateixa que la del cementiri on dormia el meu pobre mort. Aquest descobriment va consolar-me.²²

The woman who erases the geographic distinctions between one plot of ground and another and ignores the temporal limits for visiting all such places, narrates the experience of seeing and struggling with a shining black angel after she examines a long black feather she assumes he must have lost from a wing. The appearance of her personal monster, suggestive of the demonic, coincides with her transgression of the social rules governing the burial and mourning of the dead, and of her metonymic transfers of meaning and presence. Her struggle with the angel is linked with a linguistic transgression: she resists the prescribed reading of the inscription of the gravestone and gives it the reading she chooses. The inscription is overgrown at first and easily ignored, until someone weeds the area and retouches the letters in gold. She is outraged and imagines the futures obliteration of the letters. In the Catalonia of the dictatorship, of which Rodoreda was painfully aware although she did not live there, such a response to the omnipresent Castilian inscriptions and printed advertisements, books and newspapers would be a conscious tactic of lin-

²² Rodoreda, *Contes*, 329.

guistic survival, a personal «normalització». The widowed Colometa of *La Plaça del Diamant* and the seamstress in «Semblava de seda» represent the collective experience of all those who could not properly bury and mourn in the presence of their war dead. The seamstress's imaginative transformation of an inscription transforms the significance of the earth, a powerful conjuring through language.

The story's perfection is in its transition from the recognizable and explicable actions of a dislocated woman, to the windy night of a supernatural and transforming struggle. After she sees the black wing of the angel, and tries to escape, a voice tells her that «el meu mort era l'angel». He has undergone a Christlike transformation and «a dintre de la tomba no hi havia res, ni ossos ni record de persona quieta». The protagonist does not immediately welcome this transformation and struggles until the end of the story, when she says:

No podré entendre mai per què vaig necessitar tant de sentir-me protegida. L'àngel, que devia adivinar-ho, em va embolcar amb les seves ales, sense estrènyer, i jo, més morta que viva, les vaig trobar de seda i em vaig quedar allí dins per sempre. Com si no fos enlloc. Empresonada...²³

She is comforted, protected, and finally imprisoned by her angelic-demonic monster.

Mercè Rodoreda's rootedness in her language and culture coexist with her creative transgression of boundaries between logic and illogic, everyday and fantastic, angelic and demonic, political maps and places in the imagination. The translation of her work, crossing linguistic boundaries, has not only demonstrated the worldwide appeal of her work, but also the international status of Catalan as a literary language. The fantastic and the non-realistic and possibly allegorical have for Rodoreda a value that transcends the boundaries she could not freely cross for four decades. In *La Plaça del Diamant*, the spatial boundaries are histori-

²³ *Ibid.*, 335.

cal and personal limits formed by events in time. Her transformation of her world is a closing off of one area of the city to exclude her old life. When she can cross the street again, she recognizes her accomplishment: «vaig mirar amb els ulls i amb l'ànima i em semblava que no podia ser de cap de les maneres. Havia travessat. Havia travessat. I em vaig posar a caminar per la meua vida vella...»²⁴ In her late writings, of «pobles» that appear on no map, and infinitely mutable flowers, Rodoreda no longer needs to evoke or attempt to replace her homeland through literary representation. Throughout her work she addresses central issues in women's lives in an increasingly radical transformation of everyday experience. Her grounding in her culture is, paradoxically and eloquently, conveyed through the representation of transgressions of boundaries.

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²⁴ Rodoreda, *La Plaça del Diamant*, 156.