

## **My Dear, These Things are Life: a Hundred Years of Mercè Rodoreda**

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Rodoreda was born in Barcelona in 1908, according to some sources, or 1909, according to others. She wrote her first novel, *Aloma*, when she was seventeen, and took it to a publisher who read it and then advised her to go back to her womanly business.

Rodoreda, who was a seamstress by trade, is reported to have said, “I’ll write novels that will make God tremble.” And so she did: five novels and numerous short stories between 1932 and 1937 and after a long parenthesis that starts with the Civil War, she produces her best works between 1957 and her death: *La Plaça del Diamant*, 1962; *El Carrer de les Camèlies* (Camelia Street), 1966; *Mirall trencat* (Broken Mirror, 1974); and *La mort i la primavera* (Death and Spring), published posthumously in 1986.

Barcelona is located in the region known as Catalonia in the northeastern tip of Spain. Like many Catalans of her generation, Rodoreda wrote in her native language, Catalan. As many of you know Catalan has several dialects or varieties and a literary history that goes back to the Middle Ages. But in 1936 Spain was torn apart by a Civil War that started with a military coup and ended in 1939 with a military dictatorship under the rule of Francisco Franco. Although Franco himself came from Galicia, another region that has its own language and cultural tradition, he banned the publication of books in Catalan, suppressed Catalan newspapers and, for a while, prohibited the use of Catalan in public places. Offices and stores were hung with signs saying “Don’t bark, speak the language of the Spanish empire.” And so, Rodoreda, like many other intellectuals and political

refugees, fled to France and, eventually, to Geneva, Switzerland. She came back in the mid seventies, when the power of the dictatorship was waning in anticipation of Franco's death in 1975, and set up residence in a cottage in the little town of Romanyà de la Selva, where she divided her time between her two passions, writing and gardening, till she died in 1983.

It was during the years in Geneva that she wrote *La Plaça del Diamant*, which was published in 1962. Since then, dozens of editions, translations into at least thirteen languages, and a film version have appeared, making Rodoreda the internationally most acclaimed Catalan writer. Gabriel García Márquez, a regular visitor of Barcelona who is well acquainted with its literary scene, once proclaimed *La Plaça del Diamant* "The most beautiful novel to have been published in Spain after the Civil War."

The title chosen by its excellent American translator, David Rosenthal, is appropriate. "La Plaça del Diamant" means, literally, Diamond Square, and is located in the district of Gràcia, where Rodoreda grew up. It was traditionally a neighborhood of craftsmen and store keepers and this particular square owes its name to the jewelers that lived and worked nearby. Since the original title doesn't mean anything to readers outside of Barcelona, Rosenthal chose an image that has universal meaning and a particular importance in the novel, the dove, and that is related to the name given to the protagonist, Colometa, little dove.

So who is Colometa? Anyone who has read the book knows that she's nobody. She has no history. As a not particularly educated working class girl, in the twenties and early thirties she might have been considered fairly typical of the neighborhood of Gràcia or any other like it in the city; she works in a pastry shop, falls in love, gets married, helps her husband raise doves on the roof, gives birth to two children, and lives a completely ordinary life till the civil war ravages it. From that point on, a victim of history who lacks any sense of it, she knows only hunger and despair. Colometa could have been my grandmother, or the grandmother of many Barcelonans of my generation who had husbands, brothers or sons fighting for the Republicans against Franco. Catalonia was on the losing side of the Civil War. Barcelona was heavily bombed and the target of a brutal repression in the early forties, when people were no longer killed in the battlefield but in the back roads of the suburban mountains. Against this background of socio-political devastation, Colometa, at once victim and hero, anonymously struggles for survival and for meaning. *La Plaça del Diamant* is, among other things, what we call a *bildungsroman*, a progression of personal growth toward maturity. The title of this talk is a quote by George Meredith that Rodoreda chose as the foreword of the novel. It strikes me as appropriate because Colometa's story is just that, the stuff life is made of.

Let me digress for a moment and tell you briefly about myself. I'm a novelist. I have been invited to talk to you today because some critics and fellow writers—particularly the Catalan poet Pere Gimferrer—have pointed out a certain connection between my work and Rodoreda's. First of all, I think that her influence in contemporary novelists is almost inescapable. You have to deal with Rodoreda, you have to process her and

internalize her because she marks the turning point in post Civil War Catalan prose. Like her, I'm from a petit bourgeois neighborhood of Barcelona, the oldest part of the city close to the harbor known as El Raval. I grew up in an extended family that ran a tiny grocery store during the years of the dictatorship. Even though Catalan was my first language, I was semi-illiterate in it because there were no books to read, no radio stations to listen to, no TV programs to watch, and no courses to take. Catalan remained banished from public life till I was in high school and the process known as linguistic normalization designed to restore it to the status of a recognized language didn't take place till the eighties, after I had graduated from the University of Barcelona. Even before I came to the US in 81, my English was better than my Catalan. Catalan was stolen from me twice, just as it was from Rodoreda: first by Franco's dictatorship, second by exile, hers, forced and political, mine, unforced and cultural.

So let's pause for a moment on the issue of exile. The disadvantages of writing in exile are obvious. You're away from the place, the language, and the culture in which your books are set. This makes it hard to write about the present, since you lack the necessary cultural references. For example, I have not experienced the recent effects of immigration in Barcelona other than as a tourist. On the other hand, if you write about the past as I do and Rodoreda did, exile can provide a privileged perspective. The writer needs to distance herself from things in order to bring them close, because when she's immersed in them, the trees don't let her see the forest. Creation never takes place simultaneously with the portion of life it captures. It is always re-creation, re-play, re-membrance. Fiction is, so to speak, a double take of reality. This lapse that enables the writer to re-

construct her material is called distance: either distance in time or distance in space.

When you're writing about home away from home it's the interplay of both, distance in time and in space that determines the point of view in your work.

Exile makes memory essential, since you're recreating not only the past but 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. It is the haze of memory, its subjectivity, its very unreliability that lies at the core of Rodoreda's and my fiction, as well as that of many others. It is the transformative power of memory, its individual appropriation of reality that produces art.

Why do we delve so deeply into memory to find our voices? What prompts us to conjure up 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 the plaça del Diamant pestered Rodoreda from the distance and, by the exorcism that is writing, she laid them down to rest. After I came to the US I began having recurring dreams of Barcelona, which have vanished since I wrote my first novel. You want to appease the ghosts, but you miss them when they're gone.

The first book I read in my native language when I was already living in Frederick was, wouldn't you know it, *La Plaça del Diamant*. The impact it had on me, from the little corner of my own exile, is indescribable. Since then, I have taught it in Spanish, to

Spanish majors, and in English, to non majors. What I want to share with you today are those aspects of the novel that I, not only as reader but as writer, most identify with.

**Voice:** *La Plaça del Diamant* is written in the first person and perhaps its single most triumph is Colometa's voice. If you have the voice, you have the character. Nowhere is this truism truer than in this novel, in which you not only read Colometa's words, you hear them, as it is clear from the opening paragraphs I'm going to read. The setting is the Festa Major, the annual public festival in the neighborhood of Gràcia, and we're in the square, *the plaça del Diamant* itself.

This beginning foreshadows several of the themes that run through the narrative. Under the apparent brightness and merriment of the occasion, Colometa is constricted by the waistband of her petticoat that prevents her from breathing normally and makes her feel "martyred," so the waistband becomes, in fact, an instrument of torture. The impression of constriction is reinforced by the "chains" of paper and flowers, apparently so frail and harmless. We find in this detail, as in many others, a double foreshadowing, both of the limitations of a woman's condition and of the horrors of the Civil War to come.

Supposing the reader is not aware of the foreshadowing neither is Colometa. She is unsuspecting, standing in the middle of the crowded square dressed in white, missing her dead mother and about to be swept off her feet—quite literally—by Quimet, the man who will become her husband. There is a distance between the author's knowledge of these events and the character's ignorance of them that we call irony. Unless we are familiar with Spanish culture and history, we, readers, may be as ignorant as Colometa herself,

but we're moved by her voice because it conveys innocence, sensitivity, vulnerability, and a certain sense of wonderment and bewilderment in the midst of the familiar.

Rodoreda said once, "Perhaps the most notable of my multiple personalities is a kind of innocence that makes me feel good in the world in which I was destined to live." Maybe, but if Rodoreda feels good in her familiar world, Colometa feels lost in it, as she does in the square in this opening scene. Both she and Cecilia, the protagonist of *El Carrer de les Camèlies*, appear to be watching the ordinary world through glass and as if they saw it for the first time. This separation between their contemplative selves and the world accounts for the innocence that Rodoreda singles out in her own personality, but also for the strangeness of ordinary life as is portrayed in her novels. Colometa doesn't take anything for granted. Everything deserves her attention. She's all consciousness. Her eyes dwell on the minutest details--like the asparagus plants tied together with tiny wires, yet another image of constriction—as if they found them profoundly odd. From the first moment, Colometa seems to be floating in the city rather than inhabiting it, staring obsessively at the dolls in a shop window and thinking, "I really didn't have any idea what I was doing in the world."

Notice also how observations and thoughts are randomly linked together in her narrative in no logical sequence, rather as they flow through her eyes and her mind ("And my father remarried and me a young woman all alone in the Plaça del Diamant waiting for the coffee pot raffle and Julieta shouting to be heard above the music, 'Stop! You'll get your shoes all wrinkled!') This technique, reminiscent of William Faulkner's in *The Sound*

*and the Fury*, is known as stream of consciousness and contributes greatly to the dream like atmosphere of the novel.

**Entrapment:** We see the first signs of it in the first paragraph--the wires, the chains, the waistband--but there are other objects and images contributing to the feeling of entrapment that Colometa experiences with increasing intensity. For example, there's the house that belongs to the well-to-do family Colometa works for before the war, when she and her husband have trouble making ends meet. The house is not only a cage, but also a maze, a labyrinth full of confusion. The bathroom of the house has a trapdoor, and there is another trapdoor in the ceiling of Colometa's apartment leading to the dove cages that her husband keeps on the roof.

When he dies in the war, Colometa remarries a man who is yet a different type of war victim, sexually impotent as a result of the wounds he has suffered. This is how she describes her new home "When I went in the boy's bedroom: a wall. When I went into the storeroom: a wall. Nothing but walls and the hallway and that reed curtain with the Japanese lady. Walls and walls and the hallway and walls..." At some point, Colometa also mentions that "the streets, which are the same size as ever, seem narrower" to her. Finally, when she is middle aged and her children are grown she wakes up one night next to her impotent husband, quietly slips out of the apartment and starts, in her words, "walking for her old life." Of course she ends up in the Plaça del Diamant, which now strikes her as "an empty box made of old buildings with the sky for a top." The hole among the buildings becomes smaller in her vision and turns into "a funnel":



“I heard a storm coming up like a whirlwind inside the funnel which was almost closed now and I covered my face with my arms to protect myself from I don’t know what and I let out a hellish scream. A scream I must have been carrying around inside me for many years, so thick it was hard for it to get through my throat, and with that scream a little bit of nothing trickled out of my mouth, like a cockroach made of spit...and that bit of nothing that had lived so long trapped inside me was my youth and it flew off with a scream of I don’t know what...letting go?” The scream, we may add, that had begun to rise that night when Colometa went dancing to the plaça del Diamant and felt suffocated by the tight waistband of her petticoat.

The dolls Colometa is always looking at are trapped in the shop window, the doves are trapped in their cage, Colometa is trapped in her apartment, in her womanhood, in the tragedy of her two marriages, the first to a man who tries to dominate her and the second to a man who can’t satisfy her, and she is, ultimately, trapped in her past. La plaça del Diamant, the square, is the definitive cage and it is, at once, the origin--the womb, the uterus where everything began--and the coffin in which her youth and dreams lie buried.

However, some of these images, specifically the tight waistband at the beginning and the square at the end, are ambivalent to the extent that they signify at once entrapment and release. The waistband of the petticoat has a strong sexual connotation. In that opening scene at the dance Colometa is a virgin and, as she meets her future husband, she gives us a sign that that is about to change: “The loop broke and my petticoat ended up on the ground.” Similarly, at the end she is trapped among the inclosing buildings on la plaça

del Diamant, but at last she can spit out that bit of nothing that flies off and, finally, lets go? As oppressive as the square may seem, there's always that patch of sky. The plaça del Diamant is trap and liberation at the same time.

**Surrealism:** We can debate whether *La Plaça del Diamant*, which incorporates many elements of surrealism, is or is not a realistic novel. The dilemma is solved if we accept the surreal as an integral part of the real. Given Colometa's vision of the world as a strange place and her sense of dislocation in it, reality is bound to appear like a stage set, as in that first night at the dance when everything in the square--the kids, the fireworks, the musicians--seemed to her "like a decoration"; or as a succession of nightmarish paintings by Dalí.

Indeed, Colometa lives much of her life in a dream-like state. Let me back track for a moment to that other night when she left her bed to return to the plaça del Diamant. She says that the next day she woke up at noon and "my soul was still in the shell of my dreams...and I knew I had done something different but I had trouble remembering what I had done and whether I had done what I had done—and I didn't even know if I'd done it—half awake or fast asleep." So, the reader is left with the same ambiguity as the narrator, in doubt as to whether the trip to the plaça del Diamant is an actual experience or a dream sequence. Not that it matters, because in either case, the cathartic power of the moment is undiminished.

A surrealistic image that stands out early on in the novel is the group of “gentlemen,” in Colometa’s expression, who show up uninvited at her wedding with Quimet, her first husband. They are in the same restaurant as the wedding party, celebrating the recovery from surgery of one of them. They are all standing by the door, dressed in black and wearing white carnations on their lapels. Colometa recalls that while she was dancing, “she saw them on a slant and they seemed from another world.” That is, in fact, what they are, ambassadors from the world of destruction brought about by the impending war, reincarnations of the four horsemen of the Apocalypse.

Other surrealistic images are recurrent, like the one Colometa refers to as “the lobster picture.” Earlier on I mentioned Dalí’s paintings. This could certainly be one. In it the lobsters have men’s faces and wear gold crowns; they’re coming out of a well surrounded by brown grass that is improbably close to a sea of red water. However, these details are not merely whimsical; they also convey meaning and intensify the theme of violence underlying the novel. Against the background of the Civil War, the sea, red like cow’s blood, the lobsters’ armor and the tails they use as weapons against each other are as expressive as the description of a battlefield and speak directly to the reader’s subconscious. The fact that Colometa’s little boy, Toni, is fascinated by the lobster picture as well as by toy guns, with which he likes to “kill” people over and over again, reinforces the pervasive aggressiveness Rodoreda sees in human nature.

There is also the pair of scales drawn on the wall of the stairs leading to Colometa’s apartment. On her way up she often pauses to look at them, even touch them. One day,

while cleaning the house where she works as a maid, she accidentally breaks a glass and her employers make her pay for a new one. When she gets back home tired, carrying a heavy load of birdseed for the doves, she says that she “had to stop in front of those scales drawn on the wall.” Aren’t these “well-drawn scales,” with one side hanging down lower than the other, the ones that the iconic blindfolded woman who represents justice is holding in her hand? May they suggest that Colometa is making a plea for fairness, so sorely missing in her existence?

If some of the surrealistic images of the novel are Dalinian, others are Gaudinian. Antoni Gaudí is the most famous architect of Barcelona. Of all his buildings, the Church of the Holy Family is the most famous. At least two of Gaudí’s works are present in the novel: La Pedrera, the apartment building in one of the main boulevards of Barcelona, and the Parc Güell. Both of them, with their wavy lines, intricate representations of natural and mythological elements like plants, shells, trees, and dragons capture the surreal in architecture. Rodoreda, who is deeply aware of this, places Colometa in a setting that seems to justify her perception of the strangeness of the world: the Parc Güell. With its undulating stone walls, its cave-like porticoes sustained by slanted pillars, its sculpted tree trunks and fragmented multi-colored tiles, the Parc Güell defies logic and rationality. It comes out of a visionary dream—like Colometa’s narrative--and stands as a monument to surrealism. Interestingly enough, Quimet, Colometa’s first husband, envisions a structure for his doves that would be a miniature reproduction of a Gaudí building. The tower he describes is another impossible object, like the lobster picture or the convoluted

house where Colometa works, an object that Quimet can only dream but, unlike Gaudí, can never build.

The surreal vision progresses from dream to nightmare. The outdoor dance at the beginning, with its colorful flowers, paper, music, and lights, looks unreal like a “decoration” and inviting. At the end, the same square, deserted in the middle of the night, looks equally unreal but threatening.

**Identity:** This is another theme that is ever present in my own work and that I also share with Rodoreda. The protagonist of *La Plaça del Diamant* has two names. Three of my heroes have two names. When she meets Quimet, who will become her first husband, he names her Colometa: “He called me Colometa, his little dove. I looked at him very annoyed and said my name was Natalia and when I said my name was Natalia he kept laughing and said I could have only one name: Colometa.” By contrast when Antoni, who will become her second husband, proposes, he calls her somewhat emphatically, “Natàlia.”

Colometa, little dove. Doves are the central image of the novel and we associate them with innocence and peace—remember Colometa’s white dress at the dance. No doubt Quimet is thinking of these qualities when he chooses this name, but given his domineering nature and macho stance, he also associates it with submissiveness. He makes it plain from the start that he’ll make the decisions. He tells her without asking that

by the end of the year she'll be his wife; he expects her to agree with him in everything; and he enrolls in the army to go to war without consulting her.

But there's a point when the doves that had been a source of beauty and delight begin to irritate Colometa and to make her restless. They bicker and fight with each other. In fact, Colometa says that they are like people, "And while I was working on the great revolution with the doves the war started." The little civil war among the contentious doves mirrors the national war. In a moment of uncharacteristic cruelty, Colometa destroys their eggs, tears apart the cages and sends the doves flying off in all directions. What we see here is the beginning of Colometa's rebellion against her past submissiveness to Quimet and to the world in general, and specifically her rebellion against the expectation of motherhood, as shown in her destruction of the eggs.

The same ambivalence we noted in the images of the waistband and the square carries over to the doves. If they symbolize negative traits in human nature and entrapped submissiveness, they may also symbolize freedom. When the effects of poverty and the war are bearing down on Colometa, she tells herself, "Fly, Colometa, fly!" so the possibility of escape is never denied.

In a sense, Colometa is the name of her youth, as Natalia is that of her maturity. The return of the middle-aged Natalia, already married to Antoni, to the apartment on the plaça del Diamant is an attempt to retrieve the past. In other words, Natàlia is trying to rescue Colometa. When she realizes that this is impossible, she buries her instead,

carving her name—Co-lo-me-ta—on the door with a knife that has strong phallic connotations. As I said before, Colometa was all consciousness, but in her evolution into Natàlia she gains another level of it: self consciousness. Colometa is acutely but only aware of what lies outside: the flowers, the lights, the dolls, the lobster picture, the scales. When she becomes Natàlia, her eyes turn inward and are able to see Colometa from a distance that brings sadness but also understanding.

In my fiction I find, as Rodoreda finds in hers, that double identities are hard to maintain. The hero always ends up having to give up one, but the surrender, of course, can never be complete. Not all of Colometa is buried in the plaça del Diamant. A part of her still survives inside Natàlia. And that part is called memory.

**Possible ending.** *La Plaça del Diamant* ends with the word *Happy...*, which, after 200 pages of mostly misery, strikes me as an interesting choice. In the novels written at this stage of her career, Rodoreda's hero always comes to a compromise with the world. She never finds what she seeks. In *El Carrer de les Camèlies*, Cecilia is looking for her missing father. She finds, instead, a lonely old gardener that she accepts as a substitute. Colometa loses her first husband, who had little respect for her individuality, to the war. When she finds a man who, in contrast to Quimet, acknowledges her separate identity, he turns out to be sexually impotent. She must choose, it seems, between a good lover and a good husband or vice versa. The scales will never be leveled; the doves will never be totally free. But Rodoreda's women make do with imperfection. Colometa, who at one point contemplates suicide and a merciful killing of her children, has a gift for finding

escape through the narrowest crack. And that's her triumph. Does *La Plaça del Diamant* have a happy ending? For one thing, like every work of art, it has no ending, it's open ended. Nothing is resolved but everything has been explored. It has what I would call a possible ending. Colometa didn't destroy herself or her children, Natàlia won't destroy her marriage or her present life. She'll live on, just as the novel does.