



Dibuix negre IV
(Black Drawing IV),
Antoni Tàpies (2005)
paint and pencil on paper
23,8 x 16,5 cm

Tàpies

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Alone in the city

From Aloma to Mirall trencat

All the characters that describe themselves in the novels of Mercè Rodoreda, published between 1938 and 1974, are women: *Aloma*, *La plaça del Diamant* (Time of the Doves), *El carrer de les Camèlies* (Camellia Street), *Jardí vora el mar* (Garden by the Sea) and *Mirall trencat* (Broken Mirror). That describe themselves or that are described:

in *Jardí vora el mar*, the novel that, according to Rodoreda, imposed itself on her “after years of not writing anything —apart from a few stories— because it requires effort and I had more important things to do, like for example surviving”, the person talking is an old gardener waiting to die among the plants that he has looked after all his life and which hide the secrets of those who, at some time or other, have passed through the garden. Like Armanda, the maid in *Mirall trencat*, he is the repository of the secrets of the families that, one after another, have left their footsteps there; also like Armanda, he is interested in other people’s stories, not as a mere matter of gossip, but as an act of love. Thus, from the old gardener’s narration there eventually emerges the outline of a female character who, despite the lack of clarity, becomes the centre of the picture. She is, to use the title of one of Francesc Trabal’s novels, “a woman

just like the others”, whom the gazes of the other women shroud in an aura of mystery that makes her special, a sort of heroine of a romantic novel or film like the ones the gardener likes to see at the cinema, and yet who does not cease to be a woman alone, like any of the other women that inhabit the universe created by Rodoreda, in the heart of the city. The city is Barcelona and Rosamaria, the “young lady” who spends the summers, after getting married, with her husband and a few friends in a summer residence with a garden next to the sea, a girl from Sant Gervasi who was going to be a dressmaker, but who marries the heir to a well-off family in the district, and begins a typical process of social climbing. Typical, because the social climbing of the main characters is a generally recurring motif in the novels of Rodoreda: from the marriage of convenience of Teresa Godoy, “a beauty who helped her mother on the fish stall but was ready inside to go up a

step or two with that ease that a person often has, especially a woman, wrenched from her surroundings by fate”, to the peculiar form of social climbing that the ending of *Aloma* allows us to glimpse, passing through the descent into hell and the later rebirth of two female characters apparently so different as Cecília Ce, in *El carrer de les Camèlies*, and Natàlia, in *La plaça del Diamant*.

All these women find themselves in the situation of having to break, at a specific moment of their respective existences, with the dreams or ideals of a youth more or less marked by “bovarism”, in order to survive in the city at a time of change, transformation and liquidation of an entire world, the one erased at a stroke with the outcome of the Spanish Civil War and the harsh post-war period that inevitably followed. This liquidation, to which Rodoreda’s characters are witness and mould themselves, survivors rather than heroines, is played out symbolically via the loss —of a house, a garden, a district, or a dovecot, that functions as an objective correlate of the existence of these characters, who react by making a new start with their small lives, borne along by the “destiny” that Rodoreda alludes to and, above all, “without dreams”.

Thus, *Aloma* has to leave the house and garden in Sant Gervasi that holds the memories, the secrets and the experiences of her childhood and adolescence and seal it like a tomb in order to be able to carry on living; Rosamaria swaps, for a suitor with potential, the life-long friend she has shared her childhood, garden and gossip with, apart from hopes and one night of love; Cecília loses the scene of her childhood as a “baby taken in” while she scours the city in search of an ideal father, an image she herself has

been forging from the comments and gossip of the neighbours that gather each afternoon around the dining room table in the house with a small tower and garden in Carrer de les Camèlies; Teresa Goday, on the basis of the rejection of the love child resulting from a fling “on the slopes of Tibidabo” with a married lamplighter who seems like an “angel in rags and tatters”, builds a new life as Senyora Rovira in Carrer de Trafalgar that will catapult her towards the top of the social scale, a place represented symbolically by a house “in the top part of Sant Gervasi, in a half-built street, next to a field, surrounded by a huge garden that, at the back, beyond an esplanade, becomes woodland”.

The romantic “garden of all gardens” turns out to be, literally and figuratively, the typically *Modernista* abandoned garden and, ultimately, the place of death and destruction that symbolises the liquidation of the bourgeois dream that precedes the sudden awakening to the terrifying absurdity of the 20th century.

Natàlia, in *La plaça del Diamant*, is the character that embodies this absurdity. With the “cry from hell” with which, in the middle of the square, she expels the anguish and the pain of the war and the post-war years, inseparable, moreover, from the character of Colometa that she has unconsciously been assuming, and which issues from her mouth in the form of the narrative that forms the entire novel, Natàlia leaves her youth locked in the apartment with a roof and dovecot, which she bars symbolically by deeply marking the name of Colometa with a knife on the closed door of the entrance staircase: another tomb.

The city in the feminine

The characters in the novels of Mercè Rodoreda wander like souls in torment around the streets of the city, before or after making the decision that will lead them to live life “without dreams” which roots them to the ground like the bronze women, planted and upright, that Giacometti sculpts in this same period.

The place that Rodoreda’s women wander around alone is a real, specific city, filtered, none the less, through the gaze and the monologizing voices of the characters (when the narrator’s voice corresponds directly with the “I” that is describing herself, as in the case of Natàlia or Cecília), by the gaze where the all-knowing narrative voice in third person is situated, as occurs in *Aloma* and *Mirall trencat*, or also (and this is the case with *Jardí vora el mar*) by the gaze of an “I” whose innocence and good nature place sideways the different points of view that focus on the character in the vanishing point where all these gazes converge.

This means that the city, despite being perfectly recognisable in all cases, is interiorised and acquires, though the pathetic fallacy, anthropomorphic comparisons and the systematic use of synaesthesia, the human attributes that make it one more character in Rodoreda’s universe, common to all the novels and, therefore, also feminine.

And feminine equals decentralised, marginal, interior, intuitive, emotional and synthetic. Rodoreda’s narrative option —perfectly established already in the last of the novels published in the nineteen thirties, the only one she was to recognise as being by her later— does not turn out to be too far removed from the one used by Joyce

in the process of constructing the rich and hitherto unheard of gaze of the character of Leopold Bloom. The modern Ulysses is an antihero, a nobody who, as has been said, has the greatness of a god despite his greyness, his non-deliberate marginality and his prosaic personal crises, apparently ahistorical but inseparable, if we think about it, from the complexity of the social, political and cultural framework that forms the pattern of the lives of the people after the First World War.

The female characters described in the novels of Rodoreda are also nobodies: tiny insects that get stuck in the spider’s web that so often appears in these books or mere fleeting images reflected in the pieces of a broken mirror. Their gazes become, like those of Bloom, representative of naivety, innocence and impotence in the face of the decisive course of history, which passes implacably and impassively over them; but it also shows up the difficulties that women have, in general, when it comes to gaining access to intellectual and practical training, still a male preserve, that puts obstacles in the way of a pressing need for personal independence that is not easy to achieve and which, when it is obtained, is not always seen as a triumph. But these modern Penelopes, who live in a city and a society in transformation, also ask themselves what is their place in this world and make important decisions with respect to it.

As important as they are everyday and domestic. This is the great challenge that Mercè Rodoreda sets herself in her novels, not only for the fact itself of turning these decisions into material for a novel —she has before her such solid referents as *Solitud* by Víctor Català— but to turn them into the subject

par excellence of her novels. Rodoreda knows what to do and also what she has from the moment she decides to write professionally. She explains it in 1933 in the “polemic” she maintains with the editor of the magazine *Clarisme*, Delfi Dalmau, over the publication of her first novel, later disowned, *Sóc una dona honrada?* (Am I an Honest Woman?). The way to becoming a professional writer passes via the novel, and Rodoreda wants to write modern novels, something that leads her to psychologism, without falling into the sentimentality trap that novels based on the exploration of a specific personality or case run the risk of falling into. The debate about the novel has been in the pages of the Catalan newspapers for years and, although behind this debate there is an argument about the concept of culture and its concretion in political terms, one cannot neglect the strict reflection about the genre, literally speaking, that it throws up.

Mercè Rodoreda, therefore, knows how to employ some useful narrative models, from both Catalan literature —the novels of Miquel Llor, Carles Soldevila, C.A. Jordana, Francesc Trabal, M. Teresa Vernet— and contemporary foreign literature, especially English-language, as in the case of the experiments by Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence, and many others. All of them, in the interwar years, are looking for the way of reflecting, through literature and from within the realist genre par excellence, the crisis of bourgeois civilisation, the foundations and the values of the West, which, moreover, at the time Rodoreda wrote the main body of her work, have already been placed in quarantine.

Penelope on the streets of the city

The foundations of Western civilisation are combined, in Rodoreda’s fiction as a whole, in the figure of Penelope: the woman submissive and subjected to man, patient, sacrificing, a guarantee of the continuity of the species and a direct transmitter of the values —family, work, tradition— on which this civilisation is built. Her natural place is in the enclosure of the family, keeping house and bringing up the children. Molly Bloom, to use the female correlate of the modern Ulysses, completely contravenes this model, she is the figure of Penelope in negative: she works outside the home, she looks to satisfy her sexuality, if necessary outside matrimony, and turns the great novel with which, literally speaking, the 20th century in Europe begins into an affirmation of the importance of the little things in human existence.

Also contravening it, from a point of view subtler and certainly closer to Rodoreda’s sensibilities, is *Mrs. Dalloway*, the character who becomes the point of convergence and tension of the different ideological and moral discourses that form part of the construction of the character of the people in Europe after the First World War, although at the end of the novel the main character continues to appear before the eyes of those whose observe her as the clearest representation of the established values. It is clear that Clarissa Dalloway represents a social class from which all of Rodoreda’s heroines are far removed, with the exception perhaps of Teresa Valldaura when she reaches the high point of her ascent, but she shares with all of them the symbolic category that she is given by the construction of the novel based on the crossing of different lives and parallel stories in the same place and in shared time.

Aloma is a good-for-nothing girl from Sant Gervasi, an orphan, who depends on the goodwill of her brother, the heir to the family, to continue living under the family roof and who becomes, due to her innate curiosity and the ability to look at the reality surrounding her, a mirror that reproduces ad infinitum a story that belongs to everyone because, in the course of the story, they all repeat it, from the cats to the apparently well-matched couples. So-called amorous relationships are relationships of power in which on only a very few occasions does the woman have a chance of winning; and this only occurs when the woman is able to leave her feelings to one side, one of the most solid and most effective cultural constructs, in the modern age, of guaranteeing the social order.

Thus, although the very name Aloma may signify a burden of submission, domesticity and fidelity as heavy as Penelope, the main character in the novel manages to neutralise its influence after experiencing in person the inequality on which any "love" affair understood in conventional terms is based. The triangle that functions in the home between her brother Joan, her sister-in-law Anna and Coral, a friend of both of them, is not so different from the one she herself is part of with Robert, Anna's brother who returns from America, and Violeta, the femme fatale who, as they say, has clouded his judgement; but, beside these more or less stereotyped triangles, there are other subtler ones, more closely linked to jealousy: the husband who goes right off the wife he seemed to be hopelessly in love with when she has a baby; the young husband who cannot stand the idea of being a father and leaves his wife, a teenager, even before she has the baby; the husband who exerts control over a

financially and socially defenceless wife based on physical and psychological mistreatment.

The contrast to all this lies in the ability of women to approach love affairs in terms of interest, just as Aloma's neighbour does, who, while showing off the linen to her friends, is thinking of the freedom that she is about to achieve and which as a girl she doesn't have; or as Coral does, the vamp who lives from sucking the blood and the money of the men she seduces without the slightest sense of involvement, either emotional or moral. Therefore when Aloma makes the decision to go it alone with the pregnancy with which, in accordance with the stereotypes of romantic sentimental literature, her relationship with her brother-in-law ends, this decision is a bold departure, but, above all, it takes place in a historical context that doubtlessly makes it possible: during the Republic, in an age of the modernisation of customs, of greater freedom of movement and, most importantly, of thinking.

Aloma's decision is that of so many other Alomas who roam the city streets and find themselves in the situation of having to leave their childhood home, not to automatically form another family group destined also to guarantee the solidity and the continuity of the established social structure, but to begin a new way of life, beyond all the clichés. All of them: that of the femme fatale, the kept woman, the dancer in a theatre on the Paral·lel, or that of the "intellectual".

Aloma is a simple, homely and not very naughty character, different from other Penelopes due to the discomfort produced in her by gossip as a form of domestic sociability and by the almost subconscious need to get away from it

all, to breathe. This discomfort results in a form of constant journeys to Barcelona that enable her to become aware of the sound and the movement of the modern city and pave the way for her last definitive journey to the adult world, the real world, represented by “the city lit up in a great quivering of little lights” that Aloma sees, before going, from the attic of the house in Sant Gervasi, a place full of symbolic content, as it is the scene of the suicide of another brother of hers, which is where she leaves, perhaps as an offering, the novel she is carrying in her hands, before sealing the tomb of her own youth. The decision is made: life must go on. And this means assuming the loneliness and the imminent motherhood in a way that clashes with conventional morality and with the socially accepted image of woman. Alone, but aware of the existence of other cases like hers, Aloma does not hesitate to blend in with the lights and shadows of the city: “The streets were still. From a wall hung a rose bush with no roses. In the distance, there was the dull sound of the city; girls who were facing up to life, without dreams. (...) And Aloma got lost down there below, like a shadow, in the night that accompanied her”.

Life goes on in the streets

It was to be another twenty-five years before the first Penelope that Rodoreda brings out of the domestic enclosure to leave her alone, with all the virtualities open, in the middle of the city, was joined by another novel. In 1962, from exile in Geneva, Mercè Rodoreda once more addressed the readers she had left from the thirties and a new generation of readers born in the post-war years through the voice of another Penelope,

named Natàlia, born in Gràcia, not too far from Aloma’s Sant Gervasi.

The small problems of Natàlia, an only child, who has lost her mother, with an absent remarried father, who works behind the counter in a cake shop and has a fiancé, begin in the Plaça del Diamant, on Midsummer’s Night, when she meets Quimet, the man who, in less than a year, she will marry. A carpenter with his own business, Natàlia marries him despite —or perhaps because of— the moral harassment he subjects her to from the very moment he sets eyes on her: he changes her name —Natàlia stops being Natàlia and becomes Colometa— and he becomes jealous of her, he spies on her while she is serving in the shop, he makes her give up her job, he tells her she does nothing right, he invents illnesses so that she will pay him more attention, especially after she gets pregnant, and he turns the home into a dovecot and life into that sort of martyrdom which, out of ignorance or through the fear of ending up destitute, so many women have resigned themselves to confusing with married life. As one of the many set phrases that appear in the novel says, “you enter matrimony on a path of roses and you leave it on a path full of thorns”. Therefore it can be said that the first part of Natàlia’s story is also one like many others, made of the self-sacrifices that any girl had to make before the war, brought up to become a housewife, a good wife and mother, just as her mother-in-law and husband remind her, as well as the proverbs, set phrases and *double entendres* of colloquial language, which is, as has been said, the great protagonist of *La plaça del Diamant*.

But if the process of turning a young girl into a resigned Penelope is painful, the opposite process is too, which begins,

gradually but unstoppably, after the proclamation of the Republic: "it was with April and closed flowers that my little headaches started becoming big headaches". The big headaches are those associated with the course of history, although it is the course of this history that, paradoxically, the ability to explain naively and lucidly her existence as Colometa shut up in a dovecot that the need to work outside the home forces her to leave, because "business was down a little in the shop" and "Quimet said (...) the rich were messing around with the republic".

From that moment onwards, the streets become the protagonists of Natàlia's story, together with the references, ever more obsessive, to doves. Natàlia's revolution against the doves began with a visit from Mateu, who makes her think "about things that I thought I understood and which I didn't really understand... or I was learning things that I was just beginning to know...", a sort of "epiphany", which becomes the turning point of the novel, with the decision to do away with the "village of doves" and the assertion that "everything Quimet said to me went in one ear and out the other as if, between my ears, a hole had just appeared", and which coincides with the other revolution, the important and, for that reason, unnamed one.

During the war, it is Quimet who goes round the streets, becoming a militiaman. He and his companions go off to war because, says Mateu, "if we lose they'll wipe us off the map". When the bombings start, in the streets "all the lights were blue. It looked like the land of the wizards and was pretty". But it starts to be hard for Natàlia to cross the High Street. Her anguish intensifies when she is laid off and she finds herself forced to leave her son in a children's camp.

Meanwhile, the news arrives of Quimet's death and it was the turn of the young boys to be called up: "Old and young, all off to the war, and the war sucked them up and brought death to them. (...) And all of them were becoming like the rats in the rat trap". And finally, the Diaspora.

Natàlia now only leaves the house to look for work, and just crossing the High Street is too much for her. The old bosses tell her that they don't want any dealings with reds, and when she tries to cross again, she falls to the ground "lying like a sack". From this moment on, with nothing to eat and with two children to maintain, Natàlia reaches the end of the journey to hell with the idea of killing the children and committing suicide with hydrochloric acid solution. While she is gathering the strength to do it, "I went out, what to do I don't know. Just to go out. The trams were running not with glass in the windows, with mosquito grille. The people were badly dressed. All was very tired, still, from the great illness". As in dreams, and dressed in mourning, she who had had "a white dress to put on and could walk on the streets..." automatically follows another woman in mourning who leads her to a church full of people where Natàlia feels like the repository of everyone's pain and from where she escapes pursued by the vision of blood: "and I ran home and everyone was dead. Dead those who had been killed and those who had been left alive, who seemed also to be dead, living as if they had been killed".

From this journey, the Penelope in Natàlia emerges with her soul torn apart. She has reached the very edge of the abyss pushed by the force with which history acts on the individual, and this leaves an indelible mark that nothing or nobody will be able to erase. Therefore, from

the moment that Natàlia marries the grocer —another victim of the war and the *deus ex machina* that prevents the final tragedy, because modern Penelopes cannot even allow themselves tragedy—and goes to live on the other side of the High Street, she is paralysed every time she tries to step off the kerb and return to her previous world. The modern Penelope has had to become tough, with a heart of ice, to be able to survive and is reduced to the condition of living death, suffering from an agoraphobia that Natàlia explains with the recurring image of the worms in the wood, becoming for the others, when she begins to go out, the “lady of the doves”, who explains to everyone who wishes to listen, when she spends the afternoons in the parks, that she had had a beautiful dovecot with eighty doves destroyed by a bombing raid. This Natàlia who hides her true story and eventually idealises her dead husband, does not find the voice with which she narrates, like a confession, her whole existence as Colometa until, after many years, she is able to face up to the past and bury it. For the last word of this novel to be the adjective *contents* (content), instead of *feliços* (happy) that Quimet had used at another time in the story, referring to the doves that Natàlia sees soaking themselves in the puddles of water, is only possible after once more walking the streets that had become her own private hell amid the collective hell. Most significantly, the exact scene of the catharsis, the hole in the funnel where Natàlia lets out the “cry from hell” with which she expels “a beetle of saliva”, her very “youth that fled with a cry that I didn’t know exactly what it was”, is the Plaça del Diamant, where the character of Colometa was born and where Natàlia restores it in order to recover her own identity and voice.

Penelope in search of a lost world

Cecília, the girl in *El carrer de les Camèlies*, is, during the war, a teenager who “cheers up seeing the old people scared” and who likes to “go down the middle of the street when the sirens sound”. Abandoned in front of the entrance to a house in Sant Gervasi when she was just a baby, picked up by a security guard and adopted by a couple already old and childless, Cecília is certainly the most emblematic literary representation of the solitude of the individual in the modern world, characterised by violence and absurdity, by precariousness and the lack of points of reference.

In this respect, the woman who walks, who roams the streets of a city she finds hostile because she has an indomitable spirit, rootless and, in a certain sense, dangerously free, represents the depersonalised individual, lacking identity, that moreover is not content with surviving in abject poverty. It is precisely for this reason that Cecília becomes such a disconcerting character because her rebellion is not due to her will but to her instinct, and her particular journey to hell goes no further than the edges of the city, of what is known, apparently controlled and civilized. The peculiar heart of darkness that Cecília finds herself having to explore is in the very core of the bourgeois city, the right-hand side of the Barcelona Eixample, the scene of inexcusable evil, a mechanism perfectly calibrated to destroy the person with no particular aim, at random, for the pure and simple pleasure of exerting a certain power.

Nor does Rodoreda use important-sounding words, when it comes to exploring this other major theme of contemporary literature. Through a

character essentially “innocent”, brought up outside the great ideological constructs and who seems completely indifferent to history, in a microcosm condemned to immediate extinction, but which still rests on the pillars of a petty-bourgeois society symbolised by the house with a garden in Sant Gervasi, the writer constructs the negative of the stereotyped image of the bourgeois city. To do it, she uses the point of view of Cecília, a female type that does not correspond at all to the Penelopes of the previous novels, shut up at home, subjected to the authority of the husband, but to Maria-Cinta, the “kept woman” who lives, like Coral in *Aloma*, in an apartment in Passeig de Gràcia furnished by a friend who takes her to the Liceu “like a queen”.

Before getting there though, fully mature, and after finding, at the end of a long and painful journey, the same loneliness as Aloma and Natàlia, Cecília, without thinking about it too much, changes the scenes of a more or less “happy” childhood for a marginal life in the shanty towns, first with Eusebi—who eventually disappears in the innards of the Francoist city—and then with Andrés, a plasterer who dies of tuberculosis; nor will she hesitate to change the exploitation involved in the work of sewing blouses at piece rate for another type of prostitution, not as dignified and perhaps more profitable, on the Rambla. Now away from the world of the shanty towns, she will eventually change the Kafka-esque relationship with Cosme, the innkeeper from Gràcia, for the no less claustrophobic, degrading and destructive relationship in the apartment in Carrer Mallorca, which changes her black dress for a pink doll’s dress that everybody feels like fondling. Even the idealised “nice gentleman” from the café with the fern leaves, another *deus ex*

machina that saves Cecília in extremis from alienation and death, and who, moreover, gives her the material means and the sufficient presence of mind to begin a life alone, mirrored in the image of Maria-Cinta, yes, but with the necessary corrections to avoid “dying in hospital” and end up “badly buried”. Above all one, eliminating sentimentality. Seeing as she has to live, and “she had to live until she died”, Cecília rids herself of everything that may tie her sentimentally—which means subjecting herself—to the world of conventions, hypocrisy, emotional blackmail. Therefore she escapes, time and again, in search of the ideal love of a father unknown and also idealised that she will not find until the end of a winding road that will take her back right to the start of her story as a child taken in: the only true love is that of the security guard who found her, who left “that little kitten of a girl” in front of the doorway of the “most suitable” family, and who gave her a name. It is the disinterested love that she does not find even in the promises of marriage of the Majorcan sailor who keeps her locked for three days in a hotel room, nor in the “good intentions”, also related with marriage, of the innkeeper who locks her in a prison of jealousy and authoritarianism, just as—and the only difference are the “intentions”—the lover in Carrer Mallorca does. Without forgetting the emotional blackmail of the old general in the café on the Rambla de Catalunya, or the disgust produced in Cecília by the submission of Paulina, her confidant and go-between, to the man from Tarragona, going so far as to make her betray the trust of a woman friend and confuse her role as lover with that of submissive wife.

Cecília feels nauseous or is sick in the light of these last episodes, in the same way that she resolves her first “amorous” relationships with abortions and miscarriages. It is not until after the last and definitive abortion, that will take her to death’s doorway, and until after the nausea brought on by the mere sight of the “nice gentleman” in the café with the fern leaves, her “last love”, that Cecília is able to recognise the true father in the three people that intervened directly in her adoption. Where does that leave, then, the images of the father that make the society as represented by the Liceu, a symbol, Cecília’s childhood and teenage obsession? When finally a Maria-Cinta risen from the dead can enter there “like a queen”, she realises that “inside there was nothing that was mine, and outside there were the streets and the air”.

Cecília’s streets are not those of Aloma, nor are they those of Natàlia, despite the fact that very often they coincide and that all three characters, at one time or another, could perfectly and anonymously cross paths in them. Cecília’s streets are those of the district of Gràcia and El Guinardó; those that take her to El Tibidabo and the mountain of El Carmel; they are those of the Eixample, Carrer Mallorca, Passeig de Gràcia and, above all, the Rambla de Catalunya, with the lime trees; they are also the winding streets of the district of Sant Pere and La Ribera, with Carrer Vermell as a point of reference, next to the railings of the Ciutadella Park or the narrow streets of La Barceloneta. Cecília, however, will eventually find her refuge in La Bonanova, in an abandoned *Modernista* house that, little by little, becomes her lonely woman’s world, a hybrid between the lost world of the Carrer de les Camèlies and her new world.

A dead rat in the abandoned garden

Of the stock of the Corals, Cecília nevertheless shares some important traits with Aloma and Natàlia: the dignity recovered with the second birth of all three characters and the will to lay the foundations of a new existence “without dreams” from the awareness that the painful experience of loss awakens in them.

Above all, however, she shares with Teresa, from *Mirall trencat*, the space of the house, one of the main *leitmotiven* in Rodoreda’s fiction around which all the other Penelopes also revolve: Aloma passes by “the house of all houses” on her journeys between Barcelona and Sant Gervasi, and Natàlia knows of its existence from the story that Julieta tells of her night of love during the war in “a requisitioned house”. The totalising nature of *Mirall trencat* —which makes it possible to read this novel, as Maria Campillo and Marina Gustà explain, as a commentary on literature itself— affects all the novels published up to then by Rodoreda, which find a reflection —at times direct, but more often distorted— in her first mature work that, significantly, Rodoreda heads with a theoretical text. Therefore it does not seem rash to see the Valldaura family house as the macrocosm that integrates the different microcosms that make up Rodoreda’s fiction, which, for their part, are mutually mirrored and weave a web of spatial, temporal, human, thematic and symbolic relationships that allow the author to transcend all anecdote.

Thus, Teresa Goday who, like Aloma, is a single mother (although the former is a product of the nineteenth-century novelette and the latter corresponds to the psychologism of the interwar novel), shares with Cecília the construction

of a new life centring on the house understood as a place of life and at the same time of death, in accordance with the fin de siècle symbol of the abandoned garden, so prominent in the literary and pictorial tradition of the turn of the century.

The “garden of all gardens” represents, therefore, a synthesis of opposites: life/death, peace/war, beauty/decomposition, a place not of this world, a sort of limbo. Both Teresa and Cecília take possession of it immediately after the house has been witness to the collapse of a world, the aristocratic, when Teresa goes to live there, and the bourgeois, when Cecília moves in; and, in both cases, it becomes the tomb of the love affairs of the main characters, and symbolises the space of the memory.

Unlike Mercè Rodoreda’s other novels, in *Mirall trencat* almost all the action takes place in the grounds of the house and the garden, and it is reality which inevitably bursts in on the life of a family and a house that keep up a peculiar struggle with the passage of time. The characters arrive there with all their stories and all their memories in tow, secrets included, closely related to certain objects that become, in the novel’s tangle of relationships, symbols that take on their own narrative life: the black-lacquered Japanese wardrobe linked to Teresa’s first husband; the brooch in the form of a bunch of green gems that represents the character’s social elevation, the cut-glass cup, green and pink, that brings Salvador Valldaura’s Viennese history into the world of the house; the lilac dominoes, the black mask and the fan with an apple painted on that Teresa is holding the night she seduces the man who is to be her second husband; the tie clip with the grey pearl that Teresa sees the jeweller

Begú wearing, which she presents to Valldaura and he doesn’t wear, and which her lover the notary Riera ends up wearing, among so many other objects that enter the world of the house.

Moreover, reality filters into this closed world through outside characters that give it gestures, ways of speaking, diverse personal circumstances and social extractions. This is the case with Jesús Masdeu, the unacknowledged son of Teresa, a shy boy who would like to be an artist and will get no further than being a picture card painter and who, during the war, is the head of the militia charged with confiscating the house; his presence in the house is the echo of Teresa’s popular roots. The boy Masdeu looks at the red fishes that Teresa has put in the fountain of the house’s vestibule, just as he notices the lion’s head from where the bell chain hangs and which is reminiscent of the bell in Cecília’s house.

The red fishes are a badge of the new rich in Rodoreda’s work: Senyor Bellom, in *Jardí vora el mar*, and one of Cecília’s clients, has them installed on the bed head, and the owners of the house where Natàlia works also have them in the garden fountain. Furthermore, with Eulàlia, the character who makes the marriage of Teresa to Valldaura possible, the notes of society enter the house—weddings, funerals and various liaisons—and the news of social unrest. Eulàlia will end up in Paris, like Sofia Valldaura, her step-daughter and the only member of the family who constantly goes out of the enclosure of the house: first the games of tennis with friends, then shopping, journeys and burials, and finally exile.

After news of the death of the jeweller of the bunch of gems, “Teresa felt that time had just taken a leap”. Time gets

the better of the occupants of the house, who are not immune to outside reality: roadworks are done in the district, new streets are laid and offices and modern shops are built, the car replaces the horse and carriage, and Teresa Valldaura, a fat, ill grandmother, goes back to speaking like she did as a young woman, typical of the more working-class Barcelona, whose roofs Jesús Masdeu never tires of painting and to which Ramon will return, one of Sofia's sons, married to a dressmaker when he returns from South American exile to the grey, sad, starving and wretched Barcelona of the post-war years, the same city reflected by the shacks of *El carrer de les Camèlies* or the streets teeming with the poor and war-wounded in *La plaça del Diamant*.

This is where the fast-moving, indifferent Barcelona will end up, passing before the eyes of the old notary Riera, when he goes to visit Teresa for the last time; a city that already seems strange to Eulàlia on a quick visit before the war: "She had come to Barcelona on a kind of sentimental journey and had the impression that she would leave it devastated if she didn't find the way to react in time. The Passeig de Gràcia was not her Passeig de Gràcia. Her friends had all disappeared. Everything had changed without really changing at all. On days like this she clung to memories as if her life depended on it: what was left of her life..."

After the war, everything really does change. The house is demolished and the garden flattened, in order to build apartment blocks that leave no trace of it. With the destruction of the house, carried out on Sofia's orders, a world still indebted to romantic values is wiped out. And Sofia is the only character in Rodoreda's universe that can make this decision, because she is the only

one capable of distancing herself sentimentally from the past. She is the great survivor of this story, because she has learnt to control her own emotions and those of others, because she has not hesitated to smash the last testimonies of her hopes as a young woman —to which she has never yielded— once she takes control of her life and of the fortune inherited.

Like the vague Rosamaria in *Jardí vora el mar*, Sofia rejects, discreetly but without hesitation, the embrace that Armanda, the repository of this whole world, wants to give her; at the end of the novel, she is reduced to nothing, like the empty shell of the hazelnut that Eladi Farriols crushes, like the pearl that breaks off the old notary Riera's tie clip, like the head of the master of the doll's house that Ramon takes from the house, like the marble gravestone with the name of Maria that ends up on the floor of the washhouse of one of the removal men, or like the rosebush cuttings that Armanda goes to look for and which in the end are dry: a world that is symbolised by the dead rat, with its head covered in green flies, that the demolition men discover inside the hollowed-out trunk of a chestnut tree. Without turning round, Penelope "gets lost down the streets" ||