

9TH JOAN GILI MEMORIAL LECTURE

**Mercè Ibarz**

# Exile and Reconstruction:

Mercè Rodoreda and visual art in the 1950s

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This is the ninth in the regular series of lectures convened by The Anglo-Catalan Society, to be delivered at its annual conference, in commemoration of the figure of Joan Lluís Gili i Serra (1907–1998), founder member of the Society and Honorary Life President from 1979. The object of the publication is to ensure wider diffusion, in English, for an address to the Society given by a distinguished figure of Catalan Studies whose specialism coincides with an aspect of the multiple interests and achievements of Joan Gili, as scholar, bibliophile and translator. This lecture was given by Mercè Ibarz at Lancaster University, on 18th November 2006. The text of the lecture was translated by Professor Alan Yates, and edited for publication by Richard Mansell and Helena Buffery. We are grateful to Mercè Ibarz herself for prompt and sympathetic collaboration, and to the Fundació Mercè Rodoreda for access to the images reproduced with the lecture (© DACS). Grateful acknowledgement is made of the sponsorship of The Annual Joan Gili Memorial Lectures provided by the Institut Ramon Llull and the Fundació Congrés de Cultura Catalana.

### The author

Mercè Ibarz (Saidí, Baix Cinca, 1954) is a novelist, essayist, journalist and university lecturer. Her first novel, *La terra retirada* (The Secluded Land), winner of the 1992 Humbert Torres Prize, was published by Quaderns Crema in Barcelona in 1994. In 1995 she published *La palmera de blat* (The Palm Tree of Wheat), to form a diptych on the relationship between urban and rural life, memory and imagination, fiction and the everyday, returning to some of these themes in 2002 with her collection of urban stories, *A la ciutat en obres* (In the City of Works) and in 2005 with *Febre de carrer* (Street Fever). She is considered one of the foremost Catalan women writers, and is committed to the promotion of women's writing, as in her work for the Catalan Centre of the PEN Club, of which she became a prominent member in 1996.

Like Mercè Rodoreda, Ibarz combines an interest in literature with a passion for the visual arts, which she has explored in a range of work, from her doctoral thesis on Buñuel—translated and published in Spanish as *Buñuel documental: Tierra sin pan y su tiempo* (Documentary Buñuel: *Land Without Bread* and its Times, 1999)—to her classes at the Universitat Pompeu Fabra on modern and contemporary art, documentary film and photography, and published lectures, like this one, on the relationship between literature and the visual arts, as in the volumes *Cartografies del desig. 15 escriptors i el seu món* (1998) and *Memòria de l'aigua. 10 escriptors i el seu món* (1999). She produced an edition of the prose work of Maria-Mercè Marçal from 1985 to 1997, *Sota el signe del drac* (Under the Sign of the Dragon, 2004). To date she has published three biographical studies of Rodoreda, the most recent being the novel-essay *Mercè Rodoreda. Exilio y deseo* (Mercè Rodoreda. Exile and Desire, 2004). She is currently curating an exhibition on Rodoreda's paintings, 'Mercè Rodoreda en viu', which will be on show in Barcelona's Pedrera in October-November 2008.

Note: Images of the paintings by Mercè Rodoreda mentioned in the text of this lecture can be accessed at the [Mercè Rodoreda Foundation website](#)

# Exile and Reconstruction:

## Mercè Rodoreda and visual art in the 1950s

It is an honour, for which I am sincerely grateful to The Anglo-Catalan Society, to have been invited to give this Joan Gili Memorial Lecture. Especially so because of an interest which in one way and another has engaged me recently and which, thanks to the Society, I now have the chance to give expression to under the generous aegis of Joan Gili's name. I never met him, and yet I see in him an image and a clearly marked example of the subject of my talk: the relationship between literature and the visual arts in the 1950s, profoundly marked by the phenomenon of exile, and the need, at the heart of this experience, to reconstruct the world. Artistic creation in Europe after the rains, to appropriate the title of a painting by Max Ernst. In Joan Gili's case emigration became a sort of exile; for Rodoreda it was exile *tout court*.

Artistic creation was engulfed by what was probably the most powerful cultural determinant of the decade in question: the Cold War, the political confrontation of the two great power-blocks and its correlate, the cultural cold war which we are only now beginning to understand with the academic rigour it demands. Yet the reconstruction that I want to talk about is not exactly the one brought about by the Cold War. My focus is on Mercè Rodoreda's response to this general context, which was two-fold: her own self-reconstruction and the reconstruction of her work. She achieved this without the support of any institutional framework, just like the other artists and writers I shall be talking about here (with the one possible exception of Saul Bellow, a writer invited by his country to experience and connect with the cultural forces of post-War Europe, including Spain in 1954). Not everything was defined by the Cold War in the Europe of the 1950s. Amidst the ruins many creative artists were obliged to live and work, and from the rubble they extracted capacities that lay unsuspected both in themselves and in the arts. It was at this time, furthermore, that The Anglo-Catalan Society was founded.

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Let us now consider the correspondences between exile and creativity. In the case of literature, its relationship with exile is nothing new, nor is it, strictly, specific to modernity. John Berger, a contemporary author who reflects and writes frequently

on the subject, and himself lives in a particular kind of—voluntary—exile, was looking one day at Velázquez's *Portrait of Aesop* in the Prado museum. Afterwards he wrote: 'Most literature has been made by the disinherited or the exiled. Both states fix the attention upon experience and thus on the need to redeem it from oblivion, to hold it tight in the dark' (Berger 1986, reproduced in *Selected Essays* 2001: 515). It is a reflection that acquires ever more relevance.

In the twentieth century this relationship between literature and exile became central. Indeed, it could be said, without exaggeration, that this was one of the principal axes of knowledge and understanding for a century that has been one of the most marked since Classical Greece by exile—and consequently by displacement and an often tragic and haunted nomadism—as is reflected in the accounts to which it has given rise. Traumatic exile has been, and still is, one of the predominant cultural conditions of modernity. That said, it is important to remember that the phenomenon does not apply exclusively to literature.

Cinema—the twentieth century's specific art form, at least until the 1960s—is to a large degree the product of European exiles in Hollywood. The same could be said of the visual arts, on account of the movement of artists towards Paris and Berlin, or New York. And so too for photography, probably the most nomadic of all means of knowledge and the one most subject to constant exile and migration because of its particular ontology and character.

In this twentieth-century context, it is unsurprising that literature and the visual arts, deeply affected by the destruction that took so many creative figures into exile, became intertwined in a very particular way. Mercè Rodoreda was aware of this; she understood how art and exile converge. Like so many other artists she had been swept on to the uncertain path which war and exile had marked out in flames and steel: that of the reconstruction of her own work, and of the creative act itself, surrounded by a world in ruins. Her struggles in the 1950s are those experienced by Jean Dubuffet and Maria-Helena Vieira da Silva in painting, Barbara Hepworth and Louise Bourgeois in sculpture, Roberto Rossellini and Luis Buñuel in cinema, Robert Frank in photography, and, in literature, authors as apparently distant from one another as Henri Michaux, Saul Bellow and Clarice Lispector. I see Rodoreda as an outstanding case-in-point because it is the 1950s which give shape to her entire production: they are, in classical terms, her acme.

The same decade is probably also, for generational reasons and for reasons of artistic consciousness, the acme of all the artists I have just mentioned. But in Rodoreda the period has a particularly sharp and clear accent. Her post-war output,

that is undoubtedly her greatest work, was almost entirely conceived and begun between the late 1950s and 1961, as biographical and documentary sources show. Beyond this period the only books she composed entirely from scratch, the only ones not conceived at this time, were *El carrer de les Camèlies* (1966), her ‘Viatges a uns quants pobles’ from *Viatges i flors*, and *Quanta, quanta guerra*, both from 1980. That the date of publication obliges us to classify *La mort i la primavera* (1986) as posthumous should not conceal the fact that Rodoreda started work on this visionary and allegorical work long before then. She had submitted a version for the Sant Jordi novel prize in 1961, but she was unsuccessful (as she had been the previous year with *La plaça del Diamant*, her best known novel, published in 1962).

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Rodoreda had spent the 1940s writing short stories and poetry, publishing very little of her output. The Catalans in exile did not, nor would they ever, enjoy the publishing and political structures available to their German counterparts by a long margin; neither in Europe nor America. Rodoreda had spent the Second World War in Bordeaux, after deciding in 1940 not to embark for America and having had to leave Paris on the entry of the Germans. She returned to the French capital at the end of 1946 and settled there until 1954, when she moved to Geneva. At the end of the war she joined the group which was to continue publication of the *Revista de Catalunya*. Her hope, at the beginning of the 1950s, was that Edicions Proa, would renew production in Paris, under the direction of Puig i Ferreter. But things did not turn out this way.

The short stories which she continued to write under bombardment in Bordeaux and Limoges would languish unpublished for years. But Rodoreda was determined not to let her work stagnate and she turned to poetry, under the guidance of Josep Carner. There survives a body of verse, now partially collected and edited, which we hope will be published in its entirety soon. I myself included two of her sonnets in the short biography I penned in 1991, but they remained unnoticed. So, for years it has been as though Rodoreda the poet did not exist. It also has to be said that the selection edited in 2002 by Abraham Mohino i Balet, *Agonia de llum*, has received very little critical or, as far as I am aware, scholarly attention since its publication. The fact remains, though, that Mercè Rodoreda devoted much energy to creating a body of poetry between 1947 and 1953.

In this guise she was able to participate in the traditional poetry festival of the Jocs Florals, which we can say without irony was the only formal literary institution of the Catalan language in exile. In 1947, having won the *Flor Natural* prize at the London celebration of the Jocs Florals the previous year, the *Revista de Catalunya* published nine sonnets from her poetic work-in-progress, significantly entitled *Món d'Ulisses*. This was never completed despite careful revision, and it is 'unfinished', as is indeed *La mort i la primavera*, in the sense that Kafka's novels are unfinished. The number in question of the *Revista de Catalunya* in exile proved to be its third and final one. After this another sample of Rodoreda's verse, 'Tres sonets i una cançó' would appear in 1956 in Mexico, having won a prize in the Jocs Florals convened in that country by the *Gaseta de Lletres* supplement of *La Nova Revista*.

Another facet of her activity as a writer in exile was painting, which she pursued until she finally took up writing novels again. By now, she had already written a good number of short stories—of extraordinary quality—which would eventually be published in 1958, when Editorial Selecta brought out her collection *Vint-i-dos contes*, winner of the previous year's Víctor Català prize. In these stories the experience of exile comes across in all its rawness. The subject is treated here with more raw feeling than anywhere in the rest of Rodoreda's work. Here she takes exile directly as her narrative theme, without the mythical or lyrical cast she lends to it in her poetry, and without the ellipses that she applies in the novels. These are probably the starkest short stories in Catalan literature from the last half of the twentieth century. Moreover, they deserve a pre-eminent place in European exile literature. One of these pieces, 'Carnaval', set in pre-war Barcelona, had won the 1956 Joan Santamaria prize, one of the first such competitions to be instituted in internal exile, that is clandestinely, under Francoist repression.

The survey is still not complete, however. Throughout the 1950s Rodoreda felt the conviction that the time was right for her to return to novel writing, which had been interrupted in her case since 1938 and the publication of *Aloma*. But the novels still refused to appear. She writes letters and revises her short stories. And she paints.

Her painting follows very clear models: Klee, Miró, Dubuffet, Picasso, Kandinsky. She does collages and water colours, never working in oils. From the hundred and fifty or so works which have been conserved, we can say that she was fully aware of the main post-war trends in the visual arts. Although the standard histories are unanimous in seeing New York as the artistic capital of the world, because of the migration to the USA of so many major artists after the Second World War, it is nevertheless plain to see that Paris was the centre where one of the key-notes of

contemporary art was being defined: the search for possible meaning in a world ravaged by bombs, a search rooted in the innocence of childhood and in madness, *art brut*. It was an enterprise in which Joan Miró played an important role, with the grotesque and the absurd as a central idiom, taking up in this way the legacy of Paul Klee, who had died in 1940.

Was it Rodoreda's ambition to become a painter, I wonder? Probably not, but her return to literature from 1957 makes it impossible to know for certain. It is likely that she felt no urge to make a career for herself in that sphere. (What she had entertained, rather, during the 1940s, with hunger and deprivation staring her in the face, was the idea of becoming a fashion designer, a line emerging out of modern trends in pictorial art). Nevertheless, she did take painting seriously. She spent some time preparing an exhibition which was to open in Barcelona in 1957, but never came to fruition. Furthermore she left some works that deserve to be recognised in their own right, as paintings. Most importantly, in my view, painting contributed some essential elements to her writing, and in this sense her paintings speak volumes.

Through painting she is exploring, seeking nourishment, trying to understand, beyond the difficult and strange condition of being a Catalan writer in exile, how the arts—literature in her case—might still reach towards the Absolute at a time when chronicles and direct testimonies are so necessary. And whether indeed it was still possible to strive for the Absolute after Auschwitz and after the bombings she had witnessed in Barcelona and on her journeys through France.

My view is that the paintings she did in Paris and then during her first years in Geneva enabled Rodoreda to research and prepare the novels she was about to embark upon with energy and intensity, an energy and intensity that were very much a product of that moment, precisely because the pictorial arts provided her with a way of breaking free from her own native literary tradition. This was important because various gaps in the Catalan tradition—for example, the paucity of high-quality Romantic poetry—had prevented the literary language from developing those registers of natural spontaneity demanded by modernity. Achieving this would be one of Rodoreda's main bequests: that register, so much her own unique voice, developed through her experiments in painting.

Painting occupies her between 1947 and 1956, at the very least. A letter from Julio Cortázar, with whom Rodoreda had had some contact in Geneva, confirms that she was still painting in 1956. But at that point changes would soon be felt that would affect the writer and her work. 1957 saw the revival of literary prizes and of Catalan-language publishing in Barcelona, after near-extirmination under Franco's



savage repression. This can be seen as the decisive factor that encouraged Rodoreda to focus her energies on the novel.

With her short stories completed to plan (as is made clear in a letter to Anna Murià) and having won the Santamaria and Víctor Català prizes, Rodoreda faces up to the late 1950s with the challenge of the novel squarely in her sights. It was a challenge she could not and would not evade, since it harked back to her youth and was a major preoccupation of her literary generation: the consolidation of the modern novel in Catalan. Painting was what would help her to achieve success in this.

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Among the salient aesthetic and moral trends of the 1950s was *art brut*, impelled by the French painter Jean Dubuffet, who coined the name in 1945 and who soon gained recognition and acclaim. The *naïveté*, the ingenuousness of Natàlia-Colometa's voice in *La plaça del Diamant*, the process of her mental derangement in the early years after the Civil War can be linked to no uncertain degree with *art brut*.

The post-war art that Dubuffet promoted and experimented with was avowedly 'extracultural', and the painter, who had broken away from Breton's surrealist group, explained it thus in 1949: 'Works executed by people who stand outside artistic culture, allowing little or no space for the imitation of reality, quite distinct from what intellectuals are concerned with. Thus these practitioners use resources (subjects, choice of materials, means of transposition, rhythms, modes of writing, etc) drawn from their private experience and not from references in classical or modern art' (translated from 'L'art brut préférée aux arts culturels').

In Rodoreda's post-war work there is certainly no place for any intellectual figure. Her revision of *Aloma* in the mid-1960s is in line with Dubuffet's prescription above, under every heading. Rodoreda resists taking the refuge she might have found in the high tradition of Catalan literature. It was to this tradition that she had turned in the 1930s, with *Aloma*, taking for her heroine a name straight from the work of Ramon Llull when composing her first major novel during the revolution in Barcelona. (She belonged, of course, to a generation who habitually referred to events of the late 1930s in Catalonia as a revolution).

Rodoreda acknowledges that being Catalan is the cause of her exile, but she knows also that the whole of Europe is being criss-crossed by exiles and that she is bound to be drawn into these currents. Regarding Rodoreda's stance *vis-à-vis* her own literary

tradition, I merely signal here that she will eventually square up to the issue when she writes *Mirall trencat* [1975], also begun towards the end of the 1950s.

She lives and writes in a physical exile which induces the European writers and artists like her to turn inwards, on a journey of internal as well as external exile where all frontiers are blurred, and to reconstruct a sense of being through ethnography and anthropology. These disciplines constitute another connecting thread that runs through post-war creativity: the red thread of *La mort i la primavera*. We see here another variation on the theme of political emigration and the flight from terror, the search for a less corrupt mode of being which had first shown itself during the inter-war period.

In literature, one of Rodoreda's points of reference would be a friend of Dubuffet's, the poet and prose-writer of Belgian origin, Henri Michaux, in whose work the close observation of trees is so important. In a letter from 1953 she refers to him as an influence on the first prose-pieces she wrote in Paris, *Flors de debò*, eventually incorporated into *Viatges i flors*. (Of the latter she would declare that it was the only one of her books that she would rescue from the fire). Dubuffet had travelled in the Sahara in 1944–1946 and Michaux was already well known in pre-war literary circles for his travel-writing and his free, dynamic and enigmatic prose. Dubuffet and Michaux were friends; they exhibited their works together in the Parisian galleries of the post-War period, close to where Rodoreda lived; and both began painting in their youth under the influence of the work of Klee, the latter being the only artist Rodoreda mentioned when she spoke of her time as a painter. Rodoreda and Michaux were also friends with the sculptor Apel·les Fenosa, who made portraits of both of them: in 1948 and 1949, respectively.

Michaux was not just a simple chronicler or travel-writer. In 1948 he published *Ailleurs*, accounts of imaginary journeys, which had a considerable impact and which epitomised the style and the post-war projection of the author of *Un barbare en Asie* (1933). For her own part, from the space of her own *ailleurs*, Rodoreda had no need to travel any more than she had already done in order to forge a prose-style and a concept of narration beyond realist precepts, beyond history, with roots in ethnography: her *Flors*, together with *La mort i la primavera*, both written just after Michaux's book, partake equally of extracultural art and of ethnography and travel. Like her, Michaux painted as well as wrote.

A very different writer also worked with ideas of this slant. Saul Bellow, of North-American Jewish extraction, had fought in the war in Europe. Afterwards he was given US government sponsorship to spend two years travelling through the old

continent from his base in Paris. He had emerged on the scene with his first novel in 1944, and by 1954 he had already won several prestigious prizes in the USA, no easy achievement at that time for a writer whose central concern was the North-American psyche viewed by a Jewish narrator. In 1959 he published *Henderson the Rain King*, which is a breathtaking satire set in black Africa. It reads like a sort of reverse version of Dubuffet's notions of extracultural art. Henderson is a failure, an idiot who has made a fortune and does not know what to do with the money. He has left far behind him the models supplied by his parents, both of them cultivated university teachers, and he has fought on the winning side in Europe. He goes to Africa out of boredom, joining a safari organised by a couple, acquaintances of his, who are as wealthy and as useless as he is. Once in Africa he is detached from them and finds the chance—and Bellow through him—to contrast his own scant understanding of the world with the solid and tangible wisdom of the Africans. He ends up as the king of the tribe because they understand how the biggest ne'er-do-well can hide an inner nobility.

In *La mort i la primavera* things are not really very different. The tone and the 'means of transposition', as Dubuffet would have said, vary, but the underlying concerns addressed by the two authors do coincide. These link both Rodoreda and Bellow, once again, with *art brut*: a story narrated through unmediated personal experience, without bookish overtones, typically through the perspective of a mad person or through the prism of madness. Henderson is a well-educated American who has renounced the culture acquired by his parents and has become a wealthy simpleton. Rodoreda's protagonists inhabit a society that is bereft of written discourse, religion and history, without any framework for a culture that might provide emancipation or sublimation except in laws and prisons that only stifle human urges. It is not that anybody here can be classified as mad, for madness is a category from cultural history that has no place in *La mort i la primavera*: it makes as much sense to say that all the characters here are mad as to say that madness does not exist in their world. Dissidence does exist, though, just as in *Henderson* there are complicities between some of the black characters and the white man who has landed from nowhere in their midst: the dissidence of individual feeling, the urge to assert independence, to stand apart, to be different, other, with insanity on every side.

Let us turn to another parallel with Rodoreda. *Le Maître d'École*, *Le Grand Siècle*, *Les Vacances de Hegel* are works by the painter René Magritte from the 1950s. The main figure here, with his back to the viewer, is modern man, whose silhouette the Belgian surrealist took from mass culture in the first third of the twentieth century and made his own: the man in the overcoat, with his bowler hat and his umbrella, who stands as a passive, faceless witness before the events of the century. In *Les Vacances de Hegel* (1958) he does not even have to appear in person: his umbrella alone is enough. Ten years earlier, in the full aftermath of bomb devastation in the Europe he never abandoned, Magritte had painted an emblematic canvas, *La Trahison des Images*, that was to have far-reaching repercussions on contemporary thought. 'Ceci n'est pas une pipe' is written on the canvas: the painting is not the pipe; it is the representation of a pipe. Art is not a record of anything, it is purely representation.

Some years afterwards, Rodoreda would defend her novel writing against the label of 'testimony', either of Catalan culture or of Catalan history: 'My historical times interest me in only a very relative way. I have lived too close to them. In *La plaça del Diamant* I recreate them without having had the intention of doing so. Novels are over and above such things, magical acts. They reflect what their authors carry inside themselves, hardly knowing that such ballast is on board. If I had wanted to talk deliberately about my own historical times, I would have written a chronicle. There are some which are very good. But I was not born to be confined to talking about specific events' (Prologue to *Mirall trencat*, 1975).

Returning to Magritte, there is a painting of his which, although less reproduced and exhibited than those just mentioned, I like very much: *Les Valeurs Personnelles* from 1952. There is a room and we are inside it. It has the conventional ceiling of a middle-class house, but the walls seem to be made of white clouds in a blue sky. On the left in the background, against the corner wall, there is a neatly made bed on which an enormous comb stands erect. On the right, also up against the wall but facing the viewer, there is an *armoire* with twin mirrors that reflect the sky, the clouds and a window seen in just one of the mirrors. On the dresser, a shaving brush of the same huge proportions as those of the comb on the bed. In the foreground, on two classically patterned rugs we see a pink, yellow and black matchstick, an enormous green wineglass almost in the centre of the composition, and, on the right, in front of the *armoire* with mirrors where it too is reflected, a pink object whose aspect is disfigured by the transposition and inversion of proportions: it could as easily be a bar of soap as something completely abstract.

Magritte painted this scene two years before Rodoreda moved to live in the city of Geneva. She would later say that for her Catalonia had become the four walls of her Geneva flat. The property, which was not even registered in her name and to which she had no claim after she was left all alone in her exile, contained her ‘personal values’, in the symbolic-imaginative terms expressed by Magritte. When she moved there in 1954, against the sky and clouds of the walls in her Geneva apartment, the novels which in Paris she could not stir into life began to show green shoots: *Jardí vora el mar*, at that time ‘Una mica d’història’, would be the first (filled with painterly touches, including two protagonists who are painters and direct references to Miró); *La mort i la primavera* was begun; ‘Colometa’, the original title for *La plaça del Diamant*, would emerge in this context, where the second section of *Viatges i flors*, begun in Paris, was already present, and so too *Mirall trencat*, at that time called ‘Una casa abandonada’.

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A house, a home. Nature as home, woman as home: two concepts that supply key insights for reading Rodoreda, the woman and her work. Each one of her novels, from *Aloma* onwards, is the story of a house/home: built and lost, destroyed or reconstructed, earnestly sought, to be fled from or returned to... The house of literature, exile as home. One’s own home. Woman as home. Nature as home.

The art that emerges around the same time as Rodoreda’s nature/home intuition relates the cosmos with an anthropological vision, linking the outside and the inside, putting emphasis on landscape as the cradle of the human, whether in the Joan Miró of *Constel·lacions* or in the sculpture of Oteiza or Barbara Hepworth. Similarly the woman/home nexus, another powerful image that stands out in creative formulations of the 1950s, extends Virginia Woolf’s concept of ‘a room of one’s own’ from 1929. Indeed, I think that Magritte endorses Woolf’s insight, twenty years on, reinforcing it with his masculine room where he can protect ‘personal values’ after the war.

I can identify the woman/home and nature/home motifs particularly in three female creative artists besides Rodoreda: the former in the French-born sculptor Louise Bourgeois (1911) and in the writer Clarice Lispector (1920-1977), a Ukrainian-born Brazilian; the latter in the English sculptor Barbara Hepworth (1903-1975).

Some years ago, in Valencia, I saw a Hepworth retrospective. I stood for some time in fascination before two small pieces in white marble: *Group I (Concourse)* and

*Group II (People Waiting)*, one containing eleven figures and the other ten, mounted on their respective bases. My thoughts turned to *La mort i la primavera*, to figures that are isolated yet connected, a view that configures this novel in which Rodoreda's imagination works in a completely abstract way. Hepworth's two pieces date from 1951 and 1952. Reading this on the information panel I realised that the recreation of human forms in a natural landscape acquires in the repertoire of the 1950s a deeply representative character. Hepworth's own words from 1955, displayed on the gallery wall, made me associate her even more closely with Rodoreda's preoccupations:

I regard the present era of flight and projection into space and time as a tremendous expansion of our sensibilities [...]; but in order to appreciate this fully I think that we must affirm some ancient stability –a stability which is inherent in land and rocks and trees, inherent in our capacity to stand and move and feel– in order to assess our true psychological responses to our poise in the landscape as well as to our position in space and time.

I recalled the letter in which Rodoreda described to the poet Josep Carner how she saw Barcelona during one of her first visits there, in August 1949: 'One's first impression on arriving in Barcelona is that the FAI won the Civil War. And now it is almost possible to say that if you classify people according to their weight—decent folk, up to nine stone; scoundrels, upwards of nine stone—you will not be far wrong. Fortunately, there are still evergreen oaks, pine trees and broom, and it's possible that everything might be rebuilt out of these elements' (*Agonia de llum* 2002: 207). It is an 'ancient stability', Hepworth would say; the ancestral link that emerges in aid of the exile on her return to the destabilised city. It would not be far-fetched to think that this was Rodoreda's starting point for *La mort i la primavera*, a novel about resuscitated beings who wander in an ever-receding landscape. Nor far-fetched to think that here was the inspiration for her *Flors de debò*, on the off-chance nature itself might disappear from her native land.

The woman/home of the sculptor Louise Bourgeois is more directly related to exile, to the female condition and to childhood. Two images of her formulation, from 1945–1947, two drawings, are aligned in this reflection. They are, strangely, explicit and at the same time metaphorical. Their title is quite unequivocal, *Femme Maison*: a house that is a woman, and a woman that is a house; and these pieces express a radically new way of talking about and evoking womanhood, contrasting with the background of a tradition in art which had so exploited the female body. As strong as the cords which hold together Hepworth's stones from the same period,

there are here very evident points of connection with Rodoreda's women: Colometa, Aloma, Teresa Valldaura, Cecília Ce. There are links too with the women of Clarice Lispector, a writer who also lived some time in Switzerland (Berne) and in whom I detect enormous affinities with Rodoreda. Lispector's woman/home has a particularly vivid presence in *A Paixão segundo G.H.*, a novel that appeared in 1964, between *La plaça del Diamant* and *El carrer de les Camèlies*. Lispector is often, like Rodoreda, a writer who deals with time outside the frame of history, which in so many ways has been and still is woman's time: the woman shut up inside the home, weighed down by the home, merged into the home, woman-home.

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The last work from the 1950s that I want to put before us all is a film: *Europa 51* by Roberto Rossellini, starring Ingrid Bergman, where we find a kind of counter-depiction of *La plaça del Diamant*. Rossellini shows us the woman who represents the elites that rose to the top under fascism and the contradictions of a European humanism cast adrift between communism and Christianity after 1945. Rodoreda, by contrast, presents the woman who symbolises the pathos, the devastating loss of identity among the losers in the Civil War, victims of fascism living now in a ravaged and faceless city, with hardly any personality except that imposed by collective misfortune, neither heroic nor anti-heroic, neglected by consciousness. The name of Rossellini's protagonist is Irene, evoking the Greek word for peace, while Rodoreda's is Colometa, alluding also to the same idea as evoked in the silhouette of the dove in Picasso's famous drawing of 1949.

In 1947 Rossellini had made *Germania anno zero*, another film not unconnected with the work of Rodoreda. In *Europa 51*, his second film with Bergman after *Stromboli* (1949), Irene Girard is a foreigner in Italy. We do not know why she is there; hers is an unexplained exile, one of so many, a feature of the very condition of post-war life. The destruction that is about to befall her is a continuation of the war that she has probably spent beyond the range of the bombs and that now comes to settle accounts, in the Europe of 1951. A personal drama that becomes a collective image. Irene is a well-to-do, cosmopolitan woman, well-educated, and likeable, sensitive, typical of so many aspects of pre-war Europe. What transforms her is losing her eleven-year-old son, through her failure to look after him properly, for ignoring his fear.

She loses her son and loses her mind. Then she looks for a remedy by turning to others. First she finds men who are struggling in organised intellectual groups—political parties, journals, other collective organs—to give a voice to the defenceless, to people even more vulnerable than she is. Irene does not have the economic problems that are sucking out the life-blood of the poor, but she is more lost and disoriented than them.

Like Jesus Christ, the more she tries to do good, the more mistakes she makes. (On this point another film-maker comes to mind, another exile with certain things in common with Rodoreda: Luis Buñuel). Irene's acutely sensitive conscience prevents her from seeing through the dynamics of communism, mechanistic and *dirigiste*, while the organised powers of Christianity declare her to be mad. Irene Girard's traumatic and critical experience ends in the mad-house, as a face behind a window, while from the garden the humble people she has helped see her as a necessary presence, the only one who has time for them.

There is a parallel movement in *La plaça del Diamant*, where Natàlia-Colometa gradually turns into Senyora Natàlia—always without a family name, anonymous—having lived through the madness of the early post-war years, bereft even of the consolation of Christian religion, as is dramatically expressed in the novel by the scene of a hallucinatory Mass. This absolute lack of solace and of alternatives converts Colometa into the old woman whose personal crisis ends without any sublimation. She is the poignant figure sitting on a public bench in a Barcelona square, feeding birds. Whether they are pigeons or not, she does not say, limiting herself, this woman who in her memories names things so precisely, to describe them just as birds. She is able to survive her past because of the process of narrating it to us in that mnemonic and cathartic voice of hers, and through the scream that one morning she finally manages to release from within. All she can now say is that the birds are 'happy', that is all; and so the image of the birds becomes a vision of the ambiguous contradictions within the idea of Peace in the post-war period. Just as the same idea is expressed elliptically by Rossellini, her situation sums up the experience of interior exile.

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Let me conclude this Rodoredian journey by returning to a theme I introduced at the beginning of this talk, namely that of axes and means of knowledge or understanding.



Literature and the visual arts are special modes of making sense of the world. Is it too much to say that exile can also partake of this function? I think it is not.

The works that emerged from the modern experience of exile, works created out of the adventures, the hardships, the discoveries and the rewards of the emigration and diaspora that configure Europe's most recent post-war era, are *texts* in the fullest sense. The etymology of the word takes us back to the idea of 'weaving': an interweaving of language, expression, enunciation, denotation, narrative, debate, poetry, formal and moral veracity, a broadening of understanding and thus of aesthetic values. Mercè Rodoreda's painting and writing of the 1950s comes into focus for me in all the integral nobility of a literary home that houses, through the darkest days, the experience of exile to rescue it from oblivion.

*Translated by Alan Yates, 2007*