

Reflections on Historiography in Montserrat Roig's *L'hora violeta*¹

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Between the publication of her first book in 1970 and her premature death in 1991, Montserrat Roig, one of the most prominent Catalan writers of the post-Franco era, consistently explored the construction of the female subject in relation to Catalan history and to the question of national identity. Roig made her literary debut with the publication of a book of short stories, *Molta roba i poc sabó ... i tan neta que la volen* (1971), for which she won the Victor Català Prize in 1970. This work was followed by a trilogy of novels on the lives of women of the Catalan bourgeoisie, from the turn of the century to the transitional years immediately following Franco's death: these novels include *Ramona, adéu* (1972) [*Ramona, adiós*], *El temps de les cireres* (1977) [*Tiempo de cerezas*], and *L'hora violeta* (1980) [*La hora violeta*]. The sequence of these novels shows an evolution away from a narrative mode marked by vestiges of neorealism, to one that questions accepted conceptions of subjectivity, referentiality, and historiography in an overtly self-reflexive way. Roig's preoccupation with the relationship between history, subjectivity, and representation culminates in *L'òpera quotidiana* (1982) [*La ópera cotidiana*], perhaps Roig's most accomplished work of fiction in the complexity of its explorations of the political issues of gender, class, and (Catalan) national identity within the frame of a highly self-conscious literary discourse.² In addition to several other works of fiction, Roig has also distinguished herself through her journalistic writings, including her book *Els catalans als camps nazis* (1977) [*Noche y niebla: los catalanes en los campos nazis*], which is to become a key autobiographical intertext in *L'hora violeta*.

In Roig's work, notions of sexual or national identity are intimately linked to the problems of historiography, or, more specifically, to the ways in which history is put into discourse.³ While the recovery of history—particularly the unofficial histories of the oppressed, the excluded, and the marginalized—is central to Roig's intellectual project, she simultaneously explores the nature of a historiographic process that enabled one master narrative to gain legitimacy over all others within a concrete sociopolitical context of Francoist Spain. Roig thus shifts our attention from "history," traditionally understood to be a chain of verifiable facts

or events “out there” in the real world, to the theoretical problems surrounding the narrative (re)construction of these events. A consideration of history as, above all, a discursive event in Roig’s work allows us a vision of the ways in which notions of historiography shape historical discourse and, by extension, what we call the historical referent. To use David Herzberger’s words in a different context, Roig’s novels “have both history and the writing of history as referent” (9).

Many of Roig’s novels dramatize the process by which private narratives and fictions of socially marginalized or otherwise decentered individuals may be used to create an oppositional notion of collective history.⁴ As is the case in most totalitarian societies, Francoist historiography had as its goals the elimination of all counterdiscourses and the construction of the myth of a unified and homogeneous Spain whose essential “truth” was to be preserved throughout time.⁵ Such a historiographic enterprise inevitably led to the production of a hegemonic narrative from which all difference and relationality were erased, be they of gender, sexuality, nationality or class. Roig challenges not merely the false historical narratives generated by Francoist historiography, but more importantly the very conception of historiography that makes possible the production and reification of such narratives in the first place.

L’hora violeta, published shortly after Franco’s death, is exemplary in posing such a challenge. On one level, it chronicles the transition between dictatorship and democracy through the *intrahistoria* of three women, which focuses on their experiences in the private sphere of the home and the family. As Christina Dupl a has observed, Roig constructs a female “genealogy” as a way of valorizing versions of reality that have been untold by official history (122-23). At the same time, the entire novel is a hybrid of various generic conventions, including the letter, the memoir/autobiography, and the testimony, none of which has an absolute epistemological privilege. The writer figure in the text continuously undermines the historical authority of these discourses by reflecting self-critically on the process by which “histories” are generated.

The literary and historical pre-text of the novel is established in the first section, entitled “Primavera de 1979,” in which Nat lia asks her friend Norma to write a novel about the friendship between the former’s mother Judit and Judit’s friend Kati during the Civil War years. Nat lia presents her friend with various documents, including Judit’s diary and Kati’s letters, on which Norma—who may be considered a fictionalized image of the author herself—is to base her literary account. This framing technique has the effect of blurring the line between reality and fiction,

between history and story, since the yet-unwritten history of two women, insignificant within what Natàlia calls “la Historia grande, la de los hombres” (20), can only be recovered through the act of fictional creation.⁶ In spite of one critic’s perception that women’s history is “la que no es oficial, ni pública, pero real, auténtica y cotidiana” (Dupláu 118), I find such a discourse of authenticity, constructed on an implicit opposition between truth and falsehood, to be potentially problematic. The questioning of an official, authoritative version of history through the discovery of oppositional discourses is an undeniably important project for Roig and for any other writer whose ethical imperative is to oppose political, cultural, and discursive hegemony. At the same time, the relocation of “authenticity” or “truth” in these counterdiscourses, though perhaps a necessary first step, may lead back to some of the same dangers implicit in a notion of historiography in which the experience of any one particular group of individuals, in this case that of bourgeois Catalan women, takes on a foundationalist claim. As Joan W. Scott has shown, whenever a subject’s history, or “experience,” becomes tied to an essentialist or totalizing notion of identity, it threatens to erase “histories of difference” among diverse people (24). Roig, in my view, creates her counterdiscourses, or “histories of difference,” not to lay claim to an alternative form of experiential truth, but to undermine self-critically any conception of historiography that rests implicitly on universalizing or foundationalist premises.

In the framing chapter of the novel, Norma’s own response to Natàlia, when asked to write the story of Judit and Kati, is that “No me atraía la idea de escribir sobre dos mujeres de la burguesía que no tuvieron conciencia de su condición” (14). This reaction, along with Natàlia’s declaration that Norma has previously written “una novela casi costumbrista” without knowing how to “dejar a un lado la sociología” and allowing herself to be seduced by “la historia externa” (24), constitutes a critique of a literary and historiographic vision that presupposes a one-to-one correspondence between literature and its referent in the real world. At the same time as she is engaged deeply in feminist issues, Roig undermines the plausibility of a historiographic enterprise which, to use Joan Scott’s words, “attribute[s] an indisputable authenticity to women’s experience” and “establishes incontrovertibly women’s identity as people with agency” (31), as if discourse and, specifically in Roig’s terms, the processes of consciousness and memory did not play a large role in shaping this experience. Natàlia herself, in the text of the letter that she writes to Norma, suggests that past history acquires form and meaning only

through the process of remembering: “Creo que no somos capaces de valorar la realidad hasta que ésta no se convierte en recuerdo,” she says, “Como si así quisiéramos volver a vivir. Por eso creo que la literatura todavía tiene un sentido. La literatura no es historia. La literatura inventa el pasado basándose en unos cuantos detalles que fueron reales, aunque sólo lo fueran en nuestra mente” (15).⁷

Through Norma’s framing narration, Roig calls attention to the function of memory in reconfiguring discursively the narrating subject’s relationship to history. In her letter to Norma, Natàlia defines her friend’s literary project as the attempt to recuperate what official patriarchal history, “la Historia grande,” has relegated to oblivion (20). Natàlia describes herself, significantly, as a photographer of “eso que llamamos realidad” and perceives herself to be “una cámara siempre asomada hacia fuera” (15, 16). Nevertheless, later in the second section of the novel, as she narrates in first-person form, she arrives at a very different realization, that “el tiempo de la memoria interior no tiene nada que ver con el tiempo de la historia” (110), showing how words shape fragments of memory into what one calls “history”: “Y el orden que siguen los recuerdos dentro de la memoria no es nunca cronológico ni coherente. Si aciertas, las palabras a veces te ayudan a enlazarlos para formar con ellos una ‘historia’” (111). History thus acquires meaning and referentiality through the mediating consciousness of the remembering self, who makes the connections between the present and the past based on his or her own position as a historical subject.

Roig’s novel presents this mediating consciousness as that of a fragmented subject, constituted by its interpellation in multiple and contradictory discourses and ideologies (Nichols 114-15). Despite Norma’s presence as an author figure within the text, the lack of a single unifying perspective in the work reflects the absence of a unified or stable subject position from which literary discourse originates. The consciousness of what Geraldine Nichols calls a “composite—or even fractured—subject” mediates the telling of the “stories” contained within the five principal sections of the novel (115), and the fragmentarity of each of these narratives constantly reminds us of the absence of a totalizing metanarrative that serves as an interpretive framework for the text. From the very beginning of the novel, Natàlia calls attention to the splintered nature of her identity: “me he dispersado en centenares de partículas, de fragmentos, de piezas desprendidas de mí misma; me he dispersado para no encontrarme” (21), she says, and, indeed, her identity seems to be a vacuum that words cannot adequately represent. Her story traces a circular pat-

tern, as it begins and ends with the image of her reading *The Odyssey* on a Mediterranean island. She, like the other women in the novel, is trapped within the fiction of mythical archetypes, as Helen Wing has suggested (89): she is unable to reinsert herself into history and to move forward precisely because she is unable to escape the circular time of myth that confines her.

Natàlia's entrapment in mythical time can be seen as an allegory of Francoist historiography, whose ideological agenda included the reification of myth and the denial of temporality. Furthermore, the myth of national essence fulfills precisely the same function as the romantic myths of heterosexual love through which woman is expected to find her destiny in history. Natàlia's destiny is to wait like Penelope: to wait for a man, a purpose, for an historical destiny which exists only in the language of myth.⁸ The novel's second section, where Natàlia's story begins, is significantly entitled "La hora perdida," thus calling attention to the idea of loss rather than the recovery of history and identity. In the final section of the novel, ironically entitled "La hora abierta," Natàlia remains trapped in myth, as she awaits, in her dreams, the horseman—the "charming prince" of the patriarchal fairy tale—to rise out of the ocean to take her away.

Within the narrative frame of Natàlia and Norma's present and in the center of Roig's text is embedded "La novela de la hora violeta," which we presume to be the novel that Norma has written about Judit and Kati. In this section, fragments of Judit's diary, dated between 1942 and 1950, are juxtaposed with another series of entries dated 1958, from which point she reflects back on the events of the immediate post-war years. These entries from Judit's diary are followed by her sister-in-law Patrícia's account of Judit's life on the date of the latter's death and by several other textual fragments, centered on Kati's life and narrated from a third-person perspective. As Catherine Davies has suggested, the narrative fragments in this section are woven around a "structural void," represented by the absence of a single coherent narrative that tells the story of the two women's lives and relationships (56). In fact, the gaps left by the untold story appear to prevail over what is actually told. Judit, who asks herself if she has invented Kati, and Patrícia, intent on denying memory, raise the question of the relationships among history, memory, and representation.

The hermeneutic gaps in "The Novel of the Violet Hour" acquire significance not only as omissions in the memories of the narrating subjects, but as manifestations of the problems inherent in recuperating a

coherent narrative of experience, albeit from the margins of official history. This fictional narrative within the fiction of the total novel clearly indicates the impossibility of such a goal, signaling instead the constructedness and the instability of the narratives through which the characters are constituted as subjects. Norma herself, by the end of the novel, is conscious of her own instability and fragmentation as a subject: "Era como si se estuviese desgarrando, como si los pedazos de sí misma se sostuvieran precariamente, pegados con goma, recompuestos torpemente" (266). The elusive identities of Judit and Kati are, for their part, products not only of Norma and Judit's unstable positions as writing subjects, but also of the contradictory discourses and ideologies of gender, class and nationality in which the two women are interpellated (Nichols 114).⁹

The fourth chapter of the novel, entitled "La hora dispersa," returns in a circular fashion to Norma and Natàlia's present, Spring of 1979, and consists of alternating third-person narrations that adopt the perspectives of Norma and her husband Ferran. The second half of this chapter contains a third-person narration, which focuses on Norma in the process of writing the story of Judit and Kati, the story she has promised Natàlia in the first chapter, at the same time as she writes a journalistic report on Catalans in Nazi concentration camps. This section of the chapter, in particular, is a complex hybrid of fiction, autobiography, and testimony, whose effect is to prompt a self-critical reflection on the narrative practices that give meaning to history and to experience.

In her work on women's testimonial in Latin America, Doris Sommer theorizes the basic difference between "autobiography" and "testimonial," indicating the metaphoric nature of the relationship between the narrating "I" and the subject of narration in the autobiography, as opposed to the metonymic nature of this relationship in the testimonial (108). In other words, the testimonial "I," rather than representing or subsuming the collective of which she forms a part, stands in "a lateral identification through relationship, which acknowledges the possible differences among 'us' as components of the whole" (108). It is precisely such a notion of "testimony" and "historical writing" that informs Roig's self-ironic, pseudo-autobiographical account of her own participation and mediation in the creation of two narrative accounts, the one about Judit and Kati, and the other, about Catalans in Nazi concentration camps. Throughout the chapter, Norma struggles to prioritize the writing of these two different types of narration, the one predominantly fictional (though based on biography), and the other, based on testimony and ostensibly historical. Yet, in the end, her inability to choose between "his-

tory” and “fiction” and to separate them, leads to a final collapse of the apparent distinction between these two types of narration. As Christina Dupláa convincingly demonstrates, Roig’s use of the testimonial genre reveals its inherently hybrid nature: “por estar lindando los límites del análisis histórico y del literario” (53).¹⁰

In order to write her “reportaje” on Nazi concentration camps, Norma interviews an ex-deportee, who provides her with a first-hand account of the political atrocities suffered by a group of Catalan exiles after the Civil War, an account which has no place in official history. Urged forward by her sense of social and moral responsibility as a writer, Norma sees her project as that of giving voice to the experience of an oppressed group by drawing on the “truth” value implicit in the testimony of an actual witness of the historical events under question. Her obligation as a writer, as she indicates in her letter to the ex-deportee, is to tell the story of deportation of her compatriots, thus helping to preserve the nation’s silenced history in its “collective memory” (226). As she becomes more deeply involved in her work, however, Norma begins to sense the impossibility of her goal, an impossibility that arises from the contradictions inherent in the testimonial project: the integrity of the moment of witnessing the event is forever lost unless it is captured and transformed through discourse. As one Holocaust survivor has put it, what is central to the Holocaust experience is the “collapse of witnessing,” that is, the absence of an “untainted” witness from either outside or inside the event (Felman and Laub 80). The victim’s own position as witness could not remain completely uncompromised or unharmed by the delusional ideology of the Nazi perpetrators since, in Dori Laub’s words: “it was the very circumstance of *being inside the event* that made unthinkable the very notion that a witness could exist, that is, someone who could step outside of the coercively totalitarian and dehumanizing frame of reference in which the event was taking place, and provide an independent frame of reference through which the event could be observed” (Felman and Laub 81). This same survivor goes on to affirm that what ultimately matters for the witness “is not simply the information, the establishment of facts, but the experience itself of *living through* testimony, of giving testimony” (Felman and Laub 85).

In Roig’s novel, the witness himself, the ex-deportee, attests to the impossibility of recuperating a totalizing and totalizable account of the original event, even as he hands over to Norma all of the documents that he had preserved as testimonies to the political atrocities that he has experienced first hand. In spite of his near maniacal obsession with the

historical accuracy of these documents, his inability to produce a cohesive narrative of his experience as a survivor renders any kind of documentary evidence useless for Norma's project of recuperating historical memory. Significantly, it is the ex-deportee himself who never stops reminding her: "La verdad, no la sabrá nunca" (233, 237, 240).

The mediating role of Roig herself—in the fictionalized form of her alter ego Norma—in this section of the novel is in itself a commentary on the nature of the relationship between history/autobiography and fiction. It is difficult to ignore the striking parallels between Norma's role as a journalist in search of testimonies of Nazi death camp survivors and that of Roig as the author of her testimonial work, *Els catalans als camps nazis*. Like Norma, Roig perceives her project to be that of "[rellenar] los inmensos canales de nuestra memoria colectiva" and of "aclarar las zonas oscuras de la memoria colectiva de nuestros pueblos" (*Noche y niebla* 22, 13).¹¹ In particular, the existence of a real historical model, a Catalan writer and Nazi camp survivor named Joaquim Amat-Piniella, for the fictional ex-deportee in Roig's novel, has the effect of blurring even further the line that separates the two ostensibly antithetical discursive modes of "history" and "fiction." In fact, according to Roig's own introduction to her testimonial work, it is Amat-Piniella (to whose memory the work is dedicated) who first utters the highly-charged words that the author places in the mouth of the ex-deportee in her fictional work: "la verdad, la verdad, no la sabría [sic] nunca" (*Noche y niebla* 22).

Furthermore, it is, paradoxically, in her testimonial writing that Roig attests to the crisis of representation: "Este libro, pues, no intenta otra cosa que aproximarse a una realidad ... después de haber trabajado durante tres años en este libro, no sé lo que es un campo de exterminio nazi. Es imposible hacerse una idea de ello. La falta de lógica, la incoherencia, la locura y la crueldad lo dominaban todo" (*Noche y niebla* 35-37). As Christina Dupláa has suggested, such a statement deliberately calls attention to the "condición novelística" of the testimonial account (57). Not unlike the novel that Norma is writing based on "biographical" letters and memoirs, her journalistic account undergoes a process of fictionalization through the mediating role of both the journalist and the testimony bearer. As Roig herself recognizes, the reconstruction of history in the form of a cohesive and totalizable narrative is an impossible goal: "ninguna palabra, ninguna imagen ... podrá reconstruir con toda exactitud y fidelidad lo que era el universo concentracionario nazi" (*Noche y niebla* 60). By inserting within a fictional framework an "autobiographical" account of the problems that she herself has confronted in writing

testimony, Roig reveals the processes of narrativization and fictionalization to be crucial to the understanding of history.

Immediately after her interview with the ex-deportee, Norma returns to the story of Judit and Kati with a new awareness of her dual role as historian and fiction writer: "Y Norma se daba cuenta que no podía escribir la historia con inocencia, desde fuera" (241). Having herself discovered and exposed the myth of journalistic objectivity, Norma realizes that her status as a bourgeoisie, Catalan female subject who has never personally known the horrors of the War or the atrocities committed in its aftermath, positions her in a problematic place from which to write her testimonial account. Likewise, she must confront her ambiguous status as the author of Kati and Judit's (hi)story. As she is prodded by Natàlia to complete the story of the two women, Norma, on the one hand, questions her ability to represent, even in fictional form, an experience that she herself has never lived. On the other hand, she is aware that the "historical" reality of these women can only exist when it is rendered into narrative form as a fictional account. In the end, she can only invent, if not reinvent, the stories/histories of the two women, just as, in her journalistic writing, she can only hope to give realization to the ex-deportee's promise of testimony by transforming this testimony into discourse.

Ironically, Norma's fictional work about Judit and Kati ends up by absorbing her to the point that she appears to lose the distance between her own life and those of her characters, whereas her testimonial work begins to gain an aura of unreality for her: "Y Norma pensaba que crear significa comprometerse con la obra de tal modo que ya nunca se puede renunciar a ella. Porque sabía que, en definitiva, la vida se acerca mucho más al arte que el arte a la vida, como ya ha sido dicho tantas veces" (261). At the conclusion of "La hora dispersa," Norma rejects any further personal involvement with the ex-deportee or with the "ghosts" of his past experience, opting, instead, to render homage to history through her completed book: "La historia había quedado archivada en su libro, éste era su homenaje, ¿qué más querían?" (267) Yet even as she appears to assert the primacy of the text over history, she cannot help but be painfully aware of her own position simultaneously within history and within the discourses that produce this history. "También ella estaba allí, dentro de la Historia," she affirms, at the same time as she struggles to give expression to a personal history that can only exist through the mediation of literary language (281).

Roig's preoccupation with the problems of historiography allows her to question official history and to reinsert into history the voices of

those who have occupied a position of cultural and social marginality, particularly women, Catalans, and political dissidents. At the same time, Roig, like her characters, is aware that neither history nor its subjects have an essential existence, but rather, they represent contested sites of meaning produced by competing discourses and ideologies.¹² The self-reflective nature of Roig's narrative reveals that the historicization of what one may call "reality" or "experience" occurs through the process of narrativization itself. It is on this problem that Roig, with the dual consciousness of the writer and the historiographer, calls upon us to reflect in *L'hora violeta*.

Notes

¹I am grateful to Geraldine Nichols for her careful reading of the manuscript and for her invaluable suggestions.

²See my work for an analysis of *La ópera cotidiana* as what Linda Hutcheon has called "historiographic metafiction," fiction that engages in literary self-reflection at the same time as it lays claim to historical and political realities through the mimetic convention (5).

³See Hayden White for a more general theoretical discussion on the problems of historiography, in particular, on the ways in which "narrativity" becomes a precondition of "historicity" in historical discourses (1-25).

⁴According to Catherine Bellver, Roig's project is to "design a gynocentric reality" in her novels by shifting her attention from the public sphere to the private one, the latter being represented by "nonofficial, nonliterary" texts written by women (221). Bergmann presents a reading of *L'hora violeta* as a kind of "feminist memoir," which focuses specifically on (both sexual and non-sexual) relationships between women (4-5).

⁵See Herzberger for a more detailed discussion on the nature of Francoist historiography (15-38).

⁶The original edition of the novel was published in Catalan under the title *L'hora violeta* (Barcelona: Edicions 62, 1980) and was subsequently translated into Castilian by Enrique Sordo. I quote from Sordo's translation of the novel.

⁷Likewise, in her essay "Dos recuerdos lejanos," Roig reflects upon the selective function of the writer's memory: since major events are often forgotten and an accurate rendition of these events is rendered impossible, the writer's literary activity is based on the small memories ("la pequeña memoria") that she transforms through her desire and her imagination (*Dime que me quieres* 23-24). *Dime que me quieres* was originally published in Catalan as *Digues que m'estimes encara que sigui mentida. Sobre el plaer solitari d'escriure i el vici compartit de llegir* and was translated into Castilian by Antonia Picazo Serna. In his analysis of the post-war novel David Herzberger, for his part, shows how the novel of memory,

founded on a “conception of history as the discourse of remembrance,” discloses “the unreliability of a single-voiced historiography” (72). *L'hora violeta* exemplifies just such a novel.

⁸Bellver (1987) explores the manifestations of the “Penelope syndrome” in Roig’s novels.

⁹In addition to Nichols’s lucid analysis of subjectivity as a discursive construct, see Brenes Garcia, who explores the relationship between subjectivity and the body—coded as female and Catalan—in Roig’s work.

¹⁰Dupláa examines extensively the theoretical problems surrounding the testimonial genre and their relevance to Roig’s testimonial project (19-75).

¹¹The original Catalan version of this work was published in 1977 by Edicions 62, and includes an additional introductory section and a documentary appendix. I owe the Castilian translations of this work to C. Vilginés.

¹²I draw on Scott’s analysis of identity as “a contested terrain, the site of multiple and conflicting claims,” a position that leads her to challenge any notion of “experience” that rests on foundational ground (31-32).

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