



THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA  
Department of French, Hispanic & Italian Studies

# RMST 202

Romance Studies,  
Modernism to the Present

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*The Time of the Doves:*  
Mercè Rodoreda on  
Destitution and  
Bricolage

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## *The Time of the Doves:* Mercè Rodoreda on Destitution and Bricolage

with Jon Beasley-Murray

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The borders of geography and language seldom coincide, however much nationalists may wish otherwise.



France

Andorra —

Catalonia

Spain

Sardinia

Balearic Islands

Map of Catalan-Speaking Regions

Catalan is both a regional and  
a transnational language.



The book's protagonist and narrator passes through the depths of poverty and despair, but ultimately achieves a kind of reconciliation with the brokenness with which history leaves her, by entering into new arrangements of things, human and animal, organic and inorganic.





**BARE LIFE**



Barcelona, 1957

“Quimet got all excited and went marching through the streets shouting and waving a flag.” (70)

“And as I was working on the great revolution with the doves the war started and everyone thought it was going to end quickly.” (113)

It is as though, for the narrator, politics were an inconvenience, an interruption. Her focus is on the day-to-day.

“We know your husband’s one of those rabble-rousers, and we’d rather not deal with people like that, you understand?” (119)

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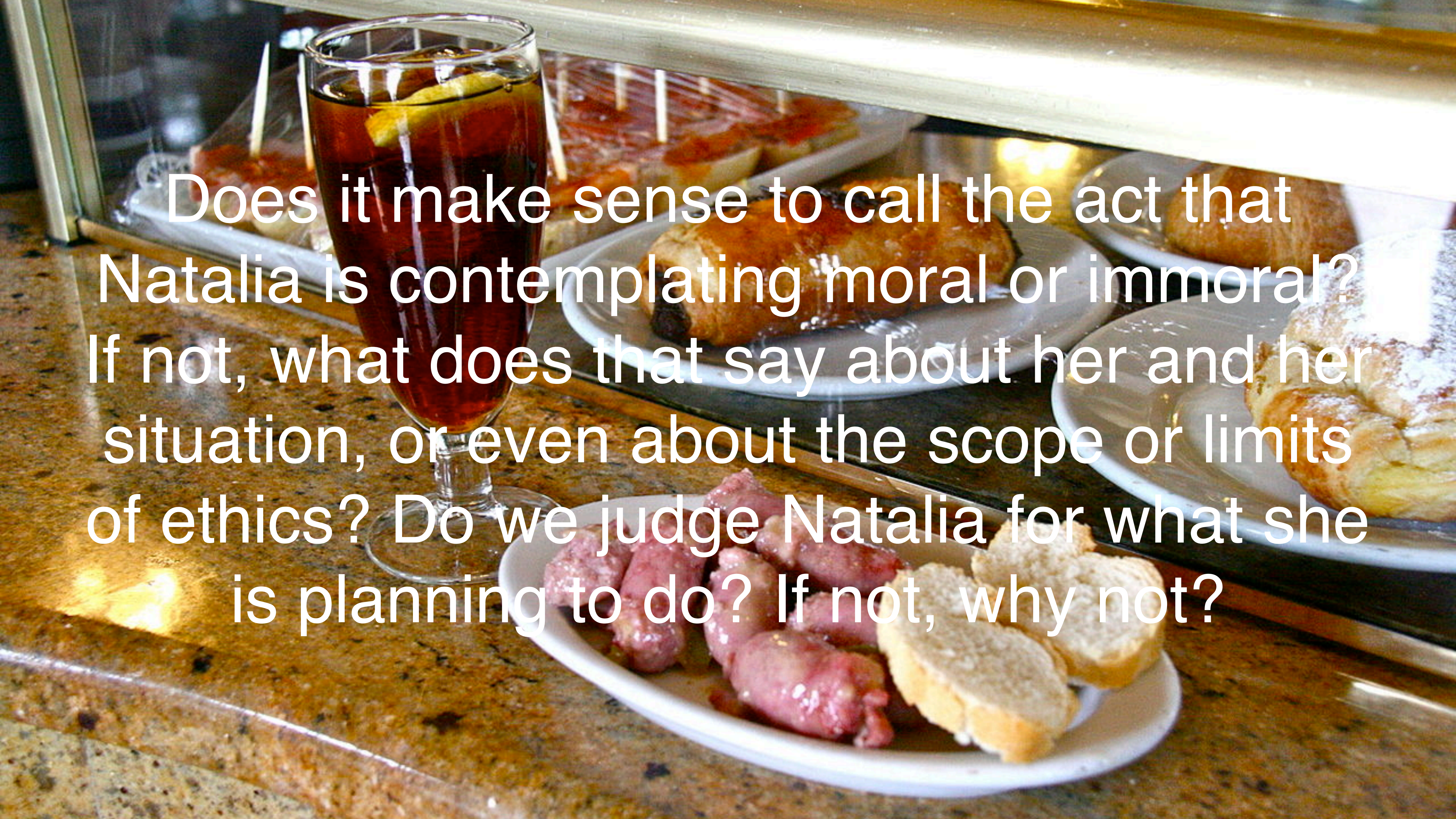
“If we lose they’ll wipe us off the map.” (122)

“Lying with his belly up [. . .]. His neck feathers were still wet from his death sweat” (138); “no food to buy. The milk was milkless. They said the meat, when there was any, was horsemeat [. . .]. And we lived. We still went on living” (141); “I had about as much strength as a dead cat” (145).



There is no rancour, critique, or blame for the situation she finds herself in. It is not even unliveable; the worst in fact is that she lives through it.

Does it make sense to call the act that Natalia is contemplating moral or immoral? If not, what does that say about her and her situation, or even about the scope or limits of ethics? Do we judge Natalia for what she is planning to do? If not, why not?

A photograph of a food display case. In the foreground, a tall glass of dark beer with a slice of lemon is on the left. To its right are several white plates containing different types of bread and pastries, including what looks like a croissant, a roll, and some bread slices with a pinkish filling. The background shows more food items, possibly more breads, under a glass cover. The lighting is warm and focused on the food.

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For a mother to murder her own children  
has been seen as one of the most  
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“Vilest woman! Condemned, hated by the  
gods, / by me, and every human creature.”  
*(Medea 79)*

They challenge our sense of a “maternal instinct” that would ensure that mothers do everything for their children’s protection.

They seem to be a crime against nature itself.

“That way we’d put an end to it all and everyone would be happy since we wouldn’t have done any harm and nobody loved us.” (146)

“It was a chant of angry angels who scolded the people [. . .]. God was showing them the evil they’d done so they’d pray for it to end.” (150)



Hers is a line of flight (“Higher, higher, Colometa, fly” [151]) that leaves the social world, with its political constraints and ethical injunctions, far behind.



# **PUTTING BACK THE PIECES**

“They’d picked him up half ripped apart on the battlefield and pieced him back together as best they could.” (160)

Everyone and everything in the landscape Rodoreda describes is fragmented, mutilated, in pieces. The challenge is to try to stitch things up, paper over the cracks, create new conjunctions of people and objects in a bricolage that is no longer indebted to myths of organic harmony or natural inclination.

Their reconstituted ethic of life involves making the best with what they happen to encounter (including each other), with the circumstances into which they find themselves thrown.

“doves on the roof, doves in the apartment” (100); “she said she hadn’t realized we kept them right inside the apartment. [. . .] They were like people” (102); “the children and the doves were like one big family. . . kids and doves were all one” (108).

The birds' intrusive presence perturbs the characters' grip on the world, as the barrier between human and animal (bare life and qualified life) becomes increasingly fragile.

“My whole body stank of doves. [. . .] I’d see them in my dreams. The dove-girl. [. . .] When I was walking in the streets on my way to work at my bosses’ house, the sound of cooing followed me and buzzed in my brain like a bumblebee.” (100-101)



It is as though she is possessed by bird life, a sensation that is only exacerbated once she is notionally free of the birds and becomes herself free as a bird (*vogelfrei*: “free and rightless”), banished from human society.

“She had a picture [. . .] full of lobsters with gold crowns, with men’s faces and women’s hair, [. . .] and the sea in the background and the sky up above were the color of cow’s blood and the lobsters wore armor and were killing each other with blows from their tails” (29; translation modified).

“As soon as he saw them he looked worried. And he puckered up his lips and started spitting: ‘Brrrr. . . Brrrr. . .’” (64); “glued to the lobsters” (88); “standing on a chair in front of that picture of lobsters with people’s heads [. . .] I had a lot of trouble getting them down” (130).

It is as though they are enticed into their own becoming-animal, faced with this image combining bits and pieces of the human, the natural, and the artificial in a context of devastation and death.

It is not just the boundary between human and animal that becomes indistinct in this panorama of fragmentation and recombination, but also the threshold between organic and mechanical.

“The dolls were always there with their porcelain faces and pasteboard flesh, beside the feather dusters and mattress beaters, the chamois dustcloths.” (65)

This is a world of things, some made, some found, some born, some put together by chance. Nothing quite fits exactly or perfectly, and everything has to be adapted or shaped to function as it should.

“I started rubbing his belly slowly because he was my little cripple [. . .] my finger bumped into his belly button and I stuck it inside to stop it up so he wouldn't empty out.” (200)




Nothing quite coincides—again, against any fantasy of a natural order or an organic society—but by the end of the story Natalia finds a way to make do.

“Happy. . .” (201)



# MUSIC

Pianochocolate,  
“Romance”



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# PRODUCTION

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Made in Vancouver, BC

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