***Time and Symbol, Life and Death, Decay and Regeneration: Vital Cycles and the Round of Seasons in Mercè Rodoreda's La mort i la primavera***

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# TIME AND SYMBOL, LIFE AND DEATH, DECAY AND REGENERATION: VITAL CYCLES AND THE ROUND OF SEASONS IN MERCÈ RODOREDA'S *LA MORT I LA PRIMAVERA*

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Rodoreda's intermittent work on this final novel, lasting more than two decades (1961-1983) produced multiple versions of several portions and two enormously different endings to what is perhaps her most significant mythic, allegorical and symbolic text. Both the number of years devoted to the effort and the fact that work on the ultimately unfinished manuscript occupied the writer almost exclusively during her final year of life—a period of heightened awareness of her own mortality—can be assumed to have contributed to the density of meaning in the resulting pages. The dying novelist's consciousness of the inevitable march of time and of the individual's insignificance in the cosmic scheme are reflected in the obsessive presence of cyclic life and death, decay and regeneration, in almost ritualistically repetitive passages, and the symbolic condensation of the sum total of human life in a few commonplace and traditional acts.

*La mort i la primavera* is quite unlike anything else Rodoreda wrote, although for readers familiar with her other works, her final novel may most meaningfully be compared with *Quanta, quanta guerra*, insofar as both possess epic dimensions, feature an adolescent male protagonist-narrator, and involve mythic conceptions of time. Time is almost entirely ahistorical in both novels, whose exact durations are obscured. Precise duration, however, is ultimately unimportant; more significant is the protagonists' loss of innocence, with the concomitant acquisition of certain knowledge about life and humanity—a most disillusioning, wearisome and troubling knowledge. Both novels share

aspects of the picaresque tradition and of the novel of initiation, as well as the *Bildungsroman*, but both transcend these antecedents via their mythic, epic, and implicitly collective dimensions. If the protagonist of *Quanta, quanta guerra* is somehow an allegorical embodiment of all whose youth was shattered by war, the narrative consciousness of *La mort i la primavera* symbolizes those whose youth has been destroyed by the mainstays of peace—those traditional, rigid, moralistic creeds, customs and conventions whereby society enforces the established order. But it is not society alone, regardless of how omnipresent the cruelty of that barbaric structure in Rodoreda's last work: it is Being itself, life and death and the sheer weight of the cosmos.

Solitude is a major theme in both novels—a radical, oppressive solitude whose dimensions transcend the existential and seem to fill creation. Intensifying the solitude of the respective protagonists is the orphan state of both, their extremely limited relationships, and their estrangement from much of society because of their age: too old to behave and perceive as children, they have not yet been admitted to the company of adults. Both novels adapt the structure of the *pícaro*'s serving many masters through a number of semi-formal apprenticeships and a series of symbolic, initiatory experiences. A major difference is that *Quanta, quanta guerra* is somehow affirmative in its ending, once the long madness of war is past; survival is a fact, at least for some, and there is a sense of the human spirit's will to endure. But in *La mort i la primavera*, the will to live is overcome or relinquished.

The non-especific nature of time in *La mort i la primavera* obliges the reader to attempt to deduce the epoch from textual clues. Rodoreda departs radically from the Catalan Realist tradition of writers such as Oller, with his careful stipulation of dates, or even the comparative realism of some of her own earlier works (including *La Plaça del Diamant, El carrer de les Camèlies* and *Mirall trencat*) where the presence of certain sym-

bolic and even supernatural incidents do not suffice to displace recognizable historical epochs and identifiable geographical settings. Not only are there no dates in *La mort i la primavera*, there are no historical references, or allusions to fashions, literature, or anything else which might serve to identify the period. The very few «modern» (mechanical) artifacts present—the most important of which is a clock—suggest that the period is post-Renaissance (or later). Significantly, however, the clock—a symbolic mandala—lacks hands, and the only invention with a comparable function, a sun-dial on the village outskirts, has been rendered similarly disfunctional by villagers' tearing away its «hand», the pole whose shadow marked the hours. Neither instrument serves to indicate time—an unlikely coincidence which can only be symbolic. The reader may deduce that times does not pass in the village, or not in the normal sense. Time does pass on the biological level, as evinced by the endless round of seasons and the fact that the only sustained action consists of the cycle of birth, maturation, reproduction, and death. No names of months are mentioned, either, nor days of the week; only light and darkness, day and night, spring, summer, winter, spring. The reader thus knows that time passes, even if the villagers are unable to mark it; the only trace of time's passing is the aging of characters, of houses, of Nature itself. Perhaps the symbolic import intended by the villagers' breaking the sun-dial (and maybe a deliberate attack on the clock as well) is an effort to halt or disguise the inexorable march of time toward the horror that is death—especially as treated in the village.

Whereas the non-functioning clock in the village's only tower indicates a relatively «modern» period, the paucity of other manufactured objects is such that the age might well be Neolithic: there are houses, but they are primitive and bare, painted annually with brushes fashioned during the long winters with hair from horses' tails and paint derived from red dust taken from a local cave. The most important post-Neolithic

elements are a forge and some rudimentary iron instruments—an ax and chains—so that Iron Age technology is present, and unlike the clock, plays a role in village life. The villagers possess tables and benches, beds and blankets, flower-pots and cooking pots, an occasional cupboard, and very little else. The dwelling-place of *el senyor*, situated atop a low mountain overlooking the village, is larger yet still primitive—a kind of rustic castle, lighted by torches, almost bare of furniture. A coat of arms above the door is curious in that its emblems are flowers (*glicines*) and birds. Cirlot indicates that «Birds are very frequently used to symbolize human souls» (27), and that the flower, «By its very nature is symbolic of transitoriness, of Spring and of beauty» (104). Significantly, a major concern of *el senyor*—a primal dread—is death. The birds and flowers are part of the round of seasons and springtime renewal (although *La mort i la primavera* also features other birds that are symbolically negative). The nobleman, who is crippled, travels in a rudimentary horse-drawn conveyance, perhaps similar to a stagecoach, but description is insufficient to allow assigning it to a century. Save for the addition of the enigmatic clock, little appears to have changed in the village and surrounding area in the last three thousand years. Thus, Rodoreda underscores the incredible primitivism of life in Spain's isolated villages in the second half of the Twentieth Century—villages where, even after the Civil War, sowing and reaping were done with the methods described in the Bible, threshing wheat with donkeys' hooves and winnowing the grain by tossing it in the air. One has only to see the Roman bridges and roads still in use in Spain today to realize that in many remote rural areas of the country, progress is not a meaningful concept, and the passage of time is, indeed, not historical but merely a biological event, as Rodoreda depicts it.

Timelessness or atemporality notwithstanding, nothing specifically contravenes the assumption that the epoch portrayed is relatively recent, despite the absence of motor vehicles,

telephones, or other evidence of twentieth-century technology; the reader is free to assign the action to the past century or the present one, or any other, depending upon individual interpretation. Nearly all communication is oral, rudimentary, with the few written words appearing mostly in the form of inscriptions. Neither schooling or any educational system are mentioned; informal apprenticeship appears to be the predominant form of training. Customs, attitudes and beliefs are not so much ahistorical as prehistoric, and most activities might as easily take place in the Middle Ages as untold centuries before. No character appears to grasp the concept of time in the abstract: their lives are governed by cyclic patterns, with daily existence at an extremely simplified level. Past and present are not sharply separated, while the future as projection of a conscious or meaningful plan is non-existent; futurity looms obscurely as the inevitability of eventual death. Given the collective fixation upon death, existential time becomes almost palpable, a weight grinding down the characters without mercy or exception. Time in all its multifaceted unfathomability is unquestionably a major theme of *La mort i la primavera*, and its passing is the essence of both plot and action, as is insistently underscored by numerous obsessive motifs of life and death, decay and regeneration. Vital cycles follow the round of seasons, with individual characters and events seeming to have no function other than to illustrate that process.

The nameless village might be almost anywhere in the Catalan Pyrenees, perhaps near the caves where prehistoric paintings have been found. The area's somewhat stylized geography is continually invoked, with the novel closely tied to the river and forest, cliffs and caves—ahistorical features which underscore the novel's timeless, cyclic character. Nature and the round of seasons, the reproductive cycles of flora and fauna, are intimately linked with the characters' lives, forming the substrata of the narrative consciousness and of the rhetoric, at once lyric and tender, unfeeling and violent. The

carefully selected elements render more visible the mythic and cyclical nature of the text, further emphasized by Rodoreda's intercalation of «mini-myths», tales of origin from the village's oral tradition, as well as her exquisitely elaborated language and abundant motifs of life and death (e. g., symbolic black and white birds which arrive each year, with the black birds killing the white ones). Human aging and reproduction are paralleled by decay and regeneration in the world of Nature.

Located near the base of low mountains, with higher mountains in the distance, the archetypal village sits astride a river which dips underground, passing below the village and emerging to the surface downstream—a visible symbol of death and resurrection. Above the village, in the mountains, is a cave, and on a slope, a cemetery, perhaps corresponding to the civil cemeteries, since it is used only for suicides and others whose deaths are treated as irregular. It is in this direction, also (above the village) that the isolated home of the solitary representative of capitalism and/or aristocracy stands. Both sides of the river are forested, with the woods beyond the river—and symbolically across the river (Jordan? Styx?) serving as place of the dead and as the site for ritual, orgiastic celebrations whenever a death occurs. Given its ritual nature, this forest probably corresponds to the sacred grove of mythology. Cirlot reports that forest symbolism is complex, but «is connected at all levels with the symbolism of the female principle or of the Great Mother» (107), as well as being a symbol of the unconscious. The reader who attempts to visualize the village setting in its entirety may recognize its primordial, archetypal nature, its being situated along a vertical axis and thereby constituting a mandala. It is also a remarkably self-contained microcosm.

As primitive as the village are its inhabitants' beliefs: cruel and fanatic superstitions related to rituals of death, burial, and springtime, incarnated in the rampaging river swollen by melting snows. The reader must remark the absence of the Church, of identifiable Christian ritual and symbols (excepting the

cruciform opening carved in the burial trees), as well as the near-total absence of mercy, pity, charity, and Christian ethics. The village's barbaric rituals of death and interment are intended mainly to protect the living from the souls of the dead and other spirits vaguely perceived as evil; superstitions concerning procreation and reproduction are also rampant. Both are indicative of very primitive religiosity. The myth relating the village's origin combines elements of violence, sensuality, suffering and sorrow:

El poble havia nascut d'un gran malestar de la terra. I la muntanya s'havia partit i havia caigut damunt del riu, estesa. I l'aigua del riu s'havia escampat pels camps, però el riu volia córrer amb tota la seva aigua junta i a poc a poc havia anat buidant la muntanya que havia caigut, per sota... I diu que no al fons d'una baixada, sinó damunt de la terra o de les pedres estimbades, una nit la lluna hi va deixar dues ombres que van ajuntar-se per la boca. I va ploure sang. I així havia començat tot. (33)

There is thus some distant echo of the Biblical fall, of original sin and a primordial curse, perhaps the origin of what seems to be a very strong collective sense of guilt among the villagers, even if the Church has not inspired it. The non-functioning clock is located on the highest tower, not of the church (none is ever mentioned), but of the slaughterhouse, another motif of death and one of the two major landmarks (the other being the stables). Both are associated with horses, the only visible wealth. Employees of the *escorxador* are old men with white faces, pariahs, whose only job is to kill horses—eaten prominently in the orgiastic burial rituals, when both stallions and pregnant mares are killed and devoured, along with the fetus:

Hi havia taules i bancs fets amb troncs d'arbre. I unes grans bacines que ja bullien. Amb els peus de cavall feien el brou. I ran de cada bacina una dona esbromava amb un cullerot i tirava a terra llunes de greix i glops de sang cuita. A la festa dels enterraments mataven cavalls

i eugues plenes. De primer menjaven la sopa, després el cavall o l'euga, i, una mica només, perquè els en tocava poc, un bocí del petit que les eugues duien a dintre. Amb els cervells feien la pasta que fa pair. Els pelaven, els bullien en una caldera que només servia per bullir cervells i un cop bullits els polien i els picaven. (38-39)

Death and regeneration are thus brought together in the ritual interment feast, although the effect is to abort the regeneration process. The reader witnesses no celebration of life, no religious observances of birth or marriage, confirmation or consecration, only the macabre and bizarre rituals of death.

Death is the focal point of village life, its significance underlined both by the title and the structure and nature of events in the novel. Only two events are shared or celebrated by the village collectively: death-interment rituals and the annual sacrifice of a man to the river. Each spring, lots are to determine which male must enter the swollen river at the point it disappears beneath the village (a ritual believed necessary to prevent the river's eating away the foundations and swallowing the town). The sacrificial victim is force-fed an intoxicating drug or beverage and cast into the raging torrent. Many men do not survive; those who do are battered, crippled, disfigured, their faces torn away. The ghostly, faceless survivors become pariahs, performing the lowliest menial jobs and working at night so as not to be seen by the more fortunate. Collective aversion and shunning makes still more patent the victims' character of sacrificial scapegoats.

Several aspects of the ceremony suggest a form of Saturnalia, with the ritual assassination at certain astral conjunctions, as well as the relationship to time and duration, and the necessity of sacrifice for re-creating. Cirlot records that Saturn «symbolizes time... the insufficiency, in the mystic sense, of any order of existence within the plane of the temporal» (265), which might well serve as epigraph for the novel; he also states that one attribute of Saturn is the oar, standing for navigation,

which is interesting since the victim must «navigate» the underground river, naked and unprotected. The ritual and orgiastic character of the event—which includes a dance by the pregnant women, a race by all the men of the village, and the drawing of canes from a hollowed-out tree trunk repainted each year for the occasion (71)—allude to Saturnalia or Carnival, born of «the desire to concentrate into a given period of time all the possibilities of existence, apart from the fact that, in its orgiastic sense, [*the rite*] is an invocation of primordial chaos and a desperate quest for the «way out of time»" (Cirlot, 267). And indeed, only as a quest for a way out of time does the last part of the novel become meaningful.

Crueler still than this springtime rite is the ritual associated with death. Both orgiastic and stylized, its liturgical character is apparent in this procession:

> I duien torxes. I passaven les dones i la dona del ferrer amb la taca morada a la galta, entre dues dones més velles que no pas ella, caminava i semblava que no mirés. Passaven de costat davant de la paret. I les dones embarassades anaven al darrera de tots amb el cap enlaire i agafades de les mans. (32)

In order to prevent the soul's escape (for spirits are seen as menacing), the mouths and throats of the dying are filled with cement; their bodies are then encased in a living tree, hollowed out in the shape of a cross. The cross needs no explanation; however, the tree «stands for inexhaustible life, and is therefore equivalent to a symbol of immortality» (Cirlot, 328). This makes the burial tree an oxymoron, unless it be understood within the Christian context of the cross and resurrection, which are never mentioned. Nor is the villagers' treatment of the dying and dead marked by mercy, respect, or any sentiment except fear. The living tree subsequently closes over the body and digests it. Each person in the village has his or her tree designated at birth, marked by a metal name-plate forged by

the blacksmith. Strangely, however, no characters' names are ever mentioned; they are designated only by trade (the *ferrer*, etc.) or by relationships (father, mother, wife, daughter, etc.) or social position, in the case of *el senyor*. The smith equates mythically to Hephaestus or Vulcan, not only by virtue of his profession but also his lameness and association with the underworld via his prominent role in burials. Cirlot remarks that «On some cultural levels, the position of blacksmith is considered to be held under the king's prerogative, and to be sacred» (27), which is consistent with the deference accorded the smith in Rodoreda's last novel (and which would suggest an Iron Age culture). The smith's mythic nature and identity are unmistakable, and he assumes priestly functions during the annual sacrifice of the propitiatory victim to the river, removing the scapegoat's clothes and casting him in the torrent if the victim is slow in complying. The smith plays an equally decisive part in pre-interment rituals, directing the actions of those filling the throats of the dying with cement. The village seemingly lacks formal political structure, but the *ferrer* has sufficient personal power and influence that he is treated deferentially even by *el senyor*. The old aristocrat, who does not share the village beliefs, hopes to escape their barbaric death, but ultimately shares the same fate—probably an allusion to the motif of death as the Great Equalizer.

The villagers all live close to Nature, which provides the setting for the essential rituals, forms the scene of most episodes of the novel, and is the workplace of most villagers, excepting the housewives, the old men in the slaughterhouse, and the smith. Work, however, is not a significant motif; the few activities described (save those of the smith) seem to be unproductive, often of a ritual nature. The relationship between the villagers and Nature appears more contemplative than exploitative; the existence of agriculture may be assumed, but it is not mentioned or described, nor are there any descriptions of any creative/procreative activity. By contrast, destructive,

neutral or unproductive activities predominate: slaughter, interments, sacrifice (albeit in the name of «salvation»), and the extirpation of plants—supposedly to protect man's constructions (61-62). Other activities are ludic, absurd or without purpose, whether as ritual, game, sacrifice, pastime or symbol. The reader never witnesses plowing or planting of fields, the cooking of normal, domestic meals, or the breeding of horses that seemingly exist to be slaughtered. Rodoreda has eliminated almost all constructive and [re]productive activity from the novel. Almost equally absent are noble sentiments, unselfish love, family affection, passion, sublimity of thought or deed (only the protagonist appears to feel some attachment to his parents and infant daughter). Neither love nor learning have a place in the novel or its myths. The reader sees only ritual or meaningless behavior, hints of an instinctive eroticism, and death. Nothing human is treated as transcendent.

By contrast with the colorlessness and anonymity of most of the villagers, only a few of whom are individualized even by such designations as «the smith's wife», the novelist places noteworthy emphasis upon flora, not only the oft-mentioned trees, but two lesser plants, the *glicina* and ivy. Both are «unproductive», in that neither provides anything edible or useful; their only function is aesthetic. The *glicina* blooms and may have a floral symbolism (Rodoreda's love for flowers and her botanical expertise are well-documented). Cirlot affirms that in addition to generic floral symbolism, each flower may have its own symbolic import, associated with shape, color or other traits. The *glicina* is blue, and borne on a stalk in bunches (like a bunch of grapes); blue flowers constitute a «legendary symbol of the impossible» (105). It can hardly be insignificant that the only flower mentioned by name is the blue *glicina*—whose voracious roots threaten to take over or undermine the village. Ivy, covering the sheer rock face above the village, is viewed as a threat to the aristocrat's home and thus pruned annually. It is surely significant that the ivy is an evergreen, to which

symbolic implications (rebirth, eternal life) attach. Again, however, symbolic elements are contradictory, for the ivy also threatens the buildings and works of man (perhaps an allusion to the fragility of human achievement vis-a-vis a self-renewing Nature).

*La mort i la primavera* comprises four parts, the first dealing primarily with the self-interment, disinterment, death and re-burial of the protagonist's father or putative progenitor, witnessed by the boy the spring he turned fourteen. Resting after swimming in the river, he sees a man appear in the forest, hollow out a cruciform cavity in a tree, and enclose himself within it. When the boy reports the incident, the villagers, led by the smith, tear the dying man from the bowels of the tree to fill his throat with cement, wounding him in the side in the process in a scene reminiscent of the Crucifixion. Only near the end of the orgiastic burial festivity (from which the boy is excluded, as are all children) does he reveal that the man was his father. Shortly afterward, the *ferrer* claims to be the protagonist's biological sire (numerous sexual exploits attributed to the *ferrer* are likewise an attribute of Hephaestus/Vulcan, father of Eros by Aphrodite).

The second part depicts the boy's physical maturation and insinuates his sexual encounter with his stepmother, barely two years older than he, an enigmatic gamin orphaned early and befiended by the old men of the slaughterhouse. This tiny, childlike woman with a withered arm, reminiscent of the lizard's short foreleg, has a peculiar empathic relationship with lizards. On one level she recalls the Salamander in Rodoreda's story by that name; on another, she shares aspects of Lilith, Lamia, Hecate. Nightwalker, witch or sorceress, and goddess of the underwold (she introduces the boy to the cave and repeatedly takes him there), she is also the Terrible Mother in her rejection of motherhood and of her own daughter, and devourer of youths in the seduction of her stepson. Perhaps she is the «triple goddess» for she does possess aspects of maiden, matron

and hag. As was true of the smith, the mythic nature of her identity is more evident than the function it was intended to fulfill, a possible consequence of the novel's unfinished state at the time of Rodoreda's death. The primary action of the second part comprises the ripening, erotically-charged relationship between the orphaned protagonist and his stepmother from the father's death until the birth of a daughter whose parents are the boy and his stepmother. Some incidents employ Freudian symbolism, including nights when the *marastra* leads the boy down into the caverns, and their entering the river—an occasion when he learns that she cannot swim and saves her from drowning. Also symbolic are games the two play, games of an initiatory nature, as when the pair visits the non-functioning sun-dial, and the *marastra* stands in place of the missing shaft so that her shadow marks the time:

Li vaig preguntar si sabia què era el temps i va dir, el temps sóc jo, i va dir, i tu; em va fer aixecar i em va fer posar al seu costat i la vaig agafar per l'espatlla i ella em va agafar per la cintura... I mentre érem el temps, de dintre meu es va alçar una força estranya, com si m'acabessin de fer de ferro per dintre, com si la meva mare, darrera de la fornal, m'hagués fet de ferro barrejant-se amb el ferrer. I per primera vegada vaig sentir què era la força d'un noi quan es va desfent de ser una criatura. (58)

Equally symbolic but less lyric, verging on the grotesque, is their gambol in the grove of the dead, tearing the name-plates from the trees, mutilating the trunks, and finally perforating them, removing small bones, and strewing these around (65-66). Eventually the protagonist goes so far as to open a tree and expose the putrefying cadaver (66-67), after which the *marastra* has him open his father's tree, revealing the decaying corpse:

I quan vaig tenir la creu oberta em va dir, estira... i vaig estirar amb tota la meva força i ella va ajudar-me. I tot va seguir endavant, escorça i carn podrida. I una mena d'aigua barrejada: la rosada negra del

cos. A l'alçada dels ulls hi teníem el cor desfet mig lligat al pit per quatre venes i més amunt la boca plena de ciment de color de rosa; i una bola de ciment de dins de tot, tenia una clapa molla de ciment de color de rosa més fort. Els genolls pelats, amb l'os torcat, es doblegaven. I la cara allà dalt, fruita madura, amb l'os pelat del front, semblava que rigués. Però els ulls no hi eren: el suc d'arbre els havia cremats... (68)

The vision haunts the boy afterwards, but there is no thought of their attempting to repair the damage. This section, lasting an indefinite time (about two years), ends with the abrupt, unexplained mention of their daughter's existence, without reference to any sexual act or to the birth. The sense of guilt felt by the boy after the desecration of the grove of the dead (referred only to his father's tree—a phallic symbol) may externalize the guilt he feels toward his father because of the growing attraction between himself and the *marastra*, and her increasing control over him:

Amb la meva marastra vam estar molts dies sense dir-nos res. Si els ulls d'ella i els meus es trobaven, giràvem el cap de pressa, com si una mà que no era enlloc ens estirés pels cabells i ens el fes girar. Jo veia l'arbre, de nit i de dia: l'escorça grisa i verda amb estries blanques, sentia l'olor, aquella olor... I sentia una veu que deia que allò no s'havia d'haver fet... Però aviat ella va venir a l'eixida amb les capses de plomes blanques i negres a demanar-me que la fes jugar... (70)

The underlying current of eroticism and unacknowledged sexual encounter could be the «real» desecration, merely symbolized by the episode in the forest.

The duration of the third part must be two to four years, and the interval between the second and third part is also some four years, beginning with the daughter's fourth birthday. The child is rejected by the *marastra*, who also despises the protagonist for having impregnated her. Considerable attention is given to the friendship between the child and the blacksmith's

son—an antisocial clairvoyant—and to symbolic clashes between the xenophobic villagers and menacing riders from beyond the mountains. Especially significant is the description of an intensely puritanical, intolerant, unnatural atmosphere—a Victorian morality in which natural impulses are immoral, and the worst sin is desire, leading to another ritual, of a more private nature, to extirpate desire:

> I em va dir que al meu pare li havien matat el desig quan la meva mare ja era lletja, quan cridava més fort contra els nuvis, abans que dugués la meva marastra a casa. I em va dir que havien matat el desig al meu pare i a molts del poble... que el poble n'estava ple... i quan t'han matat el desig et miren tendres, com si fossis una criatura, contents. (95)

Segregation of several types is prevalent, especially that of pregnant women (who must not cast eyes upon any but their husbands, lest the offspring resemble someone it shouldn't), and children (locked in the kitchen ceremonies whenever adult ceremonies are held); the pariah status of the faceless men is another case in point. The protagonist and blacksmith's son make several visits to the symbolic prisoner, caged like an animal, outdoors in all weather—a dehumanizing and pointless cruelty, for seemingly no crime is involved, merely the custom of keeping a prisoner until (more animal than human) he begins whinnying, which delights the villagers and constitutes an important event. The prisoner, something of a philosopher, exists in a kind of death-in-life, an inverse counterpart to the grove of the dead with its living coffins. The protagonist's little daughter dies at age four, a victim of the clash between the villagers and outside marauders, and he buries her in the earth, in the outcasts' cemetery on the mountainside after the *ferrer* refuses to use a plaque or tree for her.

In the fourth and final part, the protagonist is selected as the river's annual victim—at least the third time this springtime

ritual is enacted in the text. Despite surviving rocks and rapids, he is weary of life and sufficiently alienated from the villagers that he does not return; presumably he would have become one of the faceless pariahs consigned to menial tasks. Instead, he remains in the forest as an outcast, making stick dolls which represent his dead child, overcome by a sense of absurdity, futility, alienation and loneliness. An indefinite time (but probably less than a year) later, weary of living, he begins to reenact the preparations he had seen his father perform in the opening scenes:

> En la meva vida hi havia hagut la feina de créixer i aquella mena de mort del meu pare i tot el que m'havia anat fent i tot el que s'havia anat fent al meu voltant per fer-me. Sentia que la vida se m'havia tornat lletja de tant viure-la. (132)

Although probably still in his early twenties, he has found nothing in life to justify the pain of living, and hollows out his own tree, preparing his self-interment—a suicide which repeats the novel's opening scenes with the difference that the protagonist is no longer a spectator, but the agent and narrator of his own death, during yet another spring. The four parts of the novel might be equated to seasons of the protagonist's life: the springtime of adolescence, when he witnesses his father's death (first loss of innocence, end of childhood); the summer of maturation and sexual initiation, culminating with his daughter's birth; the autumn of sorrow and decaying relationships (the daughter's death, *marastra*'s estrangement); and the winter of his own sacrifice/expulsion and disfiguration, followed by psychic aging, retreat from the bitter senselessness of existence, and death.

Repetition is a major lyric device, one of the primary ones in lyric prose or the so-called prose poem. *La mort i la primavera* features both repetition and lyric passages, as already noted, and the text seems to become increasingly repetitive as the nar-

rative approaches its close. Not only are there the repetitions in Nature (round of seasons, annual life cycles, and seasonal markers such as the arrival and departure of migratory birds), but the repeated rituals of interment and of spring «sacrifice» to the river. The narrator's farewell visits to several old haunts before ending his life add to the repetition. The circular structure provided by the endless round of seasons, cyclic rituals and repetition of events makes of the novel an *ouroboros*, a symbol of eternity. But that eternity is considered by the narrator an unending cycle of rejection, loneliness, absurdity, pain, and aging (mentioned frequently in regard to his mother, and several others). By having chosen to die young, he avoids part of the cycle, and his final words suggest a belief that he is escaping from the eternal round itself. As he hollows out the tree, noting the lateness of the day from the position of the sun, he comments, «El temps fugia i jo havia d'acabar amb el temps. I es van moure les branques i es van moure les fulles i es van moure els brins d'herba com si totes les coses que no tenen veu em volguessin parlar» (161). Death is thus the means to «acabar amb el temps». Having enclosed himself within the tree and pulled the bark over him, he stabs himself, reflecting with his fading consciousness that he might have told his story differently, beginning at a different point, «però faci el que faci, la meva vida és closa. Com una bombolla de sabó feta vidre no en puc treure res ni puc ficar-hi res. No puc canviar res de la meva vida. La mort va fugir pel cor i quan ja no vaig tenir la mort a dintre em vaig morir» (162). The effect of the conclusion is to blur the distinctions between life and death, in the sense that it is his life ebbing away which the narrator terms «tenir la mort a dintre»; death and life are part of each other in the continuum of time, and only by the stab to the heart could he «acabar amb el temps».

Beyond the realm of the living or sentient, earth, air, fire and water acquire exceptional visibility in *La mort i la primavera*: earth figures prominently in cave scenes, in multiple references

to rocks, and various times when the boy digs prolongedly in the dirt. Air appears in the prevalent if not omnipresent wind: water takes the form of the river, but also of rain, snow, and fountains; fire is seen in light and the flames of the forge, bonfires at death celebrations, and winter fireplaces as well as the blazing summer sun. Images, similes, and a variety of symbolic allusions to life and death are pervasive on the rhetorical level, and sufficientlly numerous to provide conclusive evidence of the obsessive significance of those binary opposites for Rodoreda as she worked on her final novel. It is in relation to the protagonist's last act and final words that it is most pertinent to consider the parallelism between the village rites of spring and Saturnalia, especially when the latter is viewed as a «desperate quest for the "way out of time"». Such consideration would make of this last text a symbolic quest romance, and insofar as the protagonist succeeds in his attempt («acabar amb el temps», «no tenir la mort a dintre»), the narrative constitutes Rodoreda's symbolic conquest of her own death, her «way out of time». The oneiric power and primitive poetry of her creation attest to the intensity of her struggle with the ultimate mystery.

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