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***Daedalu's Wings: The Effects of Temporal Distance in La Plaça del Diamant***  
**Colleen P. Culleton**

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DAEDALUS'S WINGS:  
THE EFFECTS OF TEMPORAL DISTANCE IN  
*LA PLAÇA DEL DIAMANT*

COLLEEN P. CULLETON

Let him block land & sea—sky's open!  
We'll go there! Minos may have everything  
but he doesn't have air!

Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

The product of various types of oppression, the story of the protagonist in Mercè Rodoreda's *La plaça del Diamant* (1960) might be read as that of a collective (be it women, the working class, or the Catalan community). However, Natàlia is convincing as an individual—the novel would not be so moving otherwise—and her apparent lack of political and social consciousness complicates her possible role as a representative of a group. The case is further complicated by Natàlia's dual role as protagonist and narrator—roles which she plays with equal success, but which are so distinct (the former largely passive, the latter willful and active) that they seem to almost cancel each other out. In the center of this complexity lies the key to understanding her story. The meaning of *La plaça* is born of the space between Natàlia the protagonist and Natàlia the narrator, and like most of the meaning constructed there, it is facilitated by the passage of time.

Natàlia's dual function as narrator with perspective and protagonist who seems lost facilitates a comparison between her and Classical mythology's Daedalus, architect and eventual prisoner of Minos's labyrinth. The master builder discovers that the only possible escape from his own construction is the sky, builds wings, and flies away. Already, the image of flight calls up Natàlia as dove, an identity imposed upon her in her re-naming by Quimet. Like Daedalus, Natàlia finds that the route to freedom lies in rising above the narrow paths of her solitary experience. Taking the contradictory nature of both Natàlia and Daedalus as a starting point illuminates the importance of memory, the source of temporal perspective, as a driving force in Natàlia's narrative. Maurice Halbwachs's conception of "collective memory" helps to reveal a clear link between Natàlia's isolated existence as a character, and her ability to construct a narrative that is significant for a community.

In *The Idea of the Labyrinth*, Penelope Reed Doob describes the mythological construction as an "embodiment of contraries" (24). The same can certainly be said of Natàlia and her narration. *La plaça del Diamant* begins with an epigraph by George Meredith: "My dear, these things are life." The dual possibility that this phrase offers for interpretation mirrors the two ways in which one might read, and in fact a growing body of critical works has read, the novel's narrator/protagonist, Natàlia. On the one hand, the "such is life" concept implies passive acceptance in the face of the unchangeable, a seemingly credible description of Natàlia's behavior in response (or lack thereof) to the suffering that life imposes upon her. On the other hand, the affirmation that "these things are life" rings with a certain wisdom born of experience. Not passive, but knowing. This second interpretation is descriptive of Natàlia, the narrator, telling her story after the fact, with the perspective acquired with time.<sup>1</sup>

As narrator, Natàlia chooses to "tell" her story to an *almost* explicitly referenced interlocutor, implicating her reader in the creation of her story's meaning. In search of the source of the novel's political resonance, critics often recur to the presence of an implied *author*, suggesting a lack of knowledge or ability on the narrator's part in the process. To do so is to remove the responsibility for social-political consciousness from the implied *reader*, and place him or her in a position before history that is equally as, if not more, passive than the one that Natàlia is often described as maintaining. A concentrated look at the effects of the temporal distance that stands between the novel's protagonist and its narrator, as well as an examination of some of the narrative strategies that such a distance permits, resolves the issue of Natàlia's apparent lack of political consciousness.

### THE LABYRINTH

The labyrinth is introduced as a significant figure in the modern Catalan literary tradition by Salvador Espriu, with his collections of poetry including *Cementiri de Sinera* (1946), *Les hores* (parts one and two in 1952, part three in 1955), *Final del laberint* (1955), *Mrs. Death* (1952), *El caminant i el mur* (1955), *La pell de brau* (1960), and *Llibre de*

<sup>1</sup> On Natàlia's narrative distance and/or lack thereof Joan Ramon Resina suggests: "Because reflection is always secondary to perception, it entails the alteration of the past by the perspective gained from later experience. This foundational reference that used to privilege the traditional narrator's point of view is undermined in the modern novel for the benefit of immediacy and fidelity to experience. [...] The past can be reduced in all its vital tremor because the narrator's present is not allowed to categorize what was lived" ("Link" 240).



*Sinera* (1963). These collections form part of a coherent, laboriously laid out body of work that cannot be clearly broken up into independent parts; they address the dialectics of life and death, memory and forgetting, solitude and community (Coccozzella 40, Walters 890). Castellet identifies the labyrinth in this poetry as an *indici*, material, like titles and epigraphs, that is tangential to the texts but helps the reader understand how they should be read (95). Espriu was a student of Classics, and his use of the labyrinth is closely tied to the mythology from which it emerges; it is an expression of the inevitability of death as an inherent part of life. While that aspect of the labyrinth myth, which plays out in Espriu's poetry, is not present in this reading of *La plaça*, Espriu also expresses, through the labyrinth, his perception of people wandering lost and bewildered through their own lives. Carme Arnau describes this as "[. . .] the desolate condition of man, particularly of man as a prisoner of social conventions, and generally as a prisoner of life [. . .]" (12, my translation). This usage of the labyrinth is most clearly evidenced in the collection of short stories called *Ariadna al laberint grotesc*, which was originally published in 1935 and appeared in its final form in 1975. This certainly describes, to an extent, the disorientation that Natàlia demonstrates as a character in her own story, although in Rodoreda's novel the satiric tone of Espriu's narratives is wholly absent.

Classical mythology tells us that Daedalus was at the same time a hero and a villain. The architectural genius behind the construction of the labyrinth of Minos in Cnossos, Daedalus was imprisoned in his own creation when the king discovered that he was also the mastermind behind the prosthetic cow that had facilitated the conception of the minotaur—the reason that a labyrinth was needed in the first place. He was the first human being to achieve flight, but watched in horror as the wings that he had invented and constructed melted away and dropped his only son, Icarus, into the sea. Daedalus was a mechanical genius whose prowess would be the key to his own ruin.

Natàlia, like Daedalus, finds the sky to be the only viable route for escape from her labyrinth, although her escape is not a literal one. Freedom for Natàlia means gaining perspective on her and Barcelona's past that allows her to understand what occurred and how she fits in. Daedalus's story speaks to us through the ages as a questioning of to what extent we are the creators of our own personal prisons—a question particularly apt to shed light on a text that has inspired critical debate as to the passivity, or lack thereof, of its narrator and main character.

A comparison of Natàlia to Greek mythology's Daedalus is the point of departure for an analysis of prolepsis, a characteristic of Natàlia's narrative that some critics have alluded to as representing

faulty organization on the narrator's part—resulting perhaps from her lack of formal training, or “educational naiveté” (Clarasó 148). In contrast, the reading presented here considers it an example of her narrative prowess, demonstrative of the way in which Natàlia, as narrator, knowingly leads her reader through the text/labyrinth. For Gérard Genette, *prolepsis* refers to interruptions in the principal narrative line—that is, the narrative present—with the purpose of disclosing some point in the future. While some of Natàlia's prolepses are only implied, these anachronisms are not the sign of inadequate story-telling. On the contrary, they are an indication that the best way to describe the past is not necessarily linear. In contrast to Natàlia's, the character's, experience of time, where she is unable to see behind, or more importantly ahead, Natàlia, the narrator, makes use of her perspective to diverge from the path dictated by the passage of time and constructs a more meaningful sequence of events.

### THE BENEFITS OF PERSPECTIVE

Natàlia's mention of certain objects as already familiar demonstrates that they are present to her, as a narrator who already knows the whole story. As more than one critic has pointed out, the use of the definite article to modify certain objects upon their first appearance in the text lends a weight of significance to them before the reader is aware of their meaning. The most important example of this is the arrival of the injured dove that starts Quimet's dove breeding project: “I remember the dove and the funnel, because Quimet bought the funnel the day before the dove came. He saw the dove one day when he was about to open the dining room balcony doors” (65). From here Natàlia continues to speak of the dove. She mentions the funnel once more at the end of that fragment, and then does not bring it up again until some eighty pages later when she says “I couldn't go on. I looked for the funnel” (146). Virtually her only possession after the Civil War, Natàlia's funnel will become the potential instrument of her and her children's deaths. The definite article that modifies the funnel upon its first appearance in the text marks it as an important object, and suggests that it is known. The fact that Natàlia does not explain its importance at that time illuminates the temporal distance that allows her to see into and refer to, if only in the most subtle way, the future of her narrative. This is an implied prolepsis that, if verbalized, might be read as “Months from now this funnel would be important to me.” It represents a nod on the narrator's part toward a future moment in the text when this object *will have meaning*. In this way, the funnel serves as a textual landmark for the reader, preparing



him/her for what is to come. Natàlia takes advantage of her temporal perspective to provide an "Ariadne's thread" for the reader that she did not have as a character.

The fact that Natàlia is telling her story from some point in the future is made clear to her reader quite deliberately, early in the novel, through an explicit use of prolepsis. At the end of the first fragment, when Natàlia tells that the too-tight waist band of her petticoat snapped as she ran away from Quimet, she combines her narration of that moment with the way that Quimet would describe it "years later" (19). The mortification of one moment in her youth is magnified by her husband's multiple re-tellings of it, insensitive to the significance of the original event. The difference between the Natàlia who met Quimet and the one who is telling the story of that meeting is emphasized even earlier, in the first paragraph of the novel. When speaking of her friend Julieta's invitation to a neighborhood festival, Natàlia explains, "But she made me come, even though I didn't want to, because *that's how I was*. It was hard for me to say no if someone asked me to do something" (15, my emphasis). It is interesting to note that this is a rare example of Natàlia's establishing a clear causal relationship. She usually employs coordination instead of subordination (Glenn 65). This asserted cause might be attributed not only to Natàlia's going to the dance, but also to many of the events that follow. Here temporal distance allows for the separation of Natàlia's role as narrator from that of character, comparable to the apparently contradictory experiences of Daedalus as architect, and as prisoner of, the labyrinth. Daedalus eventually recognizes the sky as the only path that does not lead to a wall.

### PRISONER

Early in the novel, the view of the sky is blocked off to Natàlia, and she cannot achieve an overview (a process that is reversed in the novel's last pages). As Kathleen Glenn suggests, "Much of the impact of *Diamant* derives from the use of an innocent as the center of consciousness. There is an air of bewilderment about Natàlia" (61). We can read this "bewilderment" as the lack of perspective on the part of the *character* Natàlia, plunged into the midst of experience in such a way that she cannot see where she is going, and cannot explain where she has been. However, this is a bewilderment that Natàlia, the narrator, has chosen to express, focalizing her narrative through the eyes of her younger self.

This chapter begins with a brief passage from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*—Daedalus's proposed escape from Minos's (and his own)

labyrinth. The sky—vertical, rather than horizontal motion—is the only solution. We find Natàlia looking toward a similar route the first time that Quimet kisses her. “And when he started kissing me I saw Our Lord *up above* in his house inside a puffed up cloud with bright orange edges that was changing color on one side, [. . .]” (23, my emphasis). One kiss turns into another, and what seemed to suggest the only way to escape is blocked off as Natàlia describes, “I saw a big cloud moving away and other smaller ones came out and they all started following the puffed up one and Quimet’s mouth tasted like coffee and milk. And he shouted, ‘They’re closing!’” (23). One page later, Natàlia describes the sky as being black. Here Quimet marks a definitive closing off of Natàlia’s possibilities with his words and with his kisses. Natàlia narrates that closing, beginning with a view of above, a sky covering over with clouds and darkening, and descending to the terrestrial level of Quimet’s kiss (“his mouth tasted like coffee and milk”), thus associating the beginning of their relationship with a closing off of possibilities.

In the same early passages of the novel Natàlia obsesses about her mother’s death—inserting mentions of it into descriptions of events where it seemingly does not fit. Kathleen Glenn comments that the “repetition serves to reveal her feelings of loneliness and abandonment” (66). It can also be argued that this obsession points to a causal relationship that the reader must infer. Appearing only at the beginning of Natàlia’s story (although her loneliness seems to persist almost until the end), it serves as an explanation for why what follows happened the way it did.<sup>2</sup> In spite of the repetitive and apparently spontaneous way in which Natàlia mentions her mother, this moment in the novel speaks more of narrative coherence than a lack thereof, as critics agree that the complicity between narrator and reader is fundamental to Rodoreda’s technique. In terms of the novel as a construction of meaning, Natàlia narrates the labyrinth—that is, the walls of which the labyrinth is built; the path in between those walls is the space left for the reader to fill.

Natàlia gets trapped in the labyrinth, not having the guidance of a mother or other appropriate role model, who might propose an alternative solution.<sup>3</sup> Natàlia’s experience as a prisoner of the labyrinth is announced, first, by a movement of the reader’s vision away from the sky, and, second, by a darkening of it. This stands in

<sup>2</sup> Clarasó also identifies Natàlia’s obsession with her mother, but reads it in a different way, attributing Natàlia’s mention of her out of context to an absence of external logic in the narrative (149–50).

<sup>3</sup> “Never having had a propitious environment for developing a sense of selfhood, Natàlia has a serious identity problem, compounded by solitude, beginning when she was orphaned at an early age and thus deprived of her prime role model” (Pérez 80).



contrast to the closing passage, where Natàlia returns to the plaça del Diamant and resists the enclosure of the sky, allowing negativity to escape upwards, and describing the coming of a new day (198). Here, as the sky is illuminated, Natàlia character/prisoner becomes Natàlia narrator/architect as she allows her story to escape from her mouth and move upwards for the first time.<sup>4</sup>

The problem of a labyrinth is one of perspective: one loses one's sense of direction, since the view in front and behind is cut off by the curves or angles of the path. Natàlia seems to become disoriented the moment in which she first sees Quimet: "I bumped into a face so close to mine that I could hardly see what it looked like" (16). And in her first description of the apartment that she and Quimet will share, Natàlia explains, "There was a breeze blowing and you could see lots of rooftops, but the bay window on the second floor blocked our view of the street" (31). As a character, Natàlia is trapped, lacking in the perspective that might allow her a clearer perception of her situation and facilitate decision-making. In a labyrinth one moves continuously toward a center that lies an unknown distance away. The repeated "ands" in Natàlia's narrative syntactically reproduce this experience.

#### MINOTAUR IN THE MIDDLE

At the heart of the labyrinth resides its reason for being—the minotaur. To imagine this particular text as a labyrinth, its original prisoner, the minotaur, is particularly useful. Of course, it is difficult to talk about the minotaur in the Catalan cultural context without making mention of Pablo Picasso. The minotaur first appeared in Picasso's work in 1928 and "was to dominate his imagery of the personally turbulent, yet artistically productive Surrealist years 1933-37" (Posever Curtis 71). Examples of Picasso's minotaurs include *Minotaur Raping a Woman* (1933), *Blind Minotaur Led through the Night by a Little Girl* (1934), and *Dora and the Minotaur* (1936). *Minotauromachy* (1935) is considered by many to be Picasso's most important etching. Figures from Picasso's minotaur etchings reappear in *Guernica* (1937), the main example of Picasso's artistic engagement with the Spanish Civil War. Early sketches show that the bull and the woman with the lamp were two of the four initial elements that Picasso conceived; he experimented with various levels of humanization in the bull figure, which Otto Brendel describes as belonging

<sup>4</sup> "The narrator's past is released through her mouth, as it is released in the telling of her story, the novel itself," (Anderson 123).



"to the large family of Picasso's Minotaurs" (144). In the same year as the creation of *Guernica*, the artist produced a series of drawings and oil paintings depicting the death of the Minotaur. According to Ken Johnson, the minotaur symbolizes "the inextricable combination of instinct and intellect that animates Picasso's art" (120). More than one critic has read Picasso's Minotaur in a biographical light, suggesting that the beast is a mirror image of the artist himself at a time of turbulence in his love life. In 1933 Picasso drew a minotaur for the cover of the first issue of a surrealist journal called *Le Minotaure*. Indeed, it seems a point of general critical agreement that the minotaur is one of the dominant figures in Picasso's surrealist period (1933-37). Not adopted for its significance in the classical tradition, the minotaur for Picasso was the product of "immediate visual and life experiences" (Fiero 20). Gloria Fiero argues that Picasso's minotaur is born of his experimentation with the figures of bulls and men intimately linked in the *corridos* (bull fights) of which he was an aficionado. She goes on to imply a developmental link from works like *Bull, Horse and Matador* (1923), where three separate entities are gracefully intertwined, to the eventual adoption of the minotaur, where two entities are encompassed in one. The minotaur helps Picasso to articulate a type of relationship between bulls and men that he perceives in the *corrida*. In Natàlia's narrative the minotaur's significance is more closely related to the Classical myth: it is a monstrous thing that is meant to be imprisoned. There are, in fact, three different minotaurs in *La plaça*—one in the center of the protagonist, one in the center of the text, and one in the center of history (as history is depicted in the novel).

Natàlia's personal minotaur is first exposed when she describes life in her father's house after his remarriage: "We lived without words in my house and the things I felt inside scared me because I didn't know where they came from [...]." (28). While this passage may be the most frequently cited indication of the suffering that resides in the center of the protagonist, it does not stand alone. When Natàlia describes breaking off her engagement with Pere (because Quimet told her to) she says,

[. . .] and when I thought about Pere's face I felt a pain that hurt deep inside me, as if in the middle of the peace I'd felt before a little door had opened that was hiding a nest of scorpions and the scorpions had come out and mixed with the pain and made it sting even more and had swarmed through my blood and made it black. (21)

Natàlia runs into her former fiancé on the street after her marriage to Quimet, and describes the moment:

I lowered my eyes because I didn't know what to say or do, and I felt like I had to roll the sadness into a ball, a bullet, a bit of grapeshot. Swallow it. And since he was taller than me, while I was standing with my head down I felt the weight of all the sadness Pere carried inside him on top of my head and it seemed like he saw everything inside me, all my secrets and my pain. And thank God there were all those flowers. (56)

Here again Natàlia relegates pain to "the inside," and relates it to the closing off of the possibility of vertical escape, which she associates with Quimet. As Natàlia's story progresses she becomes buried by the suffering that she had intended to bury within herself, much as Daedalus finds himself trapped within his own creation.

In the center of the novel a textual minotaur emerges. It is the moment in which Natàlia begins her "revolution" against the doves, finally externalizing some of her pain, and reacting against her imprisonment. Upon examining Natàlia's description of this moment in history, one finds that she treats it (as with most of her discussions of historical context) as something "unspeakable," like the minotaur, something to be hidden away, but always present below the surface. Natàlia explains the things that she could *not* tell her employer:

*I couldn't tell her* all I heard was doves, that my hands still smelled from the sulfur in the water dishes and the birdseed in the food trays. *I couldn't tell her* all I heard was doves crying for food with all the fury in their bodies made of dark flesh stuck full of quills. *I couldn't tell her* all I heard was doves cooing because I had them shut up in my house and that if I left the door open to that dovecoat room the doves would scatter everywhere and keep flying out the balcony like some crazy game. [. . .]. *I couldn't tell her* I had no one to complain to, that it was my own private sickness [. . .]. *I couldn't tell her* my children were growing up like wildflowers no one took care of and my apartment, which used to be a heaven, had turned into a hell [. . .]. (101, emphasis added)

This passage marks the literal center (page 101 out of 201 pages in the cited edition) of this textual labyrinth. Shortly afterwards Natàlia decides to sabotage Quimer's dove project by destroying their eggs. She refers to her apartment as "a hell" more than once in this central part of the novel.

The "hell" that Natàlia's existence has become is partly the result of the stifling heat of the summer of 1936, but as Natàlia points out: "And while I was working on the great revolution with the doves the war started and everyone thought it was going to be over quickly" (113). Natàlia's domestic revolution corresponds parodically to the one that was taking place, at the same time, in the streets of Barcelona. The eruption of the Civil War in the central moment of the text marks that event as the center around which the novel develops. The fact that this describes Natàlia's experience as a character *throughout* the novel,



including the years before the war, indicates an important anachronism in this reading. It points to the centrality of the Civil War to this memory-driven narrative, in that its impact extends over *all* of the narrative, not just the part that succeeds it.

### ARCHITECT

As we have already seen, one sign of Natàlia's narrative resistance to the events of history is prolepsis. Another is repetition, related to prolepsis in the sense that it too provides textual "landmarks." Keeping in mind the importance of "things" in the navigation of time and text, Joan Ramon Resina states that for Natàlia "The old spaces are still there, but they are inhabited by a different spirit, they have been placed under a different order. People have either disappeared or been changed out of recognition, things are not themselves" ("Link" 243). The labyrinth moves beyond simple narrative cyclicity, replacing the idea of repetition with one of re-interpretation, where words accumulate meaning when returned to, as one would gain perspective on an intersection in a labyrinth, approaching it for a second time from a different direction. Of course, on the most basic level this means that events that Natàlia (as character) was unable to comprehend when they occurred are meaningful to her later on, as narrator. They gain meaning through repetition across time. Or, in Wolfgang Iser's words, "Whenever something is remembered, it changes according to the circumstances under which it is remembered, but the resultant change in the past becomes a past itself which, in turn, can be remembered and changed again" (144). This process is similar for the narrator and the reader.<sup>5</sup> Genette's felicitous use of the term *footprints* (repetitions resulting from anachronisms) is also useful here (66). When the text touches on an object (through anachronism or otherwise) it leaves a narrative footprint. When we return to that object we realize we have already been there. We can step on the same spot again and deepen the mark. Repeated images, like a textual memory, accumulate symbolic meaning. Each time the narrator returns to a word/image, the reader remembers its previous appearance(s) within a new context, although it continues to be charged with prior significance. The result is a labyrinthine construction of meaning, even within a linear text. Through the narrative mechanisms of prolepsis and repetition Natàlia demonstrates that the passage of time has the same

<sup>5</sup> "Conversely, things can still be haunted by the past, recognition in the midst of new circumstances will somehow defeat the forces working for oblivion" (Resina, "Link" 243).



effect on people that it does on physical objects. So, where some read Natàlia's prolepses as indicative of an inexperienced narrator, here they are interpreted as Natàlia's demonstration of the importance of time as transformative of "things," people, and, in fact, communities.<sup>6</sup> Natàlia, herself, is the most telling example of this phenomenon.

Clearly "temporal distance" is a function of memory. It is important to note that, unlike many other novels of memory, or novels that employ memory as a source of information, Rodoreda's readers are not generally tempted to question the validity of the "reality" portrayed, in spite of its status as remembrance.<sup>7</sup> The reader does not wonder if Natàlia embellishes or adapts her information to serve personal or political aims. Nor does he/she worry that the accuracy of Natàlia's account might suffer for the (unknown) amount of time that has passed.

Although explicit references to the political context of the novel are rarely given, implying Natàlia's lack of interest in or ignorance of it, the history of Barcelona that took place outside Natàlia's door inevitably comes into play. The political dimension of the text is present, not because an implied author places it there, but rather because that political dimension, even when not articulated or not articulable, forms an inherent part of the day-to-day world through which the narrator/protagonist moves.

The fact that Natàlia, at least in retrospect, sees some of the ways in which collective history crossed her path is demonstrated in her occasionally telling anecdotes or including details that, without the implications of their political significance, would seem extraneous. One example is when the "lady" that Natàlia works for tells of the militiamen who had been at her house and taken her husband for questioning: "And while the lady was telling me all this a drop of sweat trickled down my back like a live snake" (118). Not only the detail itself (which might be attributed to hot summer weather), but the fact that she remembers it and the way that she does demonstrates Natàlia's awareness of the seriousness of the situation. Natàlia loses her job because of Quimet's involvement with the anti-fascist militia. Politics does, in fact, play a role in her life, and she knows it. A second example of Natàlia's awareness (although in this case clearly retrospective) of the way that the personal and the political cross

6 "The intention to incise the past, to preserve the personal, lived version of it as opposed to the abstract, disembodied past recorded in historical studies is thematized in the novel" (Resina, "Link" 240).

7 "[...]this *temporal distance* between the story and the narrating instance involves no *modal distance* between the story and the narrative: no loss, no weakening of the mimetic illusion. Extreme mediation, and at the same time utmost immediacy" (Genette 169).

paths is in her description of a conversation that she has over coffee with Cinter, where he describes a bird that had gotten trapped inside the plane, "And how the bird had lain there half dead with its belly up and pulling its claws in and a last drop of spit coming out of its beak and its eyes half glazed and half shut. And we started talking about Mateu. (126)" The "and" between those two sentences is not as innocent as it seems. Through it the death of the fragile bird caught in the wind of the airplane is linked to Mateu's death in an unnamed *plça* (although the *plça del Diamant* is implied), which has not happened yet in the narrative present, but which Natàlia, the narrator, clearly remembers.

Natàlia's telling of her story is a much more hopeful act than any contained within it, and in assuming agency as the willful builder of her text, Natàlia becomes a literary descendant of the architect of Minos's labyrinth.<sup>8</sup> In naming her world, Natàlia appropriates it. She articulates the unspeakable and confronts her minotaur. In so doing, she shakes off the role of "Eve" from the Biblical creation myth forced upon her when she married Quimet and rejects the instruction not to turn back that she remembered from the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. When she leaves the store with a bottle of hydrochloric acid in her bag, "Someone called out to me and I turned around and it was the grocer and he came up behind me and when I turned around I thought of that woman who'd been changed to salt" (155). In a literal turning around, that reflects the temporal turn around that is her narrative, Natàlia resists the experiences that have been forced upon her and begins to unravel the labyrinth.

### CROSSING PATHS

Having taken control of her narrative, Natàlia is able to look around and move in new directions. Now that she can look back (and up), she re-encounters old images: "[. . .] and the first time [senyora Enriqueta] came to see me it was the same old story: trying to get me to tell her about my wedding night [. . .]" (167). A rat in a trap gets caught "right in the middle" (168), and the reference points back to the elastic cutting into Natàlia's waist the night she met Quimet. One day Natàlia realizes "Rita was Quimet" (170). Fear that Quimet might not have really died in the war and that he might "show up and wreck

<sup>8</sup> "In taking it upon himself to construct a technical means of flying in the air, Daedalus not only became the progenitor of modern air travel, but also a rebel against the limited conditions of human existence, against the purely horizontal dimensionality of life" (Jaskolski 149).



everything" leads Natàlia to the following reflection, as if reliving her years of marriage to Quimet:

When I went into the boy's bedroom: a wall. When I went into the storeroom: a wall. Nothing but walls and the hallway and that reed curtain with the Japanese lady. And walls and walls and the hallway and walls and me pacing up and down thinking about things [...]. (170-71)

Eventually Natàlia begins to leave the house (although it will still be some time before she leaves behind the role of the doves in that period of her life), a new light is shed on already known objects and things, and events that previously carried negative connotations acquire positive significance: "Everything was the same but pretty" (174). This retracing of her steps culminates in the last pages of the novel, beginning with Rita's wedding. Natàlia dances with Toni:

[. . .] and when I danced with my son the soldier, pressing my palm with that whole span of wrinkled skin that goes from your wrist to your fingers against his palm, I felt like that bedpost made of wooden balls piled on top of each other was breaking and I dropped his hand and put my arm around his neck and squeezed it and he said "What's up?" and I said "I'm strangling you." (190)

This reliving/ retelling/ rereading of the birth of Toni transforms what was a physically and emotionally traumatic moment over which Natàlia had no control and that she did not understand into a demonstration of affection that she initiates. The dance ends and her pearl necklace breaks and "all the pearls spilled onto the floor," recalling the balls ("all piled up one on top of the other," like the bedpost) made of blood in Natàlia's dream/hallucination in the church: "[. . .] so many of them that by now they were spilling off the altar and soon they'd reach the feet of the praying altar boys" (149). In the church, the congregants have their heads bowed and fail to see what is happening. At the wedding, the guests rush to gather up the pearls, and as they hand them back they respectfully call the protagonist by her real name: *senyora* Natàlia.

Of course the most poignant example of "naming" in the novel takes place at the end, when Natàlia carves "Colometa," "in big deep letters" into the door of her old apartment building. This is sometimes read as a denial on Natàlia's part of that name and a leaving behind of that part of her life. It might also be read, though, as a first recognition on Natàlia's part of that life as *hers*, where previously it was perceived as something imposed on her, a time and space in which she was lost and over which she felt she had no control. In this way, Natàlia reverses the effect of her original naming. As Resina explains,



"The name that we attribute to the other calls up a false presence and erases its otherness" ("Short" 110). By writing "Colometa," the name that Quimet had used to take possession of her, Natàlia claims control over her identity, becoming a complete subject. In carving the name that was given to her there, she marks the space like a signpost in the labyrinth that she is beginning to understand.

From there she moves to the *plaça del Diamant* ("and the walls carried me more than my own footsteps" (197). This moment, rich in symbolic imagery, brings together many of the important elements of the novel, representing Natàlia's new-found ability to see things, as if from above, in relation to one another. The walls close around Natàlia like a funnel,

[. . .] and I felt something in my hand and it was Mateu's hand and a satin-tie dove landed on his shoulder [. . .] and I heard a storm coming up like a whirlwind inside the funnel which was almost closed now and I covered my face with my arms to protect myself from I don't know what and I let out a hellish scream. A scream I must have been carrying around inside me for many years, so thick it was hard to get through my throat, and with that scream a little bit of nothing trickled out of my mouth like a cockroach made of spit [. . .] and that bit of nothing that had lived so long trapped inside me was my youth and it flew off with a scream of I don't know what [. . .] letting go? (197)

In the center of the labyrinth Natàlia finds the horrors of war, her own anger, and narrates . . . a "bit of nothing." This seemingly anti-climactic metaphoric rendering of Natàlia's not yet begun (in one sense, and almost ended in another) narrative enterprise is, on the contrary, a recognition of the spaces that she narrates into her story: the path that the reader will walk.

Unlike the beginning of the novel, where Natàlia finds herself alone in the *plaça*, with no one to guide her, here people come and ask her if she needs help. She tells them "It's all over now," and turns toward home (198). Again contrasting with the beginning of Natàlia's story, where the sky clouds over and becomes dark, here birds fly shrieking (no longer silenced) into a "shimmering blue" sky. The novel ends with Natàlia walking among the clouds (looking down on them, in fact) reflected in puddles where birds bathe. From her new perspective she is undisturbed when "the sky is shattered from time to time by a bird [. . .] a bird who was thirsty and without realizing it shattered the sky in the water with its beak" (201).

## COLLECTIVE MEMORY

The underlying assumption of Halbwachs's concept is summed up in a simple sentence: "In reality, we are never alone" (23). For Halbwachs, collective memory refers to a pool of memories born of a group, what he refers to as a "common instrument," from which we, as individuals, draw the material we need to fill in the gaps in our own memory. His contention is that, while the individual memory does exist, it is never isolated, because all remembrances are informed by the perspective of the group to which we belong when we experience the remembered event, and more importantly, the group to which we belong when we remember. It is often the case that individual memories could not be completely formulated without the assistance of other members of our group. At the most basic level, the language and thought patterns in which we represent memories to ourselves are the byproducts of the groups to which we belong. "Even in those instances when others are not physically present and we evoke an event that had a place in the life of our group, it might be granted that we can speak of collective memory because we once envisaged that event, and we still do now in the moment we recall it, from the viewpoint of this group" (33).<sup>9</sup>

While Natàlia herself suggests that in the *plaza* she lets her youth go, it is clear that "letting go" is not the same as forgetting. Like the ball of sadness that Natàlia forces herself to swallow when she meets Pere on the street, the labyrinthine narrative that she constructs encapsulates the pain not only of her life, but also that of a shared experience of a time in history. The fact that for the first time her pain is external to her emphasizes this point. That the Civil War represents the center of Natàlia's story but not the center of her life (accomplished, again, via anachronism), makes it possible to read her story as a collective one, because it revolves around collective suffering.

Through an examination of Natàlia's fulfillment of dual narrative functions, we find reflected the labyrinth:

[...] a symbol of integration. individuation, of the concentration of all essential layers, aspects, and levels of meaning of a human existence. It symbolizes, among other things, the process of maturation from a one-dimensional person, fragmented into a thousand separate functions, into a rounded-out personality, composed in itself, which has found its center. (Kern as cited in Jaskolski, 77-8)

<sup>9</sup> In "Memoria colectiva y Lieux de Mémoire en la España de la transición" Cristina Dupláa provides a brief but thorough background of Halbwachs's work.

On its most literal level, the construction of a labyrinth implies the raising of walls. With the prowess of Daedalus, Natàlia is careful to leave spaces between and behind her walls—places for her readers to walk and a reason for them to keep going. These silences or “little bits of nothing,” are the absence—only apparent—of political discourse in Natàlia’s narrative. Natàlia belongs to a community in crisis. Her collective memory is under attack: the language in which it is formulated can no longer be spoken, names of the places in which remembered events took place have been changed, memorial spaces have been destroyed or covered over. By telling her own story, Natàlia contributes to the survival of this endangered collective memory. Her silences are like the doorways in the walls of a labyrinth, inviting her readers to make connections between different paths of meaning. Natàlia’s narrative of her solitary experience is an overt act of community building. Halbwachs would suggest that it is a project that she is only able to undertake after recognizing, upon returning to the bed that she shares with Antoni and initiating intimate contact with him, that indeed, she is not alone.

COLLEEN P. CULLETON

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA, CHARLOTTE

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