Exile in the City:
Mercè Rodoreda's La plaça del Diamant

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This essay identifies a specific strategy of Rodoreda's writing: the presence of the city in her best known novel, La plaça del Diamant (1962)\(^1\), in a way that becomes an allegory to express the impact of exile and alienation. Her recourse to this rhetorical device was necessitated by the political constraints on expression imposed by censorship, on one hand, and the author's excruciating personal circumstance, which compounded the difficulties of her political situation, on the other. As in many realistic novels such as Moby Dick, The Golden Bowl, or La febre d'or, in La plaça del Diamant an element related to the title crystallizes many suggestive meanings related to the central plot and its development throughout the novel. Rodoreda's novel gets much closer to a genuine allegory than its nineteenth-century counterparts, as do some of Faulkner's and Joyce's novels as well. The public square, "La plaça del Diamant," becomes the center of a small world, and the main character's relationship with this space becomes an allegory of her state of mind and her evolution. Rodoreda's allegorical use of the city is, moreover, further evidence of what Josep-Miquel Sobré masterfully studied as Rodoreda's manipulation of reality.\(^2\) Since her early wartime writings, presentations of time and space have always had a particular strength and appeal in her work. In fact, we can identify two types of approaches to space in Rodoreda's writings. One is that of rural settings located in undefined countries, in works such as "La salamandra" or La mort i la primavera. The other uses well-known spaces, mostly related to her native Barcelona, but presented in indefinite terms, as in La plaça del Diamant or El carrer de les Camelles. Both settings have similar effects: they create a feeling of uncertainty, and perhaps a more decisive impact on our own reactions as readers, because we recognize a well-known territory that has been refashioned.

It would be too easy to portray the author as one who always had a bizarre but original approach to space for personal reasons. That would
imply that Mercè Rodoreda's entire work represents a search for maturity. It could be seen then as a refuge within whose confines she could escape the difficulties of her younger life. Biographers do indeed posit that personal circumstances (she was supposedly married against her will to an uncle when she was only twenty years old), as well as political turmoil (the Spanish Civil War) prohibited her free self-expression until she was more than sixty years old. Among other factors of turmoil that Rodoreda had to endure were those that repressed her creativity. These would include the four different varieties of exile she underwent after the end of the Spanish Civil War: political, because to a certain extent she had been a supporter of the Second Republic; geographic, since she lived in France and Switzerland from 1939 until 1973; linguistic, because she was a native Catalan, and so went through a double exile amidst the already exiled Spanish population; and personal, for she separated from her husband and son the moment she left Spain and hardly saw them again.

This biographical approach, however, would not explain the internal difficulties of the work itself; the problems we encounter again and again as we read her writings would remain unsolved. Rodoreda's use of space as an allegorical expression in her first major novel, La plaza del Diamant, is particularly striking because it introduces analogy with estrangement. Although critics have addressed her sophisticated approach to reality, few have underscored its nonrealistic strategies. As Emile Bergmann nicely put it: “the potential for the fantastic and the allegorical seen in La plaza del Diamant is realized in La mea Cristina. . . and later works.” Recourse to figurative discourse allowed the Catalan author to express what repression made unspeakable, offering her a vehicle through which she could accomplish a remarkable personal and national vindication which, once decoded, leaves us with a clear, unmistakable message.

The image of the city in La plaza del Diamant functions as a mirror for the main character's intricate destiny. Rodoreda thereby articulates the relationship between physical and psychic space with an effectiveness unmatched by any other author since who has used Barcelona as a fictional setting. The city—Barcelona—becomes a sort of character itself, going well beyond its function as a mere locale. This is a process that illustrates perfectly Mieke Bal's theory of the active role space plays in some narrative fictions: “Space thus becomes an ‘acting place’ rather than the place of action. It influences the fabula, and the fabula becomes subordinate to the presentation of space.” The city, the place of being, is transformed into a physical extension of what the main character herself cannot utter; Barcelona becomes an allegory of the unspeakable.

As Bal has stated, in such a case, space is thematized, becoming “an object of presentation itself, for its own sake.” This technique, used to present the city in La plaza del Diamant, is also evident in some of Rodoreda's other novels, short stories, and letters. My approach to the significance of the city differs from Arnaud's who affords the city a less prominent role in La plaza del Diamant when she writes:

As is the case with typical events, the exact places and situations of the city are concentrated in the first part of the book. This is determined, on one hand, by the fact that the settings must be defined in the first chapters, and on the other, by the fact that as the story moves along and times become harder, the principle character loses her grip on reality.

However, what we find in the novel is not only an increase in the number of difficulties that Colometa has to endure, but also an allegorical strategy masterfully devised by the author to achieve a certain aesthetic and moral effect. It is better not to think in terms of mere realistic techniques, because Rodoreda is working with sophisticated tools to express uncertainty and, at the same time, to stress Colometa's internal evolution.

Several qualities of the narration call attention to the city's nonliterary nature. For example, in the references to the time when the action of the novel takes place, roughly between 1930 and 1950, there is virtually no outright statement of the historical circumstances that were wracking the city and its inhabitants. All references to what is traditionally understood as "history," such as the mention of factions, figureheads, political details of war, and even evocation of the word "war" itself, hang silently and ominously, ever-present but untouchable, over the main character's personal history. Similarly, the reference to the city itself is always carefully masked behind a curtain of allegorical allusions and illusions. It is a remarkable example of a feminine approach to reality: emphasizing seemingly nonempirical reality, and stressing feelings and reactions, inner experiences and apparently insignificant changes.

Rodoreda's use of the city as a personalized background for Colometa's evolution calls for broader attention. As Kristeva Verslues has remarked, after the first interest in the city as a literary topic in late Romanticism, writers went through a period of transition, hesitating between what they saw as the coexistence of harmony and confusion. Later, in Modernity, the writer reports her or his reaction toward the metaphysical chaos implied by the city. This is what happens to Rodoreda's characters in general and most notably to Colometa: they are lost in a setting that seems labyrinthic to them. The two principle spaces evoked within the city in La plaza del Diamant to express these reactions are the streets and houses.

There are three houses with a specific symbolic value: the one where
Colometa and Quimet establish themselves as a young married couple, the rich family’s house where Colometa works as a maid, and, finally, Antoni’s home. In the latter, a transition and transformation occur from the protagonist’s experience as a maid to mistress of the house and of herself, from one controlled to one controlling, from Colometa to (señora) Natàlia. These houses constitute three different settings for Colometa’s movements and are extensions of her moral state. In the first, she is mercilessly dominated by Quimet’s actions, friends, and family. The first time she enters the apartment we realize her silenced dislike: “El pis estava abandonat. La cuina feia pudor d’escarbats i vaig trobar un níu d’ous llarguets de color de caramel.” [PD, 38; “The apartment was empty. The kitchen stank of cockroaches and I found a nest with long caramel-colored eggs,” TD, 30]. Only Quimet’s complete disappearance, his death, frees her from the physical and emotional space in which she lived with him, suffocated and denied her natural state like the pigeons whose cages he forces upon her and their apartment.

The second domestic space is her work setting where, although temporarily freed from the repression of her husband, she endures yet another kind of domination by her employers and the place in which they live. Through the voice of her seemingly naïve protagonist, Rodoreda shrewdly evokes the abyss between the class of the innocent Colometa and that of her wealthy employers. As she begins her work, she is astounded by the way rich people live, and at the kind of diseases they have. The house itself is a space that is totally alien to Colometa, one that she finds disorienting and at the same time reflects her inner insecurity. We notice this when she finishes her remembrance of the space by saying: “I si parlo tant de la casa, és perquè encara la veig com un trenzaclosques, amb les ves de d’ells, que, quan em cridaven, no sabia mai d’on venien” [PD, 109; “And if I’ve spent so much time talking about the house it’s because it’s still a puzzle to me with those people’s voices that when they called me I never knew where they were coming from,” TD, 87]. The difference between the two worlds is underscored by Quimet’s response: “vaig explicar la història del reixat a en Quimet i va dir-me que com més rics més estrany” [PD, 116; “I told Quimet about the ironworker from Sant’s and he said, ‘The richer they are, the weirder,” TD, 92].

The third space, Antoni’s house, strikes the maturing Colometa as oppressive because it does not have any natural light, and all the flowers in it are artificial. The only masculine space that has not been forced upon her, it calls her to enter it cautiously, focusing literally on its dark side: “La casa en senzilla i fosca, fora de dues habitacions que donaven al carrer que baixava a la plaça de vendre” [PD, 196; “His house was simple and dark except for two rooms looking out on the street that led down to the market square,” TD, 156]. This is not her first entry, because she once went into the shop, the public side of this space, to buy birdseed. The comments she recalls during her first visit are thus remarkable, because they enhance her positive association between the space and the person who occupies it: “La meva senyora sempre deia que feia bons preus i que era un adroguer honrat que sempre donava el pes. I era de poques paraules” [PD, 119; “My mistress always said he never overcharged and was an honest grocer and always gave fair weight. And that he wasn’t a chatterbox,” TD, 96]. The author inspires sympathy toward the taciturn man living there at this early stage, presaging some of the later developments in the novel. More important, this is the first of a series of connections linking her two domestic spaces, that are resolved after the suicide attempt when Colometa decides to marry Antoni. The moment she decides to wed him, she looks at his house from a very different perspective, that of an individual somebody almost at peace with herself, but still with some deep fears. The depiction of her new whereabouts is particularly remarkable as it contrasts sharply with that of her first apartment:

Em vaig quedar plantada damunt de les rafoles tacades de sol, al peu del balcó. Del presseguer va fugir una ombra, i era un ocell. I damunt del pati, venint de les galeries, va caure un nuvol de pols. A la sala de les campanes de vidre vaig trobar una teranyina. S’havia fet de campana a campana. Sortia del peu que era de fusta, passava per la punxa del cargol i anava a parar al peu de fusta de l’altra campana. I vaig mirar tot allò que seria la meva casa. I se’m va fer un tuss al coll. Perquè d’ençà que havia dit que sí, m’havien vingut ganes de dir que no. No m’agradava res, i ni la botiga, ni el passadís com un budell fosc, ni allò de les rates que venien de la clavaguera. (PD, 210)

[I stood on the tiles streaked with sunlight and looked out the balcony. A shadow flew out of the peach tree: a bird. And a little cloud of dust fell into the courtyard from one of the back porches. I found a cobweb in the living room. It went from one bell jar to the other. It started from one of the wooden bases, then touched the tip of the seashell, and finally ended up on the wooden base of the other bell jar. And I looked around at what was going to be my home. And I felt a lump in my throat. Because as soon as I’d said yes I’d started feeling like I should have said no. Nothing pleased me: not the shop, or the hallway like a dark intestine, or the rats from the sewer.] (TD, 166)

The mention of rats clearly underlines three kinds of affinity between both spaces. One of dissimilarity, because doves are associated with purity and rats to contamination; and one of similarity as doves are considered “flying rats” in Barcelona. Thirdly, the animals that menace Colometa-Natàlia’s security come from opposite levels: from the roof in
the first space, from underneath in the latter one. The three spaces mentioned above show us how sophisticated the use of allegory is throughout the novel: it succeeds in portraying elusively the main problems of the novel, but allegory also gives the reader a sense that the plot has to be read and understood at two levels. Exterior spaces, particularly the streets, likewise teem with allegorical significance. The street is the place for knowledge, change, and self-discovery, menacing and alluring to Rodoreda’s timid protagonist. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator refers to specific streets and places in the neighborhood of Gràcia: the plaça del Diamant, where she meets Quimet and his friends; the Carrer Gran, which is the street separating the poor from the rich, and also dividing the two periods in Colometa-Natàlia’s life; the Park Güell, also associated with Quimet. We learn very soon that his father supposedly took Gaudi to the hospital when he was run over by a streetcar. Colometa’s dislike of Gaudi’s architecture tangentially reflects her natural rejection of the mass of things Quimet will eventually impose on her. As the novel progresses, the names of streets become less important and anonymous avenues begin to dominate the novelistic space, representing Colometa’s emerging rupture with her past and its control of her life. Urban space is transformed into a physical extension of what the main character herself cannot utter. Barcelona itself becomes the forbidden word.

As names and specific places begin to fade, certain objects and urban atmospheres acquire added dimensions. Actions particular to Natàlia’s private spaces take on the relief previously allocated to the public sphere. Seeing dolls in a shop window becomes a marker for the passing of time and serves to remind the reader of the character’s changes:

Altra vegada un tramvia va haver de parar en sec mentre travessava el carrer Gran; el conductor em va renyar i vaig veure gent que reia. A la botiga dels hules em vaig aturar a fer veure que mirava, perquè si vull dir la veritat he de dir que no veia res: només taques de colors, ombres de nina... I de l’entrada sortia aquella olor antiga d’hule que, pel nas se’m ficava al cèrvell i me l’enturbia. L’adroguer de les vesces tenia la botiga oberta. (PD, 179)

[Another streetcar had to stop short and let me cross the Carrer Gran. The driver yelled at me and I saw people laughing. I stopped in front of the shop with the oilcloth and pretended I was looking in the window, because to tell the truth I didn’t see a thing; only patches of color, the dolls’ shadows. The smell of old oilcloth came through the door and went up my nose and into my brain and confused it. The grocer with the birdseed had his shop open.] (TD, 142)

In this short fragment, we identify most of Colometa’s points of reference as she walks through the streets (the dolls in the window, the streetcars, the grocer). Thus we recall Baudelaire’s flâneur, who sees the streets either as landscape or a room, and finds shelter among the big-city crowd. On many occasions when she is in the street, Colometa focuses her attention on two other aspects of reality: smells and lights. Both are useful to Rodoreda to create the novel’s historical backdrop and to help the reader relate the action to a specific time:

I tot anava així, amb maldecaps petits, fins que va venir la república i en Quimet se’m va engregar i anava pels carrers cridant i fent veoleiar una bandera que mai no vaig poder saber d’on l’havia treva. Encara em recordava d’aquell aire fresc, un aire, cada vegada que me’n recordo, que no l’he pogut sentir mai més. Mai més. Barrejat amb olor de fulla tendra i amb olor de poncella, un aire que va fugir i tots els que després van venir mai més no van ser com l’aire aquell d’aquell dia que va fer un tall en la meva vida, perquè va ser amb abril i flors tancades que els meus maldecaps petits es van començar a tornar maldecaps gosos. (PD, 90–91)

[And everything went along like this, with little headaches, till the Republic came and Quimet got all excited and went marching through the streets shouting and waving a flag. I never could figure out where he got it from. I still remember that cool air, an air that—every time I think of it—I’ve never smelled again. Never. Mixed with the smell of leaves and the smell of flower buds; an air that couldn’t last, and the air that came afterwards was never like the air on that day—a day that made a notch in my life, because it was with that April and those flowerbuds that my little headaches started turning into big headaches.] (TD, 70–71)

The second Spanish Republic was proclaimed on 14 April. This is the elusive way that Rodoreda chooses to introduce information of this kind in the novel, producing a subjective, synesthetic effect. The use of light constitutes a second example of this kind of localization of an urban atmosphere that becomes pivotal to express the inner life of the novel’s characters. The appearance of blue lights in the streets is Rodoreda’s reminder that a war is going on. Colometa and Quimet react very differently to them. To Colometa they offer the positive effect of dimming reality “Tots els llums eren blaus. Semblava el país dels màgics i era bonic. Així que queia el dia tot era de color blau. Havien pintat de blau els vidres dels fanals alts i els vidres dels fanals baixos i a les finestres de les cases, fosques, si es veia una mica de llum, de seguida xiulets” (PD, 163; “All the lights were blue. It looked like the land of make-believe and it was pretty. As soon as night fell, everything turned
blue. They'd painted the glass on all the streetlights blue and when a

crack of light showed in the window of some dark house, whistles would
start blowing right away," TD, 131]. Quimet, on the other hand, is

unnerved by the same lights: "En Quimet va dir que allò dels llums blaus
el feia posar de mal humor i que si algun dia podia manar faria posar
tots els llums vermells com si torn el país tingüés el xarrapició, perquè
ell, va dir, de brumes també en sabia fer" [PD, 165; "Quimet said those
blue lights got on his nerves and if he was ever in charge he'd have all
the lights painted red as if the whole country had the measles because
he said he also knew a few jokes," TD, 133]. The reactions of the two
to the same urban phenomenon are paradigmatic of their characters,
more often than not totally at odds with each other.

In the most desperate moment of the novel, when Colometa is about to
kill her children and commit suicide, the blue lights resurface as a
reference to war and to dislocation:

I vaig respirar com si el món fos meu. I vaig anar-me'n. Havia de mirar de
no caure, de no fer-me atropellar, d’anar amb compte amb els tramvies,
sobretot amb els que baixaven, de conservar el cap al damunt del coll i anar
ben dret cap a casa: sense veure els llums blaus. Sobretot sense veure els
llums blaus. (...)

I altra vegada la casa dels hules i les nines amb les sabates de xarol...i
sobretot no veure els llums blaus i travessar sense pressa...no veure els
llums blaus...i em van cridar. (PD, 192)

[I breathed a sigh of relief. And I left. I had to be careful that I didn’t fall
or get run over by a streetcar, especially the ones going toward town,
and that I kept my head and went straight home without seeing any blue lights.
Especially without seeing any blue lights.

And then the oilcloth shop again and the dolls with patent leather
shoes...above all not to see the blue lights and to cross the streets without
hurrying...not to see the blue lights...and then someone called out to me.] (TD, 154)

That someone was Antoni, the grocer, and thus begins the great change
in Colometa’s life, about to find relief from the dizzying uncertainty of
wartime illumination. This relief, however, comes slowly, and her ad-
verse reaction to her urban environment must intensify before it can dis-
sipate.

Toward the end of the novel, after her second marriage, senyora Na-
tàlia refuses to leave her house. She reacts negatively to the street,
where previously she had found refuge:

Vivia tancada a casa. El carrer em feia por. Això que treia el nas a fora,
m’esperava la gent, els automòbils, els autobusos, les motos. ... Tenia el
cor petit. Només estava bé a casa. De mica en mica, tot i que em costava,
m’anava fent la casa meva, les coses meves. La fosca i la llum. Sabia les
clorats del dia i sabia on quien les taques de sol que entraven pel balcó del
dormitori i de la sala: quan eren lluïgues, quan eren curtes. (PD, 217)

[I stayed at home. I was scared of the street. As soon as I stuck my nose out of
the door the crowds and cars and buses and motorcycles made me dizzy. ... I
was scared of everything. I only felt good at home. It was hard, but slowly
I got used to feel the apartment and the things in it were mine. The light and
darkness. I got to know the light during the day and where the streaks of
sunlight fell that came in through the bedroom and living-room balconies:
when they were long and when they were short.] (TD, 169).

When finally she decides to go out again she goes to the parks, because
at that moment she does not have to work anymore. In her walks she
always avoids the streets. These parks are the ‘least urban setting in the
whole novel, and of course, they may be related to her first visit to Park
Güell with Quimet. She appears to be a crazy woman and becomes
known as an anonymous person, “la senyora dels coloms” [PD, 223; “the
dove lady,” TD, 175], summarizing this way her loss of identity: “I per
anar als parcs fugia dels carrers on passaven massa automòbils perquè
em marejava i de vegades feia una gran volta per anar-hi, per poder
passar pel carrers tranquilis” [PD, 223; “And when I went to the parks
I’d avoid the streets with too many cars on them because they’d make
me dizzy and sometimes I’d have to go out of my way to keep on the side
streets,” TD, 175]. The main character’s appearance and actions in
all those spaces, houses and streets, interiors and exteriors, remind us
of the striking magnitude of this aspect of the novel. Because of the way
it is introduced, space acts not as a “fixed frame” but as a “factor which
allows for the movements of characters,” and then it operates fully in
the development of the plot.

In her final dreamlike monologue, Colometa-Natàlia rethinks her past
in terms of scents and stenches:

I mentre pensava així van néixer els olors i les pudors. Totes. Empassant-se,
fent-se lloc i fugint i tornant: l’olor de terrat amb coloms i l’olor de terrat
sense coloms i la pudor de lleixiu que quan vaig ser casada vaig saber quina
mena de pudor era. I l’olor de sang que ja era com un anunt de mort. I
l’olor de sofre dels coets i de les piules aquella vegada a la plaça del Diamant
i l’olor de paper de les flors de paper i l’olor de sec de l’esparreguer que
s’emcolava i feia un graix a terra de coses petites petites que eren el verd
que havia fugit de la branca. I l’olor del mar tan fort. I em vaig passar la
mà pels ulls. I em preguntava per què de les pudors en deien pudors i de
les olors olors i per què no podien dir pudors de les olors i olors de les pudors
i va venir l'olor que feia l'Antoni quan estava despert i l'olor que feia l'Antoni quan estava adormit. (PD, 246–247)

[And while I was thinking about all this the smells and stenches started. All of them. Chasing each other around, shoving each other out of the way and running away and coming back: the smell of the roof with the doves on it and the smell of the roof without the doves and the stench of bleach that I already knew when I got married. And the smell of blood like a warning of the smell of death. And the smell of sulfur in rockets and firecrackers that night in the Plaça del Diamant and the smell of paper flowers and the dry smell of asparagus plants crumbling into bits and making a layer of tiny green specks on the ground which were the bits that had fallen off the branches. And that strong smell of the sea. And I put my hand over my eyes. And I wondered why they called stenches stenches and smells smells and why they couldn't call the stenches smells and the smells stenches and I smelled Antoni's smell when he was awake and his smell when he was sleeping.] (TD, 193–194)

It is a long, impressive “flash-back” that revives her whole life. At the end of it she realizes at last that she has gained control over her life: “i vaig ficar-me a la plaça del Diamant: una capsà buida feta de cases velles amb el cel per tapadora” (PD, 249); “and I turned into the Plaça del Diamant: an empty box made of old buildings with the sky for a top,” (TD, 197). This sentence in the monologue gives us a clear impression of how the city has become a doll's house, and how she sees, now from the outside, her past life and suffering as a far and forgettable experience.

Thus, the use that Rodoreda makes of spaces in the city throughout the novel has a significant impact on the way the reader perceives the evolution of the main character. Rodoreda's use of interior and exterior settings can be decoded as an allusion to the main opposition of the novel, between an internal fight—that of Colometa trying to become Natàlia—and an external one—that of Natàlia trying to find her way out, physically and emotionally, of the past in which she was trapped. In the novel, as in most of her writings, Rodoreda achieves what can be called a dialectic of space; that is, a series of gestures which oppose several perceptions of space: inside (the houses) and outside (life in the streets), up (the doves in the roof) and down (the rats in the sewer). Colometa-Natàlia is always trapped between two levels, both physically and morally, as she achieves what Raymond Williams has depicted as one of the themes of modern urban literature: “the intensity of a paradoxical self-realization in isolation.” The allegorical use of space throughout the novel exposes the evolution of its main character and gives us a sense of territory, from Natàlia's being dominated to her becoming the one to dominate: perhaps unconsciously, but certainly for her survival's sake.

Notes

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1. I quote from the Catalan original and give the English translation in notes using the following abbreviations:

PD: La plaça del Diamant (Barcelona: Club Editor, 1981).
6. Ibid., 95.