

**ROMANCE STUDIES:  
Readings in Excess and Betrayal, from Modernism to the Present**

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Jon Beasley-Murray  
University of British Columbia  
jon.beasley-murray@ubc.ca

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## ***Nada*: Carmen Laforet on Narrative, Memory, and Trauma**

Sometimes events coalesce to make a story; sometimes they do not seem to add up to much at all. Carmen Laforet's *Nada* (1945) flirts with being a novel about nothing, as its title suggests. It opens with its protagonist and narrator, Andrea, arriving at her grandmother's house in Barcelona to attend university, imagining that she is embarking on "an agreeable and exciting adventure" (3). But she finds herself in a confusing chaos of hysteria and decay, as her déclassé relatives in their overcrowded tenement display various degrees of mental and emotional disturbance. All this is the symptom of a historical trauma (the civil war) that precedes and drives the narrative but can never fully be expressed, even though everybody knows what has happened and its effects—and affects—are ubiquitous in the fissures that run through family, society, and the environment. From the fragments and ruins that surround her, Andrea has to piece together some kind of story, a feat that she can finally (but still uncertainly, partially) achieve only later when she looks back and puts her memories into order.

### *1. 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. Something similar is the case also in French, where "raconter des histoires," for example, means "to tell fibs." Even in English, the word "story" can take on these two, apparently opposed meanings: both something made-up, a lie ("just a story"); and a statement of the facts of the matter ("What's the story?"). If it is not, then, its truth, or alternatively its falsity, that defines a story, what does?

In Laforet's novel, Andrea is repeatedly tempted to interpret what she sees around her as though it were part of a story of some kind. She is, after all, a student of literature. So, for instance, she tells us that her grandparents had had "many children, like in stories" (12). Some of these children have got away, such as Andrea's own mother, now (like her father) dead, which is why the young student has to depend on the generosity of her more distant relatives. In the old house on Calle de Aribau are the ones who remain, all of whom have tales to tell: stern Aunt Angustias, who presents herself as Andrea's moral compass but who seems to have had a long-term affair with her employer; would-be

painter Uncle Juan who has a tempestuous relationship with his wife, Gloria, sometimes at the expense of their small (unnamed) child's welfare; and in the attic the most intriguing of them all, seductive but dangerous Uncle Ramón, a one-time musician and former spy now involved in trans-Pyrenees smuggling. Andrea finds her "days filled with stories, too many troubled stories. Incomplete stories, barely started and already stolen like an old piece of wood left outdoors" (30). Gloria unburdens herself: "I'm going to tell you a story, my story, Andrea, so you can see it's like a real novel" (34). Román notes: "I know you're always dreaming up stories with us as characters." But he also warns her off: "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. Despite initial impressions, things do not quite proceed as a story would suggest. When, for example, a fellow student, a boy from a wealthy family named Pons, invites her to a dance at his home, Andrea tells us that "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). Looking in the mirror she says that she "contemplated, trembling with emotion, my astonishing transformation into a blond princess" (176). But things do not turn out that way: even in her "least old dress, carefully ironed for the party" (176), she feels embarrassed and alone at Pons's house; "in no way did this emotion resemble the radiant sensation I had anticipated" (179). She ends up asking herself "How would I ever understand how these things worked?" (181). The models and patterns provided by the tales she has heard and read prove misleading!

What then remains? Nothing, as the book's title suggests? As Andrea puts it at the very end of the novel, as she descends the stairs of her grandmother's house for the very last time, to leave for Madrid: "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." But is that really so? Correcting that impression, she adds: "At least, that's what I thought then" (244). After all, 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.

But we have moved to conclusions already. 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? To put this another way: how important is what we might call “back story” in this novel, or any other? Pause the video, and jot down some notes: what do we learn about the stories that have led to this one? While you do that, I’ll have a glass of water, but I’ll be right back.

Water features repeatedly in *Nada*, usually as a poor substitute for something else in a landscape of general impoverishment: Andrea “drink[s] the water the vegetables had been cooked in” (100), in place of the nutrition she needs; when Gloria comes down with a fever, Andrea brings her water (“It seemed she’d never grow tired of drinking” [230]), but it is proper medical attention that she requires; a friend has a car fuelled with “water and benzene” (111); another character, full of pretensions, claims to have drunk absinthe but is cut off with the accusation that “it’s probably green-colored water” (156). In the dilapidated house on Calle de Aribau, the water, lukewarm at best, is hardly even good for bathing, “incapable of refreshing or cleaning my flesh” (164), Andrea tells us. A pitcher of water is thrown as a weapon. Even in its figurative uses—as when someone’s words are pictured as “overflow[ing] like water that breaks through the dikes and carries away everything” (192)—there are seldom any positive associations to water in the novel.

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. *Nada* opens at a specific time: midnight, at Barcelona’s Francia train station. But just as Andrea might have caught a different train—the book’s first line tells us that “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)—so the story could also have started earlier. We never learn what these “last-minute difficulties” were. Yet surely this detail does not matter; what matters is precisely the reminder that a story has to begin somewhere, or it does not begin at all. Other aspects of the past, on the other hand, may seem more pressing. For

Andrea's family are haunted by traumas that cannot fully be articulated. They and their house are described in terms of death and mourning, from Uncle Juan's skull-like face (5) to the bed that "resembled a coffin" (9). Something has squeezed the life from them. If their current distress has a cause, it must be found in the past.

## 2. *Memory and the Open Secret*

Though Andrea arrives in Barcelona excited about her future, and at the novel's end leaves for Madrid likewise hoping to make a break from what has come before, she spends much of her time looking backwards. For the past that shadows this book has never fully gone away; its unspoken traces are to be found everywhere its protagonist looks. And in turn, when she becomes the novel's narrator, now presumably at some distance from the person she used to be, she finds herself sifting through her recollections of this significant but relatively brief episode of her life, to try to understand it and also perhaps herself. In short, 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. This had begun in 1936 with a military uprising, led by General Francisco Franco, against the then Republican government. Years of bitter fighting followed, in which Franco's Nationalist forces were supported by Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, while most of the rest of Europe stood aside. The Republic steadily lost territory despite the aid of the Soviet Union, Mexico, and thousands of idealistic volunteers who flocked to form International Brigades. Amid the chaos, Barcelona saw infighting also between anarchists (who had taken control of the city early on in the war) and Soviet-supported Communists. In the end, Catalonia was over-run in early 1939, and Madrid fell to Franco soon thereafter. All this was a prelude to World War II, which broke out later the same year, in which Spain was officially neutral. But 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.* For instance, when Andrea visits a restaurant with a boy, Gerardo, they look out over the port and see, but do not comment on, "the rusted skeletons of ships sunk during the war" (116).

Likewise, with Pons, Andrea visits a church that has been “burned during the war.” She sees “broken stained-glass windows surrounded by stones that the flames had blackened” but concludes that “This desolation overflowed with poetry and made the place even more spiritual” (124). Less poetic is the poverty and hunger suffered even by formerly comfortable families such as her own: half of the grandmother’s apartment has been sold off, and the contents of the other, “old trinkets and excess furniture,” litter the space that remains in “awful disorder” and “absolute abandonment” (13, 12). It is only when Gloria starts selling off some of this junk to a rag-and-bone man that the household can occasionally afford the “luxury” of putting “meat in the food” (239). Andrea in particular is perpetually and quite literally starving, and in part as a result sometimes feels that she is “going crazy, too. . . . People have been driven crazy by hunger” (209). But again, all this can hardly be mentioned: Andrea’s grandmother surreptitiously leaves her some over-boiled vegetables or an extra crust of bread from time to time, but neither of them can acknowledge their sacrifices.

Families closer to the regime avoid these indignities, but Andrea’s family mirrors the nation itself in its divisions and ambivalences: Uncle Juan had fought with the Republican army; Aunt Angustias is clearly more conservative, sheltering her Nationalist employer (and possible lover). Uncle Román had tried to play both sides, and continues to do so with his black-marketeering. In what is perhaps the book’s one “event,” however, faced with the prospect of blackmail from Andrea’s friend Ena (perhaps seeking vengeance for the way in which the older man had treated her mother years before) and/or denunciation from Juan’s wife, Gloria, Román kills himself. On the Calle de Aribau, as in much of Spain at the time, people had to guard their secrets, their unspeakable shame and their buried aspirations, or otherwise face the consequences.

The irony is that these are open secrets—again, the scars are publicly visible, hardly hidden; they simply fall outside the narrative frame. As Andrea notes, “the most painful and jealously guarded secrets are perhaps the ones that everyone around us knows. Stupid tragedies. Useless tears” (219). But the fact that everybody knows does not mean that these tales can be told. Censorship, even self-censorship (and Laforet’s novel had to be approved by Franco’s censors, which no doubt shaped what she felt she could write), never really works if its object is to prevent people from knowing the facts of the matter, the real story. But its object is different: it is to prevent those facts from being expressed,

to ensure that they are never registered in the official story, or any other tale that can openly be told. By exposing the groundlessness of that 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.

*works cited*

Laforet, Carmen. *Nada*. Trans. Edith Grossman. New York: The Modern Library, 2008.

Image:

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Carrer\\_Parc%ADs\\_amb\\_Aribau\\_-\\_20200824\\_170428.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Carrer_Parc%ADs_amb_Aribau_-_20200824_170428.jpg)

Song: “Spanish Bombs” (The Clash)



Calle de Aribau (Carrer d'Aribau) today