

Man without God:

***La mort i la primavera* de Mercè Rodoreda**

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Comme l'eau avance dans le lit d'un fleuve, pareillement la musique avançait dans le lit de mon être, entraînant, entraînant ampleur, et aspiration à l'ampleur.

(Henri Michaux, *Le jardin exalté*)

Mercè Rodoreda died in April 1983 of liver cancer. She had been working on her latest published novel: *La mort i la primavera*. Rewritten several times, its creation is similar to *La plaça del Diamant*, set in the late fifties. It was put forward for the *Sant Jordi* prize in 1961, but without success.

The "last novel" is a reflection in a more elaborated style, an image of the inner evolution of the writer. With *Quanta, quanta guerra* and the collection of brief narrations *Viatges i flors*, she tries to introduce an alienation from reality, with the creation of symbolic universes where the characters develop, while they fight against the obstacles that surround them. Thus, to understand *La mort i la primavera* one must decipher the complex and extensive imagery established by Mercè Rodoreda.

This process in the later works of the author has been pointed out by Carme Arnau.

According to Arnau the symbolism is perceptible throughout the work of the author, suggested in her novelistic origins, and fully the remarkable image of the garden that has roots in the early chapters of the latest published novels.

The recreation of myths leads to the musicality of the words, and rhythm dominates the prose, making it all the more intimate and striking. The imaginary universes that she recreates are based directly upon the sources of our own civilization and even of distant civilizations.

My analysis presents a possible interpretation of some of the aspects of this novel. Will examine: first, the creation of the mythical world that is represented by the town where the action develops; secondly, the early established relationships between the characters; and finally, their attempts to overcome the difficulties of the recreated universe.

The natural setting in *La mort i la primavera*: The Cosmogonic Myth of the Town's Creation

The town was created by a "malestar de la terra" (the land's indisposition)¹: The "Sacred Mountain" cracks and water comes out. This creation pattern follows the cosmogonic myth described by anthropologist Mircea Eliade, according to which a territory suitable for human life emerges, and the story of origin is recorded and passed on from the beginning of the community². The religious rites that we find within the narration remind us of the legendary principles of creation. In the novel, myth and cult merge with ritual to form a coherent framework.

The plot is set in a town limited by Maraldina, a mountain characterized by always being green. Carme Arnau sees a symbol of immortality in the constant green of the vegetation and in the name, so close to "margda", emerald associated with Hermes, the messenger of gods. Maraldina physically and conceptually surrounding the town, is the empirical obstacle that brings about the "spiritual enlightenment" of the hero, but at the same time it increases, in some circumstances, the ideological paralysis of his society.

Maraldina is seen as sacred since it is the origin of life and of the town, having been split in two by the snake. The **snake**, according to Eliade³, within the myths of creation of many archaic cultures, symbolizes chaos, the original disorder before life began; to hurt the snake (dividing or decapitating it) is identified with the change from the amorphous to the "formal," the beginning, therefore, of life. The mountain presents "magical" characteristics

¹ *La mort i la primavera*, p. 33.

² Mircea Eliade 1969, 20-25.

³ Mircea Eliade 1957, 53.

that highlight its sacredness: the red powder is extracted from it to paint the houses in order to protect them from the "bad spirits". Within Maraldina the cave man, also lives and there one can find the cemetery of the dead "without cement," which are crucial points for a full interpretation of the novel.

The mountain represents everything that motivates the flight, of the anonymous protagonist, the hero. In search of the individuality, he has to flee from the earthly world in order to gain, on the one hand, liberty, represented by the element "air", and on the other hand, his state of equilibrium, symbolized by the figure of Hermes in the science of symbols.

According to Eliade, the cosmogonic myth generally becomes known through the revelations of the old town's people to the heroes and initiated, by which, children can pass into the next phase of formation⁴. In *La mort i la primavera* the blacksmith provides the discovery of the ontological principles of the town religion to our "initiated" protagonist. This revelation causes an unconscious source for the rupture of the sacred nature by the initiated that, according to Eliade⁵, shows the authentic reality which unmask the other "reality," whose function was to control the behavior patterns of the society.

⁴ It could be that the fact that the protagonist's young daughter was aware of the cultural mysteries (due to the information passed on from the son of the blacksmith) before anyone else, was the origin of his destruction, since tribal law of the secrecy has been challenged (Mircea Eliade 1957, 82).

The protagonist of the novel has access too early to the cosmogonic knowledge of the reality of his society, without having acquired the ability to understand and to assimilate the "myth," so he will not be able to develop normally the already commenced personal initiation.

⁵ 1957, 130-133.

Mircea Eliade⁶ also points out the possibility of applying the cosmogonic myths to different planes of reference within archaic societies: periodicity, religious sacraments, everyday work, festivals, social structure, etc. The myth of the creation of the town in *La mort i la primavera* also applies this theory, visible even in physical features such as the river, characterized by a zig-zag winding movement similar to the mythical snake.

A possible interpretation of the Oedipus myth in *La mort i la primavera*

We have seen how the natural setting of the novel makes the personal progress of the hero difficult. It is interesting to analyze his personal development as parallel to Oedipus' with a basis in the connection that Freud made of the Greek myth. According to Freud, it was the rest of infantile developments, that is, the cause of psychopathological evolution⁷. My interpretation from this perspective is based on the idea of the personal progression of the protagonist in the novel. Thus, it will be useful to review the parallels and correspondences between the lives of Oedipus and our protagonist.

Oedipus murders Laio; this differs from our hero because he did not personally kill his father. However, he transgresses a social norm; as a witness of his father's "suicide," he also collaborates in his father's death. In both cases, this development will be important in the hero's life: the social transgression that has taken place marks the progression to the adult

⁶ 1963, 38.

⁷ see Fromm 1951, 148-172.

world.

Very soon afterwards, Oedipus marries Jocasta —his mother, Laios's widow—, and they form a couple of infantile games. The juridical mother, for having married his father will also become the hero's amorous partner.

Oedipus is punished for the double crime —parricide and incest—with the loss of his eyes.

Jocasta kills herself. In *La mort i la primavera* the hero is also punished for the double sin (having witnessed the death of his father and committed incest with his mother): first, his daughter dies, and then, his wife rejects him. Finally, he dies according to the customs of the town. Her fate is hardly satisfactory either: confined to her parents' house, she also loses the horizon of her existence. It is the punishment of a patriarchal society that rejects the incest and the "seduction" of a son. This interpretation of the myth is based on the investigation done by Fromm of the ideas of Sigmund Freud; some interesting things arise from Fromm's words:

The patriarchal system has won, and the myth explains the fall & the matriarchy. The mother, having violated her own highest duty, has provoked her own destruction.⁸

She represents a matriarchal reaction in an eminently patriarchal society. We again find ourselves at the root of the "myth of creation," that we have seen in the previous chapter.

This is a schematic synthesis of the parallels with the myth of Oedipus:

⁸ Fromm 1951, 160

own mother, his father's widow. In the novel, death is the only solution to escape from the feminine principle and be separated from the family environment. With death, the hero can freely make his own live. In this way, life and death bring about two consecutive realities.

Religion as an attempt to escape from the earthly world.

The origin of various images present in the narrations is the author's childhood:

The religion lived so intensely during that epoch, with images of hirdly sants represented ingenuously by figures of ideal beauty and perfection, with miracles and supernatural happening, must have helped Rodoreda to create a magical atmosphere: Guardian Angels, the Sacred Heart...⁹

In spite of this, according to Carme Arnau in the author's biography, it is not until *La mort i la primavera* that the religious aspect centers the literary development of the characters. The novel focus es the daily lines of the townspeople on the town's legendary origin, around which are placed a series of sacred rites: religious tribal manifestations that deny, as we will see, the existence of a specific god.

The religion in *La mort i la primavera* presents us a sacred central space from the moment of the first revelation: the mountain of Maraldina. In archaic religions we often find a sacred mountain¹⁰, center of the world, where the world of the living is connected with the world of the dead and spirits: for example, the peak of the Olympus of the Greek gods, the Jewish

⁹ Arnau 1992b, 17.

This image of the author's childhood appears also in “semblava de seda:”

or talked to Jesus, whon of loved from the moment of ??? him on the holy cards. (p. 330)

In this narration, the first person protagonist confesses to not practicing religion often:

I prayed. ??? cont say just ??? ??? prayed, since ??? never been able to say a whale prayer. (p. 330)

¹⁰ The sacred ness of nature is not strange. In primitive religions, as Mircea Eliade points out (1957, 101), nature has an essential role religious manifestations: gods gave life to men, but they also created world. For this reason, nature stops representing *chaos* in order to become *Cosmos*.

Sinaí, where Moses received the Ten Commandments¹¹, or within the religious tradition of our country, the peak of Randa, where the pious Lull was devoted to divine contemplation. *Quanta, quanta, guerra* also presents the mountain as “center of the world:” the "mountain of the angels" of the final chapter where Adrià receives the last revelation¹². The connotation of purity, stability, and immutability of the mountains, is seen in a great number of religions¹³. In the Taoist mythology for example, the "immortals" live in the sacred mountain called "the center of the earth" because they believe that the everlasting sun and moon go around it. In this mountain, the Taoistas believe that they achieve the desired state.

Thus, there is a great deal precedent for the symbolism in the novel in question, and the magic mountain, Maraldina is especially significant, the "cosmic mountain" as named by Mircea Eliade for its sacred quality, "sanctifies" the surrounding land.¹⁴ On the hillside of the mountain Maraldina is the "wood of the dead," the "cemetery of the dead without cement," and the well from which the red powder is extracted in order to paint the houses. This powder protects the houses; in not painting the houses because the adolescents have lost the paintbrushes, the fatal destiny of the novel's population begins. The map of the town (a drawing made by Mercè Rodoreda and her sentimental companion, Armand Obiols, and reproduced in the study of *Miralls màgics* by Carme Arnau) shows a **magic mountain** and a replica of it in the center of town. The **house of Lord**, on top of the hill, is separated from

¹¹ Another symbol of the elevation of centre of world, within judeo-christian tradition, is the parallel "tree of the world" identified as the *Cross* of Jesus.

¹² According to the judeo-christian beliefs, the "sacred mountain" is the sign of its survival from the universal flood, since it was not submerged. Thus the top of the cosmic mountain is the highest place of earth, the nave, the place where creation began (Eliade 1955, 44 -50).

¹³ Chevalier *et al.*, 1991, 722.
¹⁴ Mircea Eliade 1957, 39; 1976, 34 -40.

the houses by an ivy covered hillside. A great number of the symbols denote verticality, the rising progression that represents the importance of the Lord in society.

The **wooden bridge**, a crossroad, is the center of the important events in the narration, and just like the conversations among the protagonists it is of profound significance. It is also the path that leads to the "sacred" places: the cemetery, the woods of the dead and Maraldina. The bridge is another sacred "center" for the collective society.

A literary precedent for this space can also be found in a previous novel of the same author. I refer to the mountain of the "Encantades" (Enchanted women) in *Del que hom no pot fugir* (*The inevitable*), where Cinta, the crazy milleress, finds the "Encantades," marvelous beings.¹⁵ A significant passage in *Del que hom no pot fugir* describes the voices of their victims:

quan fa vent se senten veus planyívoles... a les víctimes de les Encantades els pateix l'ànima. Són veus d'ànima que ploren pel cos que es deixà temptar... (pàg. 141)

(when it's windy wailing voices are heard... the souls of the victims of the Enchanted women suffer. Soul voices who cry for their bodies that fell into temptation...)

With the following passage in *La mort i la primavera* we can see the similarity of the images in the two novels¹⁶:

¹⁵ According to some African beliefs, the mountains are very often frequented by fabulous beings, spirits or hidden forces that don't want to be disturbed. Thus the noises and songs of the mountains are an incomprehensible mystery by to the uninitiated. They are inaccessible without a guide (Chevalier *et al.* 1991, 726).

¹⁶ The above mentioned parallels between *Del que hom no pot fugir* and *La mort i la primavera* are clear but in the former the fictional universes don't have their own entity, they are

el vent¹⁷ de la Maraldina era un vent carregat d'ànimes que voltaven per la muntanya només per fer el vent més fort quan era l'hora d'anar a buscar la pols.. I com que no tenien boca les ànimes ens ho deien amb la veu del vent. (pàg. 19)

(Maraldina's wind was full of souls from the mountain, and it only blew to strengthen the wind when it was time to collect sand. And since the souls didn't have mouths, they told us with the wind's voice.)

In both cases, the author uses the legend as a source of explanation that causes the rational theory to be strange. The mountain, with the myths that offers, has an essential role: The closeness between the profane and the sacred world.

The sacred nature developed in the novel remind us of a religion centered in the man and his fate, in the belief in the perennality of the soul. It is at the same time, a tremendously primitive religion, far from reality superstitions that acquire "reality" through the sacramental belief of the town. The birth of a crucial spirit the author's image, and a sign of empirical truth, far from the above mentioned religion will destroy the configurative base of the collectives cosmogonical principles. Some children, some adolescent rebels, cause the rupture of the myth; which leads the community to wander lost and without horizon, because the basis of society have disappeared.

simply a product of a mentally disturbed imagination, someone rejected by society. In *La mort i la primavera*, these universes cover external reality. In *Del que hom no pot fugir*, the protagonists refuse the possible concreteness of fiction:

-Res. No crec res del que diuen. Quina llàstima que les fantasies no siguin veritat! (pàg. 142).

(I don't ??? any of what they say. What a shame the fantasies arent real!)

Only when the protagonist goes mad, at the end of the narration, does she look at the marvelous figures.

¹⁷ For the symbolic concept of **wind**, see the work of Gaston Bachelard. (1986, 278-293).

The groups of religious manifestations of a religious society. The "death of god " in *La mort i la primavera*.

If we analyze the conduct of the town in *La mort i la primavera* we can discover how the conduct is a direct result of the collective established customs. In this way we can conceive a "religion" or a determined group of religious manifestations that form a class of religious sentiment. These collective activities are subjected to the individual will of the components. In this way it is built round a firm and fenced society that does not allow transgressions of the law, and this provokes moments of cruelty and absurdity, now that customs and the conservatism drown the particular initiatives and the rational roots of the everyday life amongst the town folk.

On the other hand, *La mort i la primavera* offers us an interesting group of rites without any supreme ontological principle. There is no divinity present in the lives of these humans. "Religion" is simply an anthropological reality, it does not have an established point, and it is simply a way of living based mostly on the beliefs of the collective society. It is in these terms how we can talk about "The death of god" in the novel: The supreme divinity does not exist. The term that now we use was put forward by Mircea Eliade after her anthropological investigations about the archaic religions. Lluís Duch, an expert of the work of the rumanian anthropologist, describes to us the concept put forward by Eliade: the "death of god" is used "when the supreme god becomes a *deus otiosus*, that is, when he retreats from the world, when his "transcendence" is confused with his eclipse, it is at this point when the religion starts as a significant anthropological reality" (Duch, 1983: 63).

In this way, in *la mort i la primavera* we can understand a substitution of a possible supreme divinity in forms more concrete and closer to life. The religion developed here is presented as more materialized, more concentrated upon the resolution of problems and of unresolved questions of the everyday society. The only religious hierarchy present in the novel seems to be the figure of the blacksmith who has the supreme responsibility of the rites.

In the societies where "the death of god" exist the human being turn out to be a "complete man". The inhabitants of the town in *La mort i la primavera* live far beyond the tragedies and of the vicissitudes of history, adopting an anthropological equilibrium between the "religious tragedies" and the "historical vicissitudes"; they live in the present, and faithfully follow the ritua customs, with the intention of maintaining their belief in the "myth of the creation" and looking for the wish of the "eternal return", of the constant ontological preoccupation of the survival after death.

Thus, we only find a series of ritual demonstrations. In the primitive societies and later, as much in the oriental as in the occidental cultures, the sacred fact converts itself into reality, which are the symbols that remind us of the aspect that gives meaning to human existence. The town of *La mort i la primavera* presents some sacred demonstrations which support the meaning of life as a collective meaning, they re the "truths". But, the group of religious manifestations of the religion presents "truths" that are denied by the reader. Here lies the author's irony: the group of religious manifestations, the truth of the town, is ther rupture of the myth in the presence of the external reader that's to say, who is foreign to that civilization.

The discovery of truth supposed by the protagonist in *La mort i la primavera* marks the arrival of the profane world. Doubt and decision take opposing positions in his interior and in the same way the acquisition of the profane knowledge causes the protagonist's break with religion, and consequently the life loses the original meaning that he learned as a child. Death is, therefore, a rediscovery with the beginning, with birth; thus, the physical death of the individual is the immediate consequence of the knowledge of the divine death.

The wish of immortality. The myth of Osiris in *La mort i la primavera*.

We characterize this society as a society without divinity, that aspires to achieve the "complete man", to the constant implementation of the myth of creation in order to fight one's own identity. Thus, this town will look for life after death. We are referring to one of the most characteristic and surprising rites of the novel : the process from "arbres-taüts" to "wood of the dead".

In the novel we are studying we come across a strange custom: when a person believes that he is close to the moment of death, the adults of the town go to the "wood of the dead" to give their valediction to the dying person. The dead person is put inside the tree which is been assigned for him since birth, in such a way that the nature converts itself the "coffin". It is important to highlight a mysterious fact: the future corpse is filled of cement, so that according to the belief, it prevents the loss of spirit in death. For this reason the act of cementing is carried out while the person is still alive, when the soul is still inside the human being. One can say that what we have in front of us is the psychological concept of death: it is considered a return to the mother's womb in order to be born again soon after. We can now

see some of the cultural backgrounds of this passage. We should remember Jung's words about the greek legend of the "freixe" mother of humanity in the bronze age (trad. 1952: 258).

Quan el món es destrueix, el Freix universal es converteix en mare preservadora, en l'arbre de la mort i de la vida

According to some ancient oriental traditions, as shown by Karl Jung in the same book, the human being was born from the trees. Other cultures (pàg. 247-250), like the germanic cultures, follow funeral customs that put tombes in hollow trees; We should remember that in ancient german "taüt" is said "totenbaum", which in a literal sense was the "tree of the dead". The part which interests us is the existing celtic tradition where the sacred tree was the "alзина"¹⁸ (Jung, 1952: 249).

In our opinion, *La mort i la primavera*¹⁹ presents the development of a concrete myth: The" myth of Osiris"²⁰.

An important fact that interests us is the legend of the egyptian king-god :when his brother, Set throws him into the sea. Inside of a wooden chest which arrived at the land of Biblos,

¹⁸ The celts plant used to plant a tree at the moment that a child was born with this wodd would be made their own coffin..

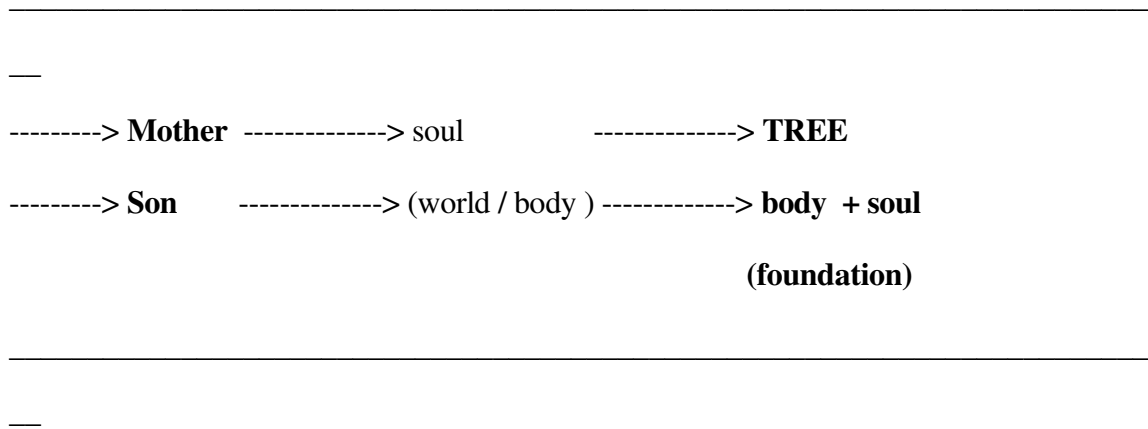
¹⁹ In the novel *ducat d'ombres* by Joan M. Monjo, he presents thirty young youngsters who fall into the hands of bewitched oaks and "little by little they are metamorphosing". The oaks sorround them and finish with the lives of the" prisoners".

²⁰ Osiris is one of most impotant egyptian divinities who has had a great influence in the formation of legends and local beliefs. Osiris, who was the son of Geb and Nut, Set's brother and Isis' brother and hus band, was enclosed in a chest and throw it away into the river by the envious Set. Isis gave him freedom but was imprisoned by Set, who cut him up into little bits and gave them out by the country. Isis with the help of the gods Neftis and Anubis, gathered all the pieces and return him to life. Osiris symbolizes the immortality of the pharaohs and is the god of the vegetation, that represents the origin which dies in order to convert herself into the plant.

alone with some branches of a bush :While the plant converting itself in a big tree, it wrapped itself around the coffin in which Osiris was lying. So the Egyptian God was freed in order to be born again in his son, Hor- Pi-Khaud. Thus, Osiris is evidently a symbol of the mythical immortality. (cf. Jung, 1952: 254).

By the title of the novel, *La mort i la primavera*, Rodoreda wants to show the desire for immortality, and a resurrection of life after death and the sacred trees (freixe, the tree of the dead, and the "glicines") offer this imagery that was already used in primitive towns. It is, therefore, a cultural myth which has roots in diverse indirect sources.

It's also worth mentioning the belief that Plato offers to *Timeo*. For Plato, the soul is the receptacle of the world in the form of a body, is the image that remind us of the mother. We can establish the following parallels:



Therefore, if the tree, in symbolic tradition, is the receptacle of death (physical body) and of life (soul, breath), we can observe a very similar use in *La mort i la primavera*, now that the trees of the "wood of the dead" are the receptacle of death (with the introduced bodies) and, at the same time, of life (the foundation preserves the soul/breath).

Mercè Rodoreda overcomes death, so that the dead body is neither transformed nor converted into another human being (like the case of Osiris); there is a wish for immortality, of conserving the physical and spiritual union, of life and of death, of body and of soul. But the author's irony is heighten in the way that the narration advances and the reader realizes the terrible reality of the deception led by the above mentioned society, of the innocence of ideals. Once more, Rodoreda does not confide in the perennial principles put forward by many oriental philosophies which was influential in her cultural working life. The principle character, a repetitive image of the writer, discovers the fallacy of her society. Thus this shown the rupture of the myth, of the myth of the tree". The immortality of the soul can not be made by hand: the raw materials destroy themselves in the process of regeneration. So, in this way we can explain the function of the "cement" in the fiction of the novel, Rodoreda with her manipulating tool achieves the principle that supports the spiritual philosophies.

La mort i la primavera.

La mort i la primavera is therefore a mythical novel. For this reason it has become universal, in the formulation of abstract worlds which allows the author's message to be interpreted on many intellectual levels. A society "without God", that constantly lives remembering the origins of the town, that strengthen the identity with the rites, it is a closed society that drowns the personal initiatives of its members. The cruelty of the human being, widespread in a repressive society, is expressed by the myth on a few bare pages that without doubt, draw the attention of the reader who is without defence. The Rodoreda's literature reaches in these pages a high level of interaction with the readers, so much so that she plays with them conscious of the literary function.

The development of Mercè Rodoreda's style according to the aspects that we have analyzed, produces a recreation of fictitious societies where the protagonists governed by nature, have to overcome the daily obstacles of life. The narrative capacity of the writer submerges us by means of imagination, and repressive means where the oneiric description reaches a high level of expression. *La mort i la primavera*, as also the latest published narrations, is an example of the progression of this style. The myths, the rituals, and the customs join forces and overcome man, the protagonists of these narrations, with the progress of time. Time, unstoppable.

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