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Muted Voices in Mercè Rodoreda's La meva Cristina i altres contes

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MUTED VOICES IN MERCÈ RODOREDA'S
LA MEVA CRISTINA I ALTRES CONTES

KATHLEEN M. GLENN

Although Mercè Rodoreda is best known as a novelist, author of *La plaça del Diamant* and *Mirall trencat*, one of her collections of short stories has attracted a measure of critical attention. *La meva Cristina i altres contes* (1967) has been described by Carme Arnau as a transitional work, important both for its intrinsic merit and because it represents a turning away from the realism of Rodoreda's earlier narratives and a move toward the expression of a mythic conception of the world. The unconscious now assumes greater importance, as does the imagination, and the theme of metamorphosis becomes prominent. The problems faced by the characters are not tied directly to particular historical or social situations but rather are ones, such as solitude and ageing, that are inherent in the human condition. Francisco Lucio has essayed a thematic classification, grouping the stories under the headings of love, witchcraft, the fantastic, psychological complexes, and solitude. This approach has its limitations inasmuch as several tales fit more than one category. «La mainadera», for instance, is about love as much as it is about loneliness, and the labelling of «Zerafina» as a story of solitude is equally questionable. A third critic, Ángeles Encinar, has noted that the estrangement or marginality of the protagonists of a number of the tales impels them to attempt to escape from or defend themselves against a harsh reality by means of fantasy and self-transformation. Applying Tzvetan Todorov's ideas, Encinar analyzes «El riu i la barca» and «La salamandra» as examples of fantastic literature and offers psychoanalytic interpretations of «La sala de les nines» and «El senyor i la lluna». Lastly, Geraldine Cleary Nichols has examined the concluding story of the collection, «La meva Cristina», as a narrative about exile and has pointed out, correctly, that it defies

reduction to any one reading.¹ The aforementioned studies, varied as they are, do not exhaust the range of possible interpretations. The one I advance first focuses on «El mar» and then traces the motif of violence that is woven throughout the fabric of the text.

«El mar» has been ignored or mentioned only incidentally in previous essays, as if it were an anomaly, somehow out of place in the collection.² A first quick reading might tend to support that view, for «El mar» differs from the other fifteen narratives in its structure and the size of its cast. Its intimate relationship to them becomes evident, however, if we read the tales as palimpsests, works «whose surface designs conceal or obscure deeper, less accessible (and less socially acceptable) levels of meaning» and as examples of double-voiced discourse, containing a «dominant» and a «muted» story.³ That muted and subversive story concerns the oppression of women and the violence to which they are subjected.

During the early years of her exile Rodoreda undertook a serious study of the short story and became conversant with the possibilities of the genre.⁴ A sophisticated, highly self-conscious writer, her description of *La meva Cristina i altres contes* as «[un]

¹ Carme Arnau, «Introducció a la narrativa de Mercè Rodoreda», in Mercè Rodoreda, *Obres Completes*, Barcelona, Edicions 62, 1976, I, 31-35; Francisco Lucio, «La soledad, tema central en los últimos relatos de Mercè Rodoreda», *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos*, 242 (febrero 1970), 455-68; Ángeles Encinar, «Mercè Rodoreda: hacia una fantasía liberadora», *Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos*, 11 (1986), 1-10; Geraldine Cleary Nichols, «Exile, Gender, and Mercè Rodoreda», *Modern Language Notes*, 101 (1986), 413-15.

² Lucio, for instance, does not assign «El mar» to any of the categories he proposes.

³ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, New Haven, Yale Univ. Press, 1979, 73, and Elaine Showalter, «Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness», in *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory*, ed. Elaine Showalter, New York, Pantheon Books, 1985, 266.

⁴ See Rodoreda's comments in her *Cartes a l'Anna Murià 1939-1956*, Barcelona, la Sal, 1985, 70-76.

llibre (...) molt treballat» suggests that she composed it with special care.⁵ It is thus logical to assume that the positioning of «El mar» as the opening tale and its length — it is the longest in the book — are indications of its importance within the collection as a whole. It is, in fact, a compendium of the themes, symbols, and strategies that are found in the other tales.

Most of the stories in the book focus on one or two characters and are written as monologues or one-way dialogues in which we hear just one side of the conversation, the person addressed remaining silent. Two tales are written as letters. This preference for first-person narration is logical, as it encourages reader identification with the protagonists, their emotions, and their ambiguous perception of events. This last point is of particular significance in the case of the fantastic tales, where it is necessary that the reader share the hesitation experienced by the characters.⁶ Special effects are also achieved by the use of naive narrators who do not comprehend the implications of what they say, as in «Zerafina». In «El mar» most of the story comes to us in the form of dialogues that are interspersed with brief outside visions of the speakers, their physical appearance, their gestures, and their actions, with no analysis of or speculation about their thoughts and feelings. These external views are like the stage directions of a play and are necessitated by the larger cast of «El mar». They serve to set the scene, detail the movements of the actors, and identify who is speaking. The six characters of this drama — two men, an elderly woman and her godson, and two children, a girl and a boy, representing the young and the old, male and female, as well as different economic strata — constitute a cross section of society. All are nameless.

The conversation between the two men revolves around accounts of a submarine trapped off the coast of Argentina. The tal-

⁵ *Obres Completes*, Barcelona, Edicions 62, 1984, III, 17.

⁶ On this point see Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard, Ithaca, Cornell Univ. Press, 1975, 24-40.

ler man is obsessed by the subject and repeatedly refers to the sheaf of newspaper articles he carries with him. The clippings contradict one another, speaking of a single and then of several subs, of one and then four frogmen, of depth charges that have and have not been laid, and of denials and then reports of US aid to the Argentineans. It is impossible for us, as readers, to get to the bottom of the mystery of the submarine. Whatever the facts may be, they come to us at second or third remove mediated first by the newspaper and then by an oral summary of what it has reported. The second man argues that the entire story has been made up to divert attention from another matter. As he is more thoughtful and is more sympathetically portrayed than is the first man, who is prone to pontificate and to slight his companion, we are subtly encouraged to accept or at the very least weigh carefully the second man's argument. By extension we are alerted to the possibility that Rodoreda too may have resorted to diversionary tactics. There may be more to «El mar» than meets the eye; a hidden meaning may lurk in its depths. The men's conversation about reading thus has a cautionary function.

«El mar» opens and closes with the men's dialogue. They literally have the first as well as the last word, and they dominate the text just as they monopolize the conversation. Framed within their dialogue is the much briefer intervention of the woman. Even before we hear her speak we see her yield to the men. When they sit down on the bench where she is seated she gathers up her skirts and moves to one side, leaving more room for them. Implicit in her action is an acknowledgement that public space rightfully belongs to men rather than to women. She moves over without being asked to — she knows her place — and they see no need to thank her; she has merely done what is expected of her. Like the caged goldfinch she holds in her lap, she «està molt ben ensenyada».⁷ The goldfinch serves as an emblem of its owner.

⁷ *Obres Completes*, Barcelona, Edicions 62, 1978, II, 193. Future page references will be given parenthetically in the text.

While the adults are talking, the children open the door of the cage and the bird hops out. Her taste of freedom is short-lived, however, for her wings have been clipped and she is unable to fly. Moments later she meekly goes back into her cage «like a lady». The situation is rendered more poignant by the fact that it is the woman who has done the clipping and she is the one who keeps repeating «Hi ha entrat com una senyora...» (II, 193). She apparently has internalized patriarchal norms as to what is and is not appropriate behavior for females.

During the course of the story the woman is subjected to several types of intimidation. She recounts how her husband, who has returned after years of absence, a total stranger, wants to resume their life together. When she refuses he terrorizes her, lying in wait on the landing outside her apartment and threatening to break in, kick her out of bed and make her sleep on the floor, and cut off the goldfinch's head. In the case of the men on the bench, the taller one is particularly aggressive in his rudeness and short-tempered remarks, as he cuts her off, belittles her, and as much as tells her she's stupid and should shut up. He is totally unsympathetic to her plight. After she departs he remarks that there was a moment there when he felt like hitting her («em venien ganes de clavar-li una garrotada» [II, 195]). Women, it appears, should always accede to their husband's wishes and should be seen and not heard. Rodoreda neither judges nor comments on the mentality of these men; she simply presents their words and actions, leaving us to draw our own conclusions.

«El mar» incorporates not only the themes and strategies but also the symbols of subsequent stories. Rodoreda frequently uses winged creatures, such as birds, to suggest freedom. Traditionally birds have been associated with the soul. High-flying ones indicate spiritual longing while low-flying ones signify an earth-bound attitude.⁸ The caged goldfinch of «El mar» has been deprived of

⁸ J.E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, trans. Jack Sage. 2nd ed., New York, Philosophical Library, 1971, 28.

the right to fly and grounded, reduced to an unnatural existence, as has its owner. Another important symbol is that of water in the form of rain, ponds, rivers, and seas. Because of its fluidity, its lack of fixed form, water is a transitional element and, appropriately, it plays an important role in the two tales of metamorphosis, «El riu i la barca» and «La salamandra». Water stands as a mediator between life and death. It is identified, on the one hand, with destruction and annihilation, and on the other with rebirth and regeneration. It also is linked to the unconscious, to the female side of the personality.⁹ In the case of the initial story, one of the men alludes to the mystery of the sea (women too are assumed to be unfathomable) and both the woman and the goldfinch are depicted as drawn to it. The former spends her afternoons at its edge, and she declares that the bird likes the sound of the waves. The woman also refers insistently to the moon. As J.E. Cirlot notes, the symbolism of this celestial body is very complex. The phases it undergoes, waxing and waning, are analogous to those experienced by human beings, who progress from youth to maturity to old age. «Because of its passive character — in that it receives its light from the sun — it is equated (...) with the passive or feminine principle». It is closely associated with the night, «maternal, enveloping, unconscious and ambivalent because it is both protective and dangerous».¹⁰ And it is popularly linked with lunacy, originally an intermittent insanity supposed to change in intensity with the phases of the moon. The connection with madness is most explicit in «El senyor i la lluna», but the characters of several tales could be termed «llunàtics». The persistent references to water, the moon, and nighttime settings link the stories while underscoring the feminine element.

The violence that is an undercurrent in the first, paradigmatic tale of *La meva Cristina* surfaces again and again in the other sto-

⁹ Cirlot, xxxviii and 364-67.

¹⁰ Cirlot, 215 and 216.

ries. Whereas in «El mar» physical violence is threatened, it is actualized in «Zerafina». The protagonist of this narrative is one of those innocents for whom Rodoreda has confessed a special affection: «Els personatges literaris innocents desvetllen tota la meva tendresa, em fan sentir bé al seu costat, són els meus grans amics» (III, 32). One of the «friends» she mentions, Faulkner's Lena Grove, has a good deal in common with Zerafina. The latter's story consists of a single, three-page paragraph and is a one-sided dialogue with suspension points indicating the questions and observations made by Zerafina's prospective mistress. On one level this is just an amusing tale about a simple-minded servant girl of whom everyone takes advantage. She is unaware of the extent to which she has been mistreated, but the brutal implications of her narrative are there for the reader to grasp. Two of the incidents she recounts reveal how she has been reified, reduced to the status of an object. The favorite sport of the fourteen-year-old son of the first family she serves is to make her stand in the middle of the hall «com una fuzta» (II, 238). He then takes aim and kicks her so hard in the behind that she is catapulted some five meters while he yells «Goal!» This entertaining game goes on all afternoon, and Zerafina does not protest because after all he's her employers' son and she's only the maid. If she's a soccer ball in the eyes of her young master, she fares no better at the hands of someone of her own class: her first boyfriend regards her as an ashtray. As she lies beside him he flicks the ashes from his cigarette into her navel and amuses himself by pulling the hair in her armpits until tears come to her eyes. As far as the two males are concerned, Zerafina is less than a person.

Violence of another kind is found in «La sala de les nines», which is dedicated to Llorenç Villalonga and consists of two letters, the first of which is addressed to Father Joan Mayols. Along with «Record de Caux» and «Un ramat de bens de tots colors», this is one of the stories that Lucio classifies as psychological studies. The male protagonists of these narratives as children were subjected to psychological violence that traumatized and femi-

nized them.¹¹ Rodoreda portrays the character Bearn as having been raised by his mother as if he were the girl she had wanted. He is clothed in velvet and lace and his hair is combed in long curls. His first toy is a doll as tall as he and he is encouraged to talk to her as if she were alive. Soon Bearn starts collecting dolls, dozens of them, and devotes his time to making clothes for them, stitching away, night and day, wearing out thimble after thimble with his continuous sewing. As his madness grows he spends more and more time shut up in the dolls' room, talking to them, ironing their gowns, curling their wigs, rocking them to sleep. One morning his body is found beneath the window of their room. His eyes are glassy and a pair of tongs has been sunk into his abdomen. Upstairs lie the bodies of the dolls, glassy-eyed, spattered with blood, their legs torn off. Have they turned on Bearn or he on them in an explosion of rage against his enclosure and the feminization he has undergone? Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar have documented the frequency with which women writers have projected the phenomenon of the mad double into their works. Through the double's violence «the female author enacts her own raging desire to escape (...) [*and*] articulates for herself the costly destructiveness of anger repressed until it can no longer be contained».¹² During the early period of her exile Rodoreda supported herself by working as a seamstress, and «La sala de les nines» is filled with references to the paraphernalia of her craft: thimbles, scissors, crotchet hooks, needles, pins, thread, buttons, various types of fabric, lace, ribbons, and bows. Bearn's immersion in feminine experience shows him what it's like to be a woman, and his rebellion may be an acting out of the frustration Rodoreda felt as she had to pour her time and energy into sewing (women's work) rather than writing.¹³

¹¹ Nichols, in the article mentioned in note 1, 408-9, studies «Nit i boira» and «Cop de lluna» as stories that depict men feminized by the experience of exile.

¹² Gilbert and Gubar, 85.

¹³ This frustration is evident in Rodoreda's letters to Anna Murià. See note 4.

Violence rises to a crescendo in the concluding stories of the book. «La salamandra» is the tale of a girl who is loved by a married man and branded a witch by his wife. The other villagers first avoid her, then harass her, nailing dead animals to the door of her house and finally burning her at the stake.¹⁴ As the flames lick her body she turns into a salamander, but the change in form does not change her lot. The wife of her former lover pokes a burning torch into her face and whacks at her with a broom, while children throw stones at her, almost severing one of her hands which is later yanked off by an eel. At the tale's end her desolation is absolute as she lies in the mud at the bottom of a pond and wonders whether she is still a person or only a little animal, whether she belongs under the water or on the ground — or does she belong anywhere? In «La salamandra» Rodoreda dramatizes both the feeling of being an outcast in an alien, hostile world and the double standard that prevails in that world. The girl's sexuality is sinful, «unnatural», and she is considered responsible for her lover's «fall» — she has «bewitched» him — even though he is the one who pursues her. At one point she speaks of biting her lips to keep from crying out with pain, and comparable restraint characterizes her narrative. The unemotional, matter-of-fact tone she employs heightens the impact of the story and throws into high relief those few occasions when she mentions her fright and anguish.

The tone of «Una fulla de gerani blanc» is similarly low-keyed, and it is logical to assume, initially, that the narrator is trying to hold back his grief as he dispassionately recounts how while his wife was dying he sat by her bed in the closed house and did not take his eyes off her («la mirava sense arar» [II, 275]). But this is not the gaze of a loving spouse, for as Balbina is choking for air he lies down on top of her and sucks her last breath from her body. Our shock intensifies when he describes how he had tried to hasten her death by not letting her sleep and how once she had

¹⁴ Cirlot notes that fire, like water, is a symbol of transformation and regeneration. It also represents eroticism (105-6).

died he pulled out one of her teeth so that he could carry it around with him. Rodoreda here portrays with great subtlety and mastery the resentment and jealousy of a man who is disparaged by his boss and who suspects that his wife loves another man, Cosme. She becomes the scapegoat on whom he vents his frustrations and feelings of inadequacy. In the opening paragraph a connection is established between Balbina's eyes, that shine in the dark like those of a cat, and the honey-colored eyes of the cat given her by Cosme. After Balbina's death the cat serves as a constant reminder of her and of the suspected illicit relationship, and so it becomes the target of the protagonist's anger. When he realizes the cat has seen him drink Balbina's final breath he hurls it across the room, and when it tries to grab her tooth he stuffs it in a pillowcase and beats it. After it swallows the tooth he makes it ingest the spine of a fish so that it chokes to death. He then slits it open with a razor blade and repossesses the tooth. And he relates this catalog of horrors without a flicker of emotion or the blinking of an eye, much less the shedding of a tear. Once he is alone the husband takes to going to the outskirts of the town and sitting under a streetlamp. An enormous cat with eyes the color of honey materializes out of the darkness and, on the last night, circles around and around him, binding him more and more tightly to the lamppost until he chokes. He thus is made to share, in death, the fate of his wife. We may conjecture that it was not only in her last moment, however, that Balbina felt suffocated. Her husband mentions the length of her illness, although he does not specify what her malady was, and describes her as burning with fever and ultimately emaciated, calling to mind the se diseased nineteenth-century heroines who wasted away in stifling houses. The only words of hers that he relays to us are «estic cansada, estic cansada» (II, 277), and that weariness may well have been more spiritual than physical.

The last tale, «La meva Cristina», echoes the first, with the mysterious submarine changed into a whale.³⁵ The «dominant»

³⁵ David H. Rosenthal, in his translation *My Christina & Other Stories* (Port

story is that of a shipwrecked sailor who, like Jonah, is swallowed by a great fish. The «muted» and quite literally submerged narrative is that of the whale, who is baptized Cristina by the sailor.¹⁶ The use of the word *batejar* and the bestowing of this particular name are significant in that they intimate that he thinks of her as human, baptism being the ceremony of admitting a *person* into *Christianity*. Or perhaps we should say he thinks of her as subhuman, for she is just a female. The sailor is the narrator of the story and so it is his voice we hear; Cristina has been rendered inarticulate. The only sounds to emerge from her are the roar of her blowhole, the wheezing of her tired lungs, and her moans of pain. Balbina's husband spoke of the wild elation («una alegria de boig» [II, 277]) he felt when, after he had laid out his wife's body, he finally closed her mouth, thereby precluding speech. The sailor lodged in the whale's mouth also appears determined to ensure speechlessness as he attacks Cristina's tongue, palate, uvula, and cheeks.¹⁷ His aggressiveness is profoundly disturbing. «Sense pietat» (II, 286) he repeatedly drives the handle of a ladle into her cheek, making new holes because the «wounds» close up quickly. Once the handle has rusted he continues to plunge it in, so as to poison her, and he pricks her with his belt buckle and stabs her with his knife. After he's carved up one side of her mouth he sets to work on the other. The words *pegar falconada*, *clavar*, *enfonsar*, and *punxar* stress the violence of assaults that are tantamount to rape. The sailor's deep-seated animosity and suspicion of Cristina are evident in the following brief passage: «La Cristina es gron-

Townsend, WA, Graywolf Press, 1984), has moved «The Sea» to the back of the volume so that it immediately precedes «My Christina». This repositioning emphasizes the parallelism between the two tales.

¹⁶ Lucio, a male reader, sees «La meva Cristina» as a depiction of man's struggle with the elements and «una monstruosa criatura», a «bèstia» (465). His reading privileges the sailor at the expense of Cristina.

¹⁷ In the prologue to *Mirall trencat* Rodoreda describes the sailor as for many years «aparellat» (III, 23) with a whale. The word suggests a husband-wife relationship, as in «Un fulla de gerani blanc».

xava igual que un bressol i em gronxava per adormir-me, però sempre me'n vaig malfiar. Vaig començar a menjar-me-la» (II, 288). His reasoning seems to be that if she rocks him to sleep, cradling him like a child, she must have some dark ulterior motive; and since he distrusts her he proceeds to devour her, slicing off pieces of her flesh. Eventually Cristina is unable to swim and simply drifts, listing a bit and groaning, until she runs aground, and, mercifully, dies. That does not, nevertheless, put an end to the violence, for when the sailor encounters a woman who claims to be his wife he shoves her away and, after she falls to the ground, pushes her to one side with his foot, but carefully, because a child is watching from a window. As there were no witnesses at sea, such «restraint» was not necessary and he was free to (ab)use his Cristina at will. And since to name is to possess, since he is male and Cristina female, she *is* his.

Elaine Showalter has pointed out that when we look at women's fiction as a double-voiced discourse our vision is altered and we see meaning in what previously was empty space. «The orthodox plot recedes, and another plot, hitherto submerged in the anonymity of the background, stands out in bold relief like a thumbprint».¹⁸ The opening and closing tales of *La meva Cristina i altres contes*, with their accounts of underwater creatures, frame a series of narratives linked by shared strategies, symbols, and themes. Throughout the text runs a thread of violence, subtle and blatant, verbal and physical, threatened and actualized. Its victims, be they young or old, single or married, females or feminized males, are marginal beings, objects rather than subjects, acted upon rather than acting, dwelling on the fringes of society rather than integrated within it. Rodoreda has recorded their muted voices so that we might hear — and see.

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¹⁸ Showalter, 266.