

France and Geneva (1939-1972)

A Long and Difficult Exile in France and Switzerland

"I was coming out of one of those trips to the end of the night, where writing seems like a horribly frivolous occupation: the flight from Paris, on foot, with incredible sights: the burning of Orleans, the shelling of the port of Beaugency, with cartloads of the dead... two years in Limoges dying every day, like that day, two years in Bordeaux, living there..."

Interview with Baltasar Porcel: "Mercè Rodoreda or the Lyrical Force," Serra d'Or (March, 1966)

In France, she lived in Toulouse and Paris, but when the Germans arrived, she had to flee on foot, facing horrifying sights, particularly the burning of Orleans; fire, in fact, would become another symbol of her work, used to signal destruction, brought about by war, but also the purification that characterises this first material, material that would become progressively important in her work. Later, she lived precariously in Limoges and Bordeaux and during these years she lived without gardens and flowers, basically writing short stories. And after returning to Paris, during the second half of the forties, she cultivated poetry and painted, following Klee and other innovative creators.

It was probably then that she wrote a novel that she never finished, published posthumously as *Isabel i Maria* (*Isabel and Maria*) (1991), which shifts back and forth between two settings that struggle for power: a house with a garden in the neighbourhood of Sant Gervasi, on one hand, and the cities of her desolate exile, on the other. And it was the former that won out.

Even so, it wasn't until the second half of the 1950's, established in Geneva, a quiet city surrounded by greenery, with large, immaculate parks, with water in the form of rivers, presided over by a lake, all elements that strongly attracted her as a creator, when she could write and publish again regularly. In fact, now she had an apartment all to herself, because her companion, Joan Prat, better known by his pseudonym, Armand Obiols, worked as a translator for the United Nations and later left for Vienna, for his work.

Initially, Rodoreda sent a collection of short stories that she had written for the Víctor Català Award in 1957, which won, entitled *Vint-i-dos contes* (*Twenty-two Short Stories*, 1958). But she wasn't as lucky with the novels that she wrote; in 1959, she presented the story that would become *Jardí vora el mar* (*Garden by the Sea*), 1967 to compete for the Joanot Martorell Award, without success. It is notable that in this first novel, the author sought to recover a space that so attracted her, and which had been lost: the garden, and her childhood as well; Eugeni, one of the characters in the story, says a few words that could have also been those of Mercè Rodoreda herself:

“There have been times when I would have sold my soul and my legs for a bit of a garden. No one would say that, would they?” And then, looking at me, he added, ‘You only live until you are twelve. And I don’t think I’ve grown.’”

Even so, and despite her desire to work and succeed, she failed again with the two following novels, sent for the Sant Jordi competition in 1960 and 1961, respectively, *Colometa*, known around the world by its later title, *La plaça del Diamant* (*The Time of the Doves*), and *La mort i la primavera* (*Death and the Spring*), an unfinished work that came out in 1993, after her death. The critical and popular success of *La plaça del Diamant* (1962), considered shortly after its publishing to be the most important post-war novel, revived her literary career, as shown by the following works, collections of short stories and novels, two genres that Rodoreda dominated equally well, something unusual in an author. With *El carrer de les Camèlies* (*Camellia Street*, 1966), a title with the flowers that so fascinated her, she won the awards that she hadn't with *La plaça del Diamant* (Sant Jordi, the Critic's Choice, etc.). The work is, formally, a continuation of it: spoken writing, female main characters, memory as the driving force behind the story, following Proust and Woolf, authors who had a profound influence on Mercè Rodoreda. This work's main character, Cecilia Ce, is the

complete opposite of Colometa, a woman committed to her family and country, for whom the war represents a personal and social downfall, driving her into marginalisation and loneliness. Cecília Ce, on the other hand, is a little girl found next to the grate of a house on Camellia Street, and the day that this happens, a miraculous sign appears: a nearly-dead cactus flowers, and this happens again each year at the same time. But as a marginalised character, she would later flee from the house with a garden and live a particularly difficult life in desolate post-war Barcelona, weighed down by death and repression. *El carrer de les Camèlies*, like *La plaça del Diamant*, is a novel about a sort of initiation, which is expressed as a trip, a different trip, but also a trip through the “dark of the night,” if we compare life to a trip; in the end, after suffering, pain, and near death, both main characters reach maturity, but they leave behind their youth, lost forever, as if it were a skin that no longer fits. And the freeing of the characters is linked to green spaces: imprecise parks and a symbolic upside-down tree in *La plaça del Diamant*, the lindens of Rambla de Catalunya, and the house with a garden in *El carrer de les Camèlies*; a Proust-like happiness would also be linked to the taste of lime-blossom tea, which is, like the famous muffin, the recovery of childhood. The tree also becomes a recurring, positive element, surrounded by prestige and made into a symbol of eternity. After these novels, especially *La plaça del Diamant*, translated to a wide range of languages, Rodoreda published a very good collection of short stories, *La meva Cristina i altres contes* (My Cristina and Other Stories, 1967), with short stories that appear in world anthologies of this genre, and in which the significance of greenery and water is evident. Later, she published an ambitious novel, *Mirall trencat* (Broken Mirror, 1974), written over the course of many years and finished in Romanyà de la Selva, precisely where she spent the final years of her life.