

## **Death and the Spring: Mercè Rodoreda and the Productive Unproductiveness of Late Style**

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For much of Mercè Rodoreda's career, her novel *La mort i la primavera* strongly resembled *Colometa*, the famed protagonist of *La plaça del diamant*: a motherless orphan adrift in an existential malaise without a clear future. Rodoreda originally submitted the novel to the *Premi de Sant Jordi* competition in 1961, prior to the publication of *La plaça del Diamant*, which itself was the runner-up for the award the previous year in 1960 under the title *Colometa*. In the two years following the competition, Rodoreda substantially revised the manuscript, adding characters and additional points of view.<sup>1</sup> In October of 1963, Rodoreda wrote to her editor, Joan Sales, that 'de moment he plantat *La mort i la primavera*. Ja xerro massa' (qtd. in Arnau 1997: 11). For nearly twenty years, *La mort i la primavera* sat unpublished before being resuscitated in the late 1970s, a few years prior to Rodoreda's death from liver cancer in 1983. Sales died later that same year. The arduous work of posthumous publication fell to Sales's widow, Núria Folch, who published the text's different versions in 1986.

Rodoreda infamously touched and retouched her novels, especially in the late period of her career. *Quanta, quanta guerra*, according to Ibarz, had been written and rewritten 'tres veces de arriba abajo y le había dedicado cuatro años largos' (2004: 233). The development of *La mort i la primavera* was more convoluted; what is certain is that Rodoreda was never satisfied with the work's conclusion despite that 'el original que trabajaba estaba bien definido, no hacía falta dar vueltas ni a los personajes ni a los capítulos' (Ibarz

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the text's different iterations, see Carme Arnau's excellent critical edition (1997: 22-38). Rodoreda, after having submitted the novel to the *Sant Jordi*, added key protagonists such as the *pres* and the *ferrater*'s son. Thematically, the novel slowly became more imbued with meditations on human nature.

2004: 234). Arnau echoes Ibarz's judgment, writing that the 1962 retouched version of *La mort i la primavera*, revised after the *Premi de Sant Jordi* competition, was a 'novel·la rodona i tancada' (1997: 24). But *dar vueltas* was precisely what Rodoreda did, which created unresolved tension and gaps of meaning in the work. The novel's narrator-protagonist, for example, commits suicide, which rebuffs his society's autocratic control over death. Suicide is prohibited, as is dying of natural causes. At the scheduled time of a community member's death, a mob forms that asphyxiates its victim by pouring cement into his or her mouth. The deceased is then placed within tree trunks in a forest adjacent to the town.

The narrator's suicide is a perfect denouement to a thematic exploration of achieving a degree of freedom in the face of a fascist society. And yet, at some point in the early 1960s, Rodoreda attached four unfinished fragments to the end of the novel where the postmortem narrator aims to recount his personal narrative. In lieu of narrating his life history, however, the protagonist finds himself within an empty, dehistoricized space where narration of the past is made impossible due to an absolute disengagement from society's rituals and myths. What ensues, in a fragment identified as the eighth chapter of the work's final section, is a stream of consciousness that begins with an entire section composed of a single run-on sentence. By opening up a closed conclusion, Rodoreda effectively unsettled the continuity of the work's thematization of individual freedom versus social expectation. The climactic tension of the narrator's suicide was hence severely muted.

Arnau published the first critical edition of *La mort i la primavera* in 1997, yet the novel, perhaps Rodoreda's most complex and disconcerting work, has received surprisingly little scholarly attention. In the attention the novel has received, little heed has been paid to contextualizing the work as a bookend to Rodoreda's career—a reshuffling of her oeuvre that is at once an uncanny repetition of the past and a turning back against the crystallized objectivity of a life that was nearly completed and a corpus of work that was nearly signified.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> McGiboney for example purports to 'not discuss the innumerable difficulties of interpretation presented by a narrative told by a dead character.

There has also been little speculation with respect to Rodoreda's incessant attachment to the novel, despite having *xerrat massa*. Indeed Rodoreda's insistent return to a work that stresses a harsh cyclicity of time suggests an unresolved tension with repetition itself.

Arkinstall contrasts the metaphors of winter and spring in the text with Enric Prat de la Riba's use of seasonal change as a symbol of national rebirth, whereas 'what is underlined in *La mort i la primavera* is the inability to break out of a relentless cycle of stasis' (2004: 173).<sup>3</sup> Arkinstall filters Rodoreda's novel through an optic of social and political critique of the Francoist regime, structuring the work along a nexus point where 'the desire to transform tradition and drive change' is 'opposed to the determination by sociopolitical hegemonies to preserve the status quo' (2004: 186). Such commentary is wholly convincing if one is considering the work as a byproduct of its initial 1960s milieu. What Arkinstall and other critics of the novel leave blank is the significance of a late-life return to the work where the notion of repetition and rebirth is made problematic on a personal level. The radical singularity of one's own impending death, after all, winnows perspective down to a highly subjective enclosure. What is at stake therefore is the effect that a 'late style' paradigm has on Rodoreda's final work-in-progress and how such a reading reflects

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Instead, it [her study] explores the function and significance of the taboos, rituals, and myths in *La mort i la primavera* from which the narrator-protagonist is eventually extricated' (1994: 61).

<sup>3</sup> The usage of seasonal change as a metaphor for the decline and rebirth of civilization may be plausibly linked to Prat de la Riba, but the wild popularity of Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* throughout Europe in the early 1920s is a convincing alternative possibility due to its sustained meditation on the idea of destiny. Spengler, whose work was referenced by Rodoreda's contemporary Salvador Espriu in his short story 'El país moribund', imbues the development of civilization with a connectedness to religion, where the autumn/winter phase of a culture's decadence is related to a loss of sacred belief whereas a springtime renewal is related to a religious upswing. Spengler also notes that through the optic of religion, which compares favorably with Rodoreda's lifeworld in *La mort i la primavera*, humankind's vision of the world becomes 'directed, irrevocable in every line, fate-laden' (1939: 117).

aspects of the author's biographical circumstances just before her death. Rodoreda, after all, was intensely private, and her fiction fills the space left vacant by the absence of a true autobiography.<sup>4</sup> In the case of *La mort i la primavera*, however, we are discussing a reversal of fortunes where life imitates literature; where a work from Rodoreda's past resurfaces late in her life due to its thematic resonance with her own biographical situation. Ibarz translates a letter from Rodoreda to Sales that is quite instructive in this respect: 'me sucede un poco como a las protagonistas de mis novelas, que todo se me hace ligeramente lejano y nebuloso' (2004: 191).

As he himself succumbed to leukemia in 2003, the scholar and literary critic Edward Said was completing a manuscript dedicated to the concept of late style. Said theorized that a lifespan can be commonly divided into three periods: birth/origin, continuous maturation, and old age. The first stage stems from a desire to ground the evolution of phenomena on a point of fixity; old age, as an end point, assures a definitive duration. A set duration allows for any evolutionary process to be extracted from the flow of time, analyzed, and ultimately understood, a point succinctly made by Reinhart Koselleck, who posits that without a before and after, 'no event can be thought and interpreted' (2002: 106). Life itself is one such event, and without a linear duration and definitive conclusion, analysis becomes problematic.

Said intuitively understood that each station of life carries with it a set of social expectations that define and, in many ways, limit behavior. Each evolutionary stage of life exhibits a particular timeliness, and 'the essential health of a human life has a great deal to do with its correspondence to its time, the fitting together of one to the other, and therefore its appropriateness or timeliness' (2006: 6). In the history of the humanities, however, some of the most innovative and original works were produced at 'inappropriate', late times. What Said refers to as late style is a process by which one rebuffs the timeliness

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<sup>4</sup> Castellet persuasively argues that 'tota la repressió voluntària que abocava sobre la seva vida, se li escapava, expressada literàriament, a través de les ficcions amb les quals disfressava els seus sentiments, les seves vivències, els racons secrets de la seva existència' (1998: 32).

of the third stage of existence and introduces ‘a nonharmonious, nonserene tension, and above all, a sort of deliberately unproductive productiveness going *against...*’ (2006: 7) within a corpus of work. Beethoven’s late symphonies, and their contribution to Theodor Adorno’s philosophy, Euripides’s late tragedies, in addition to Shakespeare’s final plays such as *The Tempest*, provide ample fodder for Said’s argument.

Late style is recognizable in its acknowledgment of the latent tensions built up within an artist’s oeuvre where meaning is thought to be closed and unproblematic. A late-age ‘going against’ has the effect of either exposing such hidden tensions or retrospectively creating a ripple effect in an artist’s past work. In Rodoreda’s case, late style is perceptible not only in the creation of a *new* work but also in the reinsertion of an old text into the present. In that vein, I will spend ample time in this essay considering the relationship between Rodoreda’s last original text, 1980’s *Quanta, quanta guerra*, and *La mort i la primavera*. *La mort i la primavera*, in my analysis, becomes a restless ghost within Rodoreda’s creative imagination. The haunting becomes more acute as Rodoreda’s life begins to mimic many of the narrator’s existential quandaries. I also put forth that *La mort i la primavera*’s resurrection from the dead function as a late-style gesture by problematizing existential freedom and the creation of being, the cyclicity of time, and the possibility of returning to personal origins –issues that also arise in *Quanta, quanta guerra*.

*La mort i la primavera*’s plot sketches a sacred time where personal freedom is exchanged for a predictable repetition of festivals, rituals, and behaviors. It could be argued that Rodoreda’s late-style re-engagement of the text appears tied to the radical modification of the text’s conclusion –the four unfinished fragments of what Arnau calls the third version of the novel– where closure is replaced by post-mortem ambiguity. Is a metaphysical rite of passage beyond death possible outside of society’s sacred rituals? How can one reconcile existential freedom with an irrational attraction to home? Answering these questions requires placing into dialogue three important aspects of Rodoreda’s biography that exerted a strong influence over her late-style production. First, I will look at Rodoreda’s transition from exile abroad to a different form of exile at ‘home’ on the Iberian Peninsula.

This point explores the possibility that exile is never homogenous; being exiled within a home that has become uncanny corresponds to a different novelistic form than an exile abroad that is fed by abstracted nostalgia. Second, I will compare the geographical similarities between Romanyà de la Selva, Rodoreda's final place of residence, and the homogenous empty space sketched in *La mort i la primavera*'s unfinished conclusion. Finally, I will examine the relationship between the death of Armand Obiols [Joan Prat i Esteve] – Rodoreda's longtime partner and critic – and the author's late-style creative arc. The narrative freedom opened up by the absence of an interlocutor creates a double bind. It achieves what Jacques Derrida calls the gift of death – a one-to-one encounter with the self beyond ethics – while concurrently creating an absolute freedom that is pursuant to existential anguish. On this point, Rodoreda's discourse resonates with one of her philosophical influences: Jean-Paul Sartre.<sup>5</sup>

Folch questions (2000: 10), perhaps rhetorically, the reasoning behind reconsidering a novel written while Rodoreda was an exiled middle-aged woman, first exclusively in France until 1954 and thereafter in Geneva. Rodoreda's 1972 return to Romanyà de la Selva, in the Gironan countryside, is in fact characterized by Kathleen McNerney as antithetical to the strictures typical of exile: 'At long last, she could buy the clothes she always wanted, have a garden, get to Barcelona conveniently, and see a few old friends' (1994: 9). Romanyà, continues Carme Arnau, represented for Rodoreda an 'impressió de llibertat, de plenitud' (1992: 118) that contrasted with the suffocating urban flats the author occupied in Paris, Geneva, and Barcelona. In contrast to McNerney's and Arnau's depictions of Romanyà, *La mort i la primavera* presents quite a different world that is steeped in immobility and closure, as reflected in the set of rituals strictly determining the activity and ontological possibility of the work's denizens. This reflects biographically the part of Rodoreda's return left unmentioned by McNerney: Rodoreda, from the perches of

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<sup>5</sup> Arnau notes that Sartre was an artist that 'va marcar' Rodoreda: 'Mercè Rodoreda llegeix Gide, però sobretot Sartre, del qual copiarà fragments o frases en papers personals i, sense citar-lo, l'esmentarà al pròleg de *Mirall trencat*' (1997: 38-39).

her apartment in Balma, encountered a definitive exile in the sense that the country had lost its linguistic base and she herself had lost her paternal inheritance. Ibarz poignantly remarks that when Rodoreda abandoned Barcelona and moved to the Baix Empordà:

Tantas cosas se rompían, se habían roto. Había dejado de tratar a su familia en Barcelona y tal vez no podría vivir ya en Ginebra, en un piso a nombre de Prat...La habitación de París era prestada, el piso de Ginebra estaba a nombre de quien fue su amante, la casa familiar de Barcelona ya no existía. (2004: 16)

The disappearance of the family home in Barcelona is reflected in the plot of Rodoreda's novel *Mirall trencat*, which was finally completed in 1974. *Quanta, quanta guerra*'s narrator, in turn, leaves home on a journey of self-initiation only to arrive back at his place of origin, which certainly fits Rodoreda's own post-Civil War trajectory. Romanyà de la Selva functioned as a private space of freedom that carried with it Rodoreda's individual insignia, both in terms of ownership and architectural style. (She oversaw the construction of her home.) If the Baix Empordà truly functioned as a liberating space free of the limitations imposed by Rodoreda's previous places of residence, it is worth questioning why her literary attention was focused on worlds either steeped in ritual closure (*La mort i la primavera*) or where freedom translates into a movement from one prison to another (*Quanta, quanta guerra*).

Rodoreda's escape to the La Selva countryside was moreover an exile toward an untarnished place of national origin. Romanyà was at once an idyllic escape into nature and a geographical perch from which to observe those elements of Catalonia's landscape that held prominent places in poetic treatments of the patria, such as in Verdaguer's and Maragall's work. In the words of Castellet, Rodoreda's house was a:

Mirador sobre Catalunya, propici a la reflexió i al gaudi. A llevant, sobre el mar...i a ponent, per sobre els alzinars de les Gavarres, el Montseny, i amb bon temps, Montserrat al fons. Cap al nord es veien els Pirineus i la costa, potser fins al golf de Roses. (1988: 47)

Perhaps the landscape, as it did for Verdaguer when he wrote ‘contemplo el mar i el cel, i llur grandesa / m’aixafa com un pes’, solicited within Rodoreda’s mind a sublime confrontation with the self. An inscription at the beginning of *La mort i la primavera* in fact bears a remarkable resemblance to Verdaguer’s verse: ‘el misteri d’aquest pes que porto adintre i que no em deixa respirar.’ On one hand, Romanyà was an idyllic repose; on the other, it exposed to Rodoreda a panorama of national spaces that held parts of her personal history that still persisted –etched onto the landscape like extinguished wildfires.

These precise circumstances describe the narrator-protagonist’s final resting place in *La mort i la primavera*. After his suicide, the narrator observes his previous lifeworld from an elevated perspective: ‘em giro de totes bandes’ (2000a: 168), and yet ‘la meva vida tancada sola i sense mi encara pateix en alguna banda’ (2000a: 169). Rodoreda, like the narrator-protagonist, is both there and yet not there; still able to observe life down below without being able to inflect what occurred in the past. In this respect, Rodoreda resembles less a Verdaguer poem than Victor Català’s Mila in *Solitud*.

While exiled abroad, Rodoreda’s absolute disconnection from the active life of the country allowed nostalgia and memory spaces to deflect a recognition that her place of origin had transitioned from being familiar to uncanny. Her literary production prior to the 1970s emitted melancholic tones of irreparable loss, meaning that what remained within memory was radically distanced from the active life of present consciousness. Rodoreda described such an image of Catalonia in a 1973 exchange with Josep Maria Castellet in her Geneva flat:

Veus aquestes quatre parets? Això ha estat Catalunya per a mi durant molts anys: Catalunya, una abstracció i una nostàlgia, és a dir, tot el que s’ha viscut intensament i s’acaba. He tornat intermitentment a Catalunya aquests darrers anys. Sota el franquisme, tot m’ha semblat embastardit i perdut. (qtd. in Castellet 1988: 41)

In Geneva, Rodoreda’s relationship with Catalonia differed greatly from the environment she encountered upon returning to the



Iberian Peninsula in the early 1970s. Before, her exile abroad sustained a definitive image of the country within memory, which influenced the shape of novels such as *La plaça del diamant* and *Mirall trencat*, where the family's ruin and disintegration are firmly rooted in the past without a possibility of flaring up in the present. Having moved back to the Iberian Peninsula, Rodoreda's flight to the countryside appears more than a simple search for a plot of land with which to till a garden. Catalonia, tainted by decades of dictatorship, had become uncanny instead of irretrievably lost: still home, yet unsettlingly so.<sup>6</sup>

*La mort i la primavera* has been characterized (Pérez 1991) as a stylistic outlier within Rodoreda's oeuvre, with its closest companion being *Quanta, quanta guerra*, 'insofar as both possess epic dimensions, feature an adolescent male protagonist-narrator, and involve mythic conceptions of time' (179). *Quanta, quanta guerra* features a male protagonist that abandons the familial hearth, the site where paternal inheritance is placed and knowledge is passed, only to return disillusioned with a firm grasp on humankind's existential anguish. Arnau's description of Romanyà as a sought-after sanctuary of personal freedom is indeed echoed by Rodoreda in her characterization of *Quanta, quanta guerra*'s protagonist, Adrià Guinart, in the novel's prologue: 'Al meu Adrià l'impulsa a anar-se'n de casa la seva aspiració de la llibertat' (23). At the same time, one also questions if Adrià's freedom of movement, and disillusioned return, is also reflective of Rodoreda's own life.

At the conclusion of *Quanta, quanta guerra*, Guinart's freedom to undergo a self-initiation results in a Sartrean questioning of the

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<sup>6</sup> This point is explicated particularly well by Carme Arnau: 'De fet, la Barcelona profundament catalana que conegué l'autora ha desaparegut totalment i, per aquest motiu, el pis que s'havia comprat a Barcelona, a finals dels anys seixanta, no li acabava d'agradar' (1992: 110). Arnau, in reference to Rodoreda's escape to Romanyà de la Selva, also characterizes the countryside in a similar state of national denaturalization. Rodoreda's house in Romanyà was at the time an island that had been saved from 'l'especulació i de les construccions, sovint deplorables, que han malmès el poble de la costa que es troben a tocar: Sant Feliu de Guíxols, Palamós, Platja d'Aro' (1992: 109).

ultimate virtue of unbridled possibility. Rodoreda herself, in the novel's prologue, notes that 'aquesta llibertat tan cantada' is nothing more than 'un canvi de presó' (2000b: 23). If freedom is nothing more than a series of different prisons, then freedom does not really exist at all. Guinart's predicament – a movement from one prison to another – seems consistent with Rodoreda's experience of exile outside of Catalonia. After escaping to France, Rodoreda experienced years of hardship and extreme poverty. War followed her from place to place: Having endured the Spanish Civil War, the Second World War was waiting north of the Pyrenees. Rodoreda's feelings of existential disjointedness continued in the decades after the Second World War. In a letter to Anna Murià in 1956, Rodoreda admits to feeling more at home in Paris than in Geneva. 'A Ginebra m'hi han passat moltes coses desagradables però, a part d'això, sempre m'hi he sentit exiliada' (qtd. in Ibarz 2004: 418). Geneva, in other words, was just one more prison.

Experiencing life as a series of prisons concludes with a disenchanting return to the familial hearth, but without an idealization of origin. And indeed Guinart, at the conclusion of *Quanta, quanta guerra*, completes the myth of self-initiation by returning having 'vist la mort de la vora. I el mal.... ¿On era a casa? ¿Encara tenia casa?' (2000b: 246). In spite of all the maturation and experience acquired during Guinart's outward journey, a repetition-compulsion intractably persists that pushes him in the direction of home, which will never again be 'home' due to the passing of time and violence of war. Origin, as a physical space, is unreachable and the return to an uncanny home has an unsettling effect on the therapeutic function of memory, turning what was formerly a nostalgic abstraction into an unsettling, yet familiar, landscape open to the senses.

Under such circumstances, why return home, and remain there atop a panoramic observational perch (as does the narrator of *La mort i la primavera* after his suicide)? Freud's early thoughts on the uncanny [*unheimlich*] stress that an instinctual pull toward repetition, which a return to one's origin indeed is, is often accompanied by distressing sentiments. Freud posits the existence of a repetition compulsion that supersedes desire itself and compels human beings to find meaningful significance in the re-occurrence of events. This

compulsion to repeat exists ‘in the very nature of the instincts –a principle powerful enough to overrule the pleasure-principle’ (1959: 391).<sup>7</sup> Such an instinctual drive, however, is supposed to remain within the subconscious, making repetition a phenomenon that is attributable to external, animistic forces. The uncanny is adept at producing anxiety because repetition tends to inadvertently release aspects of a repeated event that had been repressed. For Rodoreda, this means that the *unheimlich* nature of Catalonia after her return was not attributable to a simple variance between her mental image of the country and the adulteration caused by Francoism. Rather, certain disagreeable elements of her home that had been wiped from existence in her abstracted, nostalgic Catalonia while in France and Switzerland *still* persisted and therefore uncovered something that ought to have been hidden. The uncanny is therefore structured around an embedded repetition compulsion that goes against the pleasure principle by opening up what is repressed.

Placing *Quanta, quanta guerra*’s Guinart next to the narrator-protagonist of *La mort i la primavera* re-enacts Freud’s thoughts on the uncanny. The logical continuity of these two novels, despite being written decades apart, is itself disconcerting and indicative of Rodoreda’s late-style mindset in the early 1980s. Guinart follows the pattern of such an origin-repetition compulsion by completing an existential circle and returning, disenchanted, to his home. The narrator-protagonist of *La mort i la primavera*, in turn, brings to the fore those elements of the repressed that cannot remain hidden due to the proximity between the self and those elements of society that fed his urge to commit suicide. Despite having escaped the village’s ritualistic treatment of death and the rigidity of its activity, the

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<sup>7</sup> Rodoreda hints at such an instinct in *La mort i la primavera* in a comparison between humankind and the town’s river: ‘el riu és com un home. Sempre pel mateix camí assenyalat, i si de vegades el riu vessa com el cor d’un home quan no pot més, una llei el torna a conduir’ (2000a: 94). Existential freedom therefore compares favorably to the liminal periods of time where sacrilege is permitted or moments of crisis where violence erupts in the form of anti-clerical or anti-establishment action. Once such tension is expelled, an instinct returns whereby humankind drifts back to the ritual behavior linked to ‘home’ as thought it were a repetition compulsion.

narrator remarks at the beginning of his first post-mortem fragment that ‘quan vull la noia de l’aigua vénen i van les figures de fang apilotades i barrejades les que tenen dos braços i les que només tenen un i el color del tall de la destrat i el color del pinyol del dintre dels arbres dels arbres dels morts...’ (2000a: 168). In spite of the narrator’s desire to recall one thing (*la noia de l’aigua*), what comes to mind are two classes of victims, both sacrificed as part of social rituals: the muddy, piled up bodies of the men chosen to traverse the village’s underground river each Spring and the color of the hatchet used to bore a hole in the trees of the dead. The pleasure principle’s attachment to memory is overridden with the images of those below still actively participating in the structures that the narrator sacrificed his own life in order to escape.

*La mort i la primavera*, a novel steeped in the daemonic roots of human repetition, picks up so seamlessly where *Quanta, quanta guerra* leaves off that a similar feeling of *unheimlich* is aroused in the work’s own resuscitation from the dead. Indeed a line from *La mort i la primavera* spoken by the *pres*, a former thief placed in a public cage within the village, nearly replicates verbatim Rodoreda’s thoughts on Guinart’s freedom: ‘I va dir que ell mateix era la seva presó. I tots van amb la seva presó...que tot era igual i que només canviava el costum’ (2000b: 93). Like its immediate predecessor, *La mort i la primavera* is also a novel of initiation, but without the *Bildungsroman* motif of leaving home never to return. Here home is where one is exiled, which is precisely the *stimmung* that Said attributes to late style, where readerly expectations built up over the course of a career and the kind of behavior deemed to be timely for an ending stage of life are what serve as an entrapment.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> In the 1970s and early 1980s, Rodoreda’s work finally attracted a dedicated readership, critical attention, and the static objectification that the study of her work entailed. Edicions 62 began publishing her *Obres completes* in 1976, *La plaça del diamant* began to be widely translated in the early 1970s, and critical studies of Rodoreda’s work began to appear in the late ’70s. The very notion of a ‘late’ style is predicated on there being a previously defined style against which the author pushes back. Without question critical attention and wide readership play a role in articulating style, which Castellet argues may have been only subconsciously known to Rodoreda herself:

Guinart's anxiety ridden experience of freedom is exchanged in *La mort i la primavera* for a different component of Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy: the absolute need to completely place oneself outside of a process in order to analyze it and move beyond the past toward a new project. Sartre writes that human beings can only make Being an object of interrogation if it is 'held up to view as a totality. He must be able to put himself *outside* of being and by the same stroke weaken the structure of the being of being' (1984: 59). The narrator-protagonist's suicide is a clear attempt to step outside of the unwieldy circle of his lifeworld, and his elevated position above the village suggests the possibility of holding up society's rituals and customs to interrogation. Sartre stresses, however, that consciousness can only disinvest itself from being by not 'suffering what is' (1984: 562). Humankind, as a *néгатité*, cannot annihilate a factual state of existence while remaining invested in a previous project of existence. This is the root of the narrator-protagonist's aporia at the conclusion of *La mort i la primavera*: he floats above the fray yet simultaneously suffers from the sight of the ongoing sacrifice of victims and the strict determination of his people's right to death. This is an integral part of his history, and therefore precludes any post-mortem disinvestment: 'la meua vida...encara pateix en alguna banda'.

The geographic placement of Romanyà de la Selva and the different experiences of exile only partly explain *La mort i la primavera*'s unwieldy attachment to Rodoreda's late-life consciousness. The novel's presentation of a world where change is eschewed and identity is regulated by the Other is resolved by the narrator killing himself in order to achieve narrativistic freedom. The resistance to change is intimately tied to the village's stunted temporality. Pérez classifies *La mort i la primavera* as atemporal and ambiguous with respect to the historical time of its emplotment (1991: 183). A bevy of rituals and mechanical responses, most of which correspond to the cycle of seasons, also have the effect of fending off

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'L'escriptura, no hi ha dubte, era el seu alliberament...i aquest és un altre problema, el qual fa referència als misteris de la creació artística. ¿Fins a quin punt no era *secreta* fins i tot per a ella mateixa? I, si no ho era, jugava magistralment a demostrar-ho de cara als altres' (1998: 32).

destruction and change. The most notable example is the casting of a sacrificial scapegoat down a subterranean river underneath the village every Spring, but the entire lifeworld of the text revolves around other idiosyncratic practices, such as the locking up of children in small cabinets while the adults parade in a burial procession to a forest outside of the village. Thereafter, everyone celebrates by lighting bonfires in the stables and sacrificing pregnant horses for a communal meal. The community is thus forever decaying and rebirthing, but the populace believes the decay and rebirth to always be the same repetition: 'l'aigua que venia feia la mateixa olor que l'aigua enduta. Igual, sempre igual' (2000a: 81).

In a highly symbolic gesture, a clock atop a slaughterhouse bell tower and a sundial, the only means of telling time in the village, are without hands. The town rests perilously above its river, which when swollen with springtime rains and mountain run-off is placated by choosing a sacrificial victim via the drawing of straws. This points to the very function of sacrifice in elementary religious consciousness. The river represents a malevolent force that threatens the community's potential of temporal fixity, which paradoxically produces a spatial sacralization. The river, as a place in which to ground origin, resists its more traditional metaphorical connection to change: 'Passava i passava la mà per damunt de la roca envescada i l'aigua feia onades grasses contra la roca i em gronxaven. Em va semblar que no hi havia temps, vull dir que el temps no era enlloc' (2000a: 135).<sup>9</sup> In order to achieve a degree of freedom that might possibly permit personal change, the narrator must resort to death.

One of Rodoreda's post-*Sant Jordi* additions to the fourth part's conclusion alludes to such a beyond-time freedom. The narrator remarks, just prior to killing himself, that 'la meva vida la puc començar a explicar per on vull, la puc explicar d'una manera diferent' (2000a: 160). Rodoreda, without question, added this line of dialogue with an eye toward attaching an eighth chapter of post-

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<sup>9</sup> Humankind inevitably denies the persistence of change by inflecting temporal parlance and practice with spatial concepts and vocabulary, which Henri Begson remarks is most evident in the practice of measuring time according to mathematical principles, such as extension (2007: 2).

mortem narration. Beyond the village's static, immobile circularity, there exists narrative possibility by regaining one's control over death. As is stated earlier, opening up the conclusion of the novel greatly unsettles the cohesion of the work's original plot, which features a world that is paradoxically religious but without the possibility of salvation; cement was placed, in fact, within the mouths of the deceased so that their souls could never escape. Arkinstall reads the practice, in reference to a point in the novel where the village's *senyor* is pinned down in a public square, as 'an attempt to contain life beyond the limits of life' and takes 'to an extreme the notion that body and soul, individual and nation, are one and must be preserved intact', which is the essence of a totalitarian system (2004: 184).

In *La mort i la primavera*, traditional rites and myths bear the burden of regulating life and death, but they snatch away what Jacques Derrida calls the 'gift of death'; i.e., being capable of rescinding the ethical duty to others by refusing to expropriate the right to one's own death in a one to one encounter with the self.<sup>10</sup> In order to regain an artistic gift of death, the novelist must reject an ethical duty to the critical Other and the ways that he or she defines identity. Rodoreda, on the brink of her own death, returns to a novelistic world where time and history is closely regulated and change is discouraged through the sacralization of ritual. Going against history, and winning the right to 'començar a explicar per on vull' one's artistic and vital trajectory, regains the gift of death by blaspheming sacred time and its strict determination of the community's treatment of expiration. In terms of late style, choosing to return to a work embedded in the past and affixing it to a late-life work like *Quanta, quanta guerra* is also a proclamation of the right to define one's artistic afterlife. Re-engaging *La mort i la primavera*, and attaching it stylistically to *Quanta, quanta guerra*, allows Rodoreda to erect a circular creative arc where the end of her artistic life returns to its nascent stages, which eschews a linear,

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<sup>10</sup> Derrida notes that 'one has to take into account the uniqueness and irreplaceable singularity of the self as the means by which...existence excludes every possible substitution...Death is very much that which nobody can undergo or confront in my place. My irreplaceability is therefore conferred, delivered, 'given,' one can say, by death' (1992: 41).

canonic approach to artistry. In terms of the gift of death, this is a one-to-one encounter where the artist as a neophile engages her later self at the point of expiration.

*La mort i la primavera*'s protagonist uses his own death as a marker by which a freedom of narration is gained post-mortem. In Rodoreda's case, her own unconditional writerly freedom was perhaps gained not by her own passing but by the death of her longtime partner, Armand Obiols, in 1971. In the same exchange in Geneva in 1973 not long after Obiols's death, Rodoreda announced to Castellet her intention to retire from writing: 'Jo escrivia només per a l'Obiols, i ara ja no hi és' (1998: 41). Obiols is characterized by Rodoreda as a fierce critic, especially of his own work. (This is Rodoreda's explanation for Obiols's own incapacity to ever publish anything original.) While exiled in France and Switzerland, without critical attention in Spain, Obiols was perhaps one of Rodoreda's only critical readers, and her work needed to pass his muster: 'Jo escrivia esperant que tornés Obiols... I quan venia li llegia el que havia escrit: tenia un esperit terriblement crític...' (1988: 42). Without Obiols's watchful eye, Rodoreda indeed discovered a different writing routine and finally completed and published her most ambitious novel, *Mirall trencat*, in 1974. *Quanta, quanta Guerra*, and the recuperation of *La mort i la primavera*, each belong to Rodoreda's post-Obiols late-style period of artistic production, and the post-mortem addendum to the latter eerily resonates with the disappearance of the 'Other' in Rodoreda's creative life.

*La mort i la primavera*, after 1972, was notable in its being one of the few works from the Obiols-era that remained unfinished. Throughout the work's original gestation, Obiols assumed the role of editor and closely vetted modifications to the text. Rodoreda's official editor, Joan Sales, at the time gave the work a chilly reception, which Arnau attributes to the novel's refusal of realism in favor of the fantastic (1997: 18). In letters published in Arnau's meticulously researched critical edition of the novel, Obiols steps in for Sales and assumes an advisory role. As Arnau notes, Prat 'recomana a Mercè que no es precipiti ni es posi nerviosa perquè la novel·la es complica en una revisió que és més aviat una ampliació que aporta uns canvis substancials.' (1997: 19)



At the point where Catalonia had devolved into a nostalgic abstraction and her fiercest critic had disappeared, it is plausible that Rodoreda returned to *La mort i la primavera* with the intention of writing for and to herself –the long sought after one-to-one encounter encapsulated within the gift of death. The narrator-protagonist's intention to tell his story 'd'on vull' seems equally applicable to Rodoreda's own capacity to revise the novel beyond Obiols's shadow. An author's oeuvre, and 'what came before', is itself a sacred regulator of what is expected to be repeated in future offerings, but Rodoreda's return to the past indicates that a late style may also come about with the removal of a previous precondition, which results in the freedom to define what an author deems to be an authentic or true form of writing. However for Guinart, the narrator-protagonist of *La mort i la primavera*, and possibly Rodoreda herself, freedom becomes problematic in and of itself. Without the Other as interlocutor, and in the absence of the mythical and metaphysical structures of society that create subjectivity, individual freedom transforms into an aporia. For Rodoreda, Obiols provided a stamp of confidence and intimate disclosure that helped give *La mort i la primavera* its most substantial revisions. Without Obiols, it is possible that Rodoreda could do nothing other than unproductively *donar voltes*.

What lacks for the narrator-protagonist of *La mort i la primavera* in the eighth chapter of the novel's fourth part is a clearly defined rite of passage beyond death and beyond time, where one's soul is not encased within a cement entrapment. The existential crisis that completes Guinart's experience of freedom and his instinctual pull toward an inaccessible home in *Quanta, quanta guerra* bears a logical consistency with the unfettered potential to recast one's own fictive narrative at the conclusion of *La mort i la primavera*. Both characters begin their journeys with an inexhaustible desire for freedom but end up back home in a state of utter alienation and disenchantment. Despite the freedom to narrate and think, origin, in the words of Karl Kraus, remains the obstinate goal, yet an unresolved tension ensues due to the impossibility of disinvesting oneself from the past, the hallmark of Said's late style mood.

Prior to the narrator's death in *La mort i la primavera*, identity is established reflectively; society and its bevy of rituals hypostatistically

offers a collective image to which each individual citizen identifies. Society, and its sacred rhythms, function as a mirror whose reflection is accepted without critical examination. In death, the protagonist cannot rebuff the urge to return home –like Guinart. ‘Tornar. Deixar-me voltar per les coses...tornar per refer per afegir per canviar...’ (2000a: 169). In such a state, however, natural phenomena that were previously explainable through myth revert back to a mysterious state: ‘de vegades i cada dia més les coses vénen no sé, com vénen, com les fulles quan només en queda el que les fa’ (168). *Quanta, quanta guerra*, a novel replete with angels, gives way to a listless phantasm that silently haunts a home made totally inaccessible where the simplest of movements lose meaning outside of the rhythms of social practice.

Outside of the regulating temporal rhythms of society, *La mort i la primavera*’s narrator enters into a kind of homogenous empty time that is devoid of historicity. When it comes to narration, and storytelling, being embedded within the discursivity of culture is highly significant. From a suspended, alienated position –whether it be a post-mortem limbo or a panoramic *mirador* in the Baix Empordà– *començar per on vull* is a more difficult proposition than it seems at first glance. ‘Tornar per refer, per afegir’ is complicated, if not made entirely impossible, when one’s life is complete –‘tancada’ (2000a: 169)– and still suffering ‘en alguna banda...Jo no sóc enlloc m’he esborrat d’uns camins i d’uns arbres...Però perquè hi havia estat alguna cosa queda’ (2000a: 169). This paradox –of being both nowhere and everywhere at once– creates a narrativistic aporia that resists a definitive conclusion. Hence, the narrator exasperatingly asks the following rhetorical question: ‘Començar què?’ (2000a: 170). Such non-harmonious, non-serene tension at the conclusion of a life event defines Said’s late style, and perhaps explains a mood that befit Rodoreda in her final years.

Thinking of Rodoreda’s last artistic efforts through a late-style paradigm forces the critic to search for friction and hidden tension. At the end of Rodoreda’s career, this kind of tension emerges in the creation of one novel, *Quanta, quanta guerra*, that narrates the futility of searching for personal freedom, and the incapacity to finish an earlier work where themes of repetition, a problematic afterlife, and

the difficulty of unfettered narration predominate. I endeavored to filter these points of friction through Rodoreda's biography, based on detailed accounts provided by Castellet, Arnau, and others. Many of the frayed ends in *La mort i la primavera*, mostly in the four unfinished fragments beyond the narrator-protagonist's death, resonate with Rodoreda's late life, despite having been written decades earlier. Life imitates fiction and it is very possible that Rodoreda, from her flat in Geneva, could foresee the experience of internal exile and post-Obiols life awaiting her in Iberia. What is perhaps most tragic is that Romanyà de la Selva, as a *mirador* of Catalonia, failed to dispel such feelings of existential anguish and perhaps exasperated uncanny sentiments.

*La mort i la primavera*, as an unfinished novel with an unconvincing conclusion and several gaps in its plot, is more than simply unproductive, however. Said stresses that late style bears an unproductive productiveness, and in Rodoreda's case this is undeniable when looking at the shape of modernity in the wake of the author's death. Said notes that an artist beset with late style 'is *in*, but oddly *apart* from the present' (2006: 24), and this applies to Rodoreda with respect to her national climate in the early 1980s. Not long into the Spanish transition to democracy, when the PSOE was on the verge of controlling the government, youth culture and *la movida* was catching its stride, and Almodóvar was releasing satirical mockeries of traditional moralism steeped in popular kitsch, Rodoreda wrote one new novel (*Quanta, quanta guerra*) and re-engaged another where a rigid mythical time prevails. A national *zeitgeist* focused on progression and a disavowal of the mythical, sacred time of dictatorship certainly places Rodoreda against her epoch.

Late style –an untimely going against– is unproductive in the sense that death precludes the development of a new creative arc and it resists the progressive movement of its present. Late style tends to also be productive, however, in its anticipation of a future historical time in which the artist is absent. A late-style concern that is originally limited to a narrowed subjectivity has the potential to be critically positioned by others within a broader perspective at a later point. In Rodoreda's case, her addendum to *La mort i la primavera* –a post-mortem observation of society by the narrator from within a

homogenous empty space— emphasizes the persistence of a historical, sacred time that is unchanged by the disappearance of a single member of the body politic. Concretely, Rodoreda foresees the difficulty in transitioning from one historical temporality to another due to the earnestness and persistence of sacred tradition —which certainly reverberates throughout late twentieth-century and present-day Spain. Resina in particular espouses the pernicious fiction inherent in the Spanish transition’s attempt to stem history’s flow in a culture where ‘the Civil War continues to be a central referent for the collective self-perception of Spanish citizens’ (2010: 225). A particular continuity of Franco’s historical time that remains intact, continues Resina, is precisely a disavowal of the ritual of burial for many of the victims. Rodoreda’s novel demonstrates at a minimum that sacred time is never dependent on a single actor and instead finds its dynamism in the collective *Weltanschauungen* of the body politic; moreover, once ritual is disrupted, the very coherence of a collective is threatened as the barrier between exclusion and admittance becomes ever more tenebrous. A broader, and more tangential, concern of this essay is therefore how the resistant ‘apart’ of a late style often becomes, after the author’s death, relevant to the concerns of a later period. Lateness, in other words, becomes timely.

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