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‘Ser tota ulls’. The Visual Imagination of Mila and Natàlia, the Two Major Characters of Caterina Albert/Víctor Català and Mercè Rodoreda

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This chapter aims to analyse the parallels between the visual imagination construction of Mila and Natàlia, two of the most representative (and popular) heroines in Catalan literature. Starting from the idea that the act of looking is key in both characters’ processes of knowledge, the study will focus on the lexicon associated with the semantic field of visual perception. As we will see, Mila and Natàlia’s sensitivity makes them especially imaginative and gives them a very fine-tuned ability to observe. Paying attention to detail, both protagonists develop emotional relationships with objects, animals and people, through which they reach knowledge. As they gain experience, this visual imagination allows them to communicate, master a situation and make decisions. Thanks to this scopic dimension, Mila and Natàlia’s voices echo the main contributions of modernity to the contemporary novel: the construction of a complex individual gaze, which is projected on the environment and on others, and a living and transformative imagination.

Key words: Víctor Català, Mercè Rodoreda, Visual Studies, Imagination

The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible.

Oscar Wilde

1. Introduction

Separated by almost 60 years, the novels *Solitud* [Solitude] (1904) and *La plaça del Diamant* [In Diamond Square]¹ (1962) have created two of the most representative female characters in contemporary Catalan literature: Mila and Natàlia. Despite the historical and aesthetic differences between them, the two heroines share similar individual itineraries, determined by their gender and social class (Epps 2012) and expressed through voices with a strong emotional charge (Sobré 1973; Simbor 1989). In the first book, the narrator

¹ The study will refer to David H. Rosenthal’s translation of *Solitud* (Columbia, Readers International, 1992) and Peter Bush’s translation of *La plaça del Diamant* (London, Virago Press, 2013). All quotations from both novels come from these two versions.

echoes what Mila sees and hears; in the second, it is Natàlia herself who explains, from the present, her past.

Both characters build an identity from life experiences that involve both pain and knowledge. Rooted in reality, Mila and Natàlia observe the world around them with doubt and curiosity, describing it through images with a symbolic and metaphorical basis. Although they are active women, living in a certain place and time (the former at the hermitage of Santa Caterina, near L'Escala, the latter in Barcelona) (Bou 1994), their activity is limited to the domestic sphere, where they have to overcome innumerable family and personal difficulties. With images and words, however, they build a resilient and creative subjectivity.

The aim of this chapter is to analyse the parallels between the elaboration of the visual imaginations of Mila and Natàlia by applying Raymond Williams' *structure of feeling* concept (1961). Williams argues that individuals of different generations, communities and historical moments can share certain structures of feeling, that is, a horizon of imaginary possibilities with which they identify. Based on this idea, our comparative reading of *Solitude* and *In Diamond Square* will focus on the analysis of the role of visual imagination in the construction of Mila and Natàlia, since the way they approach reality influences their means of thinking and expressing themselves. Both characters will be analysed as narrators of their own past who, through their account, transform their tales into meaningful and transcendent experience. This ultimately conditions the making of their identity – an identity that, as Charles Taylor (1989) recalls, is determined by moral and spiritual aspects, as well as by the link with space and community. Through the construction of two very singular voices, the highly emblematic characters of Caterina Albert (who signed her books with the pseudonym Víctor Català) and Mercè Rodoreda express a disillusioned individualism, which does not project outwards a desire for transformation, but seeks in the interior the space where to realize the ideals of subjectivity. This individual process is framed in two historical moments of profound ideological and social change: the beginning of the twentieth century (*Solitude*) and the years of the second Spanish Republic, the civil war and the post-war period (*In Diamond Square*).

The analysis will be divided into three parts. Firstly, I will explain the development, from the beginning of the nineteenth century, of a poetics of the modern gaze. Secondly, I will highlight the importance of visual imagination in *Solitude* and *In Diamond Square*. Thirdly, in the core of the chapter, I will delve into the elaboration of

Mila and Natàlia from the study of the lexicon associated with the semantic field of visual perception. As we will see, the visual dimension is decisive in the creation of the two characters and gives them modernity and complexity. Part of the bibliography (Castellanos 1982; Arnau 2012) has underlined that both protagonists are characterized as sensitive women, who participate in an initiation process in which sensory stimuli predominate – this process is linked to voluptuousness (in the case of Mila) and smells, sounds and colours (in Natàlia). There is no study, however, that relates the two characters with the visual dimension. In this sense, our reading will start from the idea, so far little explored, that the evolution of Mila and Natàlia is inseparable from their visual sensitivity. This sensitivity makes them especially imaginative and gives them a very fine-tuned ability to observe. Paying attention to detail, both protagonists develop relationships with objects, animals and people, through which they attain knowledge. The emotional component is also key in this process: the feeling of loneliness that makes Mila strong and the sadness and strangeness with which Natàlia relives her past end up being distinctive features of their personalities, and imbues the vocabulary, rich and alive, through which they are expressed.

2. The modern gaze

According to cultural critic Martin Jay (1993: 128–246), each historical epoch involves a certain way of seeing reality, a scopic regime associated with the pattern of a specific visual perception. This approach urges us to understand vision not only as the act of seeing but also as a cultural and discursive construction resulting from a certain historical and social moment.

From this perspective Crary argues that ‘Vision and its effects are always inseparable from the possibilities of an observing subject who is both the historical product *and* the site of certain practices, techniques, institutions, and procedures of subjectivation.’ (Crary 1993: 5). In the nineteenth century the subject who observes is inseparable from a modernity that places subjectivity at the centre of perception. As the famous title of M. H. Abrams’ eponymous book, *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953) recalls, romanticism involves the passage from an observer-mirror, who reflects reality, to an observer-lamp, who projects himself towards the external world. The observer, therefore, becomes seen as an autonomous and active agent, generating his own visual experience

(Crary 1993: 69). In doing so, he becomes an interpreter, a producer of meanings (Bryson 1983).

In the late nineteenth century this view of the subject may be related to the introduction of Arthur Schopenhauer's thought. As Crary highlights, 'Schopenhauer rejected any model of the observer as passive receiver of sensation, and instead posed a subject who was both the site and producer of sensation.' (1993: 75). In the literary field, this new philosophical orientation involved a radical transformation of the role of the visual in creative work. While in realistic poetics empirical observation was conceived as the only viable source for knowledge, in symbolist poetics creation will depend on the sensory perception of reality and its interpretation in symbolic terms. Characters such as Mila in *Solitude* show this new relationship between the human being and the environment, insofar as her perception of external sensations, in this case resulting from nature, modulates both her actions and her state of spirit. External sensations, therefore, condition the way the characters act, express and singularize themselves. With this change, literature echoes the social and scientific turn of the end of the century: an imagery is created where the characters observe things that had not been perceived before, which are mediated by their subjectivity (Sánchez & Spiller 2004: 21). This new orientation, which radically affected literary construction, inspired in the early twentieth century the works of James Joyce, Marcel Proust and Virginia Woolf, which influenced the creation of Natàlia in *In Diamond Square* in aspects such as the expression of inner time (Cortés 2001) and the protagonist's relationship with the objects and the environs in which she lives.

One of the traits that Mila and Natàlia share as characters is that they both look more than they talk. Their learning is done through experiences that are told from a visual and sensory point of view. While they work like dogs, the two girls observe their surroundings and stare at a variety of objects that take on a symbolic meaning. Their ability to see and make the world seen is also the basis of their imagination (Sánchez & Spiller 2004: 9), which will help them to overcome painful and traumatic experiences. As Sánchez and Spiller point out, the 'scopic drive' coincides with 'the desire to know, which is a sublimation of the desire to dominate'² (Sánchez & Spiller 2004: 16) and can be related to the knowledge of oneself and of otherness. In the study we will see that the gaze of Mila and Natàlia includes a cognitive dimension: it is key in their upbringing and can

² The translation from Spanish into English is mine.

also be seen as a driver of artistic creativity (Sánchez & Spiller 2004: 9). As they gain experience, this imagination allows them to communicate, master a situation and make decisions.

3. The visual imagination in *Solitude* and *In Diamond Square*

The literary trajectories of Albert and Rodoreda are very marked by their learning in plastic arts, in a stage prior to the writing of *Solitude* and *In Diamond Square*. In the case of Català, critics have highlighted the importance of her education, during the 1880s and 1890s, in painting, sculpture and theatre (Folch i Torres 1955; Bassas & Masanés 2020). In an interview with Baltasar Porcel in 1965, the writer acknowledged the visual basis of her creation: ‘I was all eyes: looking, reading. I have a great visual memory’³ (Porcel 2003: 20). The stage dedicated to painting influenced, according to Julià, the ‘evident plasticity’ that we find in her descriptions of characters (Julià 2006: 63). More specifically, Gavagnin stresses that in *Solitude* we find a ‘sensory concentration’, closely related to the attitude recurrent in Modernism, of privileging ‘the gaze, the sense of sight’ (Gavagnin 1991: 230).

The visual predominance can be related, moreover, to two distinctive features of Mila. On the one hand, her characterization as a ‘well-individualized human personality, [...] highlighted by the way she [...] acts and speaks’ (Serrahima 1972: 241–2). On the other hand, her presentation is ‘through her effects’ (Bloomquist 1975: 104). In *Solitude* we see the world as seen by the protagonist: ‘the reader has access to reality as Mila also has access to it; and he may even follow the movement of her eyes or the misunderstood words that reach her ears’ (Castellanos 1982: 48). This aspect of the novel (and the creation of the character), unarguably one of the most praised by critics, is the result of the predominance of a narrative mode focused on the protagonist. As Simbor Roig points out, in the fiction there is a ‘perennial coexistence between narrator and character’ that transfers to the reader ‘*how* Mila is grasping reality’ (1989: 218).

In the case of Rodoreda, it is well known that in the years before the writing of *In Diamond Square*, in Geneva, she painted gouaches, watercolours and collages, under the influence of Paul Klee (Rodoreda 2002). This interest in the visual arts is not, however, punctual, but has been considered one of the constituent elements of all her work. Thus, Carme Arnau (2010 and 2012: 50–71) has highlighted that Rodoreda’s

³ All the translations from bibliography in Catalan into English are mine.

narrative is governed by a certain 'poetics of gaze'. This observation can be related to a statement by the writer herself, in the prologue to the novel *Mirall trencat* (Broken Mirror): 'The eyes are the mirror of the soul. And of the world' (Arnau 2010: 169). In the construction of Natàlia we see how the character is elaborated through visual knowledge, in an evolution that involves, at the same time, self-knowledge and discovery of the environment. In this process, the character contrasts two views: that of the present (in which she remembers) and that of the past (recalled) (Arnau 2010: 172). Concerning the point of view, the use of internal focus fixed on the protagonist (Bolo 2017: 59) makes the reader only able to access what the character sees and says.

4. The visual perception and imagination of Mila and Natàlia

Like children, Mila and Natàlia are two creatures who continuously look because watching is the means at their disposal to understand what is happening to them. The two remember very well what they see and pay attention to details that without their gaze would go unnoticed. Raised in a hostile atmosphere, where they can speak little because they are alone or unheard, they are especially sensitive to audible, visual and olfactory signs. Their imagination, based on visuals, is sustained in images that are part of their daily life, which are often repeated and, in the long run, become witnesses to the passage of time. As Calvino observes, in the formation of the visual part of the literary imagination elements coincide such as direct observation and the process of abstraction, condensation and internalization of sensory experience, which makes possible the visibility and verbalization of thought (Calvino 1993: 95). In the construction of Mila and Natàlia, this process is what allows them to move from image to word, and what implies the predominance of certain elements of reality over others. It is these elements, which are the result of a visual selection, that end up characterizing the heroines and their stories.

As we will see, visual knowledge is relational: it is built through the relationships that are established between objects or people, on the one hand, and observers, on the other. According to Berger 'We never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relationship between things and ourselves. Our vision is continually active, continually moving, continually holding things in a circle around itself, constituting what is present to us as we are' (Berger 1972: 9). An affective component must be added to the relational component: visualization is closely related to the production of affection; it channels emotions that are established between the observer and the observed. Reading makes it possible to transfer this affective bond to the reader:

it is he/she who, through visual imagination, connects with the emotions described by the narrator. This tie is often produced through feelings such as empathy (Esrock 1994: 200).

Visual imagination, moreover, is not only a path to knowledge but makes imagined objects seem more immediate and comprehensible (Esrock 1994: 193). As Esrock recalls, ‘The pleasures of imaging are sometimes derived from specific objects that one desires’ (Esrock 1994: 193). Throughout their accounts, Mila and Natàlia ritualize a series of visual practices, by which they take ownership of what surrounds them, gain security and become familiar with experiences and places where they are neophytes or newcomers. However, it is not always they who look, but the coming of age makes them the object of the gaze of others and inserts them into a framework of complex relationships in which, progressively, they must act.

In *Solitude* and *In Diamond Square* the lexical units referring to the semantic field of sight and gaze appear recurrently. Thus, while in the former we find verbs such as *mirar* [look], *guaitar* [watch], *llucar* [stare] and *entrellucar* [glimpse], in the latter we find *mirar* [look] and *veure* [see], often in the reflexive form – *mirar-se* and *veure’s* [look / see herself] – and sometimes in a figurative sense – *ja es veia a venir* [it was expected], *fer veure* [pretend], *ens hem de veure* [we must see each other], *mirar de trobar/de no caure* [try to find / not to fall], *on s’és vist* [how can that be?], *a veure si* [to see if]. In the physical descriptions of the characters the *eyes* are usually highlighted and sometimes are described with adjectives that connote them, which are associated with colours, feelings and values. In both books, the eyes link the human gaze with the eyes of animals and allow relationships to be established between the characters throughout the plot. In addition to being able to see and communicate, the eyes are the organ that allows crying, so at certain times, especially in *Solitude*, they have a strong emotional charge. In Català’s novel, moreover, the relationships between Mila, the shepherd and nature are expressed through *mirades* [looks] and *esguards* [glances], which convey a wide range of feelings, such as fear, pity, confusion, warmth, clarity, empathy and security.

Our analysis of the visual imagination in *Solitude* and *In Diamond Square* will be divided into two parts. In the first, we will focus on the occurrences of the verbs *mirar* [look] and *veure* [see] – and other verbs that are part of the same semantic field such as *entrellucar* [glimpse] or *abraçar amb la mirada* [embrace with a look] – and interpret them taking into account 1) the subject who observes, 2) the object of the observation. In the second, we will study the occurrences of the word *ulls* [eyes] and the various meanings that this word acquires (in relation to the ability to see, cry and, furthermore, morally

qualify someone or some action) depending on the context. In both parts we will consider the figurative use of lexical units referring to the visual field – in words like *encegament* [blinding]. The aim of this analysis is to interpret the construction of Mila and Natàlia’s visual imaginations, taking into account their visual perception of reality and their narrative elaboration.

4.1. *Looking and seeing*

One of the elements that best characterizes Mila and Natàlia is the fact that their gaze, which is part of their upbringing, distinguishes them from the surroundings. In *Solitude* we find three ways of looking: that of Mila, that of the shepherd and that of men. The protagonist’s gaze evolves throughout the plot. At the beginning, on the way up to the hermitage of St Pontius, the hermitess looks up towards the ‘trau’ (1990: 47) [‘crack’ (1992: 16)] of the sky. Later, Gaietà, the pastor reproaches her with this way of looking: ‘—Repari que vós sempre goiteu sempre enlaire, com els ceguets... Cal escampar uis pertot, dona... Veiam què m’hi dieu d’ací avall...’ (1990: 90) [‘Why do you keep looking up like a blind man?’ (1992: 49)].

In his mountain-guiding, Gaietà helps to train Mila’s gaze, ‘[f]ent-la abocar damunt de cada pregonesa’ (1990: 208) [‘[f]orcing her to gaze over every steep precipice’ (1992: 137)] and, later, he urges her to ‘a guaitar enrera’ (1990: 208–9) [‘look down’ (1992: 137)], towards her tender memories of youth. The protagonist’s experience, however, is ambiguous: although she surrenders to admiration before the mountain landscape, she is often frightened, does not understand the wilderness code, and prefers ‘guaitar, tot ençà, les menudes coses coneixents.’ (1990: 254) [‘[s]he preferred the miniature scenes she could recognize below her’ (1992: 171)]. Little by little nevertheless, she learns to link the land with the sky: ‘arrapava les mirades pels rebrolls, florits de blancs degotalls, i les pujava amunt, amunt, fins a trobar el velari tèrbol del firmament’ (1990: 228) [‘[she] turned her gaze toward the bushes spotted with white lichens, and then higher till she saw the sky’s somber company’ (1992: 152)]. It is through the shepherd that the woman can overcome her anxiety and, seduced by Gaietà’s ‘verbagàlia’ (verbosity), she contemplates the ‘bella miranda’ (1990: 236) of the mountain landscape [she ‘drunk her fill of the scene’ (1992: 158)].

Mila’s relationship with men (one of the driving forces of the action) is also due to the eye contact she establishes with them. While Anima ‘lluca’ [peers], closes his eyes

and shows his teeth (1992: 75), Arnau ‘guaita’ with ‘arranc coratjós als ulls de la dona’ (1990: 189) [‘bravely’ looks her ‘in the eye’ (1992: 123)] when he confesses his passion and the shepherd offers her ‘una ampla mirada calda, devota, infinida’ (1990: 185, 191) [‘a broad, warm, devoted, infinite gaze’ (1992: 124)] which gives Mila strength and separates her from the temptation of adultery with Arnau. All three relationships are conceived of as an alternative to the ‘abnormality’ of the bond with her husband, Matias, a being who, like lambs, has a thoughtless and stupid gaze (1992: 94). The protagonist herself laments the frustration of her marriage in a passage where she is shown to be aware that she is attracting the looks of males:

Si en Matias hagués estat una altra mena d’home, un home com els altres, que se la mirés a n’ella com els altres homes se la miraven: amb els ulls admirats de l’Arnau de Sant Ponç, per exemple, amb els mateixos ulls de boc de l’Ànima, fins amb els ulls fidels i humits del Mussol... amb mirada de persona o de bèstia, però que digués alguna cosa. Mes en Matias no tenia mirada de cap mena: ara ella ho reparava bé per primer cop a la vida. No tenia mirada de cap mena perquè en ell regnava la pau; la pau de bèstia, però bèstia anormal, més bèstia que les altres, puix era una bèstia sense zel... (1990: 148)

[Matias would have been better, if he were another sort of man, a man like those others who really looked at her: with Arnau’s admiring gaze, for example, or Anima’s goatish leer, or even with Mussol’s moist and faithful eyes... like a man or a beast, but with some kind of response. Matias had no distinctive look, she now realized for the first time. He had no look because peace reigned within him, as in a peaceful animal but an abnormal one, more bestial than the others because he was never in rut. (1992: 93)]

The progressive frustrations of life as a hermitess and the state of extreme exile in which she finds herself affect the way Mila sees reality. Thus, the economic bankruptcy resulting from the ‘aplec’ [festival of roses] transforms her into a wounded bird: she has a ‘esguard abimat en la fondalada’ (1990: 180) [stares ‘into the distance’ with a ‘blank and desolate’ gaze (1992: 116)]. Later the mountain sickness (chapter XI: ‘Cabin fever’) causes a loss of clarity and vividness in her glance (1992: 134). At those moments, Mila’s loneliness and feeling of desolation is expressed by the woman’s tears, an act that also sets her apart from the rest of the mountain’s inhabitants, who do not cry.

As for Ànima, he is characterised by his animality: when he laughs, he closes his eyes, he has a sunken forehead and emits guttural sounds to speak. Like the crowd that gathers at the festival, which ‘entrelluca’ [glimpses] without seeing, Ànima’s gaze does not pursue human communication. In fact, it hurts Mila on two occasions: when she rests in a meadow (chapter VII: ‘Spring’) and when she climbs with the shepherd to the

high peak (chapter XIII: 'Highpeak').⁴ In both cases, the male character's gaze is associated with pain, voluptuousness and evil. It also functions as a phallic symbol that anticipates the final aggression. Ànima's power affects the attitude of Matias, who goes from being an apathetic and gazeless man to following him on the paths, drinking, participating in petty thefts and, finally, joins in his obsession of gambling. Over time, the hermit loses his 'lazy fat' and his eyes have 'una expressió avespada semblant a la dels altres homes.' (1990: 198) ['his face becomes alert like other men's' (1992: 130)].

In Mila's process of self-knowledge, the crucial moment is when she observes herself in the mirror she sees at the bottom of the basin and realizes that she is beautiful. From that moment on, indifference 'began to crack' (1992: 60). Visual self-recognition is symbolically related to her identification with a lush and sensual nature. In the same way in which nature, when it 'miroteja' [sparkles] and becomes a mirror of itself, shows its mastery, Mila acquires a power not only when she knows how to look and understand what she has seen but also when she learns to see herself (1992: 59).

As we know, Natàlia's life is determined by her acquaintance with Quimet. The boy introduces himself through a voice (which asks 'Want to dance?') and a blurred face: 'una cara que de tan a prop que la tenia no vaig veure prou bé com era, però era la cara d'un noi' (2011: 18) ['a face so close to mine I couldn't really see what it was like, that it was a young man's' (2013: 2)]. The whole scene is remembered through the confusion of 'sweaty faces', voices and smells that impregnate Diamond Square during the 'festa major' [local festival]. From then on, a relationship begins where references to looks are frequent. At their first meeting, Quimet insists that she has to look at him and, when the protagonist does, he asks her not to. On the day of the first date, the girl feels that a young man was 'staring at my back' and Quimet looks at her 'com si fos una persona de mala llei' (2011: 28) ['as if I'd done something wicked' (2013: 10)]. The boy's insistence is not only expressed in the words (with a warning tone) he addresses to her but also when he looks at her in silence: 'Jo estava plantada al seu davant i ell em mirava i no deia ni mitja paraula i va estar així una bona estona i jo podia aguantar més i ell em mirava sense parar.' (2011: 53) ['I stood opposite him and he stared and didn't say a word and stayed

⁴ In chapter VII, Ànima's 'ninetes de llop server' ['wolfish eyes'], 'estaven clavades' [are pierced] in the girl's flesh like 'agulles roentes' (1990: 147) ['pierced her like glowing needles' (1992: 92)]. At the end of chapter XIII, the 'visió de llampec' ['a flash'] of Ànima and his 'dents de xacal' ['white jackal-fangs'] set Mila apart from the temptation to kiss the shepherd (1990: 246).

like that for a good while until I couldn't stand it any more [*sic*], and he simply kept staring.' (2013: 32–3)]. When she is alone, Natàlia looks at the sky and sees it 'pitch-black' (2013: 10) and she occasionally goes out to look around and stares at shop windows on the High Street (2013: 25). Through Quimet she meets his friend Mateu, who usually looks at her with a smile. The first episodes of the novel also include imaginary visual scenes such as when, on the first kiss, Natàlia sees 'Nostre Senyor a dalt de tot de casa seva, ficat dins un núvol inflat' (2011: 27) ['Our Lord hovering over his house, deep inside a billowing cloud' (2013: 9)].

Once married, changes in gaze are brought about by pregnancies, the creation of the dovecote and war. So, the first pregnancy makes Natàlia, who has insomnia and does not stop house-cleaning, look at her body strangely: 'Quan em despertava em mirava les mans ben obertes davant dels ulls i les feia moure per veure si eren meves i si jo era jo.' (2011: 72) ['When I woke up, I opened my hands in front of my eyes and waved them to make sure they were mine and I was still me!' (2013: 50)]; 'em mirava els peus sense acabar-ho d'entendre' (2011: 74) ['I gazed at my feet totally bewildered' (2013: 51)]. The arrival of the pigeons creates more distance in the couple: when she has them at home, 'tan ficats a dintre de casa' (2011: 126) ['so much inside our flat' (2013: 97)], Quimet doesn't 'see' that Natàlia is sick of them because pigeons dirty their apartment. The outbreak of the war further isolates the protagonist: she stops seeing Quimet, Mateu and Cintet, who are at the front, and takes her son Antoni to a children's colony because she can't feed him. The 'long sickness' of war not only forces her, however, to stop 'seeing' the people around her but also makes her see people differently, because 'la guerra canviava els homes' (2011: 157) ['war changed men' (2013: 123)]. The situation in which she finds the city during the bombings, all dyed blue, is described in scenes that, like the one of the first kiss, seem visions. So, for instance, when a tram is about to hit her, she 'no veia res' only 'gent que reia' (2011: 179) [she 'couldn't see a thing', only 'people laughing' (2013: 142)]. Flashes from the past strike her present, especially when her father dies, and she sees herself small and 'amb un llaç blanc a dalt del cap' (2011: 164) ['with a white bow in my hair' (2013: 129)], like in a faded old picture, 'walking down streets with gardens' (2013: 129).

Chapter XXXV, one of the most complex and Kafkaesque in the book and decisive in the development of the plot, includes a complex game of views and visions. The episode begins when Natàlia leaves the house and sees a 'very big lady in a mantilla' walking with two candles (Comas Arnal 2020: 54–9). Natàlia pretends to look at a shop

window to observe her better and decides to follow her ‘perquè em feia companyia mirar-la i mirar-li la mantellina que l’aire del caminar inflava una mica de cada costat.’ (2011: 185) [‘because the sight of her and her mantilla blowing in the wind kept me company’ (2013: 147)]. As the woman walks on and on, ‘stubborn and determined, like a big beetle’, she meets a mutilated young man and a woman begging for charity. Then, in a scene that Ibarz (2008: 101) has related to an episode from *Mrs Dalloway* by Woolf, Natàlia enters a church. There she sees ‘little balls above the altar’, which grow larger, light up and spread out. She closes her eyes, but continues to see them. She observes the people: ‘tots tenien el cap ajupit i no podien veure les boletes. [...] ningú no veia el que jo veia perquè tothom estava amb el cap baix.’ (2011: 187–8) [‘all those bowed heads’ were ‘unable to see the little balls, which were jostling each other’ (2013: 149)]. Natàlia believes that the woman she has followed, whose eyes ‘bulged from their sockets’ (2013: 150), ‘també devia veure els soldats morts, ella també els veia, m’ho deien els seus ulls de persona a qui li han matat algú amb bala i al mig d’un camp’ (2011: 188–9) [‘she too must have heard the dead soldiers’, since she had ‘the eyes of someone who knew somebody who had been shot and killed in the middle of a field’ (2013: 150)]. This recognition of the pain of another being who has lived close to death and expresses it with her eyes encourages Natàlia to carry out the infanticide she had planned.

The next chapter, which describes the journey from home to the grocery shop, where she plans to buy spirit of salts, reproduces the same dreamlike atmosphere of the previous day. Natàlia leaves home, stares at the scales marked in the staircase, ‘marcades molt endins’ (2011: 190) [‘cut deep into the wall’ (2013: 151)], and thinks she would like to be a ball and roll down the steps. During the route, she says goodbye, with a look to the streets:

ho anava mirant tot com si no ho hagués vist mai; potser perquè l’endemà ja no podria mirar, no sóc jo que miro, no sóc jo que parlo, no sóc jo que veig. L’endemà, cap cosa, ni bonica ni lletja, no se m’aturaria davant dels ulls. Encara se m’hi aturaven les coses, totes se’m quedaven davant dels ulls com si abans de morir hi volguessin viure per sempre. I el vidre dels meus ulls ho prenia tot. (2011: 192)

[And I looked at everything as if I was seeing it for the first time, because tomorrow I wouldn’t be able to, it’s not I who looks, who speaks, who sees. Tomorrow nothing pretty or ugly would meet these eyes. Things did now, everything passed before my eyes as if to register there for ever, before I died. And my glassy eyes took everything in. (2013: 152–3)]

Once she has the spirit of salts, she urges herself to go ahead without seeing, mechanically, resuming the ritual of going to look at shop windows:

Havia de mirar de no caure, de no fer-me atropellar, d'anar amb compte amb els tramvies, sobretot amb els que baixaven, de conservar el cap al damunt del coll i anar ben dret cap a casa: sense veure els llums blaus. Sobretot sense veure els llums blaus. I vaig tornar a mirar l'aparador de la perfumeria [...] I altra vegada la casa dels hules i les nines amb les sabates de xarol... sobretot no veure els llums blaus i travessar sense pressa... no veure els llums blaus... i em van cridar. (2011: 193)

[I had to make sure I didn't stumble, didn't get knocked over, had to take care with the trams, particularly the ones coming downhill, not lose my nerve and go straight home and not see any blue lights. I looked in the perfumery window once again [...] And back to the emporium and the dolls with the patent leather shoes... above all I mustn't see blue lights and not cross in a hurry... must not see the blue lights... and someone shouted to me. (2013: 153-4)]

In the same way that Quimet's voice had taken her out of the enchantment of the dance in Diamond Square in the first chapter to bring her to marriage, the voice of Antoni, who she remembers for the smallpox marks on his face, provides her with a new home. Marriage to the grocer is associated with a new way of looking: the look of remembrance. In this last stage of Natàlia's life, which ends with her daughter's wedding, the protagonist recalls scenes and images lived. Like certain Proust characters, the memory of past moments, often instigated by specific objects, shapes her present and fills it with experiences lived in her youth or in her hours of evasion.

Thus, for example, the visual memory takes shape in the pigeons⁵ with which Quimet used to identify her and in leaves that she has seen a few hours before in the park.⁶ The present involves looking by shutting the eyes, walking through streets that are known by heart (2013: 178) and confusing, as we have seen, pigeon feathers and leaves. In the final chapter, in which Natàlia at night returns to Diamond Square and screams, she has a gaze which does not see and does not look and which results from her deep inner knowledge: 'Era com si anés damunt del buit, amb els ulls sense mirar [...] I a l'altra banda em vaig girar i vaig mirar amb els ulls i amb l'ànima i em semblava que no podia ser de cap de les maneres. Havia travessat.' (2011: 246) ['It was as if I was blindly

⁵ '[V]eia els coloms. Com abans, els veia. [...] Tot era igual, però tot era bonic' (2011: 218) ['I was seeing pigeons. I was seeing *them* as they used to be. [...] It was all the same, but it was all lovely' (2013: 177)].

⁶ '[E]ncara veia les fulles, les vives i les mortes, les que sortien de la branca com un gemec i les que en queien sense dir res i baixaven giravoltant com una ploma de colom molt fina si cau d'enlaira' (2011: 236). ['I'd still be seeing leaves, dead or alive, ones that grew and rustled on branches and those that curled silently through the air like the lightest pigeon feather' (2013: 193)].

walking above the abyss [...] And once I was over I turned round and looked with my eyes and all my heart and thought it couldn't possibly be true. I had made it to the other side.' (2013: 201–2)].

4.2. *The eyes, mirror of the soul*

Apart from distinguishing themselves with the ways they see and look, the protagonists of *Solitude* and *In Diamond Square* oppose others by the eyes. Their eyes, which are full of expressiveness, are the mirrors of their souls. As for Mila, we know that they are green (1992: 118) and crystalline (1990: 259). Compared to those of Matias, which are 'com un trau' (1990: 184) ['narrow' (1992: 119)], they denote intelligence and vivacity. Throughout the plot, the protagonist's eyes express emotions such as admiration and gratitude (1992: 34), tranquillity (they are filled 'with the mysterious calm of a deep gorge', 1992: 118) and joy (1992: 65). While in the spring they cheered with 'their old sparkle' and 'were dazzled by the dark greens and translucent undersides of leaves' (1992: 90, 91), when Mila gets sick 'seemed to devour her face' (1992: 203). On the occasions she is alarmed, they flash 'like a cat's' (1992: 119) and in the ascent to the summit of Roquís Gros they get dizzy: 'Els ulls se m'enguexen i em sembla que el cel gira com una roda de molí, anant lo de dalt a baix; i quan el veig a sota meu tal com si me'l guaités una bassa d'aigua, me vénen unes ganes de deixar-me anar i d'enfonsar-m'hi tota, a dins del cel...' (1990: 234) ['I can't see straight and the sky seems to spin like a water wheel, and when it's way down at the bottom like a reflection in a pond, I feel like diving in and drowning in the sky' (1992: 156–7)]. In all these examples we see how the character is constructed from her external reactions. When Mila does not speak, her eyes express what she feels, in an evolution which reflects the symbolic journey she is undertaking. This path goes from initial blindness to final lucidity and evolves in communion with the seasonal change and the transformation of the mountain landscape.

Mila's final gaze, like Natàlia's, implies an innerness, insofar as it enables her to understand mysteries related to existence. Thus, on learning of the death of the shepherd her 'parpres' opened (1990: 280) [her eyes 'grow wider' (1992: 190)]. Later, realising with 'restored vision' (1992: 209) that Gaietà has been murdered, this distances her from her 'passada ceguera' [past blindness] (1990: 305) and allows her to be capable of seeing 'clar el costat fosc de totes les coses estades' (1990: 305) ['the dark side of everything with [...] clarity' (1992: 209)]. This new vision makes her acknowledge the importance of the mythical thought of the shepherd, expressed by the legends he told. It

implies, therefore, a form of knowledge that is due not only to the discovery of an inner gaze (parallel to the ‘sparkling’ of nature) but also to the wisdom that the imaginary thought that Gaietà has bequeathed to her, according to which, ‘tot el món era ple de visions i d’espectres que vagaven entre cel i terra’ (1990: 309) [‘[t]he world seethed with spectral presences that wandered between Heaven and earth’ (1992: 212)]. The ‘homenic’s (little man) knowledge is revealed, in the end, as an in-depth knowledge of man’s relationship with the cosmos, a superior knowledge that opens Mila’s eyes (1992: 48) and illuminates her mind.

Beside her, the shepherd’s eyes are ‘ulls d’auzell’ [bird’s eyes] (1990: 91), ‘màgics’ [magic] (1990: 191), and they show her the beauty of nature: ‘Tot lo del món és bonic si es mira amb bons uis, ermitana!’ (1990: 211) [‘Everything’s pretty if you look at it right’ (1992: 139)]. They also warn her of the danger posed by Ànima, who has ‘uis de brúfol’ [owl’s eyes] (1990: 308), before whom Gaietà has to keep ‘l’ui viu’ (1990: 308) [‘look sharp’ (1992: 211)] to protect himself from the evil instincts of nature. In contrast, Matias has no eyes or gaze. In the end he has a ‘rostre cadavèric’ [face of a corpse], with a ‘veu aterrada’ [underground voice] (1990: 312), while his ‘cara fadigada verdejava com la de l’Ànima’ (1990: 312) [his ‘weary face’ has become ‘as green as Anima’s’ (1992: 214)]. He is a being without character, who submissively accepts Mila’s will to abandon him. The protagonist’s final decision is expressed, again, through her eyes: ‘la tranquil·litat de gorg pregon desaparegué d’un tret i quelcom furibund, dimoniàc, resplendí en els ulls verds de la dona’ (1990: 313) [‘the gorge suddenly lost its calm, and something furious, demoniacal glowed in the woman’s eyes’ (1992: 215)]. The power of the female character connects in this way with the mystery of a nature that is conveyed through an inexpressible intelligence, like the look, serene and silent, of the horses and donkeys’ that ‘aixecaven el cap dels sarrions i permaneixien un moment en pensa [...] guaitant aquella animació exòtica amb sos grans ulls foscos, plens de pensaments inexpressables’ (1990: 171) [‘looked up pensively from their feedbags [...] and watched the excitement from big dark eyes full of inexpressible thoughts’ (1992: 110)].

In *In Diamond Square*, Natàlia characterizes the eyes of others but not her own. We only know that, due to her pregnancy, her eye contours turned blue and violet. Through the protagonist’s observations, a series of symbolic correspondences are established between the people, animals and dolls that are part of her world. One of the most recurring references is the ‘monkey eyes’ of Quimet. These are eyes that Natàlia

finds beautiful because their sides are always damp (2013: 38). With the war, those eyes get deeper, ‘com si els hi haguessin picat per acabar-los-hi de ficar dins de tot’ (2011: 166) [‘were sunk deep into their sockets as if they’d been pushed right down inside’ (2013: 131)]. Her daughter, Rita, will inherit them, just as she will inherit Quimet’s stubborn character: ‘La Rita era en Quimet. Els ulls de mico i aquella mena de cosa que no es podia explicar què era però que anava tota de cara a fer patir.’ (2011: 214) [‘Rita was Joe. She had his monkey eyes and that something which you couldn’t explain but looked as if it boded ill’ (2013: 173)].

The opposite character of Quimet’s friends, Cintet and Mateu, is also evident in the eyes: those of Cintet are ‘big cow-like eyes’ (2013: 14) and ‘aturats’ (2011: 38) [‘dreamy’ (2013: 20)]; those of Mateu, very blue, with the ‘colour of the sea’ (2013: 105). Mateu’s wife, Griselda’s eyes are ‘ulls de menta tranquil·la’ (2011: 93), ‘d’aigua verda’ (2011: 175) [‘cool peppermint eyes’ (2013: 67), made of ‘liquid green’ (2013: 138)], and her daughter has blue ones. Of all these eyes, it will be the ones of Mateu which will have the most impact on Natàlia’s sentimental education. During the war and post-war, she has various visions in which Mateu, a clearly idealized angel-like character, encourages her to take action. Also, Mateu’s eyes are the only ones that cry. This impresses the protagonist, who considers herself ‘hard to cry’ and only cries on one occasion: when Antoni proposes to her to work at his house.

For their part, the eyes of the children, Antoni and Rita, are usually very expressive. Natàlia refers to them with admiration: ‘[els nens] eren dues flors. Amb uns ullets... amb uns ullets que miraven i quan miraven amb aquells ullets...’ (2011: 98) [‘[children] were lovely, like a couple of flowers [...]. And those little eyes, those little eyes that looked at you and when they did...’ (2013: 72)]. When, during the war, she decides to take her son to the colony, she realizes that ‘només se’ls veien els ulls’ (2011: 170) [the faces of the children of the colony ‘were all eyes’ (2013: 134)] and bear no resemblance to her Antoni. The child’s crying, who is reluctant and deceived, is associated with the rain: ‘com un riu de plors l’aigua lliscava avall’ (2011: 172) [‘the water streamed down the glass like a river of tears’ (2013: 136)]. Natàlia’s relationship with her children is also conditioned by how their eyes look: during the war their eyes get sad, but they open them when the mother brings them food and when they go out to look at shop windows, Rita says that her mother’s eyes ‘looked panic-stricken’ (2013: 175). Also the eyes of pigeons and dolls seem to establish forms of human communication with Natàlia: they have glass eyes and look at her fixedly.

5. Conclusions

Mila and Natàlia's education is determined, as we have seen, by their ability to look. By looking, they create a visual imagery that is the basis of their imaginations and has a high creative component (includes dreams, nightmares and visions). Their sensitivity and intelligence are expressed in a look through which they observe, imagine and think. Once they have gained experience (through the discovery of love and loneliness), this look also applies to memory: to the way they recall certain scenes from their past. Among their experiences as working-class women, isolated and trapped by circumstances, are the moments when they can look closely. These moments, fragmentary and punctual, are associated with the revelation of experiences related to sexuality and death (in the case of *Solitude*) or with the assumption of the passage of time (in *In Diamond Square*).

The act of looking is key to the processes of knowledge that explain the two novels. Mila and Natàlia do not usually find reciprocal glances and very often they are the object of aggressive eye contact, which hurts them. In most cases, their relationship with otherness is expressed through an exchange of glances that creates opposing relationships. On the one hand, the mutual understanding between the shepherd and Mateu is built on the way these characters see them, related to warmth and comfort. On the other hand, the disagreements with Matias and Quimet are expressed through the 'thoughtless' gaze of the former and the insistent, monkey-like eyes of the latter. Both protagonists feel hurt when some men look at them lasciviously – in the case of Mila, moreover, the piercing look of Ànima is the prelude to the final rape.

Solitude and *In Diamond Square* include visionary and oneiric episodes that can be related to the development of an inner gaze. The first night that Mila spends in the hermitage, she is attacked by red balls of butcher's broom thrown by St Pontius, whose image she has seen before (chapter II: 'Darkness'). The day Natàlia makes the decision to murder her children and kill herself she sees bloody balls come from the altar of a church and light up (chapter XXXV). These episodes can be related to two of the violent experiences that will transform the lives of the two girls: rape and a suicide attempt. Although at the moment of the dream and the vision, they do not understand their meaning, these episodes, together with the experiences that they will gain, will be decisive in their personal evolution and will allow them to acquire a strength thanks to which, will be possible their final liberation (symbolically conveyed by Mila's descent of the mountain and the flight of Colometa, which represents Natàlia's youth). The first novel

expresses this lucidity with the image of Mila's crystalline 'uis vius' [sharp eyes]; the second, with the idea of having 'llum' [sparkle] in Natàlia's eyes (2013: 206).

In both works there are moments when the protagonists see themselves: when Mila contemplates herself in the basin (chapter IV: 'Housecleaning') and when Natàlia, observing her daughter in the dining room, becomes aware of the passage of time (chapter XLVI). In the first case, self-contemplation involves the discovery of one's own beauty (from which will derive the capacity for seduction and the awakening of the sexual instinct). It is in fact a beauty based on the idea of smallness and clarity, which highlights the vulnerability of the character – Mila's face is 'menuda, menuda, però clara i detallada com una fotografia colorida' (1991: 103) ['tiny but bright and detailed as a tinted photo' (1992: 59)]. In the second, Natàlia strongly feels 'el temps que no es veu i ens pasta' (2011: 231) ['the time within myself, the time we don't see, that shapes us' (2013: 188)]. This awareness of aging itself, which is told in a scene reminiscent of 'The Dead' in Joyce's *Dubliners*, takes place at a time when the character relives various moments from the past, from the dovecote to the birth of her son to the dance in Diamond Square. In these episodes, revelation is not caused by contemplation itself but by the weight of memory on the present.

In resonance with modernity, Caterina Albert and Mercè Rodoreda have created two female protagonists whose importance is their subjectivity. From the personal way they look at the world, Mila and Natàlia's voices echo the main contributions of modernity to the contemporary novel: the construction of a complex individual gaze, which is projected on the environment and on others, following the thread of a thought and a living and transformative imagination. For this reason, they continue to fascinate us. Their glance challenges us.

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