Reading the Frame: Signalling Politics in *Nada*

Fenny Ebels

Abstract This contribution contains a political reading of Carmen Laforet’s *Nada*, published in 1944 under Franquist censorship. Contrary to the general opinion which holds that there are no politics in *Nada*, I argue that there are hidden references to contemporary post-war political issues, manifesting themselves in the novel through its frame: the dedication to Linka Babecka and Pedro Borrell. The dedication proves to be effective on two levels: both as a political statement and as a clue to a political reading. The reader, filling in the Leerstellen according to this clue, finds references to political exiles and the matter of Catalan autonomy in the novel.

Keywords *Nada* · Laforet · Dedication · Artistic references · Politics

Introduction

Seventy years after the end of the Spanish Civil War in 1939 and a generation after Franco’s death in 1975, Spain is trying to come to terms with its past, re-evaluating the conflict and its consequences from both sides. After almost 40 years of enforced silence under Franquist dictatorship it was not until the mid-1980s that people began to feel confident enough to speak and write openly about the war itself and life in post-war Spain. As new information continues to be brought to light for example through interviews and recently edited correspondence, one begins to see the past in a new light and to take a different approach to its study. For instance, as one re-reads the literary texts that were subject to censorship, new information can lead to new insights. In this article a new reading is proposed of one of the most popular and influential novels of the posguerra: Carmen Laforet’s *Nada*, published in 1944,
inspired by an unexplored link between the author’s life and the frame of the novel: its dedication. The first person mentioned in the dedication, the political activist Linka Babecka, urges the reader to adopt a politically aware approach to the novel. A hypothesis derived from the second part of the dedication—the reference to the painter Pedro Borrell—will be put to the test so that the reader, by interpreting the Leerstellen on both textual and intertextual levels, may unveil the cleverly disguised references to the contemporary political situation of the posguerra. By discovering truths hidden behind seemingly innocent descriptions, an extra dimension is added to the text.

**Historical Context and Reception**

*Nada*, the first novel of 23-year-old Carmen Laforet, was an immediate success in a country which had seen the exodus of most of its authors. The novel is, to a certain extent, autobiographical, as the lives of the author and the main character Andrea run parallel to one another: both start their studies at University in Barcelona in 1939, the first post-war academic year. Barcelona, still bearing the scars of the war, is suffering from the effects of poverty and widespread hunger. Families, neighbours and friends have become alienated as a result of their different positions in the war. Catalunya has lost its autonomous status and is once again governed by centralist Spain; the use of Catalan is illegal outside the home. This is the socio-political climate as described in *Nada*, which avoids any explicit references to politics and deals with the *consequences* of a war any treatment of which was prohibited. Of course, Andrea comes across as both victim and rebel—but the nature of her victimhood, or the object of her rebellion, are not specified; the gruesome circumstances that surround her, and that create the typical setting of the Gothic novel, have been forged by disasters that are merely hinted at.¹ One can read the novel as a metaphor and interpret the fraternal strife between Juan and Romána as a symbolic manifestation of the conflict, as Miguel Delibes does (Delibes 1985, pp. 77–94), but the participants in the real war are not mentioned. One cannot but be struck, as Mario Vargas Llosa is, by descriptions such as that of the Santa María del Mar, gutted and blackened by flames (Vargas Llosa, M., cited in Laforet, C., 2006, pp. 327–330); yet, against the bleak background of the past war, ‘en Nada no hay política’, as Delibes contends.² Carmen Laforet, who qualified her own masterpiece—which had been awarded with the prestigious Premio Nadal de la Literatura—as ‘nada’ (Sobejano 1975, p. 146), shunned publicity and never made political statements. She married a conservative journalist, had five children, and wrote a few other, much less popular novels. *Nada*, meanwhile, appeared in 23 separate editions in Franquist Spain. Not until 1989, 45 years after the initial publication of *Nada*, did the author give an interview which, in combination with more recently published sources of information may—another 20 years later—change our view of the novel.

¹ For the multiple interpretations of Andrea’s character and of *Nada* itself, see Fraai (2003), pp. 43–82.
² See Delibes, M., op. cit. p. 91.