

The most relevant feature of *Aloma* is its strong autobiographical charge. Almost all of the experiences of the main character can be documented in the personal course of the author's life, from *Aloma's* first appearance, when she gets on the train at Sarrià and gets off in Barcelona to buy curtains for her bedroom window, to the loss of the house and garden in Sant Gervasi, which the girl feels as an irreparable disgrace.

Exactly forty-one years ago, Mercè Rodoreda, in an interview that appeared in the *Tele-Estel* (11 November 1966), responded to a question referencing the visible link between the titles of her two novels, *La plaça del Diamant* (*Diamond Square*, 1962) and the then recently published *El carrer de les Camèlies* (*Camellia Street*, 1966), with a touch of irony: "I'm willing to exhaust all of the urban toponyms..." The writer recognized her loyalty to herself and to her stories set in Barcelona. She continued by affirming that this factor would persist in future works, and recalled: "Still, given the years that I have been far from Barcelona, it is probable that a nostalgic fervor has caused me to find great enchantment in those book titles that evoke corners of my city. There's no reason that my next novel (which remains to be written) couldn't be called *El Putxet*, for example." A definition of the scenes in her writing is also transcribed in the pages of the *Barcelona* weekly: "A landscape is a spiritual state, they say. That may be. But we might also say that our spiritual state is what invents the landscape. I, at any rate, am of the second opinion."

In 1976, when the first volume of the complete works was published, the author officially renounced her first four novels: *Sóc una dona honrada* (*I Am an Honorable Woman*, 1932), *Del que hom no pot fugir* (*What You Can't Escape*, 1934), *Un dia en la vida d'un home* (*A Day in the Life of a Man*, 1934) and *Crim* (*Crime*, 1936), recently published by the Mercè Rodoreda Foundation and the Institute of Catalan Studies, edited by Roser Porta (between 2002 and 2006). *Aloma* is, then, the first novel--opera prima--according to Mercè Rodoreda, and in reality her fifth quite ambitious narrative exercise.

Above all, *Aloma* is the blazing of a trail to which the author would remain quite constantly faithful. It marks the beginning of her fiction set in the Catalan capital, Barcelona. The emblematic places strategically chosen do not only delineate a narrated history, but also the interior state of the first well-drawn Rodoredan heroine. The adolescent protagonist's wanderings follow the shape of a Barcelona that announces itineraries or spaces, which would become for the writer an essential literary topography.

In her later work, this literary topography is coupled with the other recurrent features that make up Mercè Rodoreda's fiction. Specifically, we find a feminine protagonist of the twentieth century who has a house and almost always a garden, with symbolic descriptions of the botanical world. Flowers tie together all of the described action and show growth and the perfecting of the protagonist's life cycle. A series of tests imposed by life drive the heroine to maturity. The denouement brings awareness (or recognition) of her own identity. All of these actions always occur within the frame of

the city of Barcelona.

Mercè Rodoreda defined *Aloma* in a television interview (1980) as a minor work, a youthful one, relative to her other writings. Even so, it represents a necessary milestone for understanding the whole of her output. The author wrote it twice: the first time it appeared in April 1938 and the second, revised in Geneva, was published in June 1969.

While we await an edition of *Aloma*'s two variants, we can undertake our discovery of this little-known work. Further incursions are possible and can be carried out because Mercè Rodoreda's oeuvre, at each new reading, offers the possibility of a different and enriched interpretation.

Rodoreda borrowed the name *Aloma* from the female character in Ramon Llull's novel *Blanquerna*. With this detail of great importance, the writer confirmed the historical continuity of her vocation within Catalan letters, to which she would more thoroughly adhere after the Republican repression. Today, all of Mercè Rodoreda's artistic creations have become classics, as Armand Obiols, her companion in exile, had already suggested in 1962. After a "torrential" reading of *La plaça del Diamant* he assured her in a letter that it was a work that could compete in the ranks of Bernat Metge or Ramon Muntaner's prose, and even with some parts of *Tirant lo Blanc*.

Still, *Aloma*'s most relevant feature is its strong autobiographical charge. Almost all of the experiences of the main character can be documented in the personal course of the author's life, from *Aloma*'s first appearance, when she gets on the train at Sarrià and gets off in Barcelona to buy curtains for her bedroom window, to the loss of the house and garden in Sant Gervasi, which the girl feels as an irreparable disgrace.

The novel was published in 1938, at the height of the Civil War, thanks above all to Rodoreda's prestige from winning the Crexells Prize the year before, and with its publication came a revelation, the birth of a best seller. Over the years any record of the discussions of the jury members, who saw a certain daring in some of the novel's passages, have begun to disappear. *Aloma* had a profusion of reviews, even before the book appeared. Some were enthusiastic, recognizing the author as a true discovery; others moralized with touches of recrimination; other, humorous approaches went to the extreme of publishing jokes that used images from the novel, in more than one magazine.

Mercè Rodoreda went into exile with uncontested literary promise, and, despite all of the difficulties that she had to overcome, never left the profession that she esteemed so highly. She affirmed the status of wanderer that had allowed her, from the first, to celebrate the Barcelona where she had been born and that she loved. In this way she participated in an extinct vein of literature, that written from the spirit of a place, its *genius loci*. From the beginning, Mercè Rodoreda wrote through the eyes of a teenager intoxicated with the dreams that paraded feverishly through the streets and squares of her city. With the novel *Aloma*, and almost without realizing it, Rodoreda contributed to the mythologizing of Barcelona.

Translated by Robin Vogelzang