

Mercè Rodoreda

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by Carme Arnau

Mercè Rodoreda (1908-1983) is the leading novelist in Catalan literature and also the most translated – particularly as regards *La plaça del Diamant* (1962). Born in Barcelona, she lived in other European cities, mainly Paris and Geneva, and experienced first-hand two of the main historical events of the twentieth century: the Spanish Civil War, in Catalonia, and the Second World War, in France. The first represented a long period of exile, while the second was a dramatic experience, and together they helped her attain a profound human and literary maturity. In fact her life was very much that of a novelist, and she always said she had lived as one ought to live – dangerously.

Rodoreda belongs very much to the twentieth century, one of war, exile and totalitarian regimes, which are essentially reflected in her work. Her fiction centres on the inner life of her characters, following the line of the European novelists she always admired, from Tolstoy to Proust via Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. It was a line that she updated and made her own.

Of her output before the Civil War, the only work she was satisfied with was *Aloma* (1938), which she rewrote in 1969. It is the portrait of a sensitive, solitary adolescent, a totally convincing figure because the author is a skilful creator of characters. In it she portrayed Barcelona – the setting for almost all her writing – as an attractive city but one with bloodstained streets that heralded the approaching war. In fact, in the prologue to her last novel with its explicit title, *Quanta, quanta guerra...* (1980), Rodoreda points out that her generation was surrounded by blood and death and that it is for this reason that war is always present in her novels. This is the case with her two best known books, *La plaça del Diamant* and *Mirall trencat* (1974). In the latter, a highly complex work, the Civil War brings to an abrupt and tragic end the rich web of characters and plots. It is a picture of upper-middle-class Barcelona, spanning a period that runs from the end of the nineteenth century up to the Civil War. With her experience of life and her knowledge of the human being's most inner crevices – heightened by the subconscious and dreams – the author demonstrates her skilful mastery of the most diverse narrative resources and techniques in order to hold the reader, without ever renouncing the literary rigour that characterises her work.

The imprint of war is also present in *El carrer de les Camèlies* (1967), whose nameless heroine has been obliged to become a prostitute in order to survive in a post-war Barcelona that has lost both its vitality and its identity. Once again, Rodoreda demonstrates the authenticity and also the symbolic quality of her characters, particularly the females who are the protagonists of her novels. On the other hand, war and love, her two main themes, acquire an almost mythical quality with a heroine named Eva in *Quanta, quanta guerra...*, in which she reflects personally and profoundly on the ill-

fated consequences of wars that leave their tragic imprint too on the often magical landscapes they pass through. This is a novel bordering on fantasy, in which the author shows the breadth of her registers and her highly personal imagination, with not only classical but also esoteric undertones.

However, from either side of the mirror, Rodoreda always deals with the human condition, the tragic side of the human condition in contrast with the beauty of the surrounding world, captured by characters of immense sensitivity.

Unusually, Mercè Rodoreda is not only an excellent novelist but also a first-class short story writer, as evidenced by the various collections published, from *Vint-i-dos contes* (1958) to *La meva Cristina i altres contes* (1967), both highly original, followed by the poetic prose of *Viatges i flors* (1980). In all these we find the rigour of an author who is considered a stylist above all else and who said that "A novel is words." In fact, while her writing can be said to contain a substrata of the great European novelists and poets, we can also find in it influences of the Catalan writers whom she considered her models: Verdaguer, Ruyra and Carner.

Translated by Robin Vogelzang