



The universe in a neighbourhood

by Barbara Łuczak

It has been said that Mercè Rodoreda's novels capture – perhaps even also create – the genius loci of Barcelona. The characters in *Aloma*, *La plaça del Diamant* and *Mirall trencat* live their lives in the city's most emblematic places – the Rambla, Plaça de Catalunya, the Liceu, the Parc Güell – or walk the streets of Gràcia or Sant Gervasi, where the author herself was born. Even in *Quanta, quanta guerra...*, in which a dream poetry predominates, some of the events and characters that the reader will quite likely consider unreal coexist with recognisable urban settings and extra-literary reference points. Adrià, the principal character, leaves the district of Sarrià and goes on a journey that will make him “wonder at the wonders” of the world. At each step the young man takes, this world becomes more and more different and astonishing, and finally is imbued with mythical elements that give it meaning.

Adrià's adventure is similar to the one the reader experiences with Rodoreda's prose. In her novels that are a mixture of tenderness and pain, she manages to give a universal dimension to worlds that are rooted in the culture and history of her country, that have their origins in her own experiences, yearnings and memories, reconfigured through her imagination. Life in exile, one of the experiences that most marked her and other members her generation, undoubtedly influenced her view of Barcelona, first from France and later from Switzerland. Although her novels are rarely set in locations other than those of her home town, artistically redrawn, the physical distance enabled her to mould them in a particular way. The universes she constructs are almost always recreations of known places or specific events in the history of Catalonia, but they immediately extend to include other territories and other times – in fact, whatever the reader wants to imagine. The districts of Barcelona give way to other districts, the streets to other streets and the gardens to other gardens; the characters go beyond the frontiers of their small private worlds. Awareness of a life on the fringe, a trivial event, an apparently insignificant detail is a starting point for going beyond familiar territory and into unknown worlds. Recounting stories about other people without leaving one's own time and space is perhaps one of the secrets of great writers, those who are usually considered “universal”.

Translated by Robin Vogelzang