

Northeastern Modern Languages Association Conference

University of Buffalo, April 2008

Writing from Memory

I began to write in Catalan relatively late and while living in a foreign country, two strikes against any author. If I didn't start sooner it was, in part, because of the demands of an academic career, and in part because I lacked the confidence to write. Till that point, I hadn't understood that creation is discovery and that when you embark on it you rarely have the entire novel mapped out in your mind, as I expected.

The choice of language was motivated by obvious enough reasons: the setting (Barcelona) and the characters and Catalan voices from my childhood and adolescence. But there was a further, semi-subconscious incentive; I said once in an interview that my native language has been stolen from me twice: first by Franco, who banned its public use throughout his nearly 40 years in power, and then by my cultural exile in the US, where Catalan is known, at best, as a "dialect," or even, as a lady from Puerto Rico told me once, "the lower class accent."

Journalists and readers alike are intrigued by my unusual position as a Catalan author in the US. As, in general, my novels are set against a richly textured socio-historical background, they wonder about the difficulties of conducting research at a distance. Of course I travel to Barcelona almost every year, sometimes twice, often with the assistance of grants, I plunder its used book stores, particularly one that specializes in

the city itself, I visit the locales and drink in the bars I write about, and I also make, as you may imagine, extensive use of the internet to purchase books and view old photographs of the areas I'm interested in—mostly, but not exclusively, the old city.

Those who are more skeptical question, for good reason, my ability to recreate a place about which I currently have limited cultural references. This would pose a major obstacle if I wrote about the present: I have not experienced the exodus to the suburbs caused by the sky-rocketing cost of housing, or the effects of immigration in Barcelona, other than as a tourist; but it's almost irrelevant when you write about the past. We must remember that a contemporary German author, whose name escapes me, portrays the American West very convincingly without ever having set foot in it. I don't like to press his case, however, since I think that it's an exception rather than the rule. But the fact that much memorable fiction and poetry have been written in exile makes a strong argument.

In what respects is distance a handicap to the novelist? Certainly in practical, extra literary ways. You feel as isolated as a medieval scribe in your English-speaking world, cut off from most gatherings and literary events that afford social and intellectual interaction with fellow writers. I receive brochures and calendars of activities from the Ateneu—an old cultural society in Barcelona, of which I'm a paying but hardly ever attending member—and long to be a part of at least some of the action. For this reason, I treasure opportunities like this one, here at the University of Buffalo, that allow me to keep in touch with the field, and do sometimes travel to the Instituto Cervantes in NY, or to take part in the Catalan Week hosted annually in the city, or to the celebration of Book Day, a Catalan tradition that has become international of late, in Washington DC on April 23, among other places. Thanks to a generous legacy left to my department at Hood, I can

also invite a major writer every few years to give a presentation to the students and the community. So far, we have been fortunate to have Carme Riera and Anna Maria Moix, who writes in Spanish, among us. Still, undoubtedly I'd know more authors in person and would be better acquainted with the literary scene if I lived in Barcelona. I'd also be able to sustain a more visible presence in the media—a requirement for every contemporary writer in Spain. As it is, when I publish a novel in Catalan I go to Barcelona to take part in promotional activities—book presentations, radio and newspaper interviews, lunches with the press--compressed in two or three rather exhausting days. Once I even traveled to a smaller town, Tarrassa, to discuss *El Carrer dels Tres LLits* with a forum of readers at the city's Public Library.

But there are also certain advantages, perhaps less obvious, to the condition of the writer in exile. First of all, publishers, the media, and, to some extent, the Catalan political establishment, single you out as a curiosity. You're writing in an "alien environment," linguistically speaking, *fent país*—making the country grow—as the Catalans like to say, even from thousands of miles away. You're a good citizen, working on behalf of your always threatened minority language, a committed artist. Journalists can ask you questions they can't ask anybody else, about American culture and values, about life in a small American town. I've given three interviews for special series on Spaniards living abroad, one in *La Vanguardia* and two for Catalan radio stations.

As for the benefits to the writing itself, I have to digress for a moment. I'm going to read a page from a chapter entitled "Voyeurs" from my first novel, *Once Remembered Twice Lived*. In it, two university students, Rosalía and Francesca, playfully argue that life is more intriguing and poignant when it's observed and recreated than when it is

lived—hence the both Shakespearean and Calderonian conceit that life is a stage; they suggest that, for some reason, life is more interesting the second time around. Intertwined with the dialogue there are references to Rosalia’s two-year old nephew’s moves around the apartment:

“Why does the existence of a watcher make things magic?”

“Because the watcher, the hidden camera, the eye, has an enlarged view of them, a privileged perspective. In the morning, as you’re getting into your jeans and your T-shirt all you can see is a fragment of your leg, and then three or four fingers holding a white or blue or red piece of cotton, and then a foot... ..What’s ‘magic,’ as you say, is the distance that enables the watcher to see all of you getting into complete garments, not just a sleeve, or a pocket, or a zipper. We’re condemned to see ourselves in fragments, to live our lives in fragments. The fragmented view is the familiar view. When we watch or are watched from a distance, the familiar becomes strange and intriguing, the ordinary, odd... ..For the watcher there’s also the thrill of snooping into something that was not meant to be seen, of being where you’re not supposed to be.”

“But movies and books are meant to be seen and read.”

“By the author and the producers, but not by the characters. Anna Karenina doesn’t know how many people have been in her boudoir. Although it may be subconscious, you enjoy the feeling of violating her privacy.”

If we apply this principle to the novel, we will agree that literary creation is always re-creation, re-play, re-membrance. Fiction is, so to speak, a double take of reality. This lapse, no matter how brief--a few seconds--or how lengthy--a few decades--that enables the writer to re-construct her material is called distance: either distance in

time, in which case memory becomes the main tool--as a Spanish novelist of my generation, Juan Marsé, once said, "You're worth as much as you can remember"--or distance in space. When you're writing about home away from home, it's the interplay of both, distance in time and distance in space, that determines the point of view in your work. In Rosalia's and Francesca's discussion, only "the watcher, the hidden camera, the eye" has an enlarged view, what Francesca calls a "privileged perspective." The common thread that runs through the watcher, the hidden camera, and the eye is distance. As she implies toward the end, we need to distance ourselves from things in order to bring them close because when we are immersed in them, the trees won't let us see the forest.

Exile is the kind of distance that, in some ways, gives you a more critical perspective. By living in an adoptive culture, you develop a greater awareness of the proclivities of your native one, a greater irony—which is yet another kind of distance—toward its assumptions and compulsions. Not till I moved to the US did I fully realize how bright the Mediterranean light can be, how verbal the Catalans are, how playful our language and art seem to the fresh eye, how much we worship food and its intestinal by-products insofar as they translate into eschatological jokes, how much we, consciously or not, strive for a balance between work ethics and pleasure, how much we congratulate and celebrate ourselves, a la Walt Whitman, much like Americans do or any big or small—very small—power does.

Exile also makes the exercise of memory doubly essential, since you're recreating not only the past but also the far away. Your literary material is then and there. I'd argue that it is absence that makes places meaningful, that you're in them more when you're not there. Because it is the haze of memory, its subjectivity, its very unreliability, that lies at

the core of fiction, from Marsé to Monserrat Roig, to Eduardo Mendoza, and at the heart of autobiography. It is the transformative power of memory, its individual appropriation of reality that produces art.

I read my first novel in Catalan when I was already living in the US but spending the long academic summers in Vilanova, 30 miles south of Barcelona. It was, wouldn't you know it, Mercè Rodoreda's *La Plaça del Diamant* (The Time of the Doves, translated by Alex Rosenthal). Our most international novel, the most emblematic, translated into numerous languages, praised by García Márquez as the most beautiful Spanish novel written after the Civil War, and, arguably, the one with the greatest evocative power, was, of course, written in exile. What prompted Rodoreda to delve so deeply into memory and to find Colometa's unforgettable voice? What prompted her to conjure up so vividly and movingly the scenarios of the Barcelona left behind?

Places, voices, and people, have a resistance to go away. They will not be silenced. They will assert themselves and secure their survival through the imagination of the artist and the memory of the writer, who act as mediums. Colometa and *la plaça del Diamant* pestered Rodoreda from the distance and, by the exorcism that is writing, she laid them down to rest. Shortly after I came to the US, I began having recurring dreams of Barcelona, which have mostly vanished since I wrote them down in *Once Remembered*. You want to appease the ghosts, but you miss them when they're gone.

The impact *La Plaça del Diamant* had on me, from the little corner of my own exile, was indescribable. I had grown up under Franco's dictatorship and, although Catalan was my mother tongue and the one I spoke at home, my generation was denied the opportunity to study it in school, so I remained semi-illiterate in it. Even before I

came to America, my English was better than my Catalan; the move to the US might easily have closed the lid on the coffin. But once I saw what Catalan could do, I couldn't let it go. It was then that I felt, stronger than before, a sense of rebellion and rage, but also of hope. Rodoreda's novel and others that I read afterwards spurred me to recover the stolen language. Furthermore, I am convinced that my style, which Carme Riera has called impressionistic and which is a crucial aspect of my work, stems partly from the socio-linguistic vacuum from which it emerged.

I don't know if I would have written had I stayed in Barcelona. Perhaps if I was immersed in present day the Barcelona I'd be writing about the plight of immigrants in the old city where I grew up. But I know that, without second guessing the past, distance has given me the incentive, the tools, and the obsessions that I need to write.