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THE EVOLUTION OF CARMEN LAFORET'S AESTHETICS BASED ON THE ANALYSIS OF HER NARRATIVE WORK

M^a. Gloria García-Blay
Cardenal Herrera-CEU University
CEU Universities, Spain
E-mail: gloria.garcia@uchceu.es

Abstract

In this article we will analyze the evolution of the work of Carmen Laforet, based on the aesthetic characteristics present in her narrative texts. Our intention is to verify the evolutionary process that the author's works went through throughout her long publication in time and to verify if there is a relationship between Laforetian production and the different postwar literary paradigms. For this, a qualitative methodology has been used through the technique of documentary analysis, since the author's works have been selected and analyzed to establish the characteristics common to the narrative literary models that emerged in Spain from the 1940s to the formal renewal of the 1960s.

Key words: Laforet, aesthetics, postwar narrative, existentialism, social realism, experimental narrative.

Introduction

Laforet's literary career, as is well known, has not been as regular as could be expected from an author who won the first Nadal prize at the age of twenty-two. In fact, authors such as Sanz Villanueva (2010: 285) state that her production after *Nada* did not help her to "achieve an overall leading role in post-war Spanish narrative". Delibes (2004: 60) adds that the delay in time until the publication of her second novel is due to the author's fear of not being able to surpass herself, a fact that causes her impotence. However, we must not forget that, although seven years elapse until *La isla y los demonios*, Laforet writes part of her stories during this period. We will have to wait three more years, until 1955, for the first edition of *La mujer nueva*. It was precisely during this period that her seven short novels were published. And, once again, silence. It was not until 1963 that *La insolación* appeared, the first work of an incomplete trilogy, the second part of which *Al volver la esquina* was published posthumously in 2004.

Given this situation, the possibility has been raised that Laforet might have been influenced by the narrative currents that appeared in Spain from the 1940s to the 1960s, the decade in which her last two novels were written.

As Sanz Villanueva says (1980: 19-26), we cannot separate from their context the different cultural manifestations of a society, understanding context in a broad sense, which encompasses both feelings - euphoria in the victors, fear in the vanquished - and those material aspects related to shortages or the difficulty of access to housing, or even as the imposition of a uniformity in thought, based on the ideological autarchy of the Falange and National Catholicism, which influenced the literary production of postwar narrators.

To verify our objective, we will briefly examine the two literary promotions of the first postwar period. We will continue with the generation of the mid-century, already distanced in time from the civil war and concerned, fundamentally, with reflecting the social unrest of more than a decade of repression. To conclude this section, we will mention the eagerness for renewal of the literary creations of the sixties due to the aesthetic fatigue of the postwar period. A regeneration that we understand to be necessary at the literary level and that is a direct consequence of the incipient opening of Franco's regime towards Europe. With this, we will be able to trace the evolution of the postwar novel from testimonial realism, through social realism, to the formal renovation of late Francoism.

In the last point, we will try to link Laforet's work with the thematic and formal transformation of Spanish narrative, based on examples of her novels and short stories.

Spanish narrative: from the postwar period to the structural reorientation of the 1960s

Since our objective is to verify whether there was an evolution in Laforetian aesthetics, it has been thought convenient to make a brief review of the author's contemporary promotions, with the sole purpose of recalling here her most outstanding characteristics.

At first, after the abandonment of the propagandistic and triumphalist literature of the years immediately following the end of the civil war, we observe the appearance of stories with an aesthetic that reflects the difficult life experience of these authors during the war. Since this group of authors lacked paradigms to imitate due to the death or exile of the writers immediately preceding them, they had to look to traditional Spanish narrative as a model, that is, the picaresque novel, nineteenth-century realism and the novel of the Generation of '98.

Therefore, a realist-oriented narrative will emerge in an attempt to generalize its concerns about the problems of the human being, although leaving behind any social criticism (Basanta, 1990: 26). They will reflect human conflicts, highlighting the uncertainty of our destiny. The aim is to show the vicissitudes of human existence and to express their feelings of anguish through the reality that surrounds them. Hence, the name of existential novel that most of the novels of the forties received (Sobejano, 1975: 279).

Despite this denomination, each author reflected the isolation of the human being and the despair and anxiety that an individual is capable of enduring from different points of view, since in a certain way they tried to combine tradition and social context. Larraz (2014: 166-167) states that:

Without being exactly part of the traditionalist or Falangist cultural project, *La familia de Pascual Duarte*, *Nada* and almost all the novels of the high postwar period possess an existential concern in which the substratum of the literary creed of the time converges: gravity, transcendentalism, anthropological concerns, the themes of God, death, guilt, etc. typical of a Catholic literature, with the anti-avant-garde realism, vigor, the heritage of '98, social commitment, etc. characteristic of cultural Falangism.

Already in the fifties, due to the evolution of the socio-political context, whose influence we cannot deny when analyzing the different texts, we observe an aesthetic change in the narrative. The so-called mid-century generation shares the thesis of literature as an instrumental and political function; however, two tendencies can be observed. They are authors who focus on a narrative of an objective and testimonial nature, influenced by the neo-realist aesthetic, who become witnesses to the suffering of Spanish society. This group is also characterized by taking care of the expressiveness in their works and by refusing the purely functional nature of prose (Sanz Villanueva, 2010: 179). In relation to the second literary line of the mid-century, novels arise that denounce the political and social circumstances of Spain, with the clear intention of instrumentalizing literature. According to Becerra (2017), this is social realism as a way of reacting against the social, cultural and political reality of the time, that is, a kind of attempt to turn literature into a substitute for the press, to denounce the idiosyncrasies of the time in a trustworthy way.

Social novels ended up causing widespread weariness: the style had been neglected, the individual protagonist had disappeared, the narrator had been turned into a mere witness (García-Blay and Micó, 2018: 97). Moreover, a social context characterized by the claim of political, social and cultural changes (Saz, 2007: 152) became the setting for a new type of literature characterized by its structural restructuring. In the narrative of the sixties it is worth mentioning the fragmentation of the story and chronological sequences (Basanta, 1990: 52), the use of the free indirect style and the interior monologue with alternating third and second person narrators (Senable, Morán and Gimferrer, 1980: 460). Regarding the treatment of language, ellipsis, temporal superimpositions, analepsis... abound (Grande and Rey, 1980: 439). There was a literary renovation that concerned both the content of the new works and their form.

Aesthetics in the narrative of Carmen Laforet

In order to analyze the aesthetic evolution of Carmen Laforet's works, we will begin in 1945, the year of the publication of *Nada*. The author's first work coincides with the existentialist aesthetics of tremendist that was in use in Spain during the forties. Next, we will talk about *La isla y los demonios*, in which the protagonist's feeling of being overwhelmed is evident throughout the story.

With regard to the short narrative that we will deal with next, we should differentiate between short stories and short novels. Although the former are earlier in their composition, they already describe the underdeveloped post-war Spain. In reference to the latter, it is worth recalling the words of Álvaro Pombo (2010: 12) in the prologue to *Siete novelas cortas*:

Both the neorealist tone, as well as what is detailed in them shows a dwarfed and, above all, damaged Spain. What is blurred, confused, fragmentary, is not only the Spanish reality, nor only the ideas that the Spaniards of that time had of themselves, but also the general system of values, the particularities of what was good and what was bad, what was accepted as good and what was bad at that time.

Therefore, we can deduce that throughout these short stories the author assumes the role of the narrator as the one who reflects the society of the time, although without the intention of explicitly denouncing it. It is a posture that is quite close to the neorealism of the early fifties, since its date of composition and publication (1952-1955) coincides with this type of aesthetics.

Next, we will focus on the existential problems raised in *La mujer nueva*, and the need to turn to religion to solve them.

Finally, we will end up this section with the novels that make up Laforet's third literary cycle: *La isla y los demonios* and *Al volver la esquina*, which present some characteristics of the experimental novel of the sixties.

Kronik (1981: 202) affirmed that *Nada* fits into a type of literature of pessimism and despair, considering that this novel is "the cry of a generation that had to cry out with its voice drowned". Therefore, it would not be wrong to start from this statement in order to investigate the way in which narrative fiction reflects the feeling of suffocation that was felt in the post-war period, specifically in the years immediately following the end of the war.

Thus, we can observe that the feeling of suffocation is constant in Andrea from the beginning of the story. The appearance of the house already indicates the suffocation that the protagonist feels and which she expresses as a bad dream: "then it all seemed like a nightmare" (p. 25). And we do not know if "then" only refers to the moment she arrives at the house in Aribau or to the whole year that passes within those walls surrounded by people whom the war and its aftermath have turned into unfortunate people. At the moment of his arrival, the oppressive sensation begins with the description of the access stairs:

I began to climb the stairs very slowly, loaded with my suitcase. Everything was beginning to be strange to my imagination; the narrow, worn mosaic steps, illuminated by the electric light, had no place in my memory.

(Laforet 1963, 25)

Andrea arrives in Barcelona with the hope of the longed-for freedom; on the other hand, the door that closes behind her seems like that of a prison that will deprive her of her independence, as the protagonist recognizes at the end of the first part:

I realized that I could bear everything: the cold that soaked my worn-out clothes, the sadness of my absolute misery, the dull horror of that dirty house. Everything but his authority over me. That was what had drowned me when I arrived in Barcelona, what had made me fall into abulia, what killed my initiatives; that look of Angustias.

(Laforet 1963, 96)

These statements are no more than a reflection of the situation in post-war Spain, in which while deprivations were endured, the control of the institutions provoked passivity and disinterest in society. It is not surprising, then, that Andrea suffers to such an extent a "suffocating heat" (p. 26) produced by the atmosphere of the house that she manifests:

Those people, moving or looking at me in an environment that the agglomeration of things overshadowed, seemed to have burdened me with all the heat and soot of the trip, which I had forgotten before. Besides, I anxiously longed for a breath of fresh air.

(Laforet 1963, 27)

The need to breathe is almost impossible, since the accumulation of objects we are talking about takes away vital space from the protagonist who describes the place where she will sleep as "a burial mound surrounded by mourners -that double row of disemboweled armchairs-" (p. 29). Hence the imperious need to try to open a window through which to contemplate the stars that transmit serenity and that contrast with the claustrophobic atmosphere of the interior of the house. And this lack of vital space is not only Andrea's impression; Román also refers to it when he justifies his family's terrible coexistence with the objects that surround them: "that is the fault of the things, which are suffocated, painful, full of sadness" (p. 46). But, at the same time, the character is aware that they cannot escape from this dominant environment, as he demonstrates through the metaphor of a shipwreck:

That is like a sinking ship. We are the poor rats who, seeing the water, do not know what to do... Your mother avoided the danger before anyone else by leaving. Two of your aunts married the first man who came along, in order to escape.

(Laforet 1963, 27)

Perhaps it is not too bold to see in this fragment the existence of a Spain in which its inhabitants are unable to act due to the misery that surrounds them, and of citizens who have fled the situation through emigration.

Although not only this distress is caused by the rarefied atmosphere of the house but also by her poverty, by the impossibility of living like her university friends, which provokes in Andrea again the anguish of feeling overwhelmed by the situation that surrounds her. Nevertheless, it is difficult for Andrea to get out of her situation, of which she is truly aware after Pons' party. She takes up the idea of an atavistic determinism, also present in *La familia de Pascual Duarte*, which governs our destiny and overwhelms her more and more: It seemed to me that there is no point in running if you always have to go down the same path, closed, of our personality. Some beings are born to live, others to work, others to look at life. I had a small and dastardly role of spectator. Impossible to get out of it. Impossible to free myself. A tremendous sorrow was for me the only real thing in those moments.

(Laforet 1963, 27)

All these existential burdens are also evident in the text through an ugly aesthetic, characterized, for example, by an animalization of the characters. We observe numerous references to animals or to some of their peculiarities that show the character of the characters or, at least, the impression they make on the rest of the actors. Antonia is an indescribable being; it is said of her that "never has another creature made a more unpleasant impression on me" (p. 26). Juan growls, as an example of the ill-mannered man he is: "I heard Juan growl" (p. 27). The grandmother is compared to a bird, probably a hen trying to defend her chicks: "the granny immediately got into the fight, flapping and attempting to hold Angustias" (p. 73). Of Andrea her aunt states: "you look like a crow over my eyes... A crow that I would like to inherit in life" (p. 94), since Angustias' perception is that Andrea is stealing her space by having slept in her room. Gloria is an "evil serpent" (p. 99) in a clear allusion to the biblical passage of Adam and Eve, as she is seen as the person who has brought ruin to the house. Angustias repeats the argument against Gloria in the following pages and takes advantage of the narrator's voice to ironize with this animalization: "the serpent woman slept coiled in bed until noon, surrendered and moaning in her sleep. At night she showed me the signs of the beating Juan had given her" (p. 101). Angustias's friends are seen "like a flock of crows perched on the branches of the hanged man's tree" (p. 101), waiting, as we read in the text, "for Angustias's beautiful and modest death" (p. 101) before entering the convent. It continues to get out of the narrow confines of that life" (p. 79). She will only be able to overcome her drowning if she distances herself from everything she experienced in Barcelona.

On the other hand, the drowning that we observe in *La isla y los demonios* is due to the sensation of feeling enclosed, alone and disconnected from the Spanish reality from which Marta Camino is separated and of which she only knows through the news that arrives from the war to the islands, from where she longs to leave, as is affirmed after a conversation with the grandfather about Marta's father:

He had anchored here on the island, and he wasn't cut out for it. He was a somewhat bohemian and vagabond type... That's probably why he was angry with his family in Madrid. Sometimes a man goes out like that, and then it's a disgrace: he can't stop anywhere. He always wants to leave. -And a woman? Grandfather laughed and stroked his head. -No, not a woman... I've never heard that. It would go against nature.

However, Martha was becoming convinced that, in spite of everything, she was something of a wanderer. She always dreamed of seeing faraway countries. The sirens of the ships scratched her heart.
(Laforet 1963, 368)

Nevertheless, from the beginning of the novel we are told of Marta's drowning. Already during her stay at the boarding school, the narrator anticipates Marta's anguish at the impossibility of escaping: "if it had not been for knowing she was locked in a building" (p. 368). Nor does she find the joy she experiences outside inside a house that is alluded to by making us look at its walls as a synonym of imprisonment: "inside the walls of the house this placidity and tranquility disappeared" (p. 364). Moreover, the doors remain closed: "the door creaked open and in the silence of the night that noise was shocking" (p. 371), "Marta closed the bedroom door behind her and when she heard the couple begin to argue she shrugged her shoulders" (p. 382), "Pino had locked himself in" (p. 415), "she heard how her brother turned the key, locking it on the outside" (p. 513). Even her mother's door, because of an illness that prevents her from recognizing anyone, remains closed to her.

She feels abandoned and looks to her relatives to make herself visible, something she does not achieve and which provokes more frustration in her: "when she thought of the way Matilde had rejected her, she even felt like crying. She would never tell her friends" (p. 406), "even Hones [...] teased her a little because, she said, at sixteen, she had not yet been able to have a boyfriend" (p. 412).

Not only does Marta feel oppression for not being able to escape from her daily life; social conventions, in turn, provoke in her a feeling of oppression. And the behavior appropriate to the custom is the one she must follow; otherwise, the punishment is not only physical, but the total deprivation of the freedom that Marta so craves, in the purest Lorca style :

-You neither want to nor can. From today on, no more studies, no more going out; all of them in here, do you understand? Here, with Pino and with your mother. Marta opposed this with a choked voice, a hesitant need. -I have to take my exams... -You're out of exams. And now, to your room, without supper. To your room to laugh.

(Laforet 1963, 507)

Precisely her mother, who with her death will free her from confinement, provokes a new sensation of suffocation represented by the same suffocating heat that Andrea feels the first day she arrives at her family's house.

Thus, despite the fact that in *La isla y los demonios*, we can observe an existential anguish due to the absence of freedom, and a feeling of suffocation produced by the oppressive life that surrounds the protagonist, the writing is kinder than in *Nada*. It seems that the tremendist aesthetics have been left behind, without having abandoned the existential concerns.

Regarding Laforet's short narrative, both the short stories and the short novels, it is worth mentioning that they would be more related to the neorealist aesthetics than to the existentialism of the forties. Through these narratives there is an attempt to reflect the reality that surrounds the characters, so that what happens is told to itself (Monterde, 1994:48), as if a movie camera were recording the scenes that appear. We could add that these texts are intended to become, as Capdevilla (2009:25) states in relation to Italian Neorealism, "a tool for polemic and social criticism of the post-war situation". According to Torres Aguilera (2003:154), the neorealist novel deals with general themes among which are social injustice or the feeling of loneliness and frustration as consequences of the war. The author's point of view does not exist, that is to say, they are testimonial narratives with which to relate the everyday life, most of the time, of the most underprivileged. This "costumbrismo" does not leave aside, in some of Laforet's short stories, the portrait of a bourgeoisie that she characterizes as trivial, as we will explain later. In these stories, the author shows us a country trying to survive the civil conflict and its consequences: misery, hunger and suffering.

Thus, and taking into account the aforementioned, we will go on to justify it in each of Laforet's short stories and novels, following the order established in the publication of Novels of 1963.

La muerta reflects the loneliness that Mr. Paco feels after the death of his wife. After many years of marriage and endless illnesses, Maria passes away. However, her husband feels her presence in the house, in the way her daughters have changed their attitude, in the way she rolls up her scarf. Maria becomes a memory that helps support the idea of the woman as the perfect housewife:

I had been feeling her for several days when I came into the house, and I couldn't say why. He remembered her as when she was young, and he had been proud of her, that she was clean and tidy like no other; with that black hair tied in a bun, always shiny, and those whitest teeth. And that smell of cleanliness, of good cooking in her kitchen, which she whitewashed every Saturday, and that tranquility, that silence that she seemed to put wherever she entered....

(Laforet 1963, 268-269)

Disillusionment and abulia have taken hold of the protagonist of *El veraneo*. The war has put an end to the aspirations that many young people had planned. Juan Pablo will never pass the competitive examinations and Rosa will stop dreaming of university studies. She will adapt to her new way of life, like so many other Spaniards:

No, Rosa has long since stopped believing and trusting in her brother. She has become a peasant. She plants potatoes in her garden with her own hands, feeds her pig and raises chickens. The old woman who assisted her at the beginning has returned, of course, to her service. The people of the village respect her...; but, to get there, can you imagine what the poor woman has had to suffer? Loneliness, spiritual hunger, continual disappointments after her hopes were always raised?

(Laforet 1963, 279)

The atmosphere described in *La fotografía* is that of post-war misery, with hunger, continuous work in order to get some money, infant mortality, emigration... The following fragment mentions the helplessness felt by the protagonist in the face of the ruin that her life has become:

In the mornings Leonor can get the idea that Sebastián is with her, as during those four wonderful and terrible years they had spent together, continually deluding themselves and continually bleeding to the point of exhaustion from so much useless effort and so much fatality.

(Laforet 1963, 286)

En la edad del pato is one of the stories that reflects a less disadvantaged social class, which can afford to attend private schools. Although the theme, the follies of adolescence, is quite timeless, there is still a latent disregard for everyday problems, perhaps represented by Latin and mathematics, and a desire to escape from reality, as an indication of the little social involvement of the bourgeoisie of the time:

The contest that one made us spend at least a week of fun. It was one of those ideas that we described as "genius". It was one of the many entertaining things we could think of between classes, to forget the troubles of the Math problems and the Latin exercises.

(Laforet 1963, 286)

We can observe an anti-war in *La última noche*. From the way in which Paul is recruited, we understand that by means of a national levy and without any possibility of refusal, it is not strange the feeling that the protagonist shows for wanting to escape from a war that he considers useless:

Can you imagine what those months of winter were for me, of a soldier's life, in conflict with all my principles and my education, against my whole formation, with nothing loved and strong to defend?

(Laforet 1963, 300)

With *Rosamunda*, the post-war panorama is taken up again. In this story, frustration in the face of a cruel reality, with abuses and ill-treatment of women, is palliated through the recreation of a fantasy world that stumbles so much with the truth of an existence from which women cannot escape:

Her real name was Felisa; but, it is not known why, she abhorred it. In her inner self she had always been Rosamunda, since the times of her adolescence. That Rosamunda had become the magic formula that saved her from the narrowness of her home, from the monotony of her hours; that Rosamunda had turned her coarse and colored boyfriend into a prince of legend. Rosamunda was for her a beloved name, of exquisite qualities... But why explain so many things to the young man?

(Laforet 1963, 307)

And the same thing happens in *El regreso*. Julián does not seek refuge in a world of fantasy, but in the asylum where he has been admitted to avoid facing a precarious economic situation that he is unable to cope with and from which he longs to escape. Again, that anguish caused by the post-war hardship that causes remorse in a man who has not known how to take care of his family; although, perhaps, we should say that circumstances have not allowed him to do so:

Now he returned cured. He had been cured for several months. But the nuns had t She no longer saw the misery of the hospital, attentive to her own sensations. The idea of her son-in-law -whom she had always believed to be a vulgar man- sitting next to that woman, listening to her, worrying about her Christmas bonus, not because of provincial nonsense but because of an impulse of her spirit, that idea reconciled her with Julio.

(Laforet 1963, 343)

Regarding the seven short novels, it should be said, first of all, that all of them describe the characteristic aspects of the Spanish postwar period: economic precariousness, beastiality, censorship and undervaluation of women. Secondly, it has been noted that they follow the same line as the short stories, that is to say, they reflect daily life without the author demonstrating his opinion in any more than an implicit way.

The first of these novels is *La llamada* which gives the impression of being a first part of *Rosamunda*, not only because of the physical appearance of the protagonist, but also because the story is the same: a woman who abandons her family to fight for a dream that she will not be able to fulfill in a strongly macho society; and the backdrop is the Spanish misery of the forties and the beatitude of the early fifties. In addition, Matilde's return trip to her home is quite similar to the one Rosamunda undertakes after her artistic failure. We find again the frustration of the individual because his freedom has been curtailed by circumstances, specifically, a marriage as a solution to family authority; something that will not produce happiness, but a greater disappointment:

Doña Eloísa had felt affection for Mercedes when Mercedes was a charming creature, full of life, somewhat unhinged. She remembered very well that her hasty marriage to a man of uncouth appearance horrified her. She knew that Mercedes was going to the marriage as if throwing a challenge to destiny. Maria Rosa herself, her daughter-in-law, commented: "It's a good thing he seems to be able to dominate her. But I don't have much confidence that she won't run off with a violinist the day you least expect it."

(Laforet 1963, 663)

El último verano may be the most testimonial short novel. We are presented with such a general theme as the possibility of vacationing in San Sebastian before the mother passes away. Throughout the narrative we observe the relationships between the different characters and the description of the problems, which are not without frustration, that each one must overcome in order to get the money necessary for the summer vacation, since they understand that it is a reward for the sacrifices that the mother has always made for them, as Lucas states:

You will understand that if not, neither Luis, nor I, nor Dad would have thought of the summer holiday in San Sebastian... It was a good idea of Luis; because mother, the poor thing, had done nothing but sacrifice herself for everyone; she never had a distraction....

(Laforet 1963, 705)

Social injustice and disillusionment are the themes depicted in *Un noviazgo*. From Alicia's point of view, her boss does not deserve to marry her and, in fact, breaks off the engagement, because he has always looked down on her due to her social class. The character is obsessed with a life she had to give up with the death of her father whom she idealizes: her job, her relatives, her house in the countryside... All the result of the disillusionment caused by a historical moment of continuous sacrifices, like all those women who had to take care of their families while renouncing to form their own:

I have known how to do my duty like few people. I have always been able to get ahead; when you needed medicine, I have gone out to get it; when you needed a dress, you have had it; we have food on the table every day... If you still think I am a bad daughter because I do not provide you with more comforts, if you think it is my duty, I will say goodbye to De Arco without any further explanations.

(Laforet 1963, 766)

Despair is observed in *El piano*. A desperation that we understand towards the end of the novel, when the illness of the protagonist's son is revealed. Once again, daily life is characterized by the surrounding economic precariousness, as part of the social injustice, for this misery decided who died and who lived: It was a death sentence that blackened their hearts and drove them crazy with anguish. It was a struggle with death, and it was the desperation to look for money, to ask for advances and loans for that struggle.

(Laforet 1963, 822)

In *La niña*, two opposing social classes. On the one hand, little Olivia who lacks absolutely everything; on the other, Carolina, part of the petty bourgeoisie who helps others because in this way she is happy; and, finally, Lula, representative of the high bourgeoisie, preoccupied with smoking, drinking, playing cards or attending séances, and for whom the child is nothing more than another entertainment, as she herself so trivially affirms:

-Dressed as a hospice girl, no, madam. The girl is wearing the uniform of the Sacred Heart, model 1925... I already thought the air of this creature was very strange!... Anyway, ladies, please sit down and tell me the whole story. I am having a lot of fun...

(Laforet 1963, 893)

The first part of *Los emplazados* begins with a costumbrist description of the baptism of the protagonist, while the second, under the guise of the courtship of Paquito and Teresa, is a synthesis of the disasters of the war:

But since the war had started, when there were deaths, panic and later -those last days- fighting... Since then Teresa thought of everything but love. She thought about her mother and her sister. She knew that her brother-in-law had disappeared in the first days; she knew that her sister was expecting her third child among those anguishes... [...] She had been a nurse and a mortician. [...] She was beginning to get used to the fact that tremendous things were happening at her side.

(Laforet 1963, 943)

Insecurity and fear characterize Elisa. The protagonist of *El viaje divertido* is the model of a post-war woman. Always depending on someone to take care of her and never being sure of adequately fulfilling her role. At the same time, she is one more victim of the war: her family has been killed, her property stolen and the murderer is one of her relatives, not too unusual in those days:

Elisita had not recognized any of them as the men of that night... -She doesn't remember... The truth is that she was very little then and it took a long time to make a serious investigation. None of those servants wanted to serve in the family again after having been considered as suspects of a murder committed under the cover of the fear and anguish of those days of war.

(Laforet 1963, 980)

This appearance of cinematographic chronicle that we observe in the short stories and novels makes us reaffirm the idea that we are talking about neorealism, especially if we notice that almost all the characters in the stories we have just examined are women and children, as happened in the late forties in Italian cinema (Velázquez, 2012: 162).

Laforet's third novel, *La mujer nueva*, takes up the existential aesthetics of her first literary cycle. However, the approach is different, since the protagonist relies on religion to find meaning in her life.

The novel begins with the warning of a storm, a metaphor for the inner conflict of the protagonist. Paulina flees her home because she is unhappy, drowning between a husband too tied to the land with whom she is no longer in love and a married lover with whom she cannot share her life. Faced with this situation, she suffocates, as she herself communicates to Antonio:

Why will life be so complicated, Antonio, why will we make it so complicated? Sometimes it is impossible to live with the hardness and strength that one longs for in youth... Why do we exist like this, unhappy, longing? Why can we not have happiness, but moments of abandonment, of pleasure and then of shadow?

(Laforet 1963, 1118)

And in that moment of doubts and uncertainties about the existence of the human being, he feels the presence of God; indeed, he perceives that his soul has united with Him and within him there begins to be peace and tranquility. However, Pauline's drowning does not cease after her conversion. She is still in love with Antonio and although she longs to overcome this situation, the contradictions are continuous:

She needed it, it was hers, this small, close and understandable human happiness. It was hers, she had won it with much anticipated pain... After these reflections she had a moment of seeing herself as a worn-out, hard woman, longing for a pleasure that had a lot of bestial, no matter how much adornment she wanted to put on it. And it was terrible to feel this way after having believed she deserved even the revelation of Heaven.

(Laforet 1963, 1205)

So it is not strange that she affirms that "at times she despaired" (p. 1265). But she manages to dominate her feelings, not without difficulties and continuous temptations, thanks to divine help. And it will not be until the penultimate chapter of the novel when, from her solitude and already sure of her complete dedication to God, she understands what her destiny is. No other ending would have been possible in the mid-fifties:

Her path of perfection must have been marked by the intimate stripping of those whom God wants to fill with light, but in appearance it was the simplest and most anodyne: the total realization, body and soul, of her abandoned marriage to Eulogio.

(Laforet 1963, 1342)

Laforet's third literary cycle began in 1963 with the publication of *La insolación*. In this novel the character is once again an adolescent who seeks to find himself in a period of personal growth and discovery of the unjust world of adults. However, we notice a small technical novelty with respect to the previous aesthetics. The two interludes that separate the summers in Beniteca are characterized by temporal condensation; although it is true that it seems that this is a way of giving speed to the story, since the action is transmitted through enunciative sentences and verbs in the present tense, because Martín's winters have no importance, since in them he does not learn, does not mature; in fact, in these two intervals nothing happens, except quick news about the character's life, centered, once again, on the post-war misery.

Thus, we can observe during the first intermission the character's life during the winter, summarized in a few lines, and common to other boys trying to pass their baccalaureate in such precarious conditions. In the second intermission, the same technique is repeated; the winter of 1942 is recounted in a few pages, because the only thing of interest is Martín's life.

At this point, we should ask ourselves what is the function of these two parentheses in a novel in which the protagonist seeks to find his own identity. Through them, the reader finds out before the character does that Martín's destiny is art. The boy discovers this fact in the third part of the novel. To arrive at this revelation, Martín must go through different phases: admiration for his father, feelings of loneliness and abandonment, disappointment and anguish. In the first part of the novel he denies his hobby and talent in an attempt to be like his father and gain his admiration:

And Martín loathed his grandmother. All his soul exposed, there, at that table. All his dreams. At that moment he didn't want to be a painter, anyway. At that moment he wanted to look like his father, only like his father.

(Laforet 1985, 5)

The feeling of not fitting in anywhere and of feeling abandoned by everyone is visible at the end of the second part of the novel, despite his attempts throughout the novel to become part of his father's life or that of his friends:

He was alone again, waiting. He had in his eyes the drawing of that house he saw in front of him, with its old roofs, its turret, its barred windows [...]. He felt terribly lonely when he heard the voices of Mr. Corsi and his friends. [...] The frivolity of what Mr. Corsi was going to tell him hurt him when compared to the bitterness he felt. [...] That night he could hardly sleep. She waited for a long time on the rooftop for a call, a warning. He waited under a bitter waning moon for the Corsi to remember to say goodbye to him.

(Laforet 1985, 122)

The fact that he feels abandoned by everyone increases after the beating his father gives him, when the Corsi's go on an outing without even taking an interest in him, and leads to disappointment for having trusted in the friendship of two such frivolous people. But what is most striking is the deep sense of anguish and guilt that Martín shows for his father's behavior towards him.

The last novel written by Carmen Laforet presents characteristics typical of the novel of the sixties. We do not know if the date of composition coincided with its delivery to the publisher in 1973 or if it was written years before, so it is not easy to ascribe it chronologically to a type of aesthetic. What can be observed in it are some features that we will comment on below. As for the character in *Al volver la esquina*, we can perceive that he feels lost and longs to understand who he is and what his mission is. The narrative time is not linear, as prolepsis and analepsis are constant throughout the story; in addition, the use of memory is frequent to relate events that are associated with the present. If we look at the space, it is worth mentioning that it is wide and different social classes are represented in it.

Finally, as regards the figure of the narrator, we observe the presence of the interior monologue in some of Martín's interventions. As an example of the use of this technique in the narrative person, we can look at one of the first fragments of the novel:

I'm awake now, I won't remember anything anymore! I have no desire to open my eyes. They hurt when I squeeze them. I suppose I am in Toledo with the light of the Fonda Vieja de Toledo surrounding me. But I don't believe I'm there, I feel at home. I can even still smell the smells of the park... So much traveling around the world to dream of this return. But what kind of world have I traveled through? A narrow world: pensions, guesthouses in Madrid. Waking up at night in winter. How many times it has happened to me, when the alarm clock rang, to wake up in the dark trying to get out of bed by the place where it is attached to the wall; or to look for the door in the shadow of the closet, or to confuse the water of a mirror with the window... I had to wait many times, head in my hands, for the lump of furniture to stop in its exact place while I, Martín Soto, tried to remember which stairs I had dragged my suitcase down the previous afternoon, looking for the new and cheaper lodging, and in which street, in which part of the city I found my new den. I have to open my eyes and see the new burrow where I have arrived today. I don't trust my sensations. I have been fooled many times. For example, now I am stiff, I cannot open my eyes.

(Laforet 2004, 4)

In these memories, like a voice-over, the sensation of feeling lost that Martín experiences already appears; that going from one place to another without being able to find himself or find out what his destiny in life is. In order to recover the memories that help the protagonist in his search for himself, he resorts to memory, which allows him to tell us about Beatriz, who, finally, will provide him with the meaning he is trying to find:

No. These confidences of Jiménez Din do not belong to the surplus of my memories. Not for a moment have I forgotten or wanted to forget these things. If I mix them among these notes of what returns to my memory after having been locked up and lost in that secret corner that Dr. Leutari has made me discover, it is to explain to myself other forgetfulness.

(Laforet 2004, 180)

In order to frame the space, there is narrative time; by means of continuous prolepsis and analepsis the different narrative frames of the novel are linked: Madrid and Toledo with their streets, Alicante, and Malaga with its beaches and towns. In all these spaces, different social classes intermingle. We have Soli and his father, belonging to a lower social class; Asis, part of the bourgeoisie; Zoila who is part of the artistic world; Rilcki and his friends from the world of cinema; Don Carolo, as a representation of the political class, in his role as consul, the Marquise, always absent, although widely mentioned and other characters from the working class more or less well off, such as Jimenez Din, or belonging to liberal professions, such as Dr. Tarro. They all coincide in the story and even share the same scene.

In spite of the technical novelties that can be seen in Laforet's last novel, there remains in this work a constant feature common to all the author's narrative work, that is, the reflection of the post-war period: I see myself one night, on the outskirts of Christmas, my first Christmas in Madrid, wandering through the square, full of stalls of nativity scene figurines and bad post-war candy, the noise of whistles and tambourines, people full of cold and scarves, and me without a scarf, but cold too, my hands in my pockets, looking at the lights of some attic windows: my studio.

(Laforet 2004, 44)

Conclusions

It would be interesting to make a brief synthesis of the aesthetic forms that we have been able to observe throughout the study carried out. The first three novels share the existentialist aesthetics of the forties, although with some differences. *Nada* is characterized, fundamentally, by reflecting the asphyxia of the character with a tremendous technique: animalization of the characters, reflection of sordid aspects of society, verisimilitude of impossible situations taken to the extreme, similarity with certain aspects of nineteenth-century naturalism such as biological inheritance or the determinism that governs the fate of the characters and from which they cannot escape and which provokes a certain catharsis in the reader as it did in the spectator of tragic plays. The existential anguish reflected by the protagonist is also a sample of the Spanish post-war panorama, since the novel becomes a mirror of the society of the time to show the effects of the war experienced by the Spanish: fear, guilt, resentment...

On the other hand, despite sharing an existential aesthetic, *La isla y los demonios* and *La mujer nueva* are more benevolent both in language and in their approach. However, a distinction can also be made between them. The first shows the drowning of the protagonist as part of her apprenticeship, of her passage from adolescence to adulthood, when she discovers the hypocrisy of the society around her and feels like a stranger in her own world; it is at this moment when her longing for escape becomes evident and causes her the frustration of feeling locked in, with no possibility of escape. On the other hand, the second novel tries to alleviate the feeling of existential anguish through religion. While it is true that the work narrates an almost mystical experience of the protagonist, we cannot fail to notice the existence of criticism, implicitly and explicitly, as we have observed, towards the Church and the hypocrisy of some of its members.

Regarding the short narrative, we cannot lose sight of the fact that it is part of the neorealist aesthetic because of the testimonial vision of society that it reflects. The author portrays, as if it were a video camera, the circumstances surrounding each of the characters. Moreover, the protagonists are usually children and women, in the style of Italian neo-realist cinema. Nevertheless, we cannot affirm that these narratives are free of social criticism, since an implicit denunciation of the living conditions of the characters can be observed.

As we have seen, *La insolación* shares existentialist traits in terms of its subject matter, since the character is a being who feels trapped between two worlds, with a certain influence of the social novel: temporal and spatial concentration of the events, evident in the two interludes that appear after each summer. In addition, in them there is a criticism, typical of this aesthetic, of the post-war social context, without providing any solution.

Finally, in *Al volver la esquina* there are traits typical of the novel of the sixties, both in content and form. Let us recall the protagonist lost in the world around him, as well as the use of language noted above.

To conclude, we must point out that the objective we set ourselves at the beginning of this research has been fulfilled: the dilation in time of Carmen Laforet's narrative has allowed us to observe the presence of different aesthetics in the work of an author considered as existentialist since she was awarded the Nadal prize.

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