Mercè Rodoreda

The novels of Rodoreda are the great novels of modern Catalan literature. As is the case with the works of all the writers of her generation, the novels of Rodoreda show the effects of the Spanish Civil War - a war that broke lives, loves, and families, and that led to uprooting (in the form of exile for many), profound unhappiness, and destruction. Often, nonetheless, her writing allows us to catch a glimpse of hope at the end in such symbolic elements as flowers and jewels. Her work is also a reflection on the female condition and love.

The works of Mercè Rodoreda (Barcelona 1908 - Romanyà de la Selva, 1983) traverse the main areas of that modern Western literature that becomes contemporary through the experience of war and, more particularly, of exile. The experience of exile stretches the limits of literary realism, which are in no way sufficient for reading Rodoreda or sharing the memory of the world from which her books and characters speak. Born together with the cinema, as she liked to say to so many of her contemporaries (Pere Quart, Rafael Alberti), Rodoreda was a self-taught writer whose literary education was obtained through popular and patriotic verse, the emblematic works of Verdaguer and Ruyra, the literature of book-stalls, and later on, through journalism, by means of which she would come to know the Catalan literary elites of the nineteen-thirties. Nonetheless, it was during the Spanish Civil War (Aloma, her first valuable novel, was completed in 1938), and above all after the experience of the Second World War and the exile, that she succeeded in giving form to her project, which can be considered as one of the most ambitious in the Catalan literature of the twentieth century and as part of the cultural heritage of contemporary Europe. It is the result of experience and experiment, or in other words, the result of fragmentation.

From popular culture and the broadening and modelling of the literary possibilities of a language without a modern narrative tradition, from the minor or modish novels (the first four that she published) to the construction of a coherent, complex, all-but-complacent and progressively abstract and mythical fresco of the everyday lives of the twentieth century, assaulted by war and by the tenebrae of love - a fresco of mosaics in which her short stories, along with her posthumous novel La mort i la primavera (Death and the Spring), stand out besides her better known books - the works of Mercè Rodoreda should be read, in the words of her friend and mentor in expatriation, Josep Carner, as the most delicate, the most "flavoursome" fruit that her exile has bequeathed to us.

The girl from Sant GervasiWhen Mercè Rodoreda was born on 10th October 1908, Sant Gervasi de Cassoles was a quarter that had been annexed only fifteen years before to the capital (an unruly Barcelona in which anarchists and big-business gangsters were embroiled in a struggle for control of the streets. At that time, Gaudí had half-completed what today is known as the Güell Park (one of the future scenarios of La plaça del Diamant) (The Time of the Doves), the riots of The Tragic Week were just around the corner (1909); and, broadly speaking, cultural life witnessed the battle between the
Modernist project, which would shortly be defeated, and the return to order that would take the polyhedral form of Noucentisme. It was an intense cultural debate that would involve the various layers of Catalan society and that in the years to come would assume a new form both along the pathways that would lead to self-government and through the struggles for social transformation: the most radical ones, those of the popular classes (anarchism, the formation of cultural circles or atheneums, the emergence of self-taught people) and those aiming at the modernisation of the mass media society (newspapers, journals, radio, cinema, the Dictionary by Fabra, novels, publishing-houses, the graphic arts, and photography).

The life and works of Rodoreda are closely linked to cultural and political events. She went to school for only three years between 1915 and 1918, and in that time attended two different institutions. The only child of a housewife and an salesclerk in a gunsmith's shop in the central Ferran Street, she seemed to be destined to married life. Mercè, a solitary girl who, according to her own account in a brief and sketchy memoir, used to write by listening to the conversations of the men working in the garden and then transcribing them, accomplished this destiny at the age of twenty. She was married to the brother of her mother, an emigrant to Buenos Aires who often helped to sustain his sister's domestic economy. Joan Gurguí was seventeen years older than Mercè. One year later, in 1929, a boy was born from this union. Living the life of a married woman awoke in the young mother an increasing desire to be independent, to write, to exercise an occupation. She began to return every day for a while to her mother's house in Manuel Angelon Street, where she would shut herself up to write in the dovecote (a blue dovecote, like the one in La plaça del Diamant). She wrote verse, a comic play of which no trace remains, and a novel. Meanwhile, the Second Republic was proclaimed. And as if she were transported on its very own impulse of liberty (like Aloma, who goes down from Sant Gervasi to the Rambla, where she will see what is new in the city and will buy C. A. Jordana's novel Una mena d'amor, to read it in secret), Rodoreda also decided to step out of that same quarter. She went to the Catalònia publishing-house and paid (actually, her husband paid) for the publication of her first novel, Sóc una dona honrada? (Am I a Decent Woman?) The girl from Sant Gervasi had taken a decisive step. The publication of this book was accompanied by a striking physical transformation, and these two factors make of the young Rodoreda one of the most interesting types of Catalan woman of the nineteen-thirties: upright, daring, unrestrained. She herself began to make her clothes in accordance with the tendencies popularised in magazines and the cinema. She also started to make her mark with contributions to newspapers.

Journalism, revolution, and war

A portrait of the young Rodoreda is to be found in the novel Aquest serà el principi (1986) by Anna Murià, a subtle work on exile as a phenomenon understood as the end of a period and as the beginning of all things: a beginning not just of another period but of everything that the generation of these two writers would be able to achieve, as much in the vital as in the creative sense. It was a generation that had a great deal to do when the war or, as Rodoreda always used to say, the revolution, began. Agustí Bartra and Pere Calders also belonged to this generation, and the book by Murià includes depictions of them. In it, Mercè becomes Berta, a journalist. Between 1933 and 1934 she wrote political articles for newspapers. She also wrote for the catalanist journal Clarisme, which supported the new orthographical and grammatical norms of Pompeu Fabra and was in favour of a thorough debate on the limits of self-government. Together with the director of this publication, Delfí Dalmau, she signed a book entitled Polemica (Polemic) (1934). In that same journal she published a series of very interesting interviews with the literati of the time. In 1934 she also put to the press two more novels, Del que hom no pot fugir (From What You Cannot Hide) and Un dia en la vida d'un home (One Day in the Life of a Man). Doors began to open to her, and in 1935 she started to publish stories in "Una estona amb els infants", the children's section of La Publicitat, where she worked with the artist Tisner. She also published short stories in other acknowledged standard-bearers of Catalan-language press: La Revista, La Veu de Catalunya, Mirador. In 1936 her fourth novel, Crim (Crime) made its appearance.

The war overturned everything. And it awakes in Rodoreda her true narrative self, which appears for the first time in Aloma. This is a novel inspired by her own life, and one that the author would subject to a radical re-writing thirty years later on. The version that we know today (1969) represents an exhaustive pruning of details and characters of the period: the doll created after the free-thinking and scandalous manner of the black singer and dancer Josephine Baker, the witty conversations of the
writer who so resembles Trabal and which fascinate Aloma. And this is, above all, and in a way that is very significant in the understanding of the role of exile in Rodoreda's work, an exercise in anti-nostalgia. Through the self-censoring of her youth the author seems to grasp that the pre-war period contained, as well as the seed of revolution, the irreducible spark of the condemnation of personal liberty and of the destruction of free morality that the case of Rodoreda herself, as a woman, clearly exemplifies as in the censure that she had to endure for her extra-marital love affair with Armand Obiols. Very rarely is a writer so willing to mutilate the written and created memory (the first Aloma had certain virtues that the author annihilated) in order to rescue poignancy.

Exile, writing, and painting
If the re-writing of Aloma in 1968 can be read as one of the fruits of Rodoreda's exile - a fruit from which neither the pulp nor the juice has yet been extracted - it is because it forms part of a literary project, one to which Rodoreda was radically committed. Apparently, the novel that made her famous, La plaça del Diamant (1962), has nothing to do with exile, because Colometa, the protagonist, forms part, justly, of the anonymous mass of people that did not go into exile. But the novel was, on the other hand, the result of the lived intellectual and political experience and the literary apprenticeship that Mercè Rodoreda had undergone step by step: first in France, and afterwards in Geneva, in Switzerland. In France she lived in Bordeaux, Limoges, and Paris, either writing short stories in the time that she had free between making one shirt and another (she earned a living for quite some time as a seamstress), creating poetry to show it to Carner and eventually to win the Floral Games in exile (she became Mestre en Gai Saber in 1949 in Montevideo, which means that she had won three prizes in the Floral Games), or painting when a strange paralysis of her arm prevented her from writing. Armand Obiols was often her sole reader in those years in which, as she herself would say long afterwards to Montserrat Roig, "Writing in Catalan in a foreign country is like wanting flowers to bloom at the North Pole".

In her short stories, and afterwards in her later works - Viatges i flors (Travels and Flowers) (1980), Quanta, quanta guerra... (So Much War) (1980), La mort i la primavera (1986) - there appears an extraordinary assortment of exiles, soldiers, and unprotected people who find expression in a no-man's-land. Rodoreda uses the first person, and monologues in particular, a great deal, but it is perhaps in the short stories that this confessional and discursive formula is more profuse, as the unrestrainable expression of these cast-aside characters who dare to speak. Her three collections were published in 1958 (Vint-i-dos contes [Twenty-Two Short Stories], in 1967 (La meva Cristina i altres contes [My Cristina and Other Stories]) and in 1978 (Semblava de seda i altres contes [It Seemed to Be of Silk and the Other Stories]). From where do the characters speak? From their home country? From where the author lends them a voice: Bordeaux, Paris, Geneva? From no-man's-land, seems the more likely answer.

Exile traverses the whole of Rodoreda's work and gives it a meaning. In this respect, there is no way to avoid thinking of the Rodoreda who in the nineteen-fifties was writing in Paris and immediately afterwards in Geneva, where she settled in 1954 and would remain for twenty years: she was working, at that time, on the first versions of what in due course would be La plaça del Diamant (1962), Jardí vora el mar (Garden by the Sea) (1967), Mirall trencat (1974), La mort i la primavera (1986). The prose of Flors i viatges was written in two stages: the first, Flors, in Geneva, and the second, Viatges, some years later in Romanyà de la Selva, where she also finished Mirall trencat and wrote the whole of Quanta, quanta guerra... (1980), and left all-but finished La mort i la primavera. But in the fifties, Rodoreda decided to carry on with La plaça del Diamant rather than with the latter work. It was a literary option that allowed her to use exile as a territory of reconstruction: the reconstruction of the narrative memory and of the reading public. In the seventies, and after the death of Obiols, she returned once and for all to Catalonia and began on the rescue of her imagination from beyond the frontiers of literary genres. This is the second great period in her creativity, one that culminates in the extraordinary La mort i la primavera.

If Rodoreda had made in the nineteen-fifties a choice that in one way or another can be considered realistic, in the nineteen-eighties she opted for the responsibility that return, as a territory on the other side of the coin of exile, required of her if she wanted to continue to make use of her creative freedom. This was a kind of relationship with her own work that allows us to think of other contemporary literary projects such as that of the Russian writer Nina Berberova (1901-1993), of the Italian Italo Calvino
(1923-1985), or of the Ukrainian-Brazilian Clarice Lispector (1917-1978), both in what they have in common - the transit through literary genres and their transformation - and in what separates them or what they resolve in different ways - the meaning given to exile and its literary expression, or interior exile.

Mercè Rodoreda transformed her first exile by making use, in the personal domain, of the freedom to alter the concept of family and motherhood, and in the creative realm, of a reduction or avoidance of delusions about the past. She celebrated her second exile, at Romanyà, by awarding herself the most radical creative freedom of which she was capable without thoughts of success - a success which she as a writer had so desired and had so fully obtained.
Comments on the author

Criticism

WEB: Mercè Rodoreda on the lletrA website in Catalan
Including more resources and reading suggestions.
http://www.uoc.edu/illetra/noms/mrodoreda/index.html

WEB: Mercè Rodoreda, mirror play
Exhibition devoted to the most widely-read Catalan novelist.
http://www.lletra.cat/expo/mercerodoreda/

WEB: Website of the AELC
Biography, information, works.
http://www.escriptors.cat/autors/rodoredam/pagina.php?id_sec=1803

WEB: Mercè Rodoreda in the City of Barcelona Literary Corpus
Biography, works, links and transcription of articles on this author.

WEB: Rodoreda in EPdLP
Biographical note with three texts in El Poder de La Palabra.
http://www.epdlp.com/escritor.php?id=2221

Miscellaneous

WEB: Mercè Rodoreda Private Foundation
Mercè Rodoreda Private Foundation official website. Including biography, bibliography and publications.
http://www.mercerodoreda.cat/gc/ViewPage.action?siteNodeId=204&languageId=5&contentId=-1

WEB: The Rodoreda Foundation in Barcelona
Information about the Mercè Rodoreda Foundation at the website "Espais escrits. Xarxa del Patrimoni Literari Català" [Written Spaces. The Catalan Literary Heritage Network].

WEB: "Aleph. Lectures contades"
Page of this Televisió de Catalunya programme. It includes a chronology and works.
http://www.tvcatalunya.com/aleph/rodoreda/index.htm

WEB: A highly translated author
A list of works by Mercè Rodoreda translated into a number of languages.
http://www.escriptors.cat/autors/rodoredam/obra.php#1326

WEB: Rodoreda on video
Information on the video Mercè Rodoreda, els miralls interiors and how to buy it.
http://www.ictisp.com/~ge382930/Rodoreda.html
Comments

**WEB: Rodoreda's early novels**
The PhD thesis by Carles Cortés, entitled *Les primeres novel·les de Mercè Rodoreda (1932-1936)*, UA, 1999), can be consulted at the BVJLV.
http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/FichaObra.html?Ref=5033

**WEB: Rodoreda, Obiols and Sales**
"La contribució crítica d'Armand Obiols i de Joan Sales en la narrativa de Mercè Rodoreda", contribution by Carles Cortès to a Symposium of the *Journal of Catalan Studies*.
http://www.uoc.edu/jocs/3/conferencia/ang/cortes2.html

**WEB: Nationalism and Language in the Contemporary Catalan and Irish Short Story**
References in an article by Irene Boada published in the *Journal of Catalan Studies*.
http://www.uoc.edu/jocs/2/articles/boada/index.html