Working at a Discount: Class Consciousness in Mercè Rodoreda's "La plaça del Diamant"

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Because it was as if instead of selling it retail—since I was selling them my work—
I was selling it wholesale and everyone knows
that when you sell wholesale there’s a discount.

(Time of the Doves 82)

Perquè era com si, en comptes de vendre a
la menuda, perquè jo a ells els venia el meu
treball, els el vengués a l’engrós i que ja se
sap que la venda a l’engrós sempre es fa amb
rebaixa.

(La plaça del Diamant 104)

These words are laced with irony. The person uttering them is
Natàlia, the first-person narrator-protagonist of La plaça del Diamant
(1962), who is seeking employment as a domestic servant in a
well-to-do household in Barcelona just before the outbreak of the
Spanish civil war. That a pastiche of Marx’s labor theory of value
should be conveyed cynically to Natàlia in the home of a Catalan
property owner coping with a changing economy by bringing down
her wages is emblematic of the dramatic irony of the most celebrated
novel by Catalan writer, Mercè Rodoreda (1908–1983). Indeed, as
Rodoreda tells the story of a woman working “at a discount,” this
property owner’s house of privilege, along with the other work spaces
of Natàlia’s narrative, stealthily make their way into the foreground of the novel and with them all the entanglements of the division of labor.

However, social class is not a critical focus that has informed much of the analysis (albeit penetrating) of this novel. The lack of attention to this issue is not surprising since “class-consciousness” (one of Raymond Williams “keywords,” 57), is hardly perceptible in a direct way. It is not something the protagonist evinces, for unlike her boss who is well aware of his class, she knows little about the economic contradictions of work or about the consequences these conditions were having on Spanish politics—and on the world—in the midsection of the twentieth century. Her innocence as she sells her labor cheaply, inattentive to the differences between labor value and use value, or of the political-historical circumstances of those values, belies the author’s careful structuring of the narrative around those very circumstances, circumstances that seem more “personal” than “political.” Indeed it is this very tension between the private and the public, between domestic/family labor and public labor, that can serve as one of the focal points of the novel. An attempt to ponder this possibility as we consider the multifaceted dynamics of the representation of the private and public dimensions of work is a timely enterprise at a moment of critical thought in which these very dynamics beg for a reconsideration.2

In her recreation of Spanish reality, Rodoreda constructs the life of a single woman along with the tangible objects that form that reality

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1 *La plaça* has been discussed from a variety of perspectives. Among the most prevalent are those that deal with gendered and gendering aspects of the novel: Carbonell (her book and her article), Fayad, McNerney, Nichols, Wyers. The social-historical underpinnings of the novel have been discussed by Bou, Glenn, Ortega, and Resina. The language of *La plaça* is an issue that informs virtually all the analyses of the work, particularly in the two studies written in tandem by Lunn and Albrecht; also in Martí-Oliva’s article. See as well the issue of *Catalan Review* (Martí-Oliva) dedicated to Rodoreda. Regarding Catalan identity and the differences between the popularized film adaptation and the novel itself see Hart. For general works see those of Arnau and Casals i Couturier and the collection of essays, *Garden across the Border* (McNerney and Vosburg).

2 I am exploring these issues from the perspective of the cultural materialism of Raymond Williams, particularly his *Marxism and Literature*. Of special interest for my analysis is the chapter of *Marxism* in which Williams discusses what he calls “the structures of feeling” (128) as a way of shedding light on the seemingly fixed (ahistorical) patterns in which capitalist society teaches us to apprehend the affective or personal domain of life. Also guiding my reading of *La plaça* is Fredric Jameson’s *Political Unconscious*. 
and that life. Objects, the things of life as affirmed in the epigraph by the modernist precursor, George Meredith, that introduces the novel ("My dear, these things are life" 14), are the markers of an implied epistemology that leads to the possibility of collective understanding. The things that constitute quotidian reality in Rodoreda's novel at first seem arbitrary in the modernist sense of the epigraph, yet their tangibility and the way they serve as perplexing signals to self-awareness have to do with the status of the protagonist as both a member of a class and as a woman. As the novel unfolds, these objects become the catalysts for the exploration of issues concerning class and female identity.

The novel opens in medias res: things such as a basket of fruit, candy, and coffeepots (15). We are in fact in the middle of objects, items raffled at a dance that will spark Natàlia's telling of her life from the moment she meets Quimet and marries him to the upkeep of their modest apartment, the birth of her two children, her work as a domestic servant, the loss of her husband to war, the material want of the war and post-war years, a re-marriage, and ending with the marriage of her daughter. These are the stages of her life narrative, and they are permeated by tangible objects, things described with such precision that they often become strange to the reader: "The dolls were always there with their porcelain faces and pasteboard flesh, beside the feather dusters and mattress beaters" "Les nines sempre allí, amb la cara de porcellana i la carn de pasta, al costat dels espolsadors, dels picamatalassos, de les camusses de pell i de les camusses imitació de pell" (65; 82). Similarly, the following description of the apartment that becomes Quimet's breeding ground for doves is filled with details begging for interpretation:

Quimet said that since the doves were used to the apartment, he'd put some nests in the little room. . . . And he set up some nests down below and for the time being he shut the door to the room so the pairs could get used to flying out the trapdoor instead of going through the apartment. The doves lived in the darkness, because he also shut the trapdoor, which was made of boards. There was an iron ring on top so you could open it from the outside and from the inside we'd climb up the ladder and open it with our heads and shoulders. (98–99)

Quimet va dir que ja que els coloms estaven acostumats al pis, posaria covadors a l'habitació petita. . . . I va posar covadors a baixa i de moment va

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3 The materialism that lays as a foundation for my own essay has to do with the attempt to synthesize feminist cultural and social theory with historical materialism (Landry and Maclean, Hartstock, C. Kaplan, Smith, Kuhn and Wolpe).
tancar les parelles perquè s’avesessin a sortir directes per l’escala, en comptes de fer la volta per tot el pis. Els coloms vivien a les fosques perquè també els va tancar la trapa, que era feta de llates de fusta i s’alçava, per la banda de dalt, estirant una rotllana de ferro; i per la banda de dintre, quan éram al capdamunt de l’escala, l’havíem d’alçar amb el cap i amb les espaltes. (122–23)

Rodoreda’s aesthetic of defamiliarization, however, seems unmindful of Victor Shklovsky’s well known essay (or the “dehumanization” of Ortega y Gasset), since its focus in the context of both an individual and a collective life is not a distancing technique but one that draws the reader into the pulp of everyday life and work. These dolls and doves make for a variety of symbolic possibilities: Natàlia’s lack of self-determination, the vicariousness of a mother’s sensations through those of her children, the doll’s market value, “always there” to be bought and sold, the imprisonment of the doves as an emblem for Natàlia herself. Given the multi-symbolic value of the objects, readers are left with the sum total of the objects themselves, their materiality, as if in response to a question regarding the meaning of these things, the author might have responded: “My dear, these things are life.”

Still, to read Meredith’s dictum as the sole interpretive key to the novel would not allow for the richness of its language and the complexity of its social and political underpinnings. Most of the objects in Natàlia’s life-story come back to her suggestively, bursting with possibilities of both individual and collective meaning. In the final episode she turns back on her life story by re-visiting her former dwelling. Her husband, the children, the doves, and the many objects within the flat appear now as ghosts of a past unforgotten. A “paring knife” (193), “roads and streets and hallways and houses” (193), “walls and more walls” (193), “termites” 193, “smells” and “stenches” (194), “the shop with the dolls” (195), “scales” (196), “cork” (196), “a satin-tie dove” (196), “the funnel” (196), “a rainbow” (197), “the Plaça del Diamant” (197), the name “Colometa” (197) that Quimet insisted on calling her and that she carves on the door of the old flat, all these “things” are surging up from her heart to her head like visions in a dream (195). She also recalls what Senyora Enriqueta said

“Comparing the underlying materialist epistemology of a poem by Pablo Neruda about the Spanish civil war, “Explico algunas cosas” (I Explain a Few Things) and Rodoreda’s novel, one understands how things can form consciousness, and even more so in the context of a revolutionary situation."
(acting as a replacement for her dead mother) about the tension between life and lives: “And life itself, free from the threads of those little lives that tied it down, could keep on living by itself the way it would have had to do if all those bad little lives hadn’t bothered it” ‘I la vida de debò, lliure de tota mena de fils de vida petita que l’havien lligada, podia viure com hauria hagut de viure... deixada sola’ (194; 247). It is the collective nature of those little lives of things—their dependence on the mind that conceives them—that get in the way of (“bother”) an imagined life, abstract and intangible, as if “life” were unreal, while “lives” were all too real.

In a prologue to a later novel, Mirall trencat [Broken Mirror] (1974), Rodoreda spoke of the uniqueness of La plaça in its attention to minute details (Obres completes 3: 16). This microscopic focus is a characteristic of much of her writing, yet in this novel, the objects become the players in a seemingly arbitrary game that engenders self-contemplation and a yearning for self-understanding. As a bildungsroman (of sorts), La plaça’s attention to things compels Natàlia to choose certain objects over others in terms of their importance in the progression of her life even though on the surface their arbitrariness is their central feature. The multifarious contradictions throughout the novel—the social background that quietly becomes the foreground, the conscious narrative choice of certain objects to affirm their arbitrariness—leads to the work’s most crucial opposition: the telling of an individual life in all its rawness and mystery in conjunction with the collectivity of that very life, albeit understated.

The most evident indicator of the novel’s collective force is the attention to feminine identity. This dimension of the novel has been discussed eloquently by several critics (Glenn, McNerney [1985], Nichols, and Wyers). La plaça del Diamant is clearly not only the narrative of the struggle of a single individual against the many forces that insist on defining and thereby limiting her; it is the life story of a woman, and whatever the uniquely psychological traits and circumstances that comprise that life, there are a series of subtle connections between the protagonist and the group or groups to which she belongs. The most apparent, as the above critics have pointed out, is that of women, regardless of the specifics of class or political circumstance. As a woman, as a wife, and as a mother, Natàlia is dragged through the events in her life as if she had little to do with

5 See also Carme Arnau whose panoramic exploration of Rodoreda’s works attaches central importance to this novel.
them. The question of women’s self-definition is crucial to the narrative: if there is one structural thread binding all the seemingly haphazard occurrences in the protagonist’s life, it is the forging of a proper voice. The “hellish scream” ‘crit d’infern’ (197; 249) that resounds in the episode discussed earlier in which Natàlia revisits the old flat in a dream-like daze is a compendium of “women’s voices” (Wyers). It is the authentic voice of the protagonist and it is the voice the text itself yearns for. However, it is also the origin of the scream within her body as well as the stream-of-consciousness rendering of it—one entire paragraph in the original Catalan (245–53)—that reveals a series of unstated and unexplored elements that loom about the narrative. One might add that the scream is an attempt to lay bare the class consciousness of the novel.

While there seems to be little room for discourse not having to do with gender, the reality of social class in all its manifestations nudges its way into the narrative. The recreation of the social and political circumstances surrounding Natàlia’s life is a telling marker of this struggle for space. The slow minimalist pace of the first half of the novel leads to a stealthy reference to the Second Republic (70; 90) and later to “revolution”: “And while I was working on the great revolution with the doves the war started and everyone thought it was going to be over quickly” ‘I mentre em dedicava a la gran revolució amb els coloms va venir el que va venir, com una cosa que havia de ser molt curta’ (113; 141). Again the mention of a political concept, as in the earlier explanation of the price of labor, is not framed solely within the understanding of Natàlia. She uses the phrase “great revolution” mimickingly in reference to the commotion Quimet’s doves were creating in her house. Thus as the social tumult appears in the narrative, almost haphazardly, Natàlia is forced to deal with a more concrete tumult of her own. Yet her use of the word “great revolution” along with the advent of the war (in the original “el que va venir,” or what happened) begs a series of crucial questions: To what extent is Rodoreda concerned with exposing “revolution” through her politically unaware protagonist? How does the text represent the relationship between this supposedly “great” social transformation and women’s work? And how do we read Natàlia as a social agent given that in fact participation in revolutionary change was part of Natàlia’s environment in this specific moment of Spanish history?

Reviewing the historical record of the fictional time in which the “great revolution” of the doves enters the protagonist’s life, it is
evident that many Spanish women were directly involved in social conflicts, speaking and acting within the frames of the various classes to which they belonged. As Temma Kaplan’s *Red City, Blue Period* demonstrates, in the history of industrial Barcelona from the early twentieth century to the civil war, working women played crucial roles both as participants and organizers in labor strikes and as workers within a family structure, often defining themselves as such (79–125). With the threat of fascism in the thirties, however, women’s specificity as a group waned within the immediate need to answer that threat regardless of gender. During the civil war, the two major women’s organizations, the Communist run Agrupación de Mujeres Antifascistas (AMA) and the anarcho-syndicalist movement of Mujeres Libres (Free Women which claimed a membership of some 20,000), were directly involved with the development of a response to class and gender oppression. Their positions on the role of women in the war, however, were very different. While the AMA argued for the subordination of women’s issues to the war effort, Mujeres Libres maintained that the battle against patriarchal family patterns was synonymous with the battle against fascism.6

One of the most apparent ways in which Rodoreda draws the social conflicts of Spanish and Catalan society in the thirties into her woman-centered novel is by describing Natàlia’s daily activity—her work—in great detail. The association of the “revolution of the doves” and the historical one is highly ironic. At times readers themselves may sense the protagonist’s working weariness as she repeats, “Every day I felt more worn out” *Cada dia estava més cansada* (96; 121): her attention to the doves, the dovecote, cleaning up after them, ordering the family’s living quarters in the midst of the pigeon-created

6 In addition to Kaplan’s history of Picasso’s Barcelona, for histories of women’s participation in political movements in Spain in the twentieth century see Geraldine Scanlon’s comprehensive and pioneering study. The war-time tensions between the AMA and Mujeres Libres are discussed in detail by Mary Nash and Martha Ackelsberg. Nash is particularly interested in women’s agency during the war and in the difficulties of forging positions that identified the particular demands of women within the movement for the defense of the Second Republic. Interestingly, while the male leadership of the Communist Party and the Anarcho-syndicalist CNT (Confederación Nacional de Trabajo) were literally carrying on an internal war with one another, there is evidence suggesting that these two women’s groups were more willing to enter into dialogue on their differences regarding the role of women, an indication of the strength of female political identity even though it did not lead to significant social change in the roles of women. See also Nash’s “Experiencia y aprendizaje.” For a discussion of women’s memoirs and autobiographies set during the civil war see Mangini.
mess are all activities that remind us of woman’s subalternation. Later, when the protagonist mouths the economic agreement devised by her employer who proposes that she sell her work to him “at a discount,” readers are further reminded that when she took care of the doves, she was offered no remuneration whatsoever. Through the description of her work, and at times by way of the words of others such as those of the property owner, Natàlia ingenuously questions the value of her labor, both as that of a wage-earner and as a useful commodity in a family-based market system that indirectly maintains the stability of that system.

Focussing on the level of class consciousness in the novel, one could argue that Rodoreda saw the war as a domestic-social struggle. Natàlia’s use of the term “revolution” is Rodoreda’s gesture signaling the entire gamut of political possibilities which she strategically chooses to leave unopen to her protagonist. In one of the several biographies of the Catalan writer, Mercè Ibarz discusses the importance of this word in Rodoreda’s ideological vocabulary as well as in her social experience:

In her later years, when she was a popularly recognized figure, Mercè Rodoreda referred always to the years 1936–1939 with the familiar words ‘when the revolution came.’ . . . It was indeed a revolution in more than one respect, with components of social and moral revolution among the workers, but also with very little influence on the family values and on ideas about women within the social group with which Rodoreda shared the first years of exile. For her sentimental education, these years were decisive.”

The understated political consciousness of La plaça del Diamant bears Ibarz’s assertion out. While Natàlia contends with the “revolution of the doves,” Quimet and his chum, Cintet, are in the street waving a flag (70), serving on street patrols (106), and talking politics (79). In one of the characteristic matter-of-fact moments of the narrative, Natàlia tells how her husband “was mixed up in it,” and that he had “put on a blue work suit, and after a few days of smoke and churches with sparks flying out of them he came back with a revolver in his belt and a double-barreled shotgun over his shoulder” ‘se’m va

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7 Ibarz’s informative biography goes on to discuss Rodoreda’s amorous relationship with Andreu Nin who was assassinated by Soviet agents on the pretext that he was a spy (44–47). Nin was the leader of the Trotskyist organization, POUM, which was the object of the Communist Party’s wrath. Casals also discusses this relationship in her biography of Rodoreda (74–77).
vestir amb una granota blava i, al cap d’uns quants dies de fum i d’esglésies llençant espurnes, se’n va presentar amb un cinturó amb revòlvèr i una escopeta de dos canons penjada a l’espatlla’ (114; 141–42). Again for a reader with an eye for history, the text begs the question: What specifically were Quimet and his friends “mixed up in”? Or stated another way, what are the looming issues of the novel that comprise the vivid political actuality of the moment? There are many possibilities: the anti-clerical politics of the left, including spontaneous church burnings, the defense of the Generalitat (the Catalan autonomous government established with the 1931 Republic) along with the defense of that Republic in the midst of the threat of fascism, the debate over capital (the communist position) versus state power (the anarchist position) as the primary focus of political activity, or perhaps even—hypocritically—the discussion of women in the revolution. Ironically, it seems more likely that Quimet and his friends would be more aware than Natàlia of the argument made by Mujeres Libres that state power was the embodiment of the patriarchal family and that combatting the latter was akin to combatting the former.8

Revolution was a charged word for Rodoreda and its representation in La plaça makes itself known not only in terms of its relevance to working women but also as an ideal. One of the revolutionary characters who begins to break Natàlia’s apparent lack of political consciousness is Julieta, a recreation of one of the highly visible militiawomen of the Republic during the civil war. Her relationship with Natàlia, however, is not political but lastingly intimate. She appears at crucial moments, one of which evokes the romantic possibilities that the “revolution” was seen to have opened for women, possibilities that are experienced vicariously through the imagination of this politically naive working mother. Julieta’s story of her night with her lover, also a soldier defending the Republic, is something of an interpolated tale, filled with trembling, passion, and devotion, both to a cause and to a love. The eerily sensual story takes place

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8 One of the most comprehensive histories of the Spanish civil war in English is that of Gabriel Jackson. Orwell’s classic work offers a vivid first-hand account of the complicated political entanglements of revolutionary Barcelona.

Nash writes of an article by Emma Goldman in the journal Mujeres Libres (published in 1936 by the organization with the same name) criticizing the male Spanish left’s (including the anarchists’) lack of consciousness regarding the tyranny of patriarchy (80–81). See also Ackelsberg (152–53) who reports of a visit by Goldman to Barcelona during the war.
within an abandoned house described in gothic detail, reminding us of certain conventions of the sentimental novel popular in Spain in the twenties and thirties (Concha Espina, Carmen de Burgos, María Lejárraga). Again the voice of Natàlia is muffled by another voice, this time that of the original story-teller, Julieta, who tells the protagonist of her encounter. She had found herself

in a garden full of ivy and boxwood and cypresses and big trees and the wind blowing the leaves around and whap! a leaf hit her face like a ghost from the grave... He’d said he’d meet her at the gate but that if he wasn’t there she should go into the garden... And he was late and she stood there waiting while it got darker and darker..., and it smelled like a haunted house and their footsteps echoed as if other people were walking in the other rooms and she thought maybe they were ghosts of the people who’d owned the house who’d all been shot and she was terrified... And she said her boyfriend was tall and slender and his eyes were black and shiny like hard coal. And his lips were made to whisper to you and make you feel calm. And just from hearing his voice through his lips she saw the world differently. (128-30)

Ironically, one of the most titillating elements in the story, in accord with the norms of the sentimental novel, is that the relationship was not consummated. The couple had slept together, as Julieta relates, but “nothing had happened” ‘sense que passés res’ (128; 160–61)³

³ Emilie Bergmann has written cogently on Rodoreda’s treatment of militiawomen in her short fiction. Clearly, the image of the romantic revolutionary was not only an essential part of the Catalan novelist’s narrative world, but it served as a figure that shaped her own experience of the war. See Rodoreda’s story “Boira” (Fog) in which we witness a woman lamenting the loss of her revolutionary lover during the war. The reference to the execution of a spy (20) is likely to have its life corollary in Anreu Nin. See also Rodoreda’s correspondence with her intimate friend, novelist Anna Murià (Cartes a l’Anna Murià).
160). The awakening of the senses, fear, nature’s role in the construction of the amorous encounter, the abandoned house, all seems to call attention to the imagination of the rendezvous while dismissing its realization: a story filled with potential, but no climax.

As Natàlia listens to the “revolutionary” encounter related by her friend, and lives it vicariously, we readers are mesmerized in similar ways. However, our suspension of disbelief seems to fade along with that of Natàlia. She responds to Julieta’s story with a comment: she too would have enjoyed spending a night like that, but since she worked and had children, she was unable to do so. Julieta, countering her friend’s qualification, submits that the experience would not have been possible without the revolution and that Natàlia should not despair, that the world would surely get better (130; 162), the implication being that positive political changes would naturally bring about individual betterment.

This episode serves a variety of narrative functions. It documents poetically the conflict between the militiawomen and those who did not want women on the front or even as replacements for working men who had left their jobs to fight the war. Moreover, the exchange among the two characters further serves as an exposition of the contradictions between the reality of women’s work in the time of scarcity and the often idyllic discourse of revolution further highlighting the precariousness and complexity of class consciousness. Both characters are representations of working women and their respective social realities during the war: Julieta thinks and acts within a public domain, relatively free and privileged in relation to her friend, while Natàlia has a de facto sense of the division of labor even though she has been unable to emerge from the confines of her domestic space. The discrepancy seems to be tipped in favor of Natàlia, a woman who offers unwittingly a more material (and more compelling) assessment of her life and work than that of the romantic “miliciana.”

As a further indication of the way Rodoreda foregrounds the complexity of the relationship between work and life, it is revealing to

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10 Nash discusses the ways in which the civil-war poster image of Spanish militiawomen as enticingly ready for both combat and love was emblematic of the conflicts surrounding women’s participation in the war among the supporters of the Republic. Women were called back from combat in 1937 and assigned rear-guard tasks such as taking care of refugee children, which is also part of the fictional creation of Julieta.

11 Jameson’s discussion of class in his “Purloined Letter” (86–88) provides a fruitful discussion of its complexities and the ways the very category has changed since the (real) death of Marx.
return to the passages relating Natàlia’s experience as a servant in the landlord’s house. These passages provide a means to understanding Rodoreda’s representation of class sensibilities as they are formed in history. As Enric Bou has pointed out (33–34), the description of the house is marked by a “feminine approach to reality” as well as by a contrasting social perspective. The strangeness of its interiors—the non-functioning doorbell (80), leather wine jugs with diseased “cammellias growing in them” (81), “a hood that came down over the stove like in an old fashioned kitchen, even though they didn’t need it since they cooked with gas” (83)—is not so much the result of modernist deformation as it is the attention to a working woman’s perception. In fact Natàlia herself demonstrates a rare moment of self-consciousness regarding her own recreation of the house in two instances: when she questions the lack of clarity in her description (81) and when she explains why she is devoting so much of her narration to the house: “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” ‘I si parlo tant de la casa, és perquè encara la veig com un trencaclosques, amb les veus d’ells que, quan em cridaven, no sabia mai d’on venien’ (87; 109, also quoted by Bou 34).12 The puzzling voices have to do not only with the strangeness of the house (to Natàlia) but with the protagonist’s lack of familiarity with the class of its occupants.

These glimpses of self-consciousness and the entire series of narrative events related to the landlord’s actions are further evidence of the socially based dramatic irony of La plaça. The decaying house in which Natàlia sells her labor “at a discount” and its occupants who insist on keeping the symbols of their past power even though these symbols of value no longer function in a useful way, are Rodoreda’s inroads to a historical discourse. The landlords represent the vestiges of a declining land-holding class ambivalent about its role in Catalan industrialization. They are “mad at the Republic” as Natàlia naïvely mentions (79), but the reasons which the reader must add are further indications of the social consciousness of the novel: the gentleman landlord and his wife oppose the Second Republic for its attempts at

12 Enric Bou’s article on La plaça also considers the urban geography of Barcelona as an important element in the construction of the novel. According to Bou, the Carrer Gran divides working class city dwellers from the bourgeoisie. The critic considers Natàlia’s various living abodes as significant structural components of the novel that are linked to the development of the war and to class.
land reform, its acquiescence to the demands of labor movements, and its failure to keep order. In the moment of the “great revolution” in the novel, Natàlia unwittingly continues the development of the employer’s class history by relating what happened to him during the war. Again through Natàlia’s telling of an incident conveyed to her (this time by the landlord’s wife), we learn of an attempt by a couple to reclaim property now owned by the landlord due to the buyers’ inability to pay him the interest on the mortgage (116–17). The Republic’s militiamen serve as politically motivated arbiters of the situation by holding a gun to the landlord’s head demanding that he sign the property back over to the couple. The situation is resolved, however, with the landlord regaining the upper hand, since he is allowed to keep his property due to his ability to convince the militiamen that he did nothing illegal. Yet both sides ultimately lose: the landlord’s wish to maintain the old patterns of class power will ultimately be thwarted with the advent of new class relations, and the Republic’s moves to balance economic power fail miserably. Rodoreda seems to offer Natàlia’s story as living proof of collective failure.

The overriding irony of the history of the landlord’s demise is that it is told second-hand by a woman who has never articulated an understanding of the issues or demonstrated support of the various interests at play. As further events of her wartime and post-war narrative unfold (her wish to kill her children and herself after she leaves the older child in a home for refugee children, her near insanity), the politics that one might deduce from the novel are guided by a veiled pacifism: the depiction of the ravages of a class war in which there are few winners. The militia’s threats to the landlord’s personal safety are no longer a reality toward the end of the work (and the war) when the side backed by the landlords eventually wins. It is clear that the property owners have suffered deprivation when Natàlia “swallow[s] her pride” (142) and returns to ask for a job to save herself and her children from hunger, but it is also clear that their material want seems minuscule in relation to that of the widowed working-class mother.

Nevertheless, with the ending episodes of the novel and the individual outcomes of the characters, it is pertinent to explore the question of the class victors of the war. A representation of the sector of Spanish and Catalan society that later surpasses the one represented by Natàlia’s former employers appears as a feature of Natàlia’s past with a connection to her future. The ultimate winner is something of an angel, Antoni, the shopkeeper. As Natàlia walks the streets
of her neighborhood in a daze pondering the possibility of killing her children, she hears voices “of angry angels who scolded the people and told them they were standing before the souls of all the soldiers who’d been killed in the war” ‘d’àngels enrabiats que renyaven la gent i els explicaven que estaven davant de les ànimes de tots els soldats morts a la guerra’ (150; 186–87). Yet Antoni prevents her from carrying out her plan by leaping “out of the machine” and into the world, then guiding her into his shop to save the day. Tenderly and with much description on the part of Rodoreda by way of a maturing Natàlia, he offers her a job (no discount this time) and later marries her and provides for her along with the children. Moreover, all these culminating developments come to pass in an atmosphere in which we begin to detect Natàlia’s free will, considering that the newly arrived samaritan allows for the protagonist’s conscious life choices.

But the angel belongs to a class—he is a store owner,—and his membership in a class should not be taken lightly, even though the flow of the narrative seems to encourage readers to do so. Indeed, Antoni, in addition to being a member of a class, is a good man—so hard to find at any time, let alone in the period of Spanish history known as the “years of hunger.” He is also “inútil” (207), a euphemism for impotent, due to a war wound, an equally significant consideration in light of Rodoreda’s multi-layered explorations of existential, sexual, and social fulfillment. But this impotent shopkeeper is not so impotent economically; he becomes her provider. He represents as well the opportunity she will be afforded to re-live her life, both through the return visit to the old apartment and through the telling of that life (the text that we are reading), now unimpeded by obsessions with doves or sexual relations. Antoni is also the one whose class is most clearly tied to the ultimate outcome of the war—that is, the opportunities arising from the victors’ entrance into the arena of post World War II market capitalism in the fifties and early sixties: the historical period which closes the novel.

The protagonist’s new class identity after the seemingly haphazard upward turn in her life—from cleaning lady to shopkeeper’s wife with a husband who would make any woman forget about gender oppression—gives rise to a sleepless night and a stroll back to the flat where she lived with Quimet and the children before the war. We witness,

13 In her prologue to *Mirall trencat* (25), Rodoreda discusses the importance of angels in her novels and cites this very passage as an example.
then, the reappearance of certain “things of [her] life,” that is, her history, from a new class perspective. We also re-view these “things” in terms of the assimilation of a woman’s collective identity: the culminating “infernal scream” (197). It is difficult, thus, to imagine this post-war Natàlia as a woman with only one layer of identity or history. “Things” have gotten better for her in a comparison with the way they were in the past (or at least they are as good as they can be), but clearly their benefits are subject to change: the continuation of the political-social history undergirding the novel seems to be self-evident. In fact, the work ends with an ellipsis (201; 253). Moreover, the circumstances that lead to the state of “as-good-as-it-gets” might be read as disclaimers to the elliptical happiness. The protagonist’s son Antoni (not insignificantly the same name as his stepfather) has become a soldier as part of the obligatory military service, and in view of Natàlia’s (and Rodoreda’s) experience of war, this development cannot bode well. In addition, Natàlia’s daughter Rita has gotten married to an industriously self-confident young man in a ceremony that reminds Natàlia (and the reader) of her own wedding. It is also significant that the daughter might have become an airline stewardess had she chosen not to marry (173), a not altogether unconscious suggestion that in post-post-war Spain (the end of hunger and the beginnings of tourism), a variety of job opportunities opened for women like Rita while the question of gender difference and subalternation remained. That there is no mention of the relatively few advances experienced by the women of Natàlia’s class prior to and during the war is another factor that constitutes the historical questions suggested by the text. Indeed, the “happy” upward social shift in the condition of Natàlia is suggestive of the economic evolution of cold-war Spain, a society in which a new class of entrepreneurs emerges leaving those like Natàlia’s ex-employers definitively behind. Given these changes, it is tempting to read further irony into the passage that began this essay. Selling “whole-
sale” is not something a worker has the freedom to do with her or his labor (at least not without a union); it is rather the profit-seeking strategy of a store owner who can choose the retail or wholesale price depending on which yields the greater profit. That Natàlia will now benefit from that strategy is another indication not only of irony but of the class differences and transformations that lie beneath the surface of the narrative. Both in this historical dimension of Rodoreda’s novel as well as in the realm of the individual woman’s life-story and search for identity, the task of reconciling class reality with women’s
reality is left unfinished. In the context of Spanish history, *La plaça* could be read as a manifestation of the failure of progressive social classes to deal effectively with the specifics of gender.

In the wake of the cultural materialism of Raymond Williams, one might reflect on the specifics of gender and the ways in which the blurring of the private realms of life and the public—the “personal and the political”—might be recast. Williams wrote compellingly about what he called the “structures of feeling” in an attempt to tread beyond bourgeois ideology’s creation of the past as fixed—the false “conversion of experience into finished products . . .” When we begin to grasp this conversion, he affirms, “we can understand, in new ways, that separation of the social from the personal which is so powerful and directive a cultural mode. If the social is always past, in the sense that it is always formed, we have indeed to find other terms for the undeniable experience of the present” (*Marxism* 128–29).

Considering Rodoreda’s novel, a life story filled with “structures of feeling,” Williams’s hypothesis allows for a counterpoint to the reading of Natàlia’s haunting past as a fixed whole, immutable, or as an assertion that the “things of life” are finished structures. It seems also that Rodoreda has extended Williams’s discussion by addressing herself specifically to the gendered “structures of feeling.” The fixed world in which her protagonist lived with Quimet on the working class side of Barcelona’s Carrer Gran, a world of unpaid and unacknowledged woman’s work, did not allow her to see the coming of the war and “revolution” as a historically changing, always forming, phenomenon. Yet the novel itself offers an antidote to that world: all these elements of social formation whether we call them “things of life” or “structures of feeling”—the scream that the protagonist utters with the birth of her first child (61) that leads to the culminating scream for her identity (197), or “the mania” that seizes her for cleaning house (59), or the abandoned house where Julieta and her young revolutionary soldier spend a night (128), or the one occupied by Quimet-and-family overpowered by doves, or the landlord’s decaying house, or Antoni’s middle-class home, economically triumphant in the wake of scarcity—all these have materiality and history, even if, we are not conscious of how “history hurts,” as Fredric Jameson has

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14 While Williams is notorious for not considering women’s issues in his cultural critiques, much of his writing has direct bearing on these issues. For an exposition of the discrepancies among Marxists see Smith.
argued (Political Unconscious 102), or, even if, in the more earthy words of Senyora Enriqueta, “we don’t know what’s going on just like we don’t know how hard our hearts work and how our guts suffer” ‘nosaltres no sabem res com no sabem el treball del cor ni el gran neguit dels budells’ (194; 247).

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