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A Note on the Language of La plaça del Diamant

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A NOTE ON THE LANGUAGE
OF *LA PLAÇA DEL DIAMANT*

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Natàlia meets Quimet. They marry, have children. Quimet dies in a war. Natàlia suffers, considers suicide. She remarries, learns to be happy. This plot outline sounds like the script of a very sentimental movie, but *La plaça del Diamant* is quite unsentimental. If, as William Butler Yeats has suggested, «sentimentality is the will doing the work of the imagination». *La plaça del Diamant* escapes sentimentality by forcing the reader to imagine Natàlia's life. Written in a deceptively naive style, the novel reproduces the shock of experience directly, and the reader experiences circumstances and revelations with the narrator. Rodoreda does not will the reader to sympathize with the limitations linguistically, and the reader instantiates and makes inferences from these linguistic patterns in the act of reading.

Rodoreda's handling of first person narration is particularly interesting, because of the tightly controlled extent to which she allows Natàlia's personality to reveal itself. First person narration can be used to foreground the personality of a narrator, as in, for example, Thomas Berger's *Little Big Man* or Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*. In reading these novels, the reader is always aware of how clever the narrator (and, therefore, the novelist) is. Natàlia, in contrast, is hardly clever. In fact, narrating her own life story seems to be almost beyond her powers. She often says things like: «There are things that are blurry», or «I don't know what I thought», or «I don't know if I've explained myself». By creating an awkward narrator, Rodoreda takes herself out of the novel. The reader finally becomes convinced that s/he is hearing someone named Natàlia try and explain what has happened to her. It is one of the ironies of fiction that Rodoreda's art achieves its highest expression in the words of an artless narrator.

If the reader knows very little about Natàlia, it is simply because Natàlia-narrator does not understand Natàlia-character very well. There are a lot of intriguing gray areas in Natàlia's story, which the reader begins to try and illuminate. Because so much is missing, the reader is forced to look for a pattern in the seemingly disjointed story that is being told, just as Natàlia-narrator is looking for a patterns in the seemingly meaningless suffering of Natàlia-character. Natàlia creates the illusion that in the act of remembering and telling, she can find in the reader's attention the reason for her own existence.¹ The reader is invited to share intimate realizations about Natàlia with the narrator, to re-experience events which overwhelm both narrator and reader, to share in searching for the key to the meaning of Natàlia's past.

Natàlia is not entirely at the mercy of history, however; she is much more than a victim. She is able, except when the war overwhelms her, to establish continuity and serenity in her home. Rodoreda sets up, linguistically and thematically, a tension between Natàlia's apparent powerlessness and her effort — chronicled in her autobiography — to make sense of her life. This tension can be observed in the language in which the novel is written. The Catalan spoken by the narrator (who could not, given the linguistic politics of the time, have studied the language in school) is grammatically perfect and free of Castilian influence.² Rodoreda suggests colloquial speech; she does not reproduce it. She writes instead in a kind of universal, correct, orthodox pan-dialectical Catalan. This variation on the generic first person narrator, whom we might have expected to reproduce colloquial speech on paper, is one of the ways in which Rodoreda signals the narrator's hard-won ability to separate herself from her own life story.

The linguistic structure of the novel is mimetic to the unfold-

¹ Maria Aurèlia Capmany, «Mercè Rodoreda o les coses de la vida», *Serra d'Or*, 104 (May 1968), 49.

² Josep Miquel Sobré, «L'artifici de *La plaça del Diamant*: un estudi lingüístic», in *In memoriam Carles Riba: 1959-1969*, Barcelona, Ed. Ariel, 1973, pp. 364-65.

ing of Natàlia's personality, and as the reader processes the language of the novel, s/he actually participates in finding out what Natàlia finds out about herself.

In this brief note, we will discuss only two of the linguistic devices which Rodoreda uses to produce mimesis.³ One of these is quite straightforward. Natàlia's vocabulary is very limited when she is describing her life at home; she uses the same words over and over, just as she performs the same tasks over and over. Her vocabulary becomes dramatically richer when she is out of her house, gazing at shop windows or looking around the market. Rodoreda has created a lexical equation: limitation of vocabulary is to limited lifestyle as richness of vocabulary is to freedom from restraint.

The second linguistic device is much more complex. Analysis of the case role played by the narrator (that is, the relationship in a clause between the noun/pronoun naming the narrator and the verb) shows a dramatic contrast between the role played by Natàlia in the climactic scene in the novel and the role played by her in other key scenes. In Catalan, as in many other languages, the category «subject» is not a semantic category; rather, «subject» is a purely syntactic category. Entities are categorized as subjects if they govern verb agreement; the semantic nature of the relationship between subject noun and its verb is irrelevant to this categorization. All kinds of entities bearing all kinds of relationships to verbal situations are included in the subject category. Because of this mismatch between syntactic and semantic roles, it is necessary to do a case role analysis of the text in order to discover the role(s) in which the narrator casts herself. The syntactic role of subject must not be confused with the semantic role of agent.⁴

³ An expanded version of this note, which discusses verb clause types and tense and aspect choices, is forthcoming.

⁴ For information on case grammar see Charles J. Fillmore, «The Case for Case», in *Universals in Linguistic Theory*, ed. Emmon Bach and Robert T. Harms. New York, Holt, Rhinehart and Winston, 1968, and Fillmore, «The Case for Case

What we are particularly interested in is the extent to which Natàlia plays the semantic role of agent in the novel. Agents, in grammar, are entities that carry out purposeful, willed actions. It is notable that Natàlia, though she is telling her own story, is infrequently the subject of the verbs she uses, and even less frequently the agent. For example, in the opening scene of the novel, in which Natàlia meets the man who will become her first husband, she plays the agentive role only 20% of the time. At her own wedding, she is the agent only 6% of the time. When her first child is born, she is the agent only 12% of the time. In the episode in which she makes preparations to kill herself and her children, where one might expect more voluntary participation from Natàlia, because she is acting alone to resolve her problems, she is agentive only 24% of the time.

Throughout the novel, up until the very end, the reader has formed a linguistic portrait of Natàlia: we know that her participation in life is passive and not active, that she reacts to circumstances and does not produce them. It is in the knowledge of this characterization that we read the final episode of the novel. Here, Natàlia returns to the neighborhood where she had lived as a young bride and where she had spent the war years. She engraves on the door of her former apartment the name that her first husband had imposed on her: Colometa, «little pigeon». And then, having quite literally written her past and left it behind (as she is using the novel to write her life's story and leave it behind), she returns to her family. It is at home, in her bedroom, that, for the first time, Natàlia acts voluntarily and actively. She undresses in view of her second husband, which she has never done before. Then, she embraces the man who, as the author says in an introduction to a recent edition of the novel, «has saved her from all the miseries of life». In this scene, Natàlia's participation is much more agentive than in any other scene: Natàlia is the grammatical

subject of 67% of the verbs, and the agent of 56% of them. Not only is she the agent more than half of the time in the final scene (compare this to her 20% and lower agentive participation in other key scenes), many of the action verbs involved appear in the preterite, the past tense form in Catalan which serves a focus function in narrative.

Natàlia plays primarily a receptive/passive role in all of the novel save the final episode. In that episode, as Natàlia realizes what the kindness and security of her second marriage mean to her, the reader comes to the same realization. Up until this scene, Natàlia's second marriage has seemed to be only a marriage of convenience, a way of ensuring that Natàlia and her children will be safe from want and danger. Our analysis of the language of the novel suggests why this final scene should be so effective. It is the only time in the novel when the narrator frequently plays the semantic role of agent, i.e. when the contrast between the agentivity of Natàlia-narrator and the passivity of Natàlia-character is minimized. Finally, Natàlia's consciousness catches up with her history, and she seems to be experiencing the story at the same time as she narrates it. As the role of the narrator changes, the reader experiences Natàlia's revelation with her, through a linguistically describable change in language use.

As has often been pointed out, readers' cumulative knowledge of literary conventions is a factor in each reading experience. Rodoreda plays on this knowledge in structuring *La plaça del Diamant*. Part of what readers expect in novelistic autobiographies is an explanation of just what the main character has learned by living the life that the novel describes. In reading *La plaça del Diamant*, the reader approaches the end of the book with this expectation unsatisfied. Surely, the reader thinks, the story is not going to end like this! Into this state of expectation, the author introduces the scene we have just described. It is one of the most powerful that we, as long-time readers of novels, have ever come across, and is testament to the absolute narrative control exercised by Mercè Rodoreda.

Natàlia is much stronger, both fictionally and linguistically, than Colometa ever was. In *La plaça del Diamant*, the human spirit has prevailed and moved on. Natàlia embodies nothing less than the power of love to protect the self against personal and historical misfortune.

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