

The Garden
across the Border
Mercè Rodoreda's Fiction

Edited by
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Introduction

KATHLEEN McNERNEY

IN 1980, Mercè Rodoreda won the prestigious *Premi d'Honor de les Lletres Catalanes* (Prize of Honor in Catalan Letters). Granted for her entire literary production, it was a rather belated recognition of her peerless talent and impressive body of work. She is the only woman to have achieved such high regard in the world of Catalan literature.

As accustomed as we might be to hearing of creative, brilliant women whose work has gone by unnoticed or attributed to others, it still shocks us to come across an unproclaimed, or underproclaimed artist such as Rodoreda. In her case, factors other than her gender complicate and add to the levels of marginality surrounding her life. She wrote in a language not known to or even heard of by many people, a language which was forbidden in its own land during most of her lifetime. She had little formal education, and she spent most of her life in exile. Moreover, her life was rather unorthodox, and even reprehensible to the Catalan bourgeoisie of which she was, after all, a part.

Rodoreda was born in Barcelona in 1908, not in 1909, as many accounts would have it, a figure she never bothered to correct. Her recollections of childhood evolve around two major axes: the garden in her family home and the tales her grandfather used to tell her. Both sets of memories were to have a great influence on her work. She studied for only three years and was apparently a solitary child.

On her twentieth birthday, she married her uncle, Joan Gurgui, her mother's younger brother. Mercè left the marriage, never a happy union, after the birth of her son Jordi. Always concerned about her economic independence, she began working for the *Institució de les Lletres Catalanes* (Institute of Catalan Letters) during the Second Republic in the early 1930s. It was a stimulating time for her and for Catalonia, a brief period of Catalan autonomy between the repressive dictatorships of José Antonio Primo de Rivera in the 1920s and Francisco Franco after the Civil War (1936–39). She met many of the leading intellectuals of her day, including anarchist leader Andreu Nin, and a group of writers and journalists from the industrial suburb of Sabadell.

When the Republic fell in 1939, Rodoreda, along with others involved in the *Institució*, crossed the border into France. This group was rather lucky in comparison to most of the exiles, for as intellectuals, they had the support of some of their French counterparts. They went to a converted youth hostel in Roissy-en-Brie, not far from Paris, and until the German occupation, were treated quite well. During this period, Rodoreda formed two important relationships. Anna Murià, who would later write novels, essays, and a biography of Agustí Bartra, became her closest friend, one of the few she had during her whole lifetime. This friendship became all the more important in light of Rodoreda's relationship with Armand Obiols, pseudonym of Joan Prat, who was associated with the group of writers from Sabadell.

Rodoreda had never bothered to divorce her husband/uncle, and she left her infant son in the care of her mother. Obiols was married as well, had a daughter, and apparently wasn't even estranged from his wife. As if that weren't enough for a proper scandal, Obiols' wife's brother, Francesc Trabal, was the de facto leader of the little group of intellectuals in exile. In fact, most of the people in Roissy disapproved of the Rodoreda/Obiols union, and Anna Murià was probably the only person besides Obiols that she could talk to. Murià met the man of her life during this period as well. She married Agustí Bartra and accompanied him to Mexico where they lived in exile for many years. The couple wanted Rodoreda to go along, since things in France were beginning to look bleak by this time, but she and Obiols stayed behind. They suffered hardships, deprivation, illness, and separations during the war, until Obiols finally got a job in Geneva. Rodoreda preferred Paris after all their wanderings about and kept their little flat there for most of her life, but they moved to Geneva and were finally materially comfortable. It was a productive period for Rodoreda, for she could at last get back to writing, but she never lost her preoccupation with economic independence.

The relationship with Obiols lasted until his death in 1971, but it was fraught with separations and arguments. He encouraged her to write and to edit her work, and himself did a good bit of editing for her. His own literary production, so promising in his youth, was disappointing.

Rodoreda returned for a few short visits to Barcelona after the wars, mainly to see her mother and son. Her only contact with her estranged husband seems to have been requests that he help her mother and son economically. There were intermittent disputes about money among various family members. Just as her literary recognition came late in life, so did her cherished economic self-sufficiency: she finally inherited something by selling the family home, very run down but in a now-fashionable neighborhood in a growing and prosperous city. With the

dictatorship finally over, Obiols gone, and enough money, she returned to Catalonia, not to her native Barcelona but to a secluded country house in the province of Girona. At long last, she could buy the clothes she always wanted, have a garden, get to Barcelona conveniently, and see a few old friends. She died in the spring of 1983.

Rodoreda's earliest work predates the war, but she disclaimed four of the five novels she wrote in that period. During her exile in France, surely the most difficult years of her life, she claims not to have been able to write, but in fact a few stories and poems date from those years. Her best work was done in Geneva, including the novel usually considered to be her masterpiece, *La plaça del Diamant* (*The Time of the Doves*). Put up for the important Sant Jordi Prize in 1962, the novel was passed over for a work barely remembered today. One of the members of the jury, however, Joan Fuster, was so impressed with the novel that he recommended it to his friend the publisher Joan Sales. Thus began a business/literary relationship that blossomed into a warm friendship. Sales was a rather heavy-handed editor and Rodoreda often argued with him about proposed changes, but he usually prevailed. At the time of her death, Rodoreda was working on revisions of an earlier work, *La mort i la primavera* (*Death and Spring*), edited and published posthumously by Sales' widow, Núria Folch i Pi. Carme Arnau has edited another novel found among Rodoreda's papers, *Isabel i Maria*.

In our collection, we have tried to be as representative as possible and to cover a wide range of the fiction of this fascinating writer who is finally emerging as a canonical writer in peninsular letters. The first three essays deal with *La plaça del Diamant*, her best known and widely translated novel. Enric Bou considers the various kinds of exile Rodoreda underwent: political, geographic, linguistic, and personal. Seeing the city of Barcelona as a mirror of the destiny of the protagonist Natàlia/Colometa, he explains the relationship between physical and psychic space, between interior and exterior alienation, between personal and general experience. Through Natàlia's search for identity and effort to distance herself from the past, Rodoreda establishes a dialectic of space and time which Natàlia must overcome to survive. Patricia Hart compares the novel with Francesc Betriu's 1982 film based on it, and finds that in the transition from novel to film, beauty is gained, sordidness lost, and ideologies shifted. Betriu, addressing a film audience, transforms some of the more difficult and even grotesque episodes into visually pretty and less troubling versions. In this conversion, Catalan nationalism takes a front seat to the feminism Hart finds in the novel. Using Julia Kristeva's theories of the symbolic order and interpretations of the biblical myth of origin, Neus Carbonell relates the questions of identity to the absence of the mother and the imposition of silence. She takes

linguistic techniques into account as she studies Natàlia's progression toward a new definition of herself, a newly liberated self.

Donna McGiboney also uses the theories of Kristeva, but to examine a very different novel, *La mort i la primavera*. This hallucinatory story is narrated by a dead person who has not accepted the rules and rites of his tightly closed society, whose existence hinges on ritual at every turn. In these mutually dependent rituals, motivated by fear, a binary differentiation emerges: again, the patriarchal discourse defines women. The narrator's suicide is seen as a refusal to adhere to the rigid, mythical social sacrifices. Elizabeth Scarlett discusses two novels, *Jardí vora el mar* (Garden by the Sea) and *Mirall trencat* (Broken Mirror), particularly with respect to Rodoreda's well-known flower imagery. Flowers are not here a decorative motif, as some have seen, but a kind of gynocentric iconology along the lines of the flower paintings of Georgia O'Keeffe. The floral leitmotif leads to interconnected rhizomes of geography, psychology, socioeconomics, and biology. Janet Pérez deals with *Mirall trencat* too, but from a different perspective. Hers is a study of the novel as a Gothic work, coming out of a society coping with its vanished past in the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution: prohibitions and transgressions lead to psychological horrors. The use of spaces and architecture are at once part of the Gothic tradition and specific to this text. Gonzalo Navajas addresses *Mirall trencat* as well, using a postmodern approach in which he sees *Heimat*—the ideal and transcendent dwelling—as specific places: Barcelona and Catalonia. His essay reconsiders the postmodernist critical premises, and he emphasizes the creation of characters that reflect the postmodern reality. Both collectively and individually, the characters' alienations result from a kind of nostalgia for a pre-postmodern time, so to speak.

In her study of *El carrer de les Camèlies* (Camellia Street), Kathleen Glenn returns to a traditional source: the picaresque novel. Cecília Ce of the novel is an orphan who is "protected" by one and then another man. There are indeed many characteristics of the Golden Age sub-genre, particularly the prototypical *Lazarillo de Tormes*. The marginalization of the protagonist is here exacerbated, obviously, by her gender.

There are two studies of Rodoreda's pre-war novels. Joan Ramon Resina pinpoints the surprising fact that *Crim* (Crime), a novel Rodoreda refused to recognize after the war, is a parodic reflection of an essentially British genre—the detective novel—but one which reflects the sociological tensions between dominating Castile and productive Catalonia. *Aloma*, the only pre-war novel Rodoreda felt worth claiming in later years, was re-written extensively and significantly much after the war. Randolph Pope's scrutiny of the two versions leads him to conclude that the first is so much more radical and feminist that the

second constitutes a kind of censorship of the younger writer by the older, both using the same signature.

Viatges i flors (Travels and Flowers) is a transitional piece with respect to genre: it is neither novel nor short stories. Rather it is a series of vignettes divided into two sections: the fluidity of travels as opposed to the stationary life of plants. Nancy Vosburg makes the most of this distinction, concentrating on metaphors of rootedness and rootlessness, exile, displacement, and wandering; in contrast with enclosure, protection, and imprisonment. The collection has much in common with *La mort i la primavera*, particularly with respect to rituals, the tyranny of conformity, and social constructions.

The rest of our essays deal with Rodoreda's short stories, from various periods, some of which announce her novelistic techniques. Josep Miquel Sobrer concentrates on the male protagonists in three stories and sees a duality between women (characterized by inward fantasy, freedom, and ambition) and men (characterized by outward fantasy, strength in persistence, and fear). In these early stories, he finds the beginnings of the psychological richness so characteristic of Rodoreda's novels. His remarks give a new insight to the question of life versus literature, so sensitive with women writers. Ana Rueda goes back into the development of fantastic fiction to explain the work of Rodoreda, who crafts, she claims, a modern fantasy conscious of traditional motifs, especially fairy tales, fables, and folklore of various kinds. Focusing on "La meva Cristina" ("My Christina") and "La salamandra" ("The Salamander"), she examines the ethical nature of fantasy, from the early didactic works to current motifs. Emilie Bergmann isolates a specific historical period, 1938, to study the development of Rodoreda's early fiction. Stories that appeared in periodicals during the war naturally reflect wartime situations: "Els carrers blaus" ("Blue Streets") is a real image that seems surreal to those who don't know the reality. In Barcelona during the bombardments, a blackout was achieved by covering all the city lights in blue. "La noieta bruna" ("The Darkhaired Girl") relates a love between classes: a milkmaid and a poet. "Camí de la guerra" ("The Road to War") has members of the International Brigades as protagonists, including a woman. But the woman, an idealized Catalan, serves as an inspiration after her death to Catalan nationalism, in contrast with the passive women fantasized by the foreign brigadiers. "Sonia" is a *miliciana* too, and Bergmann sees her emerging voice as an announcement of the narrative voice in *La plaça del Diamant*.

In concentrating on a single story, "La salamandra," Elizabeth Rhodes brings together many of the constants in the work of Rodoreda. Taking on some of the traditional critics, she analyzes the relationship between themes and form, the thread of victimization which runs constantly

through Rodoreda's work, and her basis in common cultural understandings, as opposed to Jung's collective unconscious. She studies the carefully crafted structure of the story, its repetitions and final circularity, the contrast/conflict between the traditional woman and the transgressor, the beauty of pathos. While not claiming a feminist message, Rhodes argues that feminist criticism has unlocked meanings that have not been explored by traditional scholarship.

In this collection of essays, we have addressed the main body of Rodoreda's work—fiction. We would also like to point out that she excelled, according to her peers, in writing poetry, and was named "*maestre en gai saber*" (master in the craft of poetry). She wrote plays which were performed in Barcelona in the late 1970s as well. This nonfiction production is a small body of work, and deserves more attention and study.

We would like to thank all of our essayists, and others who have helped us along the way: H. Patsy Boyer, Mary Pollock, and Michael Ugarte.