

**ROMANCE STUDIES:
Readings in Excess and Betrayal, from Modernism to the Present**

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

The borders of geography and language seldom coincide, however much nationalists may wish otherwise. What we call “Spanish”—and what many in Latin America, more precisely, refer to as *castellano* or “Castilian”—is but one of Spain’s languages. Francisco Franco tried, but failed, to expunge the country’s other languages, not least Catalan, which has ten million speakers, predominantly in the north-east, in and around Barcelona, as well as in Valencia to the south, on the Balearic Isles (Mallorca, Menorca, Ibiza, and Formentera), in parts of southwestern France, and elsewhere. The Pyrenean microstate of Andorra has Catalan as the country’s official language. In short, Catalan is both a regional and a transnational language, closely related to but distinct both from Spanish and from the varieties of Occitan spoken in Southern France, Monaco, and northwestern Italy.

Mercè Rodoreda is the most celebrated of twentieth-century Catalan prose writers, though for many decades, following the Spanish Civil War, she was exiled in France and then Switzerland, which is where she wrote *The Time of the Doves* (*La plaça del Diamant*, 1962, also translated as *The Pigeon Girl* and as *In Diamond Square*). This novel is set in the urban geography of Barcelona, and it registers, distantly if emphatically, the profound impact of the war and the devastation and displacement it brought to much of the city’s population. Its protagonist and narrator, a fairly ordinary and apparently apolitical woman, passes through the depths of poverty and despair, and even contemplates killing her own children, 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.

1. Bare Life

The novel opens as Natalia, who works in a pastry shop, is almost literally swept off her feet by a young man named Quimet, a carpenter who she meets at a dance in the Plaça del Diamant that gives the book its (Catalan) title. Very soon she leaves her current boyfriend, and with almost equal speed she and Quimet are married and setting up house. Their relationship is charged with sexual energy—instead of a wedding night they have “a wedding week”—and Quimet repeatedly declares to his wife that “Today we’ll make a child” (49). Sure enough, along comes a baby boy, Antoni, who is dangerously



Barcelona, 1957

sick at first but pulls through, and then a girl, Rita. Quimet is impulsive and unreliable, often claiming that physical ailments prevent him from pulling his weight, and throws his energy into riding his motorbike and raising pigeons. David Rosenthal's translation calls the birds doves, but in Catalan as in Spanish the same word—*colom* and *paloma* respectively—refers to both animals, and here they are best thought of as pigeons: everyday, urban birds whose homing instinct can be trained for the purposes of domestication. Quimet's plan is to make money from breeding the animals, but he soon has a new enthusiasm to distract him, as (in 1931, but dates are missing from the novel) the Spanish monarchy is deposed "and Quimet got all excited and went marching through the streets shouting and waving a flag" (70). A little later, and against his wife's wishes, he and a friend join one of the patrols that are set up to protect the Republic against right-wing threats. Amid increasing dissatisfaction at an absent husband and an apartment over-run with pigeons, Natalia starts shaking the birds' eggs to prevent them from hatching. "And as I was working on the great revolution with the doves," she tells us, "the war started and everyone thought it was going to end quickly" (113). Again, however, the original Catalan says something slightly but significantly different, in that it only alludes to the war: "what was brewing came," as Peter Bush's translation puts it. It is as though, for the narrator, politics were an inconvenience, an interruption. Her focus is on the day-to-day.

But what an interruption! Quimet enlists in the militia, and is soon more absent than present. Food becomes scarce, the air is full of bombers and sirens. Natalia loses the job she had taken after her time in the pastry shop, as maid for an eccentric bourgeois family who tell her: "We know your husband's one of those rabble-rousers, and we'd rather not deal with people like that, you understand?" (119). Young Antoni is sent to a camp for refugee children. A friend of Quimet's comments that "If we lose they'll wipe us off the map" (122). Another remarks "how sad he was that peaceful, happy people like us had gotten mixed up in a piece of history like that" (125). All but one of the pigeons die or desert. Then Natalia is told that Quimet has been killed in action, and finds the last bird "lying with his belly up [. . .]. His neck feathers were still wet from his death sweat" (138). It is scarcely imaginable that things could get worse, but they do. Natalia sells everything—sheets, dishes, her mattress—for money to buy food. There is, however, "no food to buy. The milk was milkless. They said the meat, when there was any, was

horsemeat." "And we lived," she tells us. "We still went on living" (141). But this is what Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben calls "bare life," an animal existence, reduced to nothing more than biological survival. Natalia scarcely has the energy for an emotion such as sadness or grief. She has "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.

Natalia reaches a point at which almost her sole worldly possession is a funnel, which Quimet had bought the day before they acquired their first pigeon. She finds it "waiting for me, lying on its side all covered with dust" (146). And she decides to use it, to kill her children (and herself) with hydrochloric acid. This is a shocking moment in the story, at the nadir of its narrator's trajectory. But it is as though this were the only decision available to her, and I wonder how we should view 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? Pause the video, and think about your reaction as a reader. Do we judge Natalia for what she is planning to do? If not, why not? While you consider that, I'll have a vermouth, but I'll be right back.

"Every Sunday," Natalia says of her life with Quimet before the war breaks out, "we went to the Monumental to have a vermouth and some baby octopuses" (37). Though vermouth—a fortified wine flavoured with botanicals—is most associated with Italy, particularly Turin, it is also very popular in Catalonia, where it is often housemade and on tap, served over ice with a slice of orange or lemon and accompanied by snacks. "*Fer un vermut*" (to do a vermouth) is to meet up with friends at a bar in the early afternoon ("*l' hora del vermut*"). Drinking vermouth signals sociability: being out with and among others. The last time the drink is mentioned in the novel, it is at Natalia and Quimet's wedding, as if this were the turning point for Natalia's increasing social isolation. As the event winds down, she "wishe[s] it was the day before so we could start all over again, it was so lovely. . . ." (43). This is the dream of an eternal return, of history cancelled.

For a mother to murder her own children has been seen as one of the most grievous of sins. From Medea, wife of Jason in Greek mythology, whose story is told in Euripides's tragedy, and who is described by her husband as "Vilest woman! Condemned, hated by the gods, / by me, and every human creature" (*Medea* 79) for stabbing their offspring to

death, to Rosemary West, the British mass murderer who (along with her husband, Fred) killed ten or more young women, including a daughter and a step-daughter, maternal filicides are both rare and troubling. 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. At best, reneging on that duty of care can be rationalized only as a decision *in extremis*: Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved* is about a nineteenth-century African-American woman who kills her child rather than allowing her to be enslaved. In *The Time of the Doves*, Natalia is resigned to her decision: “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). She is haunted by the memory of how she killed the unborn pigeons by shaking their eggs, and later (during a church service) has an apocalyptic vision of blood and death and of “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). But her concerns remain practical: how will she even afford the acid she needs? It is as though she were beyond good and evil. Hers is a line of flight (literally, as she imagines it, taking on Quimet’s nickname for her, “Colometa” or “little dove”: “Higher, higher, Colometa, fly” [151]) that leaves the social world, with its political constraints and ethical injunctions, far behind.

2. *Putting back the Pieces*

Natalia is saved from the consequences of her decision, and brought back into society, by her encounter with the grocer from whom she procures the poison. He follows her out of his shop and offers her a job as his maid. He later proposes marriage, vowing to adopt her children, explaining that he cannot start a family of his own as he, too, is scarred by his wartime experiences: “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 attachments or conjunctions of people and objects in a bricolage that is no longer indebted to myths of organic harmony or natural inclination.* What Natalia and her new husband the grocer construct in the novel’s final chapters is an *inorganic* harmony—literally, in that he apparently lacks the sex organs that should supposedly ground such a union; and figuratively, in that 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.

Hence the novel's interest in the interactions between the human and the animal. Most obviously, there are the pigeons who are trained to see their coop as a home, and who are given leave to invade Natalia and Quimet's living quarters: "doves on the roof, doves in the apartment" (100). Quimet's mother is shocked: "she said she hadn't realized we kept them right inside the apartment. [. . .] They were like people" (102). Natalia reports that "the children and the doves were like one big family. . . kids and doves were all one" (108). But 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. Natalia's mother-in-law has a "dizzy spell" (102). As for Natalia, she tells us: "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* in the German term used by Marx: "free and rightless" [*Capital Volume 1* 896]), banished from human society.

There is also the odd picture in the home of Natalia's friend Senyora Enriqueta, to which both Natalia and her children are drawn. It is "full of lobsters [Bush translates this as locusts; the word for both animals is the same, in Catalan as in Spanish] 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). Baby Antoni is confronted with the picture early on, held up close so he can get a good look at these strange cross-gender and cross-species monsters: "as soon as he saw them he looked worried. And he puckered up his lips and started spitting: 'Brrrr. . . Brrrr. . .'" (64). Later, however, his mother finds him "glued to the lobsters" (88). In fact, both kids are so hypnotized by the image, "standing on a chair in front of that picture of lobsters with people's heads," that Natalia has "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. Eventually, Senyora Enriqueta offers it to Rita as a wedding present, "because you always stared at

them when you were little. . ." (188). It is one of the few continuities in a life of dramatic upheaval and traumatic disruption.

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. Even the pigeons span the spectrum between human and machine, compared both to "old ladies going to mass" and to "wind-up toys" (73). Then there are the dolls on display in a shop window that the narrator repeatedly goes out of her way to view: "with their porcelain faces and pasteboard flesh, beside the feather dusters and mattress beaters, the chamois dustcloths" (65). And there are buckets and funnels and knives and sacks of birdseed: 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: a hole has to be made in Natalia and Quimet's door when they forget their keys, a hole later plugged with cork; and the novel ends with the narrator and her second husband, in bed, "and 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. The novel's last word is "Happy. . ." (201), though the ellipsis that follows makes us wonder what could possibly happen next.

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Song: "Corrandes d'exili" (Silvia Pérez Cruz)