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***The Witches' Touch: Towards a Poetics of Double Articulation in Rodoreda***

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## THE WITCHES' TOUCH: TOWARDS A POETICS OF DOUBLE ARTICULATION IN RODOREDA

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Julia Kristeva, in her article «Women's Time», reformulates the Sartrean question about the function of literature. For Kristeva, what is at stake is not the historical articulation of a given subjective discourse but the creation of a new historical subject, that of woman. Let us remember her question:

Why literature? (...) Is it because, faced with social norms, literature reveals a certain knowledge and sometimes the truth itself about an otherwise repressed, nocturnal, secret, and unconscious universe? Because it thus redoubles the social contract by exposing the unsaid, the uncanny? (...) Today, women's identification with the potency of the imaginary is not only an identification (...) it also bears witness to women's desire to lift the weight of what is sacrificial in the social contract from their shoulders, to nourish our societies with a more flexible and free discourse, one able to name what has thus far never been an object of circulation in the community: the enigmas of the body, the dreams, secret joys, shames, hatreds of the second sex.<sup>1</sup>

The enigmas of Rodoreda's textual body have certainly not circulated in the Catalan literary community which, as a whole, has regarded her work as a cornerstone in the modern Catalan narrative canon formation. Few aspects, if any at all, of Rodoreda's nocturnal, secret, uncanny universe have been expounded and elaborated upon. Almost like an American Willa Cather — enshrined as the pure, primitive voice of the pioneers — Rodoreda has been canonically appropriated as the highest literary exponent of the enduring virtues of the Catalan middle-class female soul, a kind of low scale epic symbol for the Catalan struggle for survival.

<sup>1</sup> Julia Kristeva, «Women's Time», trans. Alice Jardine in Nannerl O. Keohane, Michelle Z. Rosaldo and Barbara C. Gelpi, eds., *Feminist Theory. A Critique of Ideology*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1982, 32-38.

It is only recently, however, that a whole new set of critical discourses has been brought to bear upon Rodoreda's text. Among them, feminism, psychoanalysis and archetypal criticism are beginning to enter in dialogue with Rodoreda's subtle and complex textual body. Therefore, it is with a personal sense of satisfaction that I feel myself integrated in this collective effort to bring Rodoreda's work into the mainstream of current literary discussion beyond any patriarchal and canonical limitations. It is also to a more general project, that of the feminist rereading of Modernism, that our work on Rodoreda contributes to. Few authors have been, in this respect, clearer than Alice Jardine in identifying what lies at the core of such a project. As if she was directly addressing Kristeva's question, Jardine writes:

We might say that what is generally referred to as modernity is precisely the acutely interior, unabashedly incestuous exploration of these new female spaces: the perhaps historically unprecedented exploration of the female, differently maternal body.<sup>2</sup>

Rodoreda's text contains indeed the three major traits that define the Modernist tenet. As in the work of James Joyce, Franz Kafka or Virginia Woolf — three authors she greatly admired — the text becomes a neurotic, mythical and parodic exercise in self-referentiality. The neurosis of the modern text constitutes, precisely, the response to what Jardine characterizes as «the founding fantasy of Western patriarchal history»,<sup>3</sup> that is, the active and persistent suppression of the Mother. Rodoreda's text, on the contrary, may be seen as a truly maternal supplement, in the sense given to the term by Derrida: that of an absence that is always present and conditions all the narrative process.<sup>4</sup> A neurosis, moreov-

<sup>2</sup> Alice Jardine, *Gynesis. Configurations of Woman and Modernity*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1985, 34.

<sup>3</sup> See Jardine, *Gynesis*, 32.

<sup>4</sup> See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*. Trans. Gayatri Spivak, Baltimore/London, The John Hopkins University Press, 1976, 145.

er, that becomes the textual symptom for the original drives of the pre-Oedipal stage, the realm of the symbiosis with the maternal body, the very center of patriarchal repression.

This return to the Mother in Rodoreda's text is best seen, I believe, from the vantage point of a combined reading of Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and Mary Daly. That is, precisely, my aim in this study. Ultimately, I would like to outline what I have termed the poetics of double articulation in Rodoreda which I consider to be her most important and distinctive contribution to the inscription of woman as a historical speaking subject.

In order to delineate this poetics of double articulation one has to recall Kristeva's reading of Bakhtin's concept of dialogism:

Bakhtinian dialogism identifies writing as both subjectivity and communication, or better, as intertextuality. Confronted with this dialogism, the notion of a «person-subject of writing» becomes blurred, yielding to that of «ambivalence of writing.» (...) Dialogue and ambivalence lead me to conclude that within the interior space of the text as well as within the space of *texts*, poetic language is a «double». (...) This implies that the minimal unit of poetic language is at least *double*, not in the sense of the signifier/signified dyad, but rather, in terms of *one and other*.<sup>5</sup>

Kristeva's own development of the Bakhtinian dialogical model will be formulated in her by now famous dialectics between the symbolic and the semiotic. Glossing over the inherent problematics of the Kristevan model, what I want to retain here is her equation of the semiotic with Plato's *chora* which Kristeva herself defines as:

A wholly provisional articulation that is essentially mobile and constituted of movements and their ephemeral stases (...) Neither model nor copy, it is anterior to and underlies figuration and therefore also specularization, and only admits analogy with vocal or kinetic rhythm.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language*. Trans. Thomas Gore, Alice Jardine and Leon S. Roudiez, New York, Columbia University Press, 1980, 68-9.

<sup>6</sup> Julia Kristeva, *La Révolution du langage poétique*, quoted by Toril Moi in *Sexual Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*, London/New York, Methuen, 1985, 161.

It is the orality and kinetic quality of Kristeva's semiotic that makes it possible, if not altogether necessary, to analyze Rodoreda's text from such a perspective since it constitutes the very site of her «uncertain subject». As Makiko Minnow-Pinkney has it:

The archaic psychical site of the semiotic is not feminine, for it is situated in the pre-Oedipal phase, i.e., before sexual difference appears. Though the semiotic *chora*, as pre-Oedipal, is linked to the mother in contrast to the symbolic which is governed by the Law-of-the-Father, yet the pre-Oedipal mother contains, for the baby, both masculinity and femininity.<sup>7</sup>

In her constant return to the Mother, Rodoreda's text constitutes itself through a process of double articulation that contains at the same time the symbolic or masculine and the semiotic or feminine. A fact, however, that Rodoreda disguises subtly with her recurrent use of a more or less traditional Oedipal structure. It is Mary Daly's insight that helps us to see through that fictional structure:

Daughters seek the lost mothers in male surrogates, looking to them for the divine spark of encouragement which is not theirs to give, which is the rightful inheritance of our own kind.<sup>8</sup>

Like Cecília, the orphan girl of *Camelias Street*, Rodoreda's text sets out in search of the origin in an attempt to reestablish the maternal bond with the world. Cecília, if one follows Daly's formulation, will mistake her desire for the maternal with the search for the father, or better, the search for paternal legality. With her subtle irony, Rodoreda portrays this secondary goal as the crucial one, thus hiding the real condition of the text as maternal supplement. An irony that has frequently misled many critical readings of her work. Arnau, for instance, analyzes Cecília's search from a

<sup>7</sup> Makiko Minow-Pinkney, *Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject*, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1987, 21.

<sup>8</sup> Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology. Methaethics of Radical Feminism*, Boston, Beacon, 1978, 346.

conventional Oedipal perspective and, as a whole, turns Rodoreda's work into a succession of steps leading to the creation of a reconciled myth of childhood. Childhood, however, in our post-freudian time, cannot be recovered only as mythical paradise since, as Cathérine Clement reminds us:

By describing the anguishes of the child cruelly torn between the maternal and paternal signifiers, Freud reverses the paradisiacal image and turns it into a hellish one.<sup>9</sup>

What Rodoreda's double articulation achieves, precisely, is to keep this «infantile» tension between the paternal and the maternal signifiers thanks to her constant regression to the kinetic orality of her uncertain subject, a subject always in the process of formation, split between the semiotic pre-Oedipal drives and the awakening to the symbolic order. Thus understood, Rodoreda's text cannot be formulated as the return to a prelapsarian innocence but as a learning process of the wound inflicted upon its maternal textual body. It is again Mary Daly who helps us here:

The term innocence is derived from the Latin *in*, meaning not, and *nocere*, meaning hurt, injure. We do not begin in innocence. We begin life in patriarchy, from the very beginning, in an injured state. From earliest infancy we have been damaged, no matter how «happy» our childhood appeared to be (...) The Voyage is not one of re-gaining «lost innocence», but of learning innocence.<sup>10</sup>

It is necessary to emphasize the implications of Mary Daly's proposal to fully understand the scope of Rodoreda's textual learning voyage. What Daly proposes, in fact, is the necessity to unlearn the patriarchal history of female cultural supression in order to regain feminine selfhood. Thus, the crone-logical<sup>11</sup> force

<sup>9</sup> Cathérine Clement, «La Coupable» in *La Jeune née*, Paris, Unión Général d'Editions, 1975, 52.

<sup>10</sup> Daly, 413.

<sup>11</sup> I follow Mary Daly's polarity between crono-logical vs. crone-logical to indicate the opposition between the patriarchal symbolic order, seen as linear and restrictive, and a female, transgressive and open imaginary that would vin-

of the text coincides with its parodic content. Rodoreda herself once characterized the aging experience in woman as the passage from fairy to witch.<sup>12</sup> At its very core, Daly's radical project of feminine knowledge, therefore, implies a parodic reversal and deconstruction of the archetypal patriarchal imaginary. It is my contention that Rodoreda's text is a powerful crone-logical practice of such a project.

One of Rodoreda's most extensive reversals, in the context of her poetics of double articulation, is the relevant treatment given to the sense of touch in her configuration of female sexuality. It is in this respect that the work of Luce Irigaray becomes essential:

Sight, more than any other sense, objectifies and dominates (...) Once sight takes over, the body is left fleshless (...) Women, on the other hand, preserve more archaic sensitive strata that have been refused, censored and devalued by the dominance of sight. For them, touch is often more moving than sight (...) In touch, the boundaries between those who touch themselves are at once remembered and diffused.<sup>13</sup>

Placing Rodoreda's text between Daly and Irigaray, I would like to bear witness to the witches' touch: to Rodoreda's textual body reaching out for contact. In order to do so, I suggest recalling Arnau's reading and, more specifically, her division of Rodoreda's symbols into the two categories of dynamic and static.

Among the first and regarding *The Time of the Doves*, she lists the doves, the flowers, the sea and the sea-shells, the funnel, the trees and the dolls. Among the second, she mentions the ribbons, the picture of the lobsters, the wood, the scales and the knife.<sup>14</sup>

dicare the archetypal figurations which patriarchy has used traditionally to scapegoat woman throughout history. See Daly, 381.

<sup>12</sup> Baltasar Porcel, «Mercè Rodoreda o la força lírica», *Serra d'Or* (March 1966), 75.

<sup>13</sup> Luce Irigaray, «Otro medio de sentir», trans. Mireia Bofill and Anna Carvalho in «Luce Irigaray», *Cuadernos Inacabados*, 5, Barcelona, La Sal, 1985, 41 (My translation).

<sup>14</sup> See Carme Arnau, *Introducció a la narrativa de Mercè Rodoreda*, Barcelona, Edicions 62, 1979, 157-166.

What Arnau has failed to see, in my opinion, is the constitutive ambivalence of the entire symbolic construction. No symbol may be considered as a univocal sign. There are no «static» symbols. As Kristeva has shown, poetic language is built upon the ambivalent dialectics of kinesis and stasis, upon the double articulation of the symbolic and the semiotic.

Let us consider, for instance, one of the most significant symbols to appear in the narrative: the scales. Being one of Rodoreda's most subtle and elaborate examples of double articulation, it reveals, in an Irigarayan way, the pooriness of «sight» in front of «touch», that is, the blindness of men to see and understand women. What Rodoreda does with the symbol of the scales is to unmask the essential sexism of the traditional Western imaginary that has symbolized Justice with the figure of a blind lady holding the scales of human destiny. For Rodoreda, in a clear anticipation of Irigaray's formulation, the blind are the men who cannot even «see» women as truly existing entities without risking the stability of their constitutive self-centered images. Posited as the emblematic «blind lady» or the psychoanalytical «lack», woman is always seen as the nothingness that threatens the very existence of the phallogentric symbolic order. As Irigaray forcefully puts it:

The reality of the girl's castration could be summed up as follows: you men can see nothing, can know nothing of this; can neither discover nor recognize yourselves in this (...) The idea that a «nothing to be seen», a something not subject to the rule of visibility or of specula(riza)tion, might yet have some reality, would indeed be intolerable to man.<sup>15</sup>

The asymmetric position of the scale-pans that Natàlia touches on the wall of the staircase reveals a double play against the historical secondary and unjust situation of women, weighed and exploited «blindly» by men and also a mocking reference to what Irigaray aptly terms «the blind spot of an old dream of symme-

<sup>15</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1985, 50.



try».<sup>16</sup> In the context of Natàlia's metonymic condensation, moreover, the scales appear as a variation on the series of phallic representations — the picture of the lobsters, the ice-pick, the knife — and, as such, as a figuration of the dominant and aggressive male order. And yet, there is some reassurance, something essential to Natàlia's own being, that is invested in that compulsive gesture of reaching out for the scales. Is it not that Rodoreda, apart from the obvious attraction-repulsion of its symbolic content, is positing its archaic semiotic value? Inscribed as she is in woman's mythical time,<sup>17</sup> Natàlia seems to be reaching back to the very origin of the symbol of the scales and thus accepting a blindness that allows her to enter into the innocent — before the wound — immemorial knowledge of women whose power was not in sight but in touch, in their close contact with the world, with primeval matter. It seems just natural, therefore, that the original recorded figuration of the goddess Justice is to be found in the Egyptian Maat, meaning both Mother and Death, of whom Barbara Walker informs us that:

The wisdom of Maat (Mother) determined the rules of truth and justice in ancient Egypt; and it was she who determined an Egyptian's ultimate fate by weighing his soul in her balances after death.<sup>18</sup>

It is through the archetypal memory, therefore, that Natàlia's/Rodoreda's gesture of caressing the scales can be seen as her reaching out for that pre-Oedipal, archaic and semiotically recovered Mother whose constant absence/presence has both haunted and protected her throughout her lonely and painful life. That is why, despite her unawareness of its implications, Arnau may be right when she refers to the scales as «the necessary balance (...) the reassuring element in Colometa's life».<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Irigaray, *Speculum*, 173.

<sup>17</sup> See Kristeva, «Women's Time».

<sup>18</sup> Barbara G. Walker, *The Crone*, San Francisco, Harper&Row, 1985, 50.

<sup>19</sup> Arnau, 164-5 (My translation).

If such a double articulation might seem too elusive or even farfetched in the naturalistic context of *The Time of the Doves*, I suggest to conclude with a quick look at Rodoreda's posthumously published masterpiece, *La mort i la primavera*. Quintessentially symbolical, this novel contains a poetic synthesis of Rodoreda's imaginary. And, in its very center, the tree, the most prominent and primeval of symbols, therefore, the most prone to patriarchal distortion and appropriation. As Mary Daly reminds us:

The cosmic energy is symbolized in the Tree of Life, the Sacred Tree, which is the Goddess (...) the tree belongs to the cult of all Great Mothers (...) This Cosmic Tree, the living Source of radiant energy/be-ing, is the deep Background of the christian cross, the dead wood rack to which a dying body is fastened with nails (...) Thus the Tree of Life became converted into the symbol of the necrophilic S (sadistic) and M (masochistic) society. This grim reversal is not peculiar to christianity. It was a theme of patriarchal myth which made christianity palatable to an already death-loving society.<sup>20</sup>

Rodoreda's *La mort i la primavera* offers a haunting and hallucinatory image of such a patriarchal reversal while positing at the same time the everlasting memory of the Mother-Tree as the inexhaustible source of life. If Natàlia's reaching out for the menacing but also reassuring scales was, as I have just shown, her most significantly semiotic gesture, one might say that with *La mort i la primavera* Rodoreda's whole text is embracing the semiotic, that is, being able finally to articulate the symbolic as something exterior and hostile to the primeval origin of the text. Let me finish, then, with an emblematic scene from such a fascinatingly dark crone-logical tale:

The wind was tiring. I looked up and saw my stepmother by the dead tree. When I got closer I asked what she was doing there; she was embracing the tree, with her cheek to the trunk and she told me she was thinking about many things, of my father and herself and of the moon that she said was watching us. She reached out with her arm and caressed my eyebrow three times. I felt like embracing the tree

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<sup>20</sup> Daly, 79-80.

myself and finally I did it. I also placed my face to the trunk, but I put my arms a bit higher than hers such as my cheek so that I wasn't touching her.<sup>21</sup>

Without going into a detailed analysis of the incredible rich condensation of such a scene, I may say that it telescopes what by now appears to be one of the most consistent aspects of Rodoreda's double articulation: her constant regression to the nutritious, protective tree as a compensatory gesture from the alienating and domestic(ated) forms of the tree of life. A gesture present in Natàlia's escape from the obsessive bedpost of Toni's child-birth into the upside-down imagery of the trees in the park. A decisive gesture also in Cecília's escape from and return to the foster-parents house-prison or in the Salamander's refuge by the pond, this return to the primeval tree becomes Rodoreda's own *chora*: the very source of her semiotic desire that provides the text with its basic kinetic impulse. As for the reader, it also mobilizes her/his emotional investment with that semiotically recovered maternal body/text. In my case, in the figure of the tree as it is portrayed in *La mort i la primavera*, I see Rodoreda's most powerful example of her poetics of double articulation and also the best summary of the tree characteristics that define the modernist text. Thus, it appears as neurotic in its regressive return to the nutritious mother-matter, and in its semiotic recovery of the lost bond with the world. That is, for instance, the sense of the child protagonist, alone in the dark, trying to listen to the father buried inside the tree, in a desperate attempt to recover the bond that the father himself has cut with his ax and his cross. *La mort i la primavera* culminates also Rodoreda's parodic rereading of the myth of Eden by reversing the patriarchal appropriation of the tree of knowledge since the characters not only get to the very secret of the forbidden tree/trees but they also place themselves before the wound and the prohibition while innocently playing amidst the dead. Finally, this primeval tree articulates also the mythical

<sup>21</sup> Mercè Rodoreda, *La mort i la primavera*, Barcelona Club Editor, 1986, 55 (My translation).

component of Rodoreda's text by merging the archetypes of the Father and the Mother, by blending the Christian myth of the Cross with the Goddess rituals of eternal regeneration of life on earth. Ultimately and essentially, as Loreto Busquets' insightful reading suggests,<sup>22</sup> it becomes the utmost figuration of Rodoreda's return to the Mother.

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<sup>22</sup> See Loreto Busquets, «The Unconscious in the Novels of Mercè Rodoreda», also published in this issue of *Catalan Review*.