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Women, War, and Exile: Anna Murià's Aquest serà el principi
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WOMEN, WAR, AND EXILE:
ANNA MURIÀ'S *AQUEST SERÀ EL PRINCIPI**

MICHAEL UGARTE

Only the beginning. If someone were to translate Anna Muria's epic Spanish civil war novel into English, "Only the Beginning" would be an apt title. The narrative covers a wide historical space from the Catalan worker's revolt of 1934, the commencement of the war through its end in 1939—a year which initiated the long journey of exile first across the border into France and then to another continent. Indeed it was a journey with no end, just beginnings, and Muria's narrative intention is to depict the beginning thrusts of the entire experience in successive patterns, as if to suggest that it is impossible to understand the war as an integral whole. The only way to come to terms with it is to mark the beginning of its various phases as they become ends which are in turn more beginnings.

Similarly, the publication of the novel in 1986 coincides with somewhat of another initiation. Despite all the discussion of the Spanish civil war from nearly every perspective (historical, literary, political, anthropological, journalistic), until the 1980's there had been relatively little analysis of the conflict from the point of view of women. Although there is a rich history of feminism in the Iberian Peninsula going as far back as the late eighteenth century with Josefa Amar y Borbón's treatise on the need for the education of women, the renewed energy of European and American feminism in the nineteen-sixties did not fully make its way into the study of Spanish history and literature until a few years later.¹ From the mid-seventies through the eighties, a variety of studies on the importance of women's issues related to the Spanish civil war and on neglected women writers of the thirties began to appear. The publication of Mary Nash's pioneering historical investigations on women in the Spanish conflict dates from 1976 to the present with most of her work appearing in the eighties and nineties. Other investigators from the Peninsula, mostly historians, have written penetrating recreations of the lives of early twentieth

*I would like to thank Prof. Kathleen McNerney for reading this essay in manuscript form and for helping me understand certain passages of Muria's novel.

¹See Amar y Borbón's *Discurso* and Constance Sullivan's study of this early Spanish feminist, "Josefa Amar y Borbón and the Royal Aragonese Economic Society." In Catalonia, the period of the *Renaixença* marks the beginnings of what might be called a self-conscious modern feminism in the work of Maria Josefa Massanés who was also deeply concerned with women's education. See McNerney and Enríquez, 228-32.

century feminists and their reaction to the war, as well as on the role of women in the social upheaval of 1936-1939. Most recently, Shirley Mangini in *Memories of Resistance*, drew from direct accounts by women of their war time and post-war time experiences and discussed the themes along with the anguished construction of what she calls women's "memory texts" (Chapters 4 and 10). Thus, over ten years after the publication of *Aquest serà el principi*, the historical and literary understanding of the labyrinth that was Spain in the 1930s and 1940s has been enriched by women's voices. And in many cases the woman who speaks her tale of the war questions and subverts previous renditions.²

One such woman is Anna Murià. Her novel is itself a project of interrogation on the life consequences of war. Yet the very notion of political history, so important to all the novelists who set out to write fiction based on their civil war experience, is barely detectable in Murià's narrative. There are no lengthy political tirades on the part of the characters as in Max Aub's *Campo de sangre* (from his series of five novels, *El laberinto mágico*) or in Ernest Hemingway's famous bad novel, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Murià concerns herself with vital relationships and changes in the attitudes and life stages of her characters. Whatever the political content, it must be relegated to interpersonal relations of power and love, psychological dynamics which coincide with monumental historical events almost by happenstance. A reader used to recreations of the war based on promulgation of political positions or on the real-seeming depiction of social conditions might find *Aquest serà el principi* a rather quirky novel, a narrative apparently oblivious to political motivations or economic interests. How can there be a war novel without politics?

Only if we understand politics differently can we capture the importance of history in Murià's *Beginning*. Although the historical events are barely mentioned according to their conventional names, they serve as a backdrop for Murià to weave the tales of her many characters. In the opening of the novel, the narrator reflects on a line of poetry by François Villon about the certainty of uncertainty, "Res no tinc per segur sinó la cosa incerta" (17), as one of the characters, Gabriela, reflects on her relationship with her lover, Eloi. As the story of Gabriela's unrequited love of Eloy unfolds through a series of reflections and dialogue, political events begin to make their way into the narrative certainly yet unobtrusively. The initial reference to a

²In addition to Nash's and Mangini's contributions to the understanding of women in the history of the Spanish civil war, see Di Febo, Scanlon, Gallego Méndez, and Polguera. There has been relatively less work on the literature of the war from the perspective of women, although the studies cited above often deal with the fictional recreations of the war by women.

political situation is merely a pretext to the further development of Eloi, a self-indulgent and ambitious young man whose indifference to Gabriela's suffering for him will become one of the crucial psychological questions of the novel: women's self-punishment in the form of attraction to an indifferent or cruel man. Eloi's lack of attention to Gabriela and his attraction to another woman from an upper class family, are reflected by his apparent unconcern for what is happening in the city. Eloi, flighty and unable to apprehend anything without filtering it through his own vanity, is the object of criticism of one of his friends, Pere, who reprimands him for boasting of his two women while not coming to terms with a potentially explosive situation in the city: "Però, Eloi... el país viu en tensió... tothom sent que s'acosta quelcom dramàtic, que potser correrà la sang... I tu, preocupat només entre dues dones" (34).

This is the first recognition on the part of the narrator that the characters are living in an identifiable place. Indeed, the very notion of social space or geography—a real city, a specific country—is strangely unacknowledged within the psychological entanglements of love and friendship among the various characters. Yet at the same time, the subtle recreation of contemporary Catalan history is not only the context of all the psychological problems posed by the novel, it constantly hovers about the characters and almost without notice moves out of the background and into the foreground. The words, "tothom sent que s'acosta quelcom dramàtic, que potser correrà la sang," are a nebulous reference to the worker's uprising in Barcelona and throughout Catalonia in October of 1934. The following section of the chapter begins with a sentence fragment, "Nit d'octubre" (35), followed by a series of descriptions of a city plagued by a social upheaval, a city which suddenly has a name as well as a social and historical condition: "Angoixa a Barcelona" (35). The narrator's attention shifts from individual psychology to the collective space of Barcelona at a precise moment of its development. In the following passage, the narrator captures the intensity and urgency of the beginning of what will later become a horrific war, reminiscent of the rapid-fire descriptions of Max Aub's civil war novels. But a female collective presence is equally evident both in the narrator's perspective of an observer watching the events and in the inclusion of women in the portrait:

Flamarades de fusells, esclats furiosos de canons; i tenebres. Xarbotar d'ira. Angoixa a Barcelona. Homes armats al carrer, concentracions d'homes a les casernes improvisades, dones als llocs de socors, amants. Els hospitals tenen les portes obertes. Es veïns esporuguits tanquen les portes. La ràdio fa ressonar per tota la ciutat les paraules vibrants d'incitació a la lluita; els barcelonins vetllen ran dels aparells. (35)

At the same time, the narrator never loses sight of the individual plights of the characters, especially that of Gabriela. As the revolt continues in the streets, the characters' lives change, but only on the surface. Gabriela's self-defeating love for Eloi has not waned, and now that she cannot find him due to the social strife of the city, her fear turns to anguish. The narrator makes several references to the "desapareguts" and to the confusion caused by the turmoil (40). Political prisoners abound, as other characters begin to make their way into the lives of Gabriela and Eloi: Berta, Delmira, and Martina first appear as friends of Gabriela, all of whom share the experience of life in a city full of political turmoil. While Gabriela searches for Eloi, the other women dutifully pay visits to the prisoners arrested for having participated in the revolt, and as they wait to see them, Berta compares the experience to being herself incarcerated (45). Gabriela, on the other hand, remains imprisoned by her own desperation regarding Eloi, a condition that strays the same from the opening of the novel regardless of the uprising. Gabriela discovers that Eloi has left Barcelona unwilling to compromise himself in anything political, that he has managed to eke out a comfortable situation for himself in Nice, and that later he returned without having gotten in touch with her. They meet for the last time at the insistence of Gabriela, but the encounter only serves to worsen the relationship. Later, with new elections and the freeing of political prisoners, Eloi lands a job in city government and marries the rich companion whom he feels won't give him any problems. Through a third-person interior monologue, the narrator ruminates on Gabriela's anguish within the tense political atmosphere that informs the motivations of all the characters. Gabriela has been the victim of Eloi's indifference and selfishness, but at the same time she has succumbed to her own projection of the love relationship: "Tres anys. I quin és el resultat? Queda igual que abans: el cor buit i les mans buides. Però no, no igual que abans... Ella ha de creure en la importància dels petits detalls anatòmics... Si deixa de creure-hi, tot el seu drama cau. I de veres ella no és la mateixa, els tres anys d'exaltacions de goig i dolor l'han canviada" (57).

The narrative voice intensifies Gabriela's heartsickness by penetrating further into her state of mind to the point at which the narrator's identity merges with that of the main character: "Preferiria plorar sempre d'amor perdut, com en aquells moments tan dolços quan les llàgrimes llisquen suaus i el cor s'ofereix com un anyell. Àlexia Mas de Rodes [Eloi's new wife]: nom de merlets i forques. No, nom de cotxe-saló, nom de morfina, nom... És gelosia? Oh, no pas gelosia! És que és una dona, aquell nom cantellut? Una dona... una dona sortosa... La injustícia del món!" (57-58). And the paragraph ends with yet another fragment: "Misèria de Gabriela!" (58). The private life

of Gabriela has overtaken the public voice of the narrator. The character's anguish – “angoixa a Barcelona” in another context – is almost indistinguishable from the collective chaos of Barcelona from October of 1934 to the elections of 1935.

Yet to interpret Murià's novel as a statement on the similarities between collective and private problems would be incomplete. I prefer to read the narrative as an exploration of the tension between public and private space within a multidimensional time frame. The passing of historical time is indeed difficult to ascertain, and the story of Gabriela's self-destructive love of Eloi within the revolt of 1934 is an example. The narrator, adopting the voice of Gabriela, refers to “three years” as the duration of the relationship, and considering the historical nature of the work, the reader's inclination is to associate those three years with the time of the revolt. Yet we know that from the uprising to the elections that eventually led to the civil war, far less than three years passed; as a matter of fact, this period only lasted some four or five months. Moreover, the narrator adds a note of deceptive precision when we find references to specific durations of time within the development of the love story: “Passaren i passaren els dies obscurs” (44); “És cert que l'Eloi és a Barcelona?” “Sí.” “Fa dies?” “Sí, uns quants” (47); “Cinc mesos estranys han passat” (47). “Després de vuit mesos!” (50).

Murià is questioning the conventional notion of a “beginning” to any story or any history. Unlike the historical novels of nineteenth century realism, in which the readers witness the gradual and studied unfolding of social processes, in *Aquest serà el principi* the history of Barcelona is imbedded within a deeply psychological notion of the development of time. The revolt, and later the war, simply happen: their explosions are simultaneous with the individual entanglements of a young woman foolishly in love with someone who does not love her. There seems to be no need to explain or even understand the reasons for all the political passion. The author interrogates the very notion of cause-and-effect, central to the structure of most historical novels. At the same time, however, our narrator never wants us to forget the collective dimensions of her story(ies). When we arrive at the time of the February 1935 elections, the narrator interrupts Gabriela's lamentations over Eloi's marriage to Alèixia Mas de Rodes with a seemingly definitive commentary on her own novelistic enterprise, “la història d'un poble”:

Per damunt de les històries individuals, s'estremeix poderós el gran entrellat del cor de tots, adolorit, combatiu i roent dins aquell febrer d'aire gèlid que sembla un estiu. La història d'un poble. La riuada que tots seguim i omplim, cadascú servant els seus nusos, el seus ensopecs

particulars, els seus trontolls. Altra vegada el país vibra. La ciutat vibra. Fulls plegats a les urnes. I s'obriran les presons. (54)

As this initial chapter comes to a close, Gabriela, as we have seen, reflects on the way she has changed (or has not changed) since her love relationship with Eloi. And here again the lamentations are interrupted with the coming of yet another period of turmoil, this one somewhat more developed in the conventional historical sense. The end of the chapter is the beginning of the war, and like the "nit d'octubre" which marked the advent of the 1934 rebellion, this one commences with a description of "les nits de juliol." These July nights, however, have something of a pleasantly nostalgic quality — "són nits per ésser respirades... Els cafès eran plens" (59), only to be interrupted by the revolution: "Me'n vaig a casa. Diuen que hi haurà revolució" (60), and back to the beginning of violence: "ronquen avions... Pugen fumeres... Retrunyen canonades. ... Ja sondrolla els carrers la torrentada de sang i foc... Cadàvers de cavalls... Soldats que fugen" (60-61). The final paragraph reads: "Barcelona ha acabat una vida que es contarà amb somriures. Neix entre fogueres una existència monstruosa: serà endavant la seva" (61). Indeed, yet another end which is a beginning.

The collective dimension of the novel has as much to do with the contemporary history of Spain but with that of Catalonia. As the previously quoted narrative statement concerning the exploration of the relationship between the "històries individuals" and the "història d'un poble" shows, Murià is deeply concerned with the "poble" in a variety of senses. She refers to the people of Catalonia as well as to their center city, Barcelona, a locale which takes on almost archetypal significance. It serves as the unifying thread of the collective space of the novel, despite the fact that the narrative moves to a variety of places outside the Peninsula: the South of France, Paris, New York, Cuba, and Mexico. Regardless of where the characters find themselves, Barcelona will always serve as their point of reference and comparison. As a center, the city also marks a link among a variety of national phenomena: it is the capital of a nation (even though the political reality denies that very status), it provides a home for the main characters, and perhaps most important, it nourishes them with a language, a language which is itself the center of a controversy. Indeed the idea of Barcelona as center is crucial, for the city offers not only all the above signs of identity, but a logos, a world order that will serve as a beginning and an end for all the characters' behavior and motivations.

But what can we say of a woman's national logos? In a thought provoking essay on Mercè Rodereda's *Mirall trencat* (1974), Gonzalo Navajas questions the notion of a national logos with a discussion of "the Catalan *heimat*" which he argues is one of the most important

issues in Rodoreda's novel. The *heimat*, a Greek word designating an ideal dwelling place, is especially pertinent to Catalan novels of the civil war since the supposedly ideal enclave of Catalan culture was not only thrown into disarray, its preservation and protection was cast as a primordial reason to go to war. Thus for Navajas, the post-civil war Spanish novel is riddled with something he calls "assertive nostalgia" (98), the attempt to recover something lost through a recuperation and redefinition of a national culture, and for novels written in Catalan, that assertion is even stronger due to the proscriptions imposed on the very language. The reliance on the comfort—or false comfort—of the metaphorical Eden is perhaps an unwitting affirmation of an established order. Indeed there is something maternal in the notion of *heimat*, the social construction of the protective domestic space. According to Navajas, Rodoreda, through her novel, "manifests a need for an ideal order that would counter-balance the disarray in which the novel's characters are placed and which appears imposed on them" (99). A comparable statement could be made of Murià's novel. Clearly, Catalonia manifests itself in *Aquest serà el principi* as something we might call an essence: the history of the "poble" is a history of resistance: the characters are forced to leave their dwelling, they cross the Pyrenees on foot, some (like Víctor [sic], one of the main characters) land in concentration camps, and from the camps or from exile in France, they begin another exile journey to another continent. Murià actually lived this experience with her dear friend, Rodoreda, and in many ways *Aquest serà el principi* is the fictional version of that experience. Like the people of biblical Zion, the characters are displaced, de-centered; and the pathos of the entire situation is based on the necessity of perpetuating the imaginary home—Catalonia, Zion, the mother's breast, or the *heimat*, all essences which bestow meaning to their lives.

Yet there is something missing from this analysis in connection to Anna Murià's novel. As I have stated elsewhere (*Shifting Ground*), the phenomenon of exile renders literary texts problematic and difficult to place within the confines of national literary boundaries or pre-established formal patterns of expression. Moreover, a woman's experience of exile and the notion that gender is a crucial factor in the understanding of the workings of language render *Aquest serà el principi* a complex narrative that does not lend itself to a single reading, and much less an easy reading.³ The essentialist interpretation of the novel notwithstanding—the story of war, exile, pathos, etc.—, there are

³Jean Bethke Elshtain's book on the ways in which gender influences representations of war reveals that the social construction of femininity is multifarious and can lead to surprising manifestations of women's expressions about war.

a series of features, including the restructuring and rethinking of conventional history, as we have seen, which question the hackneyed perspective of an "assertive nostalgia." The experience of exile, in my view, leads almost inevitably to the questioning of a previous life, and Murià's recreation of that experience is filled with questions. Her writing of history is by no means Hegelian: there is no progress, not even in terms of a clearly marked development of historical factors. Her history is exilic; it never seems to end, it can only begin.

The story of exile in *Aquest serà el principi* does not start in the first chapter of the novel, but in the second chapter in which the civil war begins, and ends with the trip out of Spain, out of Catalonia, and into the no-man's-land (or in this case, no-woman's-land) of exile. The entire structure of the novel is asymmetrical; there is no clear reference to an exilic fall from grace as in some narratives of Spanish civil war exile such as Ramón Sender's *Crónica del alba*, or Rafael Alberti's famous autobiography *Arboleda perdida* in which the symmetrical comparison between a "before" and an "after" is a dominant motif. The only suggestion of a contrast between the tranquility of Catalonia before the war and exile and after is in the culminating paragraph of the first chapter: "Barcelona ha acabat una vida que es contarà amb somriures" (61). But even in this case, the agreeable July evenings of Barcelona are only agreeable in a superficial sense. In most of the more specific situations in Murià's novel, there is something deeply problematic. Gabriela, for example feels no peace of mind, self-esteem, or even happiness before October of 1934, July of 1936, or April of 1939 when the war ends. And the characters who take her place as protagonists—Martina, Berta, Victor, Delmira, and Roger—rarely reflect on the fullness or solidity of life before they were forced to leave. There is a lyrical and emotionally engaging instance, however, in which the crossing of the Pyrenees figures as a crucial moment, not only in terms of the lives of the characters but in the construction of the novel. This moment takes the form of a chapter, titled "Hi hagué un roure als Pirineus" (121-130), significantly shorter than the others, in which the narrator describes the long march over the mountains into France. The beginning of exile is marked by an oak tree which the characters pass as they escape their own country on foot. The trajectory from Barcelona to the south of France takes the form of both a collective and an individual experience, not unlike the war itself. The narrator detains the progression of the story to describe this oak tree, since it marks a decisive point. That point, however, is not the least bit precise, and its significance is less so. The oak tree simply stands in the center of the narrative; it is a point of both departure and entrance. It refers to a historical monument, yet the exact purpose of its erection by the author is unclear. The lyrical nature of the narrator's

description testifies to its importance, but the tree cannot stand alone with a single meaning.

Era un roure dels Pirineus, un arbre que duia a les venes nueses i a l'ample front de brancom tota la puixança de la serra... Tots deu o dotze, escampats a l'entorn del roure, miràvem vers l'espai enllà de les muntanyes, l'espai de demà, del principi. Mig milió d'éssers començarien una existència inconeguda, cada u la seva i la de tots. Un principi, altres principis, iguals en l'impuls i diferents de faisó per a cadascú. (126)

In the presence of the oak tree, the progression of both historical and psychological time has come to a brief halt, as has the continuation of Murià's narrative of war and exile. The tree, strategically placed somewhere en route from a former existence to a new one, has several functions: it is a marker that facilitates the characters' contemplation of their own condition, it serves as an object through which to conjure up a memory, and it is a reminder of both the individual and the collective nature of the events that are unfolding. Indeed, the oak tree has a great deal to do with memory, and its historically monumental nature is obvious. Yet what exactly does it commemorate? Certainly not an idyllic land or a lost paradise. On the contrary, it is a daunting and ironic indication of the groundlessness of that former land. In Catalan, as in English, "principi" can mean a norm as well as a beginning, and it seems that the solidity or the truth of any norm is under question with the portrayal of this oak tree. Admittedly, the narrator does not hesitate to use the oak as another indication of political tragedy as well as of the ravages of war, any war: "Pujava de la vall propera remor de multitud, inusitada i tràgica remor, en aquelles soledats" (126). Yet the notion of a national identity is subtly questioned by the presence of the tree: "El darrer moment de pàtria" (128), and most importantly, the very notion of certainty:

Aquella tarda deixaren el camí per enfilel·lar-se i veure més terra, tanta com fos possible, abans d'emprendre la darrera jornada... No, la darrera no, la primera del camí definitiu sense tornada... Què? Si hom no ha trobat mai res definitiu, si ha tornat moltes vegades, si ara està tornant, si no sap on és la primera jornada, on serà, on ha estat. Si sempre és la primera, si la darrera no existeix. (127-28)

Yet if the final moment did not exist or did not happen, what are the ontological consequences? The political strife of 1934, Gabriela's painful love affair, the bombing of the streets of Barcelona, the war itself, exile, and all the experiences of the novel become extremely nebulous, and this seems to be the crucial question of the entire chapter. Murià is not only fusing the moment of an ending with that of

a beginning, she is interrogating perception and reality itself. The final words of the chapter are: "Mai no he estat sota un roure dels Pirineus! I una remor aspra de fullatge baixaria cap a nosaltres. Clouriem els ulls. Hi ha coses certes?" (129).

The fact that the narrator's contemplation of the oak tree merges with the perception of women is no less significant than the construction of the tree itself. Toward the beginning of the chapter, the narrator sets the scene for the appearance of the oak tree by describing the movement of people northward within the context of the historical moment. At first, the men seem to be in charge; they give orders, they organize the stages of the journey, but when they happen upon the oak tree, they diminish in importance within the series of reflections that arise from the tree: "Els homes de llurs destins estaven escampats i com tots els qui tenien el nord obert s'hi dirigien d'una manera o altra, per uns o altres camins" (122). Men have "el nord obert," they have a destiny, and no time to reflect on the solidity (or lack thereof) of that destiny. Getting to France is an aim, and the questioning of that aim is simply an impediment to its fulfillment. Some of them boldly shout encouragement to the exhausted ones who are far more skeptical about the certainty of the arrival. In an incident that resembles the tale of Sisyphus and his tortuous trek up the mountain, Víctor Montclar tries to animate the tired refugees with his optimism despite the difficulties: "Avanceu, avanceu! —deia Víctor—. Falta poc. Darrera aquestes cims" (123). Yet when the tree appears, the reasons for the journey, as well as the sisyphian nobility of its continuation, become far less tangible through the perspective of women. "Sota el roure, tres figures femenines..." (127), and one of the three, Berta (whose resemblance to Mercè Rodoreda is not arbitrary)⁴ recalls the tree years later as she questions her own humanity: "Avui fa anys... Recordes? No ho puc evitar: en pensar-hi, el sentimentalisme més vulgar m'aixopa i em fa veure'm humana. Tu saps que moltes vegades dubto de la meua humanitat, que sovint em sorprenç de no experimentar emocions comunes" (127). While the tree stands for Berta as an assertion of mutual or collective feelings, she cannot rid herself of the notion that these very sentiments are "vulgar," and that the sense of a common bond may be illusory. The difference between the women's assimilation of the experience of crossing the Pyrenees and that of the men is as asymmetrical as the structure of the novel itself. Murià has no intention of drawing a contrast in behavior or sentiment between the feminine and masculine in a dialectical unity of opposites. Instead,

⁴ In an interview I conducted in October of 1995, Murià revealed that her character, Berta, was inspired by her intimate friendship with Rodoreda. See also *Cartes a l'Anna Murià*.

she affirms difference. The men seem to focus on a goal, while the women are concerned with a process and with the constantly changing nature of that process: "Hi ha coses certes?" (129).

Anna Murià's husband, the acclaimed poet Agustí Bartra, was also captivated by trees as vehicles to the creation of an idea or an image. In a moving poem written shortly before his death, "El meu cor a dalt d'un arbre," he contemplates the stages of life through the familiar qualities of the tree—its stability, its strength—, as the poet's heart hovers over the tree yearning for the lilies to bloom. Certainly and predictably, as if by the natural design of "destiny," the poet receives his wish: "Cor, ja ve la primavera, / ve la joia dels lilàs ... i el destí no és atzar" (*Alguna cosa ha passat*, 88). The similarities between Bartra and Víctor Montclar of *Aquest serà el principi* strongly suggest the autobiographical dimensions to Murià's novel, although, here again, to attribute a one-to-one relationship between the fictional characters and the people who have played important roles in Murià's life would be reductive.⁵ It is more accurate (and far more interesting) to read the correspondence in terms of linguistic and poetic associations. In the final images of the novel, the narrator returns to the oak tree, but this time in reference to Víctor, the man who has been searching constantly for meaning and solidity in his life, and the frustration at not reaching these ends has been one of the most important motifs of the narrative. With the culminating pages, however, the search seems to have borne fruit: "Víctor Montclar ja avançava pel camí atzarós, difícil, que se li havia obert perquè el cercà i l'emprengué, acceptant, amb decisió" (379), and in the final image of the novel, Martina, Víctor's wife, gazes at him and admires his "fermesa": "Als ulls un resplendor fosc, serè de supèrbia i fermesa: miraven el món fit a fit. Era com un roure" (380). Ironically, the reminder of the oak tree creates anything but the picture of self-assurance. Despite Martina's admiring gaze, it is clear that she is looking outside of herself; she feels the certainty of Víctor's newly found determination, but considering all that has taken place in the novel, that very certainty loses the ground it stands on; it disappears with yet another image of a beginning: the end does not exist, just beginnings. The fact that the reader is able to contemplate Víctor

⁵ See Murià's book on Bartra. Some of the attributes of the main characters, Berta, Roger, Martina, and Víctor, resemble those of the people who accompanied Murià on her journey of exile. Yet as she states in the prologue to the novel (12-13), the real figures served as models only in the way that every author draws from his or her experience to create fiction. The reader's curiosity about the real life correspondences, such as Andreu Nin's fictional recreation in the form of Haima (also mentioned in the prologue, 12) and Mercè Rodoreda's love affair with him (described by Murià in "Merçè Rodoreda viva," 12), can only lead to more questions. I believe Murià is encouraging her readers to draw their own conclusions, perhaps even begin their own novels.

through the eyes of a woman again reminds us of the process of constructing an illusory reality.

The questioning of reality in *Aquest serà el principi* is best illustrated by an inspection of the narrative voice or voices. Murià manipulates the perspective of her narrative by submitting all the details, events, and reflections to a first person who never reveals her or his identity. We do know, however, that the first person has direct subjective knowledge of these events, that the "I" is a personal friend or acquaintance of virtually all the characters, and that she or he (probably she, given the intimacy of the "I" with the female characters) is desperately trying to recall the events as they happened. The narrator's knowledge is reliable in the seemingly objective portrayal: there is little or nothing to indicate that the narrator has any special interest in altering reality, the only motivation is a concern for the plights of the characters. But it is easy for the reader to lose sight of the flesh-and-bone nature of the narrator, since the majority of the events are related by an entity who seems to possess an almost god-like knowledge of the situations, including the inner thoughts of a particular character at a particular moment. The interior monologue of Gabriela as she laments her own submission to Eloi is an example. In the same section there are first-person thoughts on the part of Eloi on the "problem" that Gabriela represents for him (48). Throughout the novel, there are veiled suggestions, never explicit, that the narrator is an implied author: that he or she is writing the story of those who have passed through the experience of life in Barcelona in the 1930s and the subsequent exile, and it is this implication that allows the reader to accept the narrator's vast knowledge of the inner and outer lives of the characters.

The narrator's reflections on the process of remembering are pointed reminders of the nebulousness of the entire story. The initial explicit indication of a first-person story teller does not appear until the second chapter when the narrator interrupts the plot with a parenthetical paragraph on the construction of specific details. In this commentary we discover that the person telling the story has learned, through a conversation with Gabriela, of incidents involving an anarchist who wants to sleep with her because he believes in free love. Gabriela, according to the narrator, "m'ho contà bo i rient" (111). There are several more narrator's intrusions, all of which serve to remind the readers that the truth or even accuracy of the story is partial. Reminiscent of Galdós's *Fortunata y Jacinta*, the narrator interjects comments, however infrequently and unexpectedly, that reveal the subjective nature of the entire situation. The narrator of the Galdós novel appears as a chronicler of local history, and since he is a personal friend of the main characters, we believe (or suspend our disbelief of)

his rendition. Similarly, Murià creates a person whose identity we know first as a story teller and secondly as an intimate acquaintance of the characters whose lives are under scrutiny. Moreover, the collective dimension of both novels manifests itself through the narrative voice. Just as the narrator of *Fortunata* creates a sense of Madrilenian identity with his narrator, Murià likewise establishes that her tale has to do with the "poble" of Catalonia and that the narrator is part of it. In fact the first person singular at times becomes a first person plural (221, 280).

There is, however, an immense difference in the two narrative voices. While the first-person narrator of *Fortunata* is barely detectable, the self-consciousness of the narrator of *Aquest serà el principi* becomes so intense at times, that the process of telling the story seems to make its way into the foreground of the novel. The very ordering of the events and the purpose of telling the story become parts of the narrative itself, and the overall effect is the further questioning of its reality. At a particularly significant moment, the narrator begs the reader's pardon for what might appear as a confusing sequence of events:

Veig que avanço i retardo situacions, que salto enrera i endavant, que barrejo el temps, que esbullo els fulls del calendari. Us en demano perdó, si és que sou amants d'allò que en diuen ordre cronològic. Veureu, jo no registro fets a mesura que s'esdevenen davant dels meus ulls, sinó que evoco moments viscuts en un passat, uns passats, agavellament en el record. Narració sense ordre, però amb concert. En el temps de la memòria s'encavallen els moments de dimensions no pas naturals (hi ha una mida natural del temps?) ans arbitràries d'un arbitri misteriós. La previsió pot tenir calendari, però no l'evocació. Els dies nous que vull reviure no són sis o set, no són de vint-i-quatre hores: són anys amuntegats. (280)

Indeed, the "I" of this commentary explains that the process of structuring the story is an act of "evocation" of moments and years without the precision of the calendar. That process is further linked to the creative process of Anna Murià in *Aquest serà el principi*. Thus like the narrator, an implied author, Murià is composing her rendition of women, war, and exile, and the subjectivity of that rendition is perhaps its most significant factor.

With the end of the novel, there is one final narrative intrusion in the form of another commentary on the very act of structuring the story. Here the distance between the narrator and the author diminishes, as it becomes clear that the narrator has been engaged in a process of creative memory. The "I" returns to the structure of the story itself by alluding once again to the notion of a beginning.

M'adono que el teixit d'aquesta història que he volgut reconstruir queda una mica esfilagarsat. He volgut lligar caps solts, nuar fils dispersos, però

no sempre he pogut, en resten molts de penjants [loose ends?] i la mostra resulta desdibuixada, més ben dit, no hi ha mostra, sinó un desordre semiabstracte com el d'aquests tapissos moderns de materials rebels i vores amb serrells desiguals. En el meu teixit no aconseguixo l'acabat. La vida és, tanmateix, esfilagarsada. ¿Com podria fer-hi un perfecte voraviu al capdavant? Si cada gest, cada pensament, cada minut són preludi d'un nou temps que comença... (380)

The association between the "history" which is about to end and woven material reveals not only a creative process but a woman's creative process. This woven fabric, however, is not neatly tied together; it is "threadbare," "rebellious," "disordered," filled with loose ends.⁶ The conventional notion of the loose end ("fils... penjants") in the context of a story or novel denotes something unfinished or perhaps even a defect in the construction of the story. But in *Aquest serà el principi* the implied author, looking more and more like Anna Murià, lets the readers know that the "loose end" has been one of the narrative's most dominant aesthetic devices. A loose end leaves the reader frustrated, anxious to know the outcome of a particular anecdote, the final dwelling place of a character, or a culminating state of mind. But, says the narrator, "life is threadbare," and every ending is the prelude to a new moment. The need for completion is a virile affirmation of order, symmetry, destiny; it is a need for something—like Bartra's lilies or Sisyphus's rock—that resists arbitrariness.

Murià's autobiographical or semi-autobiographical novel affirms something different. Her history belies order and cause-and-effect explanations of events. Her lilies and rocks have no substance or essence; they are, on the contrary, impressions that appear woven into a fabric. They are loose ends that lead us constantly into a beginning.

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⁶ See Iriarte's book for discussion on the relationship between women's language and weaving in Greek mythology.

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