

THESIS

"TOO DISCONNECTED/TOO BOUND UP":  
THE PARADOX OF IDENTITY IN MERCÈ RODOREDA'S  
THE TIME OF THE DOVES

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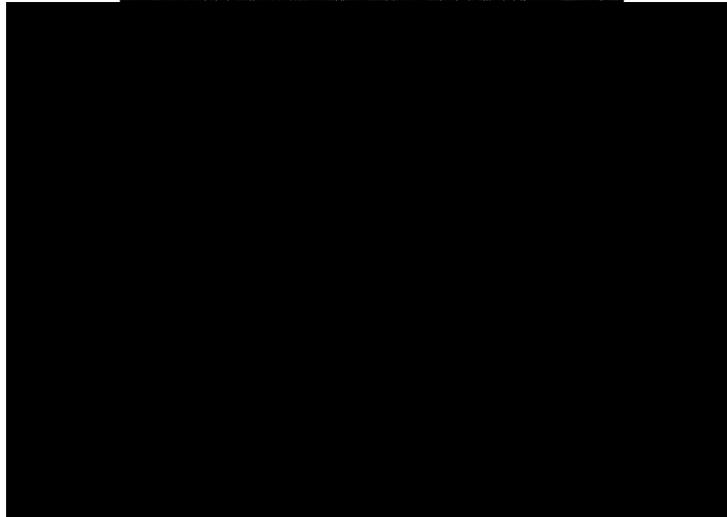
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WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER OUR SUPERVISION BY KAY ANN SHORT ENTITLED "TOO DISCONNECTED/TOO BOUND UP": THE PARADOX OF IDENTITY IN MERCÈ RODOREDA'S THE TIME OF THE DOVES BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING IN PART REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS.

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

"TOO DISCONNECTED/TOO BOUND UP":

THE PARADOX OF IDENTITY IN MERCÈ RODOREDA'S

THE TIME OF THE DOVES

Feminist theory has shown how women's lives are paradoxically both marginal to, yet affected by, hegemonic discourses of power. However, as long as women's experiences are viewed singularly along an axis of sexual difference, placing paradox as a trope for female identity risks reinscribing a closed system of oppression based only on male-female relations, thereby foreclosing possibilities for oppositional strategies organized around intersecting locations of resistance. Mercè Rodoreda's The Time of the Doves, originally published in Catalan as La Plaça del Diamant in 1962, portrays a working-class woman's life in Barcelona from the onset of the Second Republic to the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War, a period she calls "a piece of history." Natalia's presence as both "articulate" narrator and "inarticulate" character embodies her paradoxical position as both outside and inside discourses of gender, class, and national oppression. Attention to the specific cultural contexts within which women's lives are both externally constructed and internalized allows a recognition of Natalia's silence and inwardness as

oppositional strategies of survival rather than as qualities  
of limitation and alienation.

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The feminist critique of Western epistemology has exposed how women's perceptions of lived experience are different from those traditionally represented in political, historical, and social discourses. The idea that women speak, to borrow Carol Gilligan's influential title, "in a different voice" has been particularly popular in the discussion of literature written by women because of its emphasis on "voice" as the written articulation of women's experiences. For example, at a panel on "Gender Poetics," African American poet June Jordan explained that she chose female personae for her poems because:

. . . the political world is supposed to be a male world; it's supposed to do with the kind of power that women know nothing about. [But] whether or not we are actually in positions of political power, we are certainly affected by the exercise of political power. . . . It's very important . . . for us to understand that you cannot talk about what's happening in Central America or in the Middle East or in South Africa, without looking at that through the eyes, through the embodiment, in fact, of [the] response of a woman. . . . And I think that that gives to our understanding of these places and issues an entirely different perspective, which is at least as important as what you will encounter in the New York Times.

Similarly, in "Reading Contemporary Spanish Narrative by Women," Elizabeth Ordoñez suggests that since a woman's position is "often marginal to the making of history," yet "nevertheless suffers its effect," such "paradoxical experience, once considered natural law or female destiny by the

dominant, male-defined culture, accordingly becomes restlessly problematical in the texts of women" (247). Difference, then, is not just a question of how women differ from men but of how women experience themselves in the paradoxical position of being marginal to, but affected by, hegemonic discourses of power.

The Time of the Doves, originally published in 1962 as La Plaça del Diamant by Catalan writer Mercè Rodoreda, lends itself to this feminist framework of paradox through the novel's portrayal of a woman's life in Barcelona during the turbulent period from the onset of the Second Republic to the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War. Feminist critics such as Kathleen Glenn have pointed out how the novel presents "the other side of the story" from official accounts of the period because of its consistent focalization and narration of events through the consciousness and voice of its protagonist, Natalia, a working-class woman struggling to survive against gender, class, and national oppression. Political names, dates, and statistics are strikingly absent from the narrative. For Natalia, the war is just a "piece of history" she has gotten "mixed up in," yet political events cause catastrophic changes in her life (Rodoreda 125). She calls the establishment of the Second Republic "a day that made a notch" in her life because with it her "little headaches turned into big headaches" when she must take a cleaning job to support their two small children after her husband joins the fighting (71). Rodoreda herself

suggested a paradigm of paradox for The Time of the Doves by describing the period before she left Barcelona as "too disconnected from everything, or maybe too terribly bound up with everything, though that might sound like a paradox" (Rosenthal 7-8) ["Estava massa deslligada de tot, or potser massa terriblement lligada a tot, encara que això pugui semblar una paradoxa" (Porcel 74)]. Writing the novel while exiled in Geneva, Rodoreda, like Natalia, was both shaped by and alienated from Catalan history and politics.

Yet the placement of women in a position of paradox can be, to borrow Ordoñez's term, "restlessly problematical" in that paradox itself is not a stable, static relationship between two terms but an uneasy, shifting place that seems to be no place. As Caren Kaplan explains, "This location is fraught with tensions; it has the potential to lock the subject away in isolation and despair as well as the potential for critical innovation and particular strengths" (187). Feminists warn of the risks of theorizing what Teresa de Lauretis calls "the nonbeing of woman": "at once captive and absent in discourse, [she is] simultaneously asserted and denied, negated and controlled" (115). De Lauretis links current discussions of female identity as "a process of continuing renegotiation of external pressures and internal resistances" with feminism's evolving conception of itself as a process which seeks to account for simultaneous and contradictory differences between women (137). As long as feminists view women's experiences

singularly along an axis of sexual difference, placing paradox as a trope for female identity risks reinscribing a closed system of oppression based only on male-female relations, thereby foreclosing possibilities for oppositional strategies organized around intersecting locations of resistance.

An alternative paradigm of paradox suggested by women of color includes the recognition that gender is only one aspect of a movement between margin and center. Race, ethnicity, nationality, class, and sexual preference--all culturally specific positions as well as particular relationships to language--must be included in any analysis of positionality.<sup>1</sup> María Lugones and Elizabeth Spelman, for example, call for a feminist criticism which will "engage in a mutual dialogue that does not reduce each one of us to instances of the abstraction called 'women'" (581), while Audre Lorde cautions, "The oppression of women knows no ethnic nor racial boundaries, true, but that does not mean it is identical within those boundaries" (97). Furthermore, cultural identities do not exist along parallel, coequal axes but interact and intersect within an imbricated system of practices.

In the field of American feminist literary criticism, feminist scholars are currently rethinking earlier assumptions about the universal nature of female experience as expressed in literature written by women and are actively engaged in an often painful critique of their own biases.

This critique pertains not only to the reading of writers marginalized by the Anglo-European tradition in our own country but also to ethnocentric readings of works by writers of other countries.

With the end of the Franco regime, interest in Spain's growing feminist movement, as well as increased access to literary works by women, focused new academic attention on Spanish women's literature. Because this interest coincided with the growth of American feminist literary criticism as a discipline, works by Hispanic women writers were often read and discussed in terms of "women's roles" or "women's oppression." However, as Linda Chown warned in her 1983 review essay, early American feminist criticism of Spanish novels by women tended "either to consider the novels as aesthetic products independent of cultural tradition or evaluate[d] them in accordance with American feminist values," reading "the Spanish world either in reductive black and white terms or as a mirror reflection of American reality" (Chown 91, 96).

According to Chown, American critics often measured a character in terms of the "physical world"; they tended to "conceive of significant change as external or physical and to overestimate the importance of the social world" (96). These biases caused a misreading of Spanish women writers' "concern for the invisible, inner world and a belief in the possibility of internal harmony and authentic personal growth" (97). Chown cautioned that "this inner growth may

be hard to 'read,' given the evident fragmentation and cruelty of physical, external circumstances" (98). By failing to place Hispanic women's writing in its own cultural context, American critics "render[ed] the world as a hopeless, alienating place for Spanish heroines" (96).<sup>2</sup>

Without consideration of the importance of inner reality to the texts of Hispanic women writers, it would be possible to label The Time of the Doves "a woman's story about a life turned in and imprisoned within itself" (Wyers 301). However, placing the novel within a framework of paradox defined as a movement between multiple "centers and margins" allows a reading of Natalia's inwardness as an oppositional strategy of survival, a means of living within a dominant society hostile to the needs and desires of those it oppresses (Kaplan 188).

As a young wife and mother, Natalia is exhausted from meeting the incessant demands of children, household, and her husband Quimet's doves:

I was worn out. I was killing myself working and everything seemed to go wrong. Quimet didn't see that I needed a little help myself instead of spending all of my time helping others and no one could see how I felt and everyone kept asking me to do more like I was superhuman. (107)

Natalia is oppressed not only by traditional sex roles but also by class exploitation since her rich employers insist they can pay her less because she is selling them her work "wholesale." Later, after fascist forces have almost destroyed Barcelona, Natalia considers suicide and murder

rather than submit her children to slow death by starvation. Yet despite, and perhaps because of, her struggles with gender, class, and national oppression, Natalia is not a victim. Rather, her life represents a woman's victory in a chaotic world turned upside-down by "a piece of history." Rodoreda uses images of silence and inner reality to portray this working-class woman's identity as being "too disconnected from everything" and "too terribly bound up with everything" at the same time.

Rodoreda's narrative technique in The Time of the Doves blurs the distinction between external and internal awareness through her use of a first-person monologue which metonymically juxtaposes physical sensations and memories with details of setting and characterization in an often stream-of-consciousness style, as in the following passage from the beginning of the novel, just before the young Natalia meets her future husband Quimet for the first time at a neighborhood street festival in the Plaça del Diamant:

My petticoat had a rubber waistband I'd had a lot of trouble putting on with a crochet hook that could barely squeeze through. It was fastened with a little button and a loop of string and it dug into my skin. I probably already had a red mark around my waist, but as soon as I started breathing harder I began to feel like I was being martyred. There were asparagus plants around the bandstand to keep the crowd away, and the plants were decorated with flowers tied together with tiny wires. And the musicians with their jackets off, sweating. My mother had been dead for years and couldn't give me advice and my father had remarried. My father remarried and me without my mother whose only joy in life had been to fuss over me. (15-16)

Here Natalia's pain is displaced onto her surroundings--the plants are being "martyred" just as she is--and this martyrdom is equated with motherlessness. Because relationships between women are important in Spanish culture, both to provide supportive networks and to pass on traditions and knowledge, Natalia's motherlessness is linked to both her naiveté and her inarticulateness. At the beginning of the novel she says, "I really didn't have any idea what I was doing in the world" (38) and "We lived without words in my house and the things I felt scared me because I didn't know where they came from" (28).

In "A Woman's Voices: Mercè Rodoreda's La Plaça del Diamant," Frances Wyers perceptively parallels Natalia's silence under male domination with the suppression of the Catalan language during the Franco regime (a language from which Rodoreda, writing in Geneva, was doubly exiled): "This book, all words, is about speechlessness communicated in a language that is itself, at the time of its writing, being eradicated" (304). However, for Wyers the style of Natalia's narration is limiting:

Natalia's account is not an autobiography; there is no final taking stock, no deliberate tying of past and present, no psychological or moral distance between past feeling and present telling. Natalia never stands away from her world; she cannot categorize or judge; she does not tell us about her violence but she describes violent acts. Nor does she reflect on her position as a woman; she simply puts it before us. (307)

Because the novel's "only exterior projection is the narrative, the lament itself," the only location for hope or

happiness is in the author's writing of the story as "literature comes to the rescue of characters who speak of passivity and impotence" (307, 308).

By negatively defining Natalia's silences, Wyers overlooks the significance of the paradox she herself implies: The novel is written by a character who "repeatedly protests her inability to speak" (301). This position is not accidental. As Clarasó points out, Rodoreda's previous novels (written, although not published, before The Time of the Doves) did not merge the roles of protagonist and narrator. In The Time of the Doves, however, this blending breaks down the boundaries between objective and subjective realities. It is Natalia's voice, not Rodoreda's, that tells the story, a role reinforced in those rare moments when the narrator disrupts the diegesis. For example, when Natalia is describing the layout of her employer's home, she says, "I noticed all this later on, of course" and "I don't know if I'm explaining it clearly" (81). Such statements emphasize Natalia's concern with the process of recollection rather than reflection or judgment.

In fact, rather than limiting her role as narrator, Natalia's naiveté and silence are integral to it. Kathleen Glenn states that because Natalia "finds the world and her own place in it incomprehensible," the reader must "fill in the gaps, connect the blanks, and listen to Natalia's silences if he [sic] wishes to hear the other side of the

story" (66-67). Mercè Clarasó relates this naiveté to Rodoreda's view of Catalonian political events:

Rodoreda's choice of a simple, unsophisticated woman like Colometa [the name her husband gives her] as the center of consciousness of a novel that describes the impact of the Civil War on the ordinary people allows her to make an unvoiced comment on the whole tragic business. Colometa's inability to see the point of any of it can be taken, on the surface, as springing from her own limitations; but it can also be taken as Rodoreda's way of saying the same thing, that the pointlessness is inherent in the situation itself. (150)

Thus Natalia's presence as both "articulate" narrator and "inarticulate" character embodies her paradoxical position as both outside and inside hegemonic discourse and problematizes the feminist ideal of speaking "in a different voice." Natalia's realization at the end of the novel that "I thought more than I said and I thought things you can't tell anyone and I didn't say anything" signifies neither silence nor speech but a moment of being in language, of lived experience as it is understood by the person experiencing it (200). Most importantly, for Natalia this statement represents the awareness of an internal voice that is able to exist in opposition to the society around it.

Rodoreda's refusal to locate her protagonist's identity in either silence or speech parallels the position of women writers like herself under the harsh censorship restrictions imposed by the Franco regime. As Janet Pérez and others have outlined, such writers found creative and subversive methods to circumvent the censors. One such method was to

employ the guise of naiveté. The less intellectual the character, the less seriously the novel would be taken by the censors.<sup>3</sup> Although Rodoreda's characterization of Natalia as innocent and inarticulate should not be attributed solely to this motive, one reason The Time of the Doves was reprinted twelve times during the Franco regime may have been that, ironically, it was "only" about a woman's life and, therefore, not a political novel.

Just as the novel contextualizes and complicates definitions of silence and speech, images of inwardness represent not only "confinement," "enclosure," or "isolation" but also harmony and love. Images of termites burrowing in wood, waves crashing inside a shell, chicks forming inside of eggs, and sap surging through trees all represent Natalia's heightened awareness of inner realities. Natalia often uses such concrete metaphors to express her innermost feelings. For example, when she suffers a guilty conscience at the beginning of the novel for breaking her engagement to one man in order to marry Quimet, she says:

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)

Later, at the news of Quimet's death, the simile of a disorderly house reveals the shock and pain she has forbidden her "heart of stone" to feel:

I'd wake up at night and all my insides were like a house when the moving men come and shift

everything around. That's what I felt like inside: with wardrobes in the front hall and chairs with their legs sticking up and cups on the floor waiting to be wrapped in paper and packed in straw in boxes and the mattress and the bed taken apart and leaning against the wall and everything all messed up. (139)

Throughout the novel, bodily images such as hearts, blood, guts, umbilical cords, and navels express connection--or the need for connection--with others. At the beginning of the war when Natalia is worn out from the responsibilities of caring for two households, she wakes up in the middle of the night feeling like:

. . . someone had tied a rope around my guts and was tugging on them, like I still had that cord on my belly button from when I was born and they were tugging all of me out through my belly button. . . . Everything sucked out into nothingness again through that little tube that had dried out after they knotted it. (112-13)

Here the image of an umbilical cord expresses Natalia's struggle to remain connected to her inner self, while at the end of the novel, the image of a navel links Natalia with her second husband, Antoni, during a moment of shared solitude: ". . . and before I fell asleep as I was rubbing his belly my finger bumped into his belly button and I stuck it inside to stop it up so he wouldn't empty out . . ." (200).

Bodily functions also symbolize life as it cannot be controlled or manipulated but only lived as in this passage toward the end of the novel where Natalia remembers the belief of Senyora Enriqueta, an older woman who befriends

the motherless Natalia, that:

. . . we had many interwoven lives and sometimes but not always a death or marriage separated them. . . . [and] those little interwoven lives fight and torture us and we don't know what's going on just like we don't know how hard our hearts work or how our guts suffer. (194)

This passage also uses the imagery of weaving to express the interconnected nature of individual lives, representing both the interwoven moments of an individual life (as in the protagonist's progression from "Natalia" before her marriage, to "Colometa" when she is married to Quimet, to "Senyora Natalia" after his death) as well as the way one person's life is connected with another's.

Weaving also symbolizes Natalia's concept of her own existence as one individual thread joined with many others, not in an oppressive way but through love. As Spanish writer Carmen Martín Gaité remarks, "One is never free; the person who is not tied to something does not live" (Chown 104). This sense of interwoven lives can be seen most dramatically after her daughter's marriage inspires Natalia's return to the neighborhood where she lived with Quimet, a place she has been afraid to visit since his death: "I felt like I'd already done what I was doing sometime before but I didn't know when or where, like everything was growing out of roots in some time without memory" (195). Here time is "without memory" because it is time without past, present, or future--time that is recursive in the sense of life always spiralling back on itself.

Earlier Natalia experiences a similar sense of time as different from both the "unnatural" mechanical time of clocks and calendars and the "natural" time of biology when she realizes that her daughter is becoming a woman:

And I got a strong feeling of the passage of time. Not the time of clouds and sun and rain and the moving stars that adorn the night, not spring when its time comes or fall, not the time that makes leaves bud on branches and then tears them off or folds and unfolds the flowers, but the time inside me, the time you can't see but it molds us. The time that rolls on and on in people's hearts and makes them roll along with it and gradually changes us inside and out and makes us what we'll be on our dying day. (183-4)

Here time is both recursive and internal; it cannot be measured or marked in any way but only lived.

At the end of the novel, Natalia confronts the horrors of her past--war, death, poverty, starvation--when she returns to the plaza where, as a young girl dressed in white who "didn't have any idea what [she] was doing in the world," she stood at the edge of her future (38). Alone in the middle of the empty square with the buildings rising around her like the sides of a funnel, Natalia liberates herself from her past through a solitary scream that she calls "letting go":

. . . 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 for it 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)

Neither speech nor silence, Natalia's scream manifests inner emotion in a material image: a cockroach made of spit. That "little bit of nothing," itself a paradox, represents Natalia's life as both "too disconnected" from and "too bound up" with the experiences which have shaped her life as she has lived it. Told from the paradoxical position of expressing both the "other side of the story" and the story itself, the novel can offer no "happily-ever-after" ending, but the final image of flying birds and the word "happy" suggest that Natalia has found an inner harmony of peace and self-awareness.

In a 1973 interview with Mercè Rodoreda, Catalan critic and author Montserrat Roig wrote that Rodoreda's characters are "too wounded to die" ["demasiado herida para morir"], that they have an instinct to live even while they contemplate suicide. Rodoreda herself stated that the only way to survive is "simply, to go on living," that "some hope always remains" ["Simplemente, ir viviendo . . . Siempre . . . queda alguna esperanza"] (Roig 39; my translations). For Natalia, "living" during a time of political turmoil and devastation is an act of survival. To read The Time of the Doves as a novel of inwardness and silence without attention to its specific cultural context denies the power of these qualities as oppositional strategies. Instead, a focus on how women's identities are paradoxically both "externally constructed and internalized" (de Lauretis, 122; my emphasis) enables the recognition of Natalia's courageous

struggle against the devastating effects of "a piece of history." Having reached the end of the novel, we must go back and reread the epigraph to understand that this working-class woman's life presents not one stable position of female identity but a shifting, paradoxical one: "My dear, these things are life."

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>See Kaplan for a discussion of "positionality" in literature.

<sup>2</sup>Like feminist criticism of American literature, recent feminist analyses of texts by Hispanic women are increasingly sensitive to cultural and historical contexts. See, for example, the special issue of ALEC edited by Mirella Servodidio, Reading for Difference: Feminist Perspectives on Women Novelists of Contemporary Spain.

<sup>3</sup>From a lecture by Janet Pérez, "Post-War Women Writers of Spain." See also Linda Gould Levine, "The Censored Sex: Woman as Author and Character in Franco's Spain."

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