



THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
Department of French, Hispanic & Italian Studies

RMST 202

Romance Studies,
Modernism to the Present

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Nada: Carmen Laforet
on Narrative,
Memory, and
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with Jon Beasley-Murray

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Nada flirts with being a novel about nothing.

All this is the symptom of a historical trauma that precedes and drives the narrative but can never fully be expressed. From the fragments and ruins that surround her, Andrea has to piece together some kind of story, a feat that she can finally achieve only later when she looks back and puts her memories into order.



NOTHING LIKE A STORY

The Spanish word “historia” can be translated into English as either “history” or “story.” So where English tries to establish a clear distinction between a true account (history) and a false one (story), Spanish threatens to elide this difference.

If it is not its truth, or alternatively its falsity,
that defines a story, what does?

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Andrea is repeatedly tempted to interpret what she sees around her as though it were part of a story of some kind.

“Days filled with stories, too many troubled stories. Incomplete stories, barely started and already stolen like an old piece of wood left outdoors.” (30)

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“I’m going to tell you a story, my story, Andrea, so you can see it’s like a real novel.” (34)

“I know you’re always dreaming up stories with us as characters.”

“As for the rest of it, don’t make up any novels about it: Our arguments and shouting don’t have a cause, and they don’t lead to any conclusion.” (26)

Is it then causes and conclusions that
make stories cohere?

In *Nada*, coherence and conclusions are elusive. Things do not quite proceed as a story would suggest.

“For me the word evoked an exciting dream of evening clothes and gleaming floors, the effect of my first reading of the story of Cinderella.” (166)

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“I contemplated, trembling with emotion, my astonishing transformation into a blond princess.” (176)

“In no way did this emotion resemble the radiant sensation I had anticipated.” (179)

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“How would I ever understand how these things worked?” (181)

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“How would I ever understand how these things worked?” (181)

The models and patterns provided by the tales she has read prove misleading!

“I remembered the terrible expectation, the longing for life, when I had climbed them for the first time. I was leaving now without having known any of the things I had confusedly hoped for: life in its plenitude, joy, deep interests, love. I was taking nothing from the house on Calle de Aribau. At least, that’s what I thought then.” (244)

A narrative about her experience has cohered in some way, in the book that we are reading and that is now coming to its conclusion, a book that makes “nothing” its theme, that makes something out of nothing. Perhaps “nothing” (*Nada*) is precisely what she takes from her year in Barcelona.

What of causes? What takes place, or what do we imagine to have taken place, before this novel—or any novel—begins? To what extent do we understand how things came to be the way they are when the narrative opens, with Andrea's arrival in Barcelona? And how much do we have to understand?

How important is what we might call “back story” in this novel, or any other?

What do we learn about the stories that have led to this one?

A photograph of a white ceramic plate with a clear glass of water on a wooden table. The table is made of horizontal wooden planks. The glass is partially filled with water. The background shows a wooden railing and some greenery, suggesting an outdoor setting. The text is overlaid on the image in white font.

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What do we learn about the stories that have led to this one?

All narratives start *in medias res*: in the middle of things. However much a story has a beginning, a middle, and an end, we know beginnings (like endings) are arbitrary.

“Because of last-minute difficulties in buying tickets, I arrived in Barcelona at midnight on a train different from the one I had announced.” (3)

What matters is the reminder that
a story has to begin somewhere,
or it does not begin at all.

Andrea's family are haunted by traumas that cannot fully be articulated. Something has squeezed the life from them.

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MEMORY AND THE OPEN SECRET

The past that shadows this book has never fully gone away; its unspoken traces are to be found everywhere its protagonist looks.

There is a doubled memory at work in *Nada*: the narrator's remembrances of the events of her time in Barcelona resonate with the efforts of recall (and repression) that shaped her time there.

The legacy that the city, and indeed the country as a whole, has to confront is that of the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939).

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Franco and the authoritarian regime that he installed long outlived his erstwhile backers, and the country did not return to democracy until his death, in 1975.

The scars of conflict are everywhere
evident, if seldom dwelt upon,
in Laforet's novel.

“the rusted skeletons of ships sunk during the war” (116); “broken stained-glass windows surrounded by stones that the flames had blackened” (124); “old trinkets and excess furniture,” “awful disorder” and “absolute abandonment” (13, 12).

All this can hardly be mentioned.

Andrea's family mirrors the nation itself in
its divisions and ambivalences.

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People had to guard their secrets, their unspeakable shame and their buried aspirations, or otherwise face the consequences.

These are open secrets—the scars are publicly visible, hardly hidden; they simply fall outside the narrative frame.

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“The most painful and jealously guarded secrets are perhaps the ones that everyone around us knows. Stupid tragedies. Useless tears.” (219)

The fact that everybody knows does not mean that these tales can be told.

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By exposing the groundlessness of the official story, the way it is based on “nothing” and cannot account for the affect that pulses through Laforet’s novel, *Nada* quietly gives voice to Spain’s trauma.




Calle de Aribau (Carrer d'Aribau) today



MUSIC

Pianochocolate,
“Romance”



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PRODUCTION

jon.beasley-murray@ubc.ca

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