

# The intimate Barcelona of Colometa and Cecília Ce

*Roxana Nadim*

INSTITUT D'ÉTUDES POLITIQUES D'AIX-EN-PROVENCE

roxana.nadim@sciencespo-aix.fr

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## ABSTRACT

Mercè Rodoreda tells the story of Barcelona through Colometa and Cecília Ce in her novels *La plaça del Diamant* (2002 [1962]) and *El carrer de les Camèlies* (2007 [1966]). The former is a republican and the latter is a prostitute; both are impoverished and form part of the vanquished, whose names are not mentioned in the history books. Rodoreda uses these characters to write the silent history of women and the marginalised, without idealising or mythologising them, thus showing us a Barcelona which too often remains anonymous.

**Keywords:** Mercè Rodoreda, Barcelona, women's literature, Walter Benjamin.

**Corresponding author:** Roxana Nadim, Institut d'Études Politiques d'Aix-en-Provence Rue Gaston de Saporta 25, 13625 Aix-en-Provence cedex 1

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*To Montserrat Casals, my dear friend.*

*The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'emergency situation' in which we live is actually the rule. We must arrive at a concept of history which corresponds to this.*

**Walter Benjamin, *Thesis on the philosophy of history*, VIII**

The German, Jewish, antifascist, and communist-sympathising philosopher, Walter Benjamin fled from his country in 1933. He found refuge in Paris, lost his citizenship in 1939, and was interned several times in refugee camps before embarking on his journey south. Now finding ourselves in 1940, the Germans are arriving, and Benjamin knows he must flee. He

has seen the horrors the Luftwaffe are capable of; he remembers Guernica. The worst is yet to come. His departure is somewhat bizarre. We know some fragments about what happened, which I have used to paint an image of the philosopher. I imagine a tired man, restless, agitated, caught between his obsessions as an archivist and the need for a quick

escape. This man moves me: the thunderstorm of history looms over him, he finds himself embroiled in the urgency of an ‘emergency situation’ but, without a doubt, he knows better than anyone that the world is heading towards horror. Before leaving Paris, Benjamin gave Georges Bataille, curator of the National Library, two large suitcases on which he wrote “To be saved”. In them were papers, papers, and more papers, and his watercolour by Paul Klee, *Angelus novus*. Benjamin wrote his *Über den Begriff der Geschichte* [Theses on the philosophy of history] at that time. The text is poetic, sibylline, and prophetic; it was not meant to be published. Benjamin fears the text will be badly received, he is afraid of being misunderstood, once again. He sends a copy to Hannah Arendt and, no doubt, keeps another copy in a small black towel that will follow him on his path to exile. Like many readers of Benjamin’s work, I had difficulties coping with this text and had to read every word several times, in an attempt to reconstruct its meaning, just as he had done when he was a studious young teenager, at the time of the Greek and Latin book editions. Later, reading Michael Löwy enlightened me and made me see that the text could also be read as a poem, that Benjamin’s thought was sometimes fragmentary and paradoxical; that in it there was German romanticism, Jewish messianism, and a revolutionary thinking that drank from the fountain of Marxism and violently criticised social democracy, the USSR, fanatics of progress, and positivist historians. By chasing progress, says Benjamin, we run towards catastrophe. Those who run, or make us run, are our oppressors: they are the privileged ones, the victors of the great ideological war—the class struggle—that confronts us because the world had entered its industrial and capitalist phase. History is at the service of these victors: it describes their panegyric, redraws its victories, and forgets the bodies of the rebels, the poor, and the oppressed in the trenches. Jews, indigenous people, workers, antifascists, anti-Francoists. When Walter Benjamin was crossing the Pyrenees, hoping to find a way out to the United States from Spain, others were going the opposite direction. They had to leave Spain, quickly fleeing Franco through the mountains.

One morning in January 1939, the Catalan writer Mercè Rodoreda hurriedly leaves in a bus from Barcelona towards France: she carries a small bag, and quickly kisses her nine-year-old son who embraces his mother in return, before she gets on. An emergency farewell before a separation that would last a lifetime and would remain uninterrupted for at least ten years (Casals, 1991, p. 91), writes Montserrat Casals i Couturier in her biography of the writer. Rodoreda settles near Paris in a palace in Roissy-en-Brie with other Catalan writers including Anna Murià, Pere Calders, and Sebastià Gasch. But in June 1940, the arrival of the Germans at the gates of Paris leads her, like Walter Benjamin, to set out on the road again. He goes to Lourdes and then to Portbou; she settles in Limoges. After the war, Mercè Rodoreda meets in Bordeaux with her lover, Armand Obiols; then she goes to Paris, before settling in Geneva, in 1953, where she spends many years. That is where she writes *La plaça del Diamant* (*The time of the doves* [In Diamond Square]; 2002 [1962]) and *El carrer de les Camèlies* (*Camellia Street*; 2007 [1966]). These two great Barcelonan novels are built around a central female character: Natàlia, nicknamed Colometa, in *La plaça del Diamant*, and Cecília Ce, in the *El carrer de les Camèlies*.

At first glance, everything seems to separate these two women: the first is a good—and serious—wife, an irreproachable mother, an effective housewife. While the second falls in love with miscreants who mistreat her and which she blindly follows; she prostitutes herself out, has abortions, wanders around looking for herself, looking for her broken identity, and ends up fighting for her freedom and independence. However, both of them are emblematic of a popular and overlooked Barcelona, a Barcelona that is not mythicised, with none of the gypsies, sailors, or cabarets that made Chinatown so seductive a place; one in which the anarchist resistance are not supermen or *pasionarias* [in reference to the Communist leader, Dolores Ibárruri], a Barcelona in which women occupy a place that history books have too often forgotten. With Colometa and Cecília Ce, Mercè Rodoreda pays homage to the vanquished, tells their story and, as Walter Benjamin would say, brushes history against the grain.

### COLOMETA AND CECÍLIA'S BARCELONA

When Mercè Rodoreda writes these two novels, Barcelona is a city that has already been amply mythologised by literature. Since the 19th century, this city has been at the heart of Catalan novels, which present both its bourgeois side—we talk of the literature of the *Passeig de Gràcia*—as well as its passionate and transgressive aspects. A two-faced Janus, the city is between *seny* [wisdom] and *rauxa* [whimsy]. After 1910–1920, the city's transgressive side fascinates foreign authors and Barcelona feeds the exotic dreams of French writers; to them, Andalusia seems too far away while they can, surely, find something with which they can debase themselves in the north of Spain. Barcelona gives them gypsies, thieves, whores, and cabarets. Authors such as Henry de Montherlant, Francis Carco, Pierre MacOrlan, Jean Genet, or Georges Bataille each contribute their grain of sand to building Barcelona's stereotype and the city gradually merges into the imaginary with its red-light district, Chinatown. But, by describing the life of Colometa and Cecília Ce in *La plaça del Diamant* and *El carrer de les Camèlies*, Mercè Rodoreda surpasses all those topoi by showing the life of ordinary people in popular neighbourhoods which are neither dangerous nor fun. The titles of the two novels draw attention because of their similarity: they are built around a geographical indication or, more exactly, around an address in the same Barcelonan neighbourhood. Calle Camèlies is between the Gràcia and Guinardó neighbourhoods, a few blocks from the Plaça del Diamant, which is in the middle of Gràcia. If the novels of bourgeois Barcelona were set in Eixample, and the literature of the underworld, in Chinatown, until Rodoreda there had been few authors who had explored the neighbourhoods of Gràcia or Guinardó—intermediate spaces, villages of artisans which were linked to Barcelona at the beginning of the 20th century.

Obviously, there are other characters that appear together with our Gràcian heroines in 1966: Juan Marsé, the poet from Carmel and Guinardó neighbourhood, gave life, in *Últimas tardes con Teresa* (Last Evenings with Teresa) and Pijoaparte, a Murcian from Barcelona, the prince of the *xarnegos* [Spanish

economic migrants], who dreams of becoming the boyfriend of the beautiful, independent, bourgeois, and Catalan, Teresa Serrat. Also at that time, Paco Candel wrote *Els altres Catalans* (The other Catalans; 1964), the first work on immigration in Catalonia. The author describes life in the *barris de barracas* [shack neighbourhoods] where the *xarnegos* that have just settled in Catalonia are concentrated. Certainly, Rodoreda knew the book through her editor, Joan Sales, who adored him and, in spite of her exile, Rodoreda clearly understood the social dimension of Barcelona's spaces. Therefore, her two novels take place in a Barcelona that is divided into spaces for the rich and places for everyone else. In *El carrer de les Camèlies*, Cecília Ce is abandoned at birth in front of a house on Calle Camèlies; she is taken in by a couple from the neighbourhood and, when she leaves the family home, she begins her journey through the city and moves—up to eight times—with the men she meets. Their movements have both a diegetic value—they are closely related with the character's narration and vicissitudes—and social value, describing her rise through Barcelonan society. When she leaves Gràcia, she follows a gypsy to the Somorrostro *barracas*, the poorest and unhealthiest neighbourhood in the city, in which the most disadvantaged *xarnegos* live among the plates of their makeshift houses. Therefore, Cecília begins with a social regression, like resetting to zero to start a game. She leaves the *barracas* for the popular Carnel neighbourhood, thus improving her situation. Finally, poverty leaves her *working the street*, which provides her with better living conditions. One of her clients houses her in an apartment in Eixample, at the intersection of Calle Mallorca and the Rambla de Catalunya and, at the end of the novel, she lives in the high end of the city and frequents Calle Muntaner and the Bonanova promenade.

In contrast, from a spatial point of view, *La Plaça del Diamant* is quite a static novel, because all the action takes place in Gràcia. The first pages are devoted to the *fiesta major* [the main street celebration] in Gràcia; the characters live Calle Montseny, frequent the Calle Gran and the Rambla del Prat, and stroll through the Güell park. When they get to the edge of their

neighbourhood, at the intersection of Diagonal and Gràcia, they turn around, even though only a few more steps would take them to the other side, to the Eixample of the rich: “*Vam arribar a la Diagonal–Passeig de Gràcia. Vam començar a voltar un pilot de cases*” [We arrived at Diagonal and Passeig de Gràcia. We started walking around the neighbourhood] (Rodoreda, 2002 [1962], p. 23). They only leave their neighbourhood to go to work when they are at the service of those who are richer than them: for example, Colometa’s first boyfriend works in the basement kitchen of the famous hotel Columbus. These places for ordinary people—artisans, servants, and workers—are also, in the post-war context, the places of the vanquished. The Republicans, crushed by the Franco regime, can be found on the terraces—spaces of resistance in which they can speak freely; escapes in which the memories of war and the weight of the dictatorship can be temporarily forgotten. In his work on the poetics of the city, Pierre Sansot considers that terraces “*gira hacia lo alto, hacia el cielo, hacia el sol*” [turn upwards, towards the sky, towards the sun] and are “*casi hostil hacia la calle*” [almost hostile towards the streets] (Sansot, 1966, pp. 364–365). Colometa and her children spend their afternoons on a terrace, temporarily forgetting the worries and misery of their daily lives. On terraces you will also find the defeated Republicans of *El pianista* (The pianist) (1985), by Manuel Vásquez Montalbán. In those spaces of the vanquished, of poor and ordinary people, a silent story is written that Mercè Rodoreda manages to represent through Colometa and Cecília.

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### A BRIEF HISTORY OF BARCELONA

Both in La plaça del Diamant and *El carrer de les Camèlies*, the story comes from female characters—narrators who talk about their intimate lives, mixed with the collective destiny of their compatriots, in first person. Through the eyes of Colometa, we witness the historical events that shake Barcelona from the end of the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera to the post-war period. The first political event that marks Colometa’s life is, without a doubt, the proclamation

of the Republic. We find ourselves in April 1931, and Colometa describes the happy excitement that takes over the city: her husband runs down the street shouting and waving a flag; freedom is within reach, they can imagine a better future. With time, the month of April would become engraved in memory: it was the month in which everything was possible, before the world changed drastically, before the *Frente Popular* [Popular Front] sank so soon after its constitution, before the war that destroyed the country. Colometa remembers that mythical month of April: “*Encara em recordo d’aquell aire fresc, un aire, cada vegada que me’n recordo, que no l’he pogut sentir mai més. Mai més. Barrejat amb l’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 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 grossos*” [I still remember that fresh air, an air that, every time I remembered it, I realised I hadn’t felt it since. Never since. Mixed with the odour of tender leaves and the smell of buds, an air that disappeared, and no air since then has felt like that one which changed everything in my life, because it was in April and with still-closed flowers that my little worries began to turn into big ones] (Rodoreda, 2002 [1962], p.76). In effect, small problems start to become large ones because, with the proclamation of the Republic, politics and history come into Colometa’s life. In July 1936, the streets of Barcelona are shaken again: this time it is the Francoist uprising that shocks the city. Again, Colometa’s husband runs up and down the streets and one day comes to his wife wearing his uniform of the resistance: “*Se’m va vestir amb una granota blava i, al cap d’uns quants dies de fum i d’esglésies llençant espurnes, se’m va presentar amb un cinturó amb revòlver i una escopeta de dos canons penjada a l’espatlla*” [He was dressed in blue overalls and, after a few days of smoke and burning churches, turned up with a revolver in his belt and a two-barrelled shotgun hanging on his shoulder] (Rodoreda, 2002 [1962], p. 127). [He] appears here like an ordinary person, a father of the most normal family who, during the Spanish Civil War, takes up arms to defend the Republic. We are very far from the mythic and passionate images

that are sometimes used to talk about the Spanish Civil War. In fact, here the conflict is seen from the inside, narrated by a character who, far from the ideologies of the trenches and the stereotypes, must fight, every day, to survive. Colometa and the rest of Barcelona's citizens must confront tuberculosis epidemics, hardships, misery, and hunger—*“L'adroguer de sota de casa va quedar buit en pocs dies”* [The general drugstore under the house was empty in a few days] (Rodoreda, 2002 [1962], p. 127), says the narrator. Descriptions of the lack of food are a dominant theme in the novel: *“ens ficàvem d'hora al llit per no adonar-nos tant que no teníem sopar”* [We sent to bed early to help us forget that we hadn't eaten dinner] (Rodoreda, 2002 [1962], p. 150), Colometa tells us. When the situation becomes untenable, she decides to send her son to a refugee settlement. Colometa's perspective on the war and, thus, that of Rodoreda, is characterised by a categorical rejection of the epic, lyrical, and exalted tone of the discourse [of the time]. The quote by George Meredith, presented as an epigraph in the book, also emphasises: “My dear, these things are life”. This text is a poetry of the everyday, a story that reflects the opposite perspective, a story against the grain. Mercè Rodoreda's outlook on the divisions that shake the country is intelligent and audacious: it highlights the abuses of the Francoists, but also those of the militia. For example, she ridicules their fierce anti-clericalism. A woman, laughing, tells us that a militiaman has confused her husband with a priest because [her spouse] is bald: *“Me l'havia pres per un capellà... com que no té ni un cabell a dalt del cap... el milicià es pensava que s'havia tret els cabells per dissimular”* [I would've mistaken him for a priest... as he hasn't got a hair on his head... the soldier thought he'd shaved his hair off as a disguise] (Rodoreda, 2002 [1962], p. 129). The discourse of the militia, in all its naivety, emerges when, for example, Julieta, a dear friend of the heroine, explains its position: *“em va dir que no m'amoïnés perquè el món aniria millor i que tothom podria ser feliç, perquè a la terra hi havíem vingut per ser-hi feliços i no per patir sense parar”* [He told me not to worry because the world would be better and everyone could be happy because we'd been put on earth to be happy, not to continuously suffer]

(Rodoreda, 2002 [1962], p. 145), Colometa accounts. Finally, a character denounces the violent methods of some members of the Republican side: *“Amb el que no he estat mai d'acord és amb les passejades i amb les picades i amb cremar esglésies”* [What I've never agreed with is the marching, the insect bites, and the church burning] (Rodoreda, 2002 [1962], p. 138). Therefore, the ideological nuances of positions on the war are treated with delicacy, with a sobriety like that described in the post-war period.

At the end of the Spanish Civil War, Barcelona had lost part of its population: the dead on the front, those who had left the country (a third of the Spanish exiles were Catalans), and others who continued to die every day. The city was immersed in a morbid environment: *“tothom era mort i els que havien quedat vius, que també era com si fossin morts, que vivien com si els haguessin matat”* [Everyone was dead, and it was as though the living were also dead, living as if they had been killed] (Rodoreda, 2002 [1962], p. 167), says the heroine of *La Plaça del Diamant*. The post-war era brought with its material and health problems: the country was exhausted; malnutrition and typhus and tuberculosis epidemics had caused many deaths. The tear that constituted an internal struggle of this magnitude was noticeable from day-to-day; from that moment, the population was divided into two categories: winners and losers. Think of Jaime Gil de Biedma and his poem *‘Los años triunfales’* [The triumphant years]: *“Barcelona y Madrid eran algo humillado. / Como una cosa sucia, donde la gente es vieja, / la ciudad parecía más oscura / y los Metros olían a miseria...”* [Barcelona and Madrid were somewhat humiliated. / Like something dirty, where people are old, / the city seemed darker / and the Metros smelled of misery...]. Once again, Rodoreda manages to describe that terrible time through the life of her character. Without pathos. Without tears. But through Colometa who, like her city, rises up little by little. In the cold and in the colour of grey.

The treatment of the story is somewhat different in *El carrer de les Camèlies*. Although the novel takes place during the post-war period, the conflict that had just left the country is barely mentioned. A character speaks

briefly of revolution: “*el senyor de Tarragona m’explicava que en el carrer on l’autobús es parava hi havien matat set o vuit persones els primers dies de revolució*” [Mr. Tarragona told me that in the street where the bus stopped, seven or eight people had been killed at the beginning of the revolution] (Rodoreda, 2007 [1966], p. 105); but then it is not mentioned much more. However, it is the post-war air of poverty that pushes Cecília Ce into the street. Cecília is something of a rogue: she fights for her survival and must become twice as inventive to escape hunger. But, with no mention of picaresque fiction or its epic stories of hunger? Rather, through Cecília, *El carrer de les Camèlies* allows us to see a brief social history, one that is not mythicised. Cecília is not a good-hearted prostitute nor an exotic whore from a cabaret in Chinatown. She is far from any of these stereotypes: Cecília is simply a slightly lost girl that sells her body to survive, in the same way many other women whose stories we forget very often must do.

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### THE SILENT HISTORY OF WOMEN

Of course, some great male writers have told the life of women. They have narrated, staged, and sometimes channelled female characters. But then, what have female writers done? Do they write female characters in the same way as male authors do? Or, do they tell the stories of women in another way? I do not know if there is a ‘type’ of female writing; if being a woman, or ‘playing at’ or ‘refusing’ to be one, brings any kind of specificity to writing, but when I read *El carrer de les Camèlies* (2007) [1966] by Rodoreda for the first time, I felt intimate echoes of these stories pass through my being. Then I thought: I’ve never been told this [story]. A story about my essential nature and about me. Obviously, they had told me stories of existences with which I had identified: I had no problem feeling ‘Julien Sorel in love’ or ‘Emma Bovary melancholy’; although they are both far from my experience, I feel the magic of the novel and [I feel that] ‘I am Madame Bovary’. I have no doubt about it. However, the discovery of Rodoreda’s text left me perplexed: Why had I not previously felt that physical closeness with a character’s life? Why did that prostitute from Calle

Camèlies resonate more with me than the courtesan of camellias that Alexandre Dumas had described less than a century before? I went back to thinking about the words of Hélène Cixous: “*escribete: es necesario que tu cuerpo se haga oír*” [write yourself a note: you must make yourself heard]. A woman’s essence is exactly what is heard in these two novels from Rodoreda. Cecília Ce menstruates: “*Encara em trobava malament, i amb la sang tanta com vulguis*” [I still felt in really bad way, and with so much blood] (Rodoreda, 2007 [1966], p.89). Cecília Ce aborts: “*Al cap d’uns quants mesos vaig que-dar embarassada i la senyora Matilde em va fer avortar només amb una branqueta de julivert per fer passar l’aire*” [After a few months I got pregnant and Mrs. Matilde helped me abort with nothing more than a sprig of parsley to let the ‘air’ flow] (Rodoreda, 2007 [1966], p.78). Cecília Ce gets pregnant and has miscarriages. Above all, Cecília Ce and Colometa put female desire and sexuality into Catalan literature. The character in *El carrer de les Camèlies* speaks of the men with whom she has lived, loved, and desired. Even the discreet Colometa, in *La plaça del Diamant*, allows herself to confide her sexuality and confesses to the impotence of her second husband. She tells us about Antoni’s situation using a soft litote: “*no puc fundar una família, perquè per culpa de la guerra sóc inútil del mig*” [I cannot have a family, because the war left him useless below] (Rodoreda, 2002 [1962], p. 182).

These female characters, whose life outlines the silent history of women, suffer the scourges of violence from a patriarchal world. Colometa submits to the state of mind and whims of her first husband. Cecilia is constantly subjected to brutality, rapes, and beatings. However, there is a scene of exceptional violence at the culmination of *El carrer de les Camèlies*.

Two men, Marc and Eladi, have Cecília locked in an apartment and they make her drink a little more [alcohol] each day. Little by little, Cecília falls into depression and intoxication, to the point of not being able to differentiate between sleep and reality: “*I aleshores va començar el que no he sabut mai si va ser un somni o si va ser una barreja de somni i de veritat*” [And then it began, I could never tell if it was a dream or a

mixture of dreams and truth] (Rodoreda, 2007 [1966], p. 154), she says. Disorientated by the alcohol and violence of these two men, she can no longer trust her senses: “*tenia els ulls emboirats*” [my eyes were foggy] (Rodoreda, 2007 [1966], p. 154), “*Vaig haver de tancar els ulls perquè era com si tingués una boleta de foc a dintre que me’ls volgués foradar*” [I had to close my eyes because it was as if I had a fireball inside my skull trying to drill its way out]. During this long period of near unconsciousness, Cecília is the victim of repeated rapes: “*Va fer amb mi el que li va semblar*” [He did what he wanted to me]; “*vaig sentir una cosa freda entre les cames*” [I felt something cold between my legs]; “*Jo em sentia la cuixa molla d’aigua i el fred em feia tremolar*” [I felt liquid on my thigh and the cold made me shiver] (Rodoreda, 2007 [1966], p. 155) She is prey to delirium and morbid images appear: “*vaig començar a veure el cementiri*” [I began to see the cemetery] (Rodoreda, 2007 [1966], p. 156). Thus, she tries to end her life. When they revive her, she discovers that she is pregnant. Her rapists beat her so that she miscarries and then they abandon her in the street. Narrating the marginalisation of women in Francoist and sexist society is, for Rodoreda, a firm political act: it is about making a voice heard in a struggle which reaffirms her as a person.

The question of one’s self-assertion is also the basis of our two characters’ lives. In *La plaça del Diamant*, Colometa’s evolution is followed through a series of key scenes that comprise the character’s *cursus honorum*: the beginning of the feeling of love, the first kiss, marriage, pregnancy, and childbirth, the death of her husband... Colometa gradually rids herself of the influence her first husband exerts on her and progressively becomes an autonomous woman. We witness this evolution and follow the stream of consciousness of a character who seems to confide in us. The feeling of intimacy the character generates is accentuated by a series of narrative techniques designed to bring the reader closer to her. For example, Colometa comes to question the reader with expressions like: “*No sé si m’explico*” [I don’t know if I’m explaining myself properly] (Rodoreda, 2002 [1962], p. 89). The feeling of realism and the proximity of the characters

also comes through in a certain orality in the text, which recreates the way the craftsmen of Gràcia speak in all its vividness. Likewise, we follow the evolution of a character and her progressive construction as an individual in *El carrer de les Camèlies*. This time the *cursus honorum* is mixed with a *cursus dedecorum*, because Cecília’s trajectory is much more meandering than Colometa’s, but her trajectory is clearly still a personal search. The prelude to the novel narrates the abandonment of Cecília Ce when she was a baby: “*Em van deixar en el carrer de les Camèlies, al peu d’un reixat de jardí, i el vigilant em va trobar a la matinada*” [They left me in Camellia street, at the foot of a garden gate, and the watchman found me in the morning] (Rodoreda, 2007 [1966], p. 9), it tells us at the beginning of her story. The identity of the girl immediately raises questions:

[They took the paper attached to my chest with a safety pin. It was a piece of roughly torn paper with a name written on it in pencil, ‘Cecilia Ce’. They said it looked like the letter had been written by someone who barely knew how to write, but the gentleman, who paid attention to everything, pointed out that the word ‘Cecilia’ was written better than ‘Ce’. And that meant that whoever had written my name had not been able to finish writing it because when they wrote the word Ce their hand had been shaking, it had been written while they were crying] (Rodoreda, 2007 [1966], pp. 11–12).

That incomplete name constitutes the starting point of the search for an identity that pushes her character through the whole novel. But that inner search is intimately linked to the Barcelonan space. By wandering through the city, through her moves which [each] reflect a social or romantic situation, she learns to get to know herself, little by little. Perhaps T.S. Eliot’s quote, “I have walked many years in this city”, which appears in an epigraph, is inviting us to read this novel as an urban poem which mixes roaming and searching? At the end of the novel, Cecília is a much older woman. She returns to her first home and is reunited with the man who found her at birth. During a long conversation, he clarifies her origin.

Thus, the end of the novel presents a reconciliation of the character with her identity and ends the search she started at the beginning of the story. At the end of *La Plaça del Diamant* the main character confronts the spaces of her youth: Colometa takes a nostalgic stroll through her old neighbourhood, “*em vaig posar a caminar per la meua vida vella*” [I started walking through my old life] (Rodoreda, 2002 [1962], p. 218), until she finds herself in front of her old flat, letting the memories invade her and measuring the long distance she has travelled and that had led her to a sweet and peaceful happiness. In these novels, therefore, the city still plays its traditional role, because it is a place of starting, a place of learning... for women.

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘emergency situation’ in which we live is actually

the norm, writes Walter Benjamin. Being a woman, be it a Republican or a whore, during the Spanish post-war period, means belonging to the oppressed, to those who eternally live in a state of emergency. In *La plaça del Diamant* and in *El carrer de les Camèlies*, Rodoreda writes about the lives of the women who usually hide in the shadows. By relating their lives, it gives them the place in history to which they have a legitimate right: in the history of literature, but also in the history of their country and in the history of their city, because Colometa and Cecília Ce are already emblematic figures of Barcelona at the same level as Marsé’s Pijoaparte or Montalbán’s Carvalho. But adding Rodoreda’s characters to the body of literature, caused a small revolution, because these female spirits—their afflicted beings, their willing selves—were integrated into Barcelonan novels.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Roxana Nadim is a professor of general culture at the Institut d'Etudes Politiques d'Aix-en-Provence where she is also head of cultural affairs. She has a doctorate in comparative literature from Université Paris 3 – Sorbonne Nouvelle and wrote her thesis on the literary representations of Barcelona in French, Spanish, and Catalan literature produced from the period of the Franco regime up until the year 2000.

