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*‘A pesar de todo, hubo algo comico en aquello’:  
Humour in the Postwar Spanish Social Realist Novel*

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**‘A pesar de todo, hubo algo  
cómico en aquello’:  
Humour in the Postwar  
Spanish Social Realist Novel**

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# Abstract

Whilst a darkly comic vein is often acknowledged in Spanish neorealist cinema, the postwar social realist *novel* has been pigeonholed as dispassionate, solemn, and sombre, featuring monotony, disgust, and filth. One character in *El Jarama* (1956) encapsulates the mood: 'una vida que no tiene chiste' (57). However, this thesis argues that, alongside the brutality, an undercurrent of dark, sardonic humour encourages laughter from the bleakest of situations, before immediately questioning the veracity and appropriateness of this mirthful reaction. Full-length studies of Laforet's *Nada* (1945), Cela's *La colmena* (1950) and Sánchez Ferlosio's *El Jarama* (1956) introduce the term 'grey humour' to describe an amusement born fundamentally, and paradoxically, out of weariness and tedium. The thesis cements its understanding of the comic in the latest advancements in the field of Humour Theory, exploring five central manifestations of Francoist feel-bad comedy:

1. How the *humour of hardship* and its mordant irony destabilise the testimonial, realist stance
2. What it means to be *just joking* (both 'fair', and 'only' joking), given the complicity and hostility of the narrator
3. What I call *grey humour* and the *comedy of comedown*: the debilitating humour of hiatus, bathos, and tedium
4. *Comic-kazi* humour: *the* laughable fallout of a splintered self, when characters find their situation and their bodies ludicrous but inescapable
5. The degradation of *fiesta* atmosphere through the corruption of Bakhtinian carnivalesque laughter, and the resultant comedy of failure and discontent

To treat these novels as dreadfully *comic* unsettles many existing readings of reception, interpretation, and affect in the Spanish postwar novel. It establishes that social realism is capacious enough to encompass comedy (and *vice versa*), thus capturing the full flavour and complexity of experience. This thesis will ask how comedy affects the representation of social conditions (and the reception of such representations), and whether this humour of hardship is ultimately critical or collusive. Contrary to criticism that has worked hard to perceive a critical function, undercutting triumphalist rhetoric under Franco's regime, social realist humour serves not to overcome the misfortune but, merely, to endure it.

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Perhaps I know best why it is man alone who laughs; he alone suffers so deeply that he had to invent laughter.

– Friedrich Nietzsche

When I was very young and in the cave of Trophonius I forgot to laugh. Then, when I got older, when I opened my eyes and saw the real world, I began to laugh and I haven't stopped since. I saw that the meaning of life was to get a livelihood, that the goal of life was to be a High Court judge, that the bright joy of love was to marry a well-off girl, that the blessing of friendship was to help each other out of a financial tight spot, that wisdom was what the majority said it was, that passion was to give a speech, that courage was to risk being fined 10 rix-dollars, that cordiality was to say 'You're welcome' after a meal, and that the fear of God was to go to communion once a year. That's what I saw. And I laughed.

– Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*

Strange times, that weep with laughing, not with weeping!

– William Shakespeare, *Timon of Athens* (IV.iii.486)

## Introduction

### The Greying of Humour?

MR. PLOPPY: Ah no, Sir, he's the executioner. But he does sometime make the tea.

BLACKADDER: Yes, and your name is?

BALDRICK: Baldrick, my Lord, but I'll change it to Ploppy if it'll make things easier.

BLACKADDER: No thank you. I can cope with more than one name. What are you doing here?

BALDRICK: Well, it's a hobby.

MRS. PLOPPY: It would be more... more *fun*, Sir, if he were to change his name. Give the place a more family atmosphere.

BLACKADDER: A family atmosphere? This is meant to be a place of pain and misery and sorrow.

MRS. PLOPPY: That's what I mean, Sir.

MR. PLOPPY: Eh, Mistress Ploppy is a bit of a social realist, Sir.

– *Blackadder* (BBC), Season 2 Episode 2: 'Head' (1986)

Several scholars have observed that social realism, within postwar Spanish cinema, is distinctively shot through with dark comedy. Indeed, for Tatjana Pavlović (2009: 89), '[o]ne characteristic that distinguishes Spanish neorealism from its Italian counterpart is its use of *esperpento*'.<sup>1</sup> Filmmaker Pedro Almodóvar agrees: 'entre los años 50 y 60 se dio en España cierto neorrealismo que, a diferencia del italiano, era más feroz, más divertido y menos sentimental' (quoted in Vidal i Llorens 1989: 116). As early as 1954, García Escudero (quoted in Ferrando 2009: 230) had already identified a 'dark neorealism' in Spanish cinema, which he further subdivided into 'sombre' and 'bitter', and of a neorealism that he qualified as pink (laughable, unobjectionable, *sainetesco*). However, a corresponding blend of the

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<sup>1</sup> *Esperpento* is a darkly comic vein, built on distortion, exaggeration, and inversion of hierarchies, that is prevalent in Spanish culture. Coined by Valle-Inclán in *Lucas de bohemia* (1924), Nil Santiáñez defines it in his study of Valle's theatre as 'a radical form of literary and political dissidence', featuring 'the comic and the grotesque', 'ridicule and debasment', 'attraction to the decadent', 'profanation', and an 'erosion of the line dividing the serious from the comic' (2004: 485).

ferocious and the amusing in depictions of downtrodden, everyday individuals has not yet been explored within the postbellum *novel* of the 1940s and 1950s. This thesis bridges that gap. Pablo Gil Casado (1968: *passim*) organises the ‘novela social española’ into the following categories: ‘La abulia’, ‘El campo’, ‘El obrero y el empleado’, ‘La vivienda’, ‘Libros de viajes’ and ‘La alienación’. Whilst, for Roberto Ruiz, these titles ‘señalan con bastante claridad las distintas corrientes temáticas’ (1970: 180), I will reveal this sombre list to be insufficient, for a bleak, uncomfortable funniness also breaks through the misery. A recurrent aesthetic of fragmented, pathetic, low-spirited humour – what I coin as *grey humour* – builds limping gags that never pick up pace, caught in an endless cul-de-sac. Neither a ‘P.S.’ nor the icing on the cake, it is fundamental to the genre. Having proved and cemented the presence of this albeit broken, often deliberately *unfunny* funniness, I next interrogate its purpose and reach in a Francoist climate of oppression and stagnation. Returning to our epigraph, Blackadder insists ‘This is meant to be a place of pain and misery and sorrow’, yet Mrs Ploppy, ‘a *social realist*’ (my italics), prefers (ha) ‘more... more *fun*’, ‘a more family atmosphere’. We expect the social realist novel quite literally to be made of sterner stuff.

Instead of timeless rural tragedies, generally located in the past – *El bosque de Ancines* (1947), in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; *Los hijos de Máximo Judas* (1950), in the 1920s; *La familia de Pascual Duarte* (1942), in the pre-war years – the social realist novel (40s-50s) features upfront, unflinching language and a focus on the immediate urban present. Rejecting the *vanguardia*’s penchant for the ‘dehumanisation’ of art (Ortega y Gasset’s 1925 work of that name advocated a cultural inclination towards an ‘art-for-art’s-sake’ approach), these texts emphasised harsh, daily realities. In 1958, playwright Alfonso Sastre even wrote that ‘lo social es una categoría superior a lo artístico’ (1958: 110). Writers were heavily influenced by post-war Italian neorealist cinema (De Sica, Rossellini) and *verismo*, which focused on aimless drifters, derelicts, and vagabonds lost – literally and figuratively – in the sprawling metropolis. The archetypal image of the Spanish postwar novel is a grief-stricken have-not ambling alone, hands in pockets.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This very image recurs five times in *Nada* (1945) and nine times in *La colmena* (1950).

Accordingly, the genre has been universally characterised as dispassionate, solemn, and sombre. A selection of comments on Cela's *La colmena* (1950) illustrates the consensus: 'sustained hopelessness' (McPheeters 1969: 10); 'una estética de lo feo' (Ilie 1963: 57); 'un olor a miseria' (Sobejano 1978: *passim*). On the genre as a whole, Barea observes a stark 'note of hunger' (1953: 9), and Mario Vargas Llosa perceives an aura of 'fustiness, sacristy and Francoism' (2007: v). This is perhaps unsurprising given the titles of the major existential novels of the period. *La sombra del ciprés es alargada* (1947-8), *Las últimas horas* (1949), *Cuando voy a morir* (1950), and *Con la muerte al hombro* (1954) evidently concern death, whilst *Hospital general* (1948) and *Cama 36* (1953) suggest mortality through disease. Likewise, *Lázaro calla* (1949), *La gota de mercurio* (1954), and *Segunda agonía* (1955) are unmistakably morose, and *Lola, espejo oscuro* (1950) and *Sin camino* (1956) point to a troubling indeterminacy. Gonzalo Sobejano summarises the atmosphere of what he terms 'un realismo existencial': 'Insolidaridad, incertidumbre, incomunicación, violencia, rutina, ensimismamiento, angustia ciudadana, exploración de la tierra incógnita' (quoted in Barrero Pérez 1987: 60). Elsewhere, he writes that the main character in Spanish social realism 'lives through hollowness, repetition, nausea, guilt, struggle, agony' (2003: 176). One might assume from these readings that social realism is no laughing matter, hardly the stuff of gags. Paul Preston writes of a 'shortage of essential goods', '[s]tarvation, a massive increase of prostitution, and epidemic of diseases' in the *años de hambre* (1995: 345), and Oscar Barrero Pérez sums up: 'Entre 1946 y 1955' the Spanish novel features 'el clima de angustia y pesimismo característico de la posguerra mundial' (1987: 9). Such aimlessness, monotony, and filth seem antithetical to humour. However, alongside the relentless brutality an undercurrent of dark, sardonic comedy pierces the surface, both encouraging laughter and immediately questioning the appropriateness of such a response amidst such strife. Moreover, the true-to-life seriousness of the narrator's role entails a pledge of verisimilitude that sits uneasily alongside the idiosyncratic funniness.

Surveying criticism on the postwar novel, one is compelled to ask with Francois Roustang whether (Spanish) 'literary critics have [...] forgotten how to laugh?' (Arribas 1997: 22). Comic neglect perhaps derives from an assumption that humour and tragic dissatisfaction are incompatible. Silvia Burunat's study on the interior monologue (1980) never mentions humour apart from passing remarks on the uproarious *Cinco horas con Mario* (1966). One

recalls the director of Woody Allen's *Stardust Memories* (1980) who complains 'I don't feel funny anymore. I look around me and all I see is human suffering!' However, in the Spanish context, not only are pain and comedy well attuned, they complement one another and intensify a fundamental bathetic frustration. Humour theorist Nigel Gaut writes that 'a comedy might be bad because it is sombre', and that, when applied to something *played for laughs*, the word 'sombre... picks out a demerit' (2007: 36). But the Spanish postwar novel disagrees forcefully, crafting enigmatic, unnerving humour *out of (mock-)solemnity* and gloom to highlight that fecund comedy is already and always a staple of everyday life.

Indeed, Yves Aguila's comprehensive study of twentieth century Hispanic humour demonstrates that Spanish narrative from the 1930s onwards features the same 'humor ácido, corrosivo [...] que se acerca en la deformidad, en la exageración y lo hiperbólico, en lo escatológico y lo tétrico' as 'Cervantes, Quevedo, Torres Villarroel, Valle-Inclán, Pío Baroja' (Aguila 2007: 149).<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the presence of amusement in postwar Spanish art should come as no surprise, for Monterde (1995: 230) observes that the majority of Spanish films between 1939 and 1950 were comedies, and Steven Marsh (2006: 2-18) shows that humorous CIFESA productions in cinema were already engaged in a critique of existing ideologies, long before Berlanga and Bardem. Marsh finds a 'constant presence' in Spanish cultural production (*Ibid*: 18) of what, following Bakhtin, he terms *grotesque realism*. I will identify a similar tone in the postwar novel.

This thesis is inter-disciplinary, blending recent advancements in philosophical Humour Studies with close readings of the novels, all examined within a shifting, uncertain postwar Iberian context. Alongside its contribution to the field of Twentieth-Century Spanish Literature studies, it also hopes to be beneficial for drama specialists with an interest in absurdist, existentialist theatre (e.g. Beckett, Pinter), media scholars interested in the comedy of boredom in other contexts (such as sitcom, television, radio), and humour theorists keen to interrogate the perceived 'death' of comedy (Segal 2001), because it concludes with the fundamental abstruseness and paradoxical humourlessness of this humour.

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<sup>3</sup> However, 'exageración' and 'lo hiperbólico' are commonly replaced by with a quashing, dampening grey humour.

The thesis interrogates the uses and abuses of humour in three full-length studies of canonical social realist novels: Laforet's *Nada* (1945), Cela's *La colmena* (1950), and Sánchez Ferlosio's *El Jarama* (1956).<sup>4</sup> It explores five central manifestations of feel-bad comedy:

1. How the *humour of hardship* and its mordant irony destabilise the testimonial, realist stance
2. What it means to be *just joking* (both 'fair', and 'only' joking), given the complicity and hostility of the narrator
3. What I call *grey humour* and the *comedy of comedown*: the debilitating humour of hiatus, bathos, and tedium
4. *Comic-kazi* humour: the laughable fallout of a splintered self, when characters find their situation and their bodies ludicrous but inescapable<sup>5</sup>
5. The degradation of *fiesta* atmosphere through the corruption of Bakhtinian carnivalesque laughter, and the resultant comedy of failure and discontent

All of this feeds into an aesthetic of dryly comic flatness, questioning the competence and capability of comedy as a response to pain and suffering. I examine laughter as *liability* by exploring moments when readers are encouraged to half-laugh, laugh badly, laugh at the wrong time, laugh at a victim's expense, or merely gasp at a scene that laughter has already evacuated.

### **Criticism on Postwar Spanish Humour**

Studies that have identified a funny side to postwar Spanish prose have almost always begun in the 1960s. For Brad Epps (2003: 193), 'Sometime during the 1960s, the mirror breaks for Spanish narrative', with works such as *Cinco horas con Mario* (1966), *El mercurio* (1968), and *Volverás a Región* (1967) that 'wreak havoc on the reality, idea and ideal of

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<sup>4</sup> See Appendices for detailed analysis of humour in several other novels of the period, which proves that such funniness is not isolated but widespread. Appendix A examines grey humour and comically-failing *fiestas* in objectivist social novels by Agustí, Suárez Carreño, Fernández Santos, Matute, Aldecoa, Romero, Juan Goytisolo, Delibes, López Salinas, María de Lera, and López Pacheco, and Appendix B explores *grey humour* in the 60s social novel (Marsé, García Hortelano, Fernández Santos, and Arce).

<sup>5</sup> In coining these terms I imitate wordplay in existing works of Humour Theory, such as Simon Critchley's 'the superego is your amigo' (Critchley 2002: 92, 103).

realism'. Likewise, Manuel Durán (1980: 92) notes an 'ironía crítica y corrosiva, no exenta de humor' in novels such as Goytisolo's *Juan sin tierra* (1975), Labanyi (1985) analyses irony in Martín-Santos' *Tiempo de silencio* (1962), and, in cinema, Juan F. Egea's study *Dark Laughter* (2013) begins with *El cochecito* (1960). This thesis, heeding Manuel Vázquez Montalbán's warning of the 'abuso de generacionismo' (1988: 127) in Spanish literary criticism, illustrates that earlier postwar novels (and films) were *already* demonstrating such generic unsteadiness, before Martín-Santos's *realismo dialéctico*.

Moreover, literary criticism on social realist prose has consistently underestimated the equivocation offered by humour. Juan Goytisolo caricatured 'realismo fotográfico' as a linguistic straitjacket unable to harness irony: 'Encastillados en el imperfecto de indicativo y en la primera o tercera persona del singular, no hemos probado hasta ahora las inmensas posibilidades de la sintaxis' (1976: 93). A 'lenguaje nuevo, virulento y anárquico' and 'el uso de la dinamita o el purgante' (*Ibid*: 93) were required to shake the country to its core. Josep María Castellet agreed, writing caustically of social realism's '*buenos propósitos y las mejores intenciones*' (his italics) that wholly forgot 'los medios y los fines de la literatura' (1976: 141, 142). The 'compromiso' is not 'total' but rather an 'opción superficial y mecánica' that 'ni nos comunica o revela intensidad de su experiencia' (1976: 148, 149). It is certainly curious that Goytisolo should make reference to 'antecedentes cómicos tan ilustres como los de Cervantes y Larra... Quevedo y la novela picaresca' (1976: 88-89), lamenting the loss of 'sátira y hasta la facultad de sonrisa'. Although this thesis will agree that social realist comedy ultimately failed, presenting only a pervasive suffocating atmosphere, it will demonstrate that it is a more subtle and more despairing *grey humour* that accentuates this weakness. Tiresome subjects, aware of their own monotony, can only idle around whilst everything is falling to pieces. Although Goytisolo finds a missing 'doble visión' (*Ibid*: 88) in social realism, the genre's early novels, including his own, already exploited the comedy – a deliberately ambiguous, not gag-a-minute, but nonetheless present 'facultad de sonrisa' – of characters trapped in a world that bores them to death.

Existing overviews of the postwar novel omit any mention of the funniness therein (Sobejano 1975, Villanueva 1972, Gil Casado 1973, Soldevila 1980, Morán 1971a and 1971b, Labanyi 1989), and whilst more recent work as argued for a more complex form of realism,

it still disregards humour. Leggott and Woods show that many 50s novels have been 'pigeonholed as realist' mainly 'in an attempt to separate them from the more self-reflexive and non-realist texts of the 1960s and 1970s' (Leggott and Woods eds. 2014: 3), and Perriam et al. (2000: 135) challenge the long-held commonplace, deriving from Castellet and Juan Goytisolo, that sets 'early tentative realism (1950s)' against 'openly critical realism (late 1950s to mid-1960s)'. Following this movement away from realism, a dissident and socio-politically subversive attitude has been observed: 'el realismo fue una especie de subversión radical contra la censura' (Larraz 2014: 209); 'Through *paradox and irony*, social realistic novelists subvert the mythic and heroic ordering of history offered up by historians of the Regime' (Herzberger 1995: 12, my italics). However, it is precisely this 'paradox and irony' that have yet to be analysed (even by Herzberger), and this thesis makes the case that this very humorousness makes the social realist novel far more interesting and nuanced than is often acknowledged, contextualised within the Francoist dictatorship in which 'seeing the funny side' was fraught with ambiguity. Moreover, it will run counter to such subversive interpretations of comedy, finding a dejected funniness of characters whose awareness of their futile demand that the world be *interesting* brings no salvation whatsoever. Indeed, Michael Ugarte (2004: 611) concludes 'It would be reductive' to suggest that all literary works of this period demonstrated a 'committed resistance to the government's impositions', and I will build on this view through a reading of passive, ashen humour.

This thesis will take as its starting point what theorist Critchley terms a 'black sun' at the centre of comedy, stemming from the perception that 'the object of the laugh is the subject that laughs' (2002: 49-50). Disturbing, swelling ripples of dark laughter fall back on themselves, doubting the veracity and suitability of that laugh. We hear what Beckett, in *Watt*, termed the *dianoetic* laugh, 'The bitter, the hollow and – haw! haw! – the mirthless [...] the laugh of laughs, the *risus purus* ... bitter laugh, the laugh that laughs—silence please—at that which is unhappy' (1959 [1953]: 48). In this generic seepage and leakage between comedy and tragedy, humour provides a stylistic disequilibrium, interwoven with the erotic and the visceral. Teetering on the brink of full revelation, social realism invites but prohibits access. It jokes, cloaks, and provokes in equal measure, engendering a tone of *post-seriousness*. The resultant laughter is an indeterminate effusion that seeks not to gladden but to disorient and defamiliarise.

## Humour Theory

First, it is important to clarify ‘humour’ and ‘comedy’, for it is ironically common for theoretical works on the topic to stress the impossibility of definitions, before providing one or more. By way of example, Roger B. Henkle warns against ‘[a]bstract declarations about the function of the comic’ (1980: 4) but soon makes grand decontextualised claims: ‘Comedy’s particular vision of life...’, ‘Comic works characteristically expose...’ (*Ibid*: 12-13). This is what Andy Medhurst has termed ‘the lure of the big C’ (2007: 10), the tendency to begin ‘Comedy is/does...’. Cartoonist Saul Steinberg put it best: ‘trying to define humour is one of the definitions of humour’ (in Levin 1987: 191). Murray Davis criticises those who would ‘slow down’ jokes and spoil ‘their surprise’ in order to elucidate the mechanisms by which they produce meaning (1993: xiii), and E. B. White’s line is almost ubiquitous in Humour Theory: ‘Humour can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind’ (quoted in Bergan 1989: 35). The analyst of comedy, for Andy Medhurst, is ‘the definitive killjoy [...], who takes what was life-affirming and renders it inert’ (2007: 5). For Harold Bloom (2010: xv), ‘Defining dark humor is virtually impossible’, and, within Spain, playwright Jardiel Poncela summarises: ‘Intentar definir el humorismo es como pretender pinchar una mariposa con un palo de telégrafo’ (2000: 81). Harry Levin punningly divides humour theorists into ‘playboys’ and ‘killjoys’ (1987), and Robert McKee (1998: 359) even alleges ‘critics hate comedy’ because ‘there is nothing to say’. There is nothing less funny than a theory of humour.

Furthermore, the humourlessness of those who write about humour is itself risible.<sup>6</sup> For Francis Hutcheson, to treat laughter gravely leads to the charge of writing ‘in a manner very unsuitable to the subject’ (‘Thoughts on Laughter’ [1725], in Graham 2004: 34). One becomes the mirthless agelast that Swift and Fielding so gleefully lampooned. This thesis, therefore, seeks neither to nullify nor eviscerate comedy’s merriment. Instead of dissecting its frog, to continue White’s metaphor, it will employ minimally invasive keyhole surgery. Jardiel Poncela calls humour the ‘zotal de la literatura’ (1967: 83), but *fun theorists* (to use

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<sup>6</sup> Howard Jacobson (1997: 34) revels in taking these paradoxes to their absurd extremes.

John Rutherford's term (2012: *passim*) must also be careful lest they become ideological cleansers, rationalising the obscene into the palatable or polishing up repulsive jokes in a bid to make them fit.

Indeed, when literary criticism has tackled black humour, it dissatisfies when it focuses uniquely on the *black*. Bruce Janoff omits *humour* entirely: 'Discounting the comic element [...] black humor can be roughly equated with tragedy' (1972: 18). Likewise, in his study of 'black humour' in American fiction, Max Schulz (1973: x) maladroitley justifies movement 'away from the "humor" of Black Humor' merely for its critical inconvenience ('the shallows of laughter', 'psychology's attempt to explain why we chuckle'). Must grotesquerie be inoculated before examination can take place? James Agee praises the ending of Chaplin's *City Lights* – 'it is enough to shrivel the heart to see' (1948: 138) – but this prompts the question: Why extol a comedy for ceasing to be comic?

However, whilst emphasising that the Spanish social realist novel *goes for laughs* and tries to be funny, this thesis also defends Agee's review, illustrating that the texts' aberration and ineptness make for a discomfiting aesthetic experience. Social realist humour signals that it is non-serious but knows, in a delicious paradox that goes beyond existing models of Humour Theory, that it is not very funny at all. Self-consciously *humour*, aware of itself as joke, it is not (particularly) *humorous*. Rather than fun and jollity, it provides a nettlesome blend of blockage and blunder that aspires not to comfort but to stymie and dishearten. Spanish social realism is both very, very funny 'ha ha' (and sometimes not even that) and very, very funny-strange.<sup>7</sup> To borrow from theorist Gero von Wilpert, it may be the 'humorloser Scherz', a joke *without* humour, characterised by 'absurd terror, horrible comicry, macabre ridiculousness, dark grotesquerie, and crass cynicism' (in Bloom 2010: 81).

Having examined the obscurity of humour, we shall now examine the mysteriousness of its most obvious outlet: laughter. For Kant, delightfully, laughter is 'the oscillation of the organs' ('die Schwingung der Organen') (quoted in Critchley 2002: 9), a cry that insists upon

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<sup>7</sup> *Goodfellas* (1990, dir. Martin Scorsese): 'Whaddaya mean I'm funny? Funny how? Like funny 'ha ha' or funny-strange? What, you sayin' I amuse you? Some kinda clown, I'm here to fuckin' amuse you?'

itself. An intensely physical response to outside stimulus, it is a strange mixture of inward and outward, brash outcry beside inner reflection. We talk of ‘bursting’ into a ‘belly laugh’ at something *rib-tickling*, as though it reached deep inside of us. As Thersites puts it in 1 Chapman’s Homer (*Iliad* II. 181-184), ‘Laughter he never could containe’. We are *swept up* in laughter, *overwhelmed* by laughter. As Derrida argues, the laughing space is ‘buccal’, defaced and disfigured (Derrida 2005: 28-9). Jokes that incite laughter are literally ‘breath-taking’. We *drown* in laughter, *faint* with laughter, laugh until we choke or cry, till our ribs ache, or our sides split. We laugh ourselves *sick* or roll in the aisles. Our bodies run away with us. At its most extreme, we give up the ghost: we *die* laughing from something *dead* funny. In theatrical slang, to ‘corpse’ is to spoil a performance by laughing irrepressibly, and a failed comedian has brutally ‘bombed’ in public. We talk of comedians who ‘kill’ and ‘slay’ on stage at a *punchline*, as though to achieve a belly laugh were akin to murder. In the light of such splicing and violence within the laugh, this thesis also introduces *comic-kazi* humour, a self-lacerating, self-loathing autodestruct by characters who appreciate and laugh at their own ridiculousness, yet are powerless to reverse it. It shows that the Spanish social realist novel interrogates the laughter it engenders through a backpedalling and unprogressive humour that disbands mind and body but capitalises on hardship and despair. The eye-roll and grimace coexist with the sardonic chortle, and readers are compelled to ask, fretfully, ‘Are we laughing in (all) the right places?’

### **Realism... and Raillery?**

Having analysed humour theory frameworks, I shall now introduce the particularities of the postwar Spanish novel. Firstly, it is important to note that contemporary authors stressed their testimonial and political duties, adamant that realism was a laudable, attainable goal. Fernández Flórez, ‘asqueado’ by the ‘*novelística falsa y preciocista*’ of the 40s, yearned for ‘unos personajes en carne viva’, and to ‘hacerlos vivir en una sociedad sin máscaras’ (1967: 58). For Luis Goytisolo (1959: 4), it was important to ‘enfrentarse con la realidad, analizarla, casi como pudiera hacerlo un científico’. Shirley Mangini González argues that the contribution of social realism, which tackles the ‘problem of history’ itself (1987: 111), is ‘more historical than literary’ (119), and for Juan Goytisolo, these writers shared ‘como

denominador común una actividad crítica [...] hacia el mundo concreto' (1959: 8). Critic Entrambasaguas (1952: *passim*) called the social realist movement 'El hombre y los hombres, tema literario actual', José Manuel Caballero Bonald wrote that 'La realidad de España está al alcance de todos los que quieran mirarla y entenderla' (Olmos García 1963: 214), and Alfonso Grosso's objective was 'dar testimonio de los días de oscurantismo [...]. Mi actitud es de denuncia' (*Ibid*: 217). Fidelity to circumstance was paramount.

Furthermore, although, for reasons of censorship, the Civil War is rarely tackled directly in social realism, its presence is keenly felt. To illustrate from my main case studies, in *La colmena* (1950), both Martín Marco's and Pura's parents died in the conflict, forcing them into poverty and prostitution respectively. Likewise, in *El Jarama* (1956), one daytripper mentions casually that his uncle died in battle close to the river. Lastly, in *La noria* (Luis Romero, 1951), González's mother died in a shooting whilst queuing up to collect food. This death is the most needlessly absurd, illustrating the impact of warfare on innocent civilians. López Salinas sought to bring about 'cambios en la sociedad que nos rodea' by showing 'el mundo tal como es' (*Ibid*: 222), and Antonio Ferrer even wrote that 'La realidad española es bien fácil de ver' (*Ibid*: 220). Social realists use language to nail things in their place, immovably.

Despite such commitment, however, Fernando Larraz's study of postwar narrative points to the (humorous) paradox of supposedly apathetic coverage: 'la censura había llevado a las letras españolas a las antípodas de lo que pretendía: a que los autores españoles terminaran por ser los más ortodoxos adalides de la literatura comprometida en el contexto europeo' (Larraz 2014: 209). Ironically, 'como respuesta a la censura [...] un lenguaje más cerrado y hermético' (*Ibid*) would surely have been expected, logically. However, the presence of ironic comedy is far more complex, asking to lean on but also hold reservations about the authenticity of the narrative at hand, thus rendering social realism both trustworthy and dryly capricious. As Cervantes wrote of Sancho, that wisest of comic fools, 'duda de todo y créelo todo' (*Don Quijote* Part II, Chapter XXXII, accessed online). The truth is the safest lie.

Indeed, this thesis will argue that comic realism is a legitimate – if enigmatic – conflation because comedy, especially grey comedy, is also rooted in the mundane and material. Its

credo is 'Nothing human is alien to me', including as many people, from as many walks of life, as *humanly* possible. 'The comic sense', for Eric Bentley, 'tries to cope with the daily, hourly, inescapable difficulty of being' (1991: 306). Moreover, comedy is often concerned with the lessening or deflecting of expected impact, handled not with poise but rather with an ungainly 'Do something!' – or, perhaps more often, 'No, not *that!*' – awkwardness. The characters that populate social realism are an assortment of nobodies (Zunzunegui's title *Esta oscura desbandada* (1952) is illustrative), typically just as boring as the style that inscribed them into being. In this funniness of the slow, chafing, downtrodden fellow, solitude is endured for far too long. Irksome molehills become towering, oppressive volcanoes, and fatality hovers over everything, blending with comedic overtones.

In addition to this intermingling of comedy and realism, this thesis will demonstrate that a pledge to objective, unvarnished truth-telling is coupled with a perceptible, personalised, idiosyncratic thrill in the narrative voice, basking in its ability to maintain composure, to react to gravity with comic nimbleness. To be 'natural' is to adopt a pose. Although another motto of comedy is 'I live on good hot-pot, not on fancy language', as a character in Molière's *Les Femmes Savantes* (1672) observes (in Nelson 1990: 137), comedy *exploits* everyday speech, raising it with ludic, festive excess and theatricality. It goes *beyond* the triteness of everyday life. For instance, the subtitle to Zunzunegui's *La vida como es* (1954) is 'novela picaresca en muy paladina lengua española...' – an addition at odds with the adjacent realist prerogative.

Given that contemporary NO-DO newsreels laid claim to documentary reportage whilst, in truth, amounting to strictly regulated and manipulated propaganda, Spanish audiences of the early postwar years were *already* attuned to doubt the veracity of cultural products with realist pretensions. During the *años de hambre*, after the Ley de Prensa in 1938 until the Allied victory in Europe, the Minister of Information and Tourism Gabriel Arias Salgado sought to implement the Francoist 'imperio de la verdad', the 'gran obra de reconstrucción nacional' (Order of 14<sup>th</sup> January, 1937, decreed by the Delegación para Prensa y Propaganda). However, the electorate were well aware that this was only one – warped and distorted – version of 'la verdad'. In an autobiographical account, novelist Fernández-Flórez even remarked upon 'esta paradójica ambivalencia mía' (1966: 10), perhaps referring to the

equivocal nature of the National Office for Propaganda itself, determined to impose ‘the truth’ but somewhat unclear about what form this ought to take.

In what follows I shall emphasise that Spanish literary criticism must recalibrate its view of postwar prose to incorporate *comic* realism, however uneasy that fusion may seem. After all, as Roland Barthes wrote, realism is but the imitation of previous representations: ‘This is why realism cannot be designated a “copier” but rather a “pasticheur” (through secondary mimesis, it copies what is already a copy)’ (1974: 55). The assumption of realism’s ‘stylelessness’ and transparency imagines that perception could exist in a vacuum – pure and unconditioned by time, place, or observer. As Champfleury put it, ‘the reproduction of nature by man will never be a reproduction and imitation, but always an interrelation... since man is not a machine and cannot render objects mechanically’ (1857: 92, my translation). Instead, we must focus on the angles of refraction at play, as well as each writer’s distinct perspective.

Indeed, upon closer look at the Spanish postwar context, it becomes clear that social realism coexists with acerbic comedy throughout the postwar years. Zunzunegui wrote the tragic, realist *Esta oscura desbandada* (1952) but also the overtly satirical *El barco de la muerte* (1945) and the dark farce *La úlcera* (1949). Moreover in 1954, José Alcántara’s grotesque *La muerte le sienta bien a Villalobos* and Matute’s extremely farcical *Pequeño teatro*<sup>8</sup> were awarded the Premio Nadal and the Premio Planeta respectively. In Elisabeth Mulder’s *Preludio a la muerte* (1946), Mariona ironically explains

Tener hambre es bonito. Y sufrir de querer cosas que no se pueden comprar. Y correr libre por las calles sucias, pobres, apestosas, y salir a vender periódicos sin haberse desayunado. Éstas son cosas divinas que solo suceden a seres superiores, y por eso yo voy a ser algo muy grande y mi vida va a ser maravillosa. (16)

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<sup>8</sup> Rosa María Avila-Mergil observes an ‘aspecto de farsa’ (1991: 35) and Winecoff Díaz notes an ‘atmósfera de farsa’ (1970: 28) in this novel

The reader perceives the double meaning, toying with the comic distinction between determination and resignation. Similarly, Ricardo Fernández de la Reguera's *Cuando voy a morir* (1950) undercuts Francoist rhetoric with humour:

Y pueblos que dejaban en el alma una sensación de tristeza y de melancolía por todo aquel pasado de esplendor, de maravillosa historia, de heroicidad viril y viva – juvenil–, gastada para siempre y para siempre soterrada por el polvo de los siglos...  
(128)

The *falangista* vocabulary ('viril', 'viva', 'juvenil') is totally absurd, and the reader laughs almost conspiratorially at this 'in-joke'. Though the voice may obfuscate it, as U. C. Knoepfelmacher writes in another context, '...readers must make the judgment that the slippery narrator refuses to provide' (1971: 21). Both examples are funny because we recognise the inversion to be true – truer, in fact, than the original, thus rendering the wrong-footing ultimately *right* – and this forces a radical disconnect between accepted truth and actual experience. The paradox embraces and revels in its own disharmony, confounding conventional strictures. Moreover, Vicente Risco's *La puerta de paja* (1953) – a sarcastic story about a vicious bishop that, despite its medieval setting, evidently criticises the papacy – was eventually permitted by the censors with five alterations that '[le r]estan algo del valor *carnavalesco*' (Larraz 2014: 211, my italics). Clearly, therefore, a popular, ribald form of humour – complete with frequent misdirections and misgivings – was a source of destabilising consternation for the authorities. That said, in what follows we shall examine the extent to which comic realism should be considered a progressive, rebellious coalescence.

### **Success or Failure?**

On the one hand, the aforementioned examples suggest that abrasive funniness, capsizing the commonplace and challenging stripped-back realism, is subversive. It recognises that human complexities cannot be distilled into immutable rules and rubrics and does justice to the irrational and nonsensical in felt experience. Woody Allen lays a trap for any humour

theorist through the odious Lester in *Crimes and Misdemeanours* (1989), who pompously records his pseudo-intellectual comments 'Comedy is tragedy plus time' and 'If it bends, it's funny; if it breaks, it isn't'. Yet there is truth to both, particularly the latter, and Spanish humour theorists have advanced similar perspectives. For Mihura, 'El humor es verle la trampa a todo, darse cuenta de por dónde cojean las cosas; comprender que todo tiene un revés, que todas las cosas pueden ser de otra manera...' (2004: 1312-3). Likewise, for Gómez de la Serna, 'El humor es ver por dónde cojea todo [...] como puede ser otra cosa o ser de otra manera [...] muestra el doble de toda cosa' (1988 [1934]: 205). Humour puts reality to the test and sees where it wobbles ('cojear'). This is what theorist Kenneth Burke terms 'the *dancing of an attitude*' (1973: 9, italics his), entertaining more than one position at once and undercutting accepted certainties. Humour redeems and 're-deems', perceiving a situation anew. As Matthew Bevis puts it, comedy 'means to put your shoes on the wrong feet' (2013: 1), to perceive a different reality beneath the surface.

Applying this subversive import to the Spanish postwar novel, comic realism provides a humorously undignified vision of the denigration of humanity, an ironic counterpoint to the image that Francoist propaganda sought to disseminate. Even a line as seemingly innocuous as 'Es difícil ser alguien aquí' was censored from Saura's neorealist film *Los golfos* (1960) for implying that Spain was imperfect (see Gubern 1981: 164). Contemporary critic José Mancisidor (1952: 48) observed an 'España de dos Españas: la del mito y la de la realidad, la que se hunde en su angustia y su martirio y la que germina, en un medio de tormento del nacer, con su eternal ilusión auestas'. Accuracy and exactitude are ambivalent: the goal is to represent reality as it really is because the reality *already represented* is false. *Tal y como es*, and *tal y como parece* are two different things. Humorist Máximo asserted that the 'humorista o escritor' under Franco 'tenía que expresarse de tal modo que el lector cómplice pudiera entender lo que el humorista quería decir, pero ante un juez nadie pudiera demostrar que el dibujante decía lo que realmente decía [...]' (quoted in Seaver 2004: 1). Moreover, in her work on parody, Linda Hutcheon argues it can be "'ex-centric" [...] of those who are marginalized by a dominant ideology' (1998: 35). Laughter loosens social rigidities through an oblique, ambiguous approach.

One knowing, richly ironic Miguel Gila gag puts it best: ‘When I get back to Spain and read the papers, I can’t understand a word, but my friends tell me not to be silly, all I have to do is read between the lines. The trouble is, all I see between the lines is blank space!’ (quoted in Threlfall 2000: 21). Reading at variance is essential. Asking how *real* the ‘real world’ actually is, grey humour unveils a grey area, wrestling with Pilate’s ultimate question: ‘What is truth?’ (John 18:38). Indeed, in his list of ‘los restantes medios para desactivar la censura’ (1994: 77), Neuschäfer lists ‘El chiste, la ironía, incluso el humor negro’ as number one, closely followed by ‘El empleo de modelos de comunicación, textos y géneros literarios cotidianos y/o consagrados por la tradición como medio de banalización’. This thesis examines that very blend of ‘ironía’ and ‘banalización’, akin to what it calls grey humour; however, it also questions whether such funniness is more acquiescence than attack.

Indeed, Spanish social realism is clearly squalid and dismal – as criticism has agreed – but its grey, deflating, often *unfunny* humour builds that impression.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, this humour is often conservative and unproductive, stretching realism to its limit, intensifying that gloom by showing that there is no way out, even through laughter. Whilst critical consensus posits that these novels defiantly and subversively undermine Francoist propaganda by refusing to prettify quotidian harshness<sup>10</sup>, grey humour is a more undaring, inflexible style of diversion. It both hinges on and (often unsuccessfully) reacts against boredom, taking the gilt off the gingerbread through a discomfiting sense of stalling and impediment, and provoking what James Joyce termed not laughter but ‘laughtears’ (1975 [1939]: 15.9). Emphasising averageness, hollowness, and hopelessness, it is gridlocked and unvarying, offering no resistance at all.

Humour theorists have devised various terms to describe the emotions induced by comedy. Langer (1965: 344) suggests *exhilaration*, Christie Davies (2017) prefers *mirth*, but both underline the euphoric and the pleasurable. Perhaps the most appropriate term in our context, encompassing the palatable and the distinctly unpalatable, is Chafe’s ‘*the feeling of*

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<sup>9</sup> Indeed, if many examples are not laugh-out-loud, this is precisely the point. A suffocating, unfunny humour offers no release from tension.

<sup>10</sup> e.g. Sobejano 1976: 53-56; Sobejano 1975: 212-13 and 353-55; Gil Casado (1968: VIII-XXII); Sanz Villanueva 1980: 168-77; Martínez Cachero 1985: 193-98; López Salinas 2007: 39-48, Jones 1985: 28-29; Herzberger 1991b: 153-73; Pérez Moreno 2005: 115-136

*nonseriousness* – the feeling of *not being earnest*' (2007: 1, italics his), clearly at odds with realism. Social realism announces 'This is serious business', disrupts said tone with levity and spoofing ('Just kidding!'), and lastly, in a final twist, refuses to allow us to settle: 'If you thought we were kidding, guess again. Playtime's over'. This keeps us off-guard in an eager, nervous imbalance, and humour's oblique stance degrades *and* embellishes, cementing generalisations *and* dismantling them. The narrator of Nuñez Alonso's *Segunda agonía* (1955) doubts whether he is 'un evadido o un escarmentado, si un redimido o un condenado, si una desesperación o una esperanza, si una risa o una lágrima, si soy una vida o nada más el molde, la matriz de un ser' (23). Social realism is not backslapping bonhomie. It amuses and bemuses, examining this very conundrum between 'risa' and 'lágrima', life and mould. Its humour is latent – a gap, yawn, or hiatus – and features gags without a last line, gags without gags. This unveils a facelessness and void at the heart of humour itself, to which we shall return in Chapters 2 and 3, as well as the conclusion.

### Grey Humour

Having discussed both Humour Theory frameworks and the specific Spanish context of this study, we shall now introduce the concept of grey humour. Whilst black humour weaves amusement out of serious or taboo subject matter, grey humour signals the beleaguered decay of funniness, finding amusement not in melodramatic extravagance or distorted grotesquerie but in boredom, vacillation, and dawdling.<sup>11</sup> This humour of entrapped vulnerability, nausea, and irritation is very far from good cheer and bonhomie, less dystopian or apocalyptic than jaded and jaundiced. Repeated fails efforts to accomplish anything are fundamentally *funny*, and to pass time or contend with solitude brings even greater solitude. A metronomic tone of relentless cynicism just leaves us cold, eliciting disgruntled, embittered, enfeebled laughs. Grey humour is *haltingly* comic, a funniness of pulverised specialists in failure. Whilst this comedy of tedium is one of many categories of humour found within the Spanish social novel, most explicitly discernible in *El Jarama* (Chapter 3), the other manifestations described (see p. 11) feed into this overarching aura of

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<sup>11</sup> That said, the postwar Spanish novel also features much humour of cumbersome corpses, e.g. *El camino* (1950: 179), *Las ratas* (1962: 36), *Duelo en el Paraíso* (1955: 183), *Fiesta al noroeste* (1952: 94, 163), *La zanja* (1961: 156-7).

impending calamity, frustrated listlessness, and perpetual stalling in which the hollowed-out joke goes down as a death-knell. Almost every character in *La colmena* and *El Jarama*, crucially including the narrator, is fundamentally *bored* of life, and in *Nada* Andrea's most salient characteristic is her pococurantism. Indifference expands to ennui, and there is no escape from the listlessness, no payoff from this utter fatigue, absence of activity, and enveloping darkness.

Humour Theory has drawn near to this 'greyness' without ever locating or analysing it. Alain Blayac (1992) used 'grey comedy' for jokes about ageing in Evelyn Waugh, and both Robert Johnstone (1977) and Katrina Bachinger (1984) assert, tangentially, that the comedy of their respective studies is more 'grey' than black. Bruce Jay Friedman, in his anthology of bilious humour, cast doubt on whether it 'is black... it is some fairly dark-hued color' (1965: vii). Spanish social realist humour features a similar ambiguity of hue. Grey humour is a half-hearted humour of world-weariness: things exist, persist, endure, and die away. In 1972, Sanford Pinsker noted the 'graying of black humour' in the contemporary American novel, but his article relied heavily on typical black humour of Vonnegut and Berger (Pinsker 1972). Patrick O'Neill (1990) examines apocalyptic, black, and gallows humour, accentuating a comic decline, and Laura Salisbury's study of Beckett (2012) analyses a more despairing, paralysed funniness in theatre, but the blend of comedy and boredom that this thesis formulates has yet to be scrutinised.

Boredom is clearly a major generator for comedy since failure and discontent often give rise to absurd, comic expression. Indeed, creator of *The Simpsons* Matt Groening once advised budding comedians to 'Take careful notes on all the *boring*, stupid and unfair things going on around you' (*Simpsons Illustrated* 1992, my italics), and much of the comedy within British sitcoms such as *The Young Ones* (BBC, 1982-84) and *The Office* (BBC, 2001-2003) tackles little more than boredom. However, existing Humour Theory has almost entirely failed to impute meaning to this, focusing either on violent black humour or, mostly, on its freewheeling, energising side: 'comic view of life', 'comic spirit' (Corrigan 1965: 3); comic 'vision of life' (Weitz 2009: 36); comic '*liberation or elevation*' (Critchley 2008: 9, italics his); the 'keynote' of comedy as 'freedom from restraint' (Nelson 1990: 71). Yet, as theorist Elliot

Oring reminds us, 'A theory of humor cannot be a theory of only those examples a theorist happens to appreciate' (2016: 62). There must be a space for the grey humour of tedium.

Moreover, Humour Theory often assumes comedy's power of reconciliation, an ordering, life-affirming tendency, linking laughter ('best medicine') and positive revolution, that makes a chaotic world more manageable. Sean O'Casey encapsulates this consensus: 'laughter is brought in to mock at things as they are so that they may topple down, and make room for better things to come' (1956: 229). On the contrary, my concept of benumbed, grey humour, always on the way out, reveals a darker, soulless side. Instead of a soothing, feel-good reinforcement of shared values, it indicates the twitching, turgid titter, a trembling at the core of laughter. It is funny without ever being fun. Truncated jokes are nearly there, always on the turn, and not quite fully-fledged. As asphyxiation replaces anticipation, the characters of Spanish social realism, perpetually stalled and *left behind*, say 'Look at how insignificant we (all) are'.

Moreover, given the tendency of realism to flatten and dehumanise already motiveless, aimless figures, comedy's pervasiveness in postwar social realism should come as no surprise. Seminal theorist Henri Bergson argued that comedy derives from inflexibility and rigidity: 'we laugh every time a person gives us the impression of being a thing'; 'something mechanical encrusted upon the living' (1999 [1900]: 28, 22). Grey humour says there is nothing new in this dehumanised, passive, gradual sinking, and the aura is not so much tenebrous or menacing as spiritless and jejune. Indeed, for Bergson, repetition is laughable because each reiteration is both monotonous and ceaselessly getting *worse*, or at least older: 'the continuous evolution of a being growing ever older; it never goes backwards and never repeats anything' (1911b: 88). Brought to a deathly halt, the comedy is a collective shrug that reveals no payoff and no escape from listlessness.

Having outlined the theoretical undergirding to grey humour, we shall now analyse the literary history of boredom. Neither Reinhard Kuhn (1967) nor Patricia Meyer Spacks (1995), in their monumental analyses of ennui in Western literature, ever mention humour, although Spacks (118) makes a passing reference to Jane Austen's funniness. Yet nineteenth-century German philosopher Karl Rosenkranz did observe a self-reflexive,

tedious comedy: 'Boredom is not comic in itself but a turn-around towards the comic occurs when the tautological and boring are produced as self-parody and irony' (1990 [1853]: 240-41, my translation). This 'self-parody' of apathy and dispiritedness is evident in our case studies, especially *Nada's comic-kazi*, self-sabotaging humour that shoots itself in the foot (see Chapter 1). Throughout social realism, the suffocating, quivering *funniness* of boredom lays down its arms, raises the white flag, and admits defeat. Through a steadily mounting apprehension amid rejection and refusal, progression becomes regression and characters achieve only more of the same.

### **Deadpan, Flat Humour**

Early humour theorist Max Eastman argued that 'things can be funny only when we're in fun'. Humour is 'dead' if the reader is 'in dear earnest' (1993: 3). However, the social realist novel deliberately toys with this generic boundary, unsettling the reader. It is thus fruitful to compare its features with deadpan in visual media, the essential 'shtick' of which, as Nick Holm's essay (2017: 104) argues, it to seem unaware or uninterested in the underlying humour and any potential for amusing the audience. The performance 'seems to work against – or at least not with – the comic grain of the underlying content' (104).

Fundamentally, Holm proves that the 'confirmation of the text's comic status remains difficult to pin down' (*Ibid*); this is not a bug but an integral *feature* of the mode. Deadpan is characterised by 'the muting and flattening of those formal, aesthetic elements that make it recognisably comic' (105), and throughout Spanish social realism, the narrative resists its own humorousness, violating our accustomed sense of what is (suitably) comic.

Born losers, its characters search for a deeper reality beneath the veneer of mundane, soporific experience, but – in a final comic flourish – none is forthcoming. For theorist George Meredith, comedy is a *cure* for 'the malady of sameness, our modern malady' (1947 [1879]: 2), but Spanish grey humour actively foregrounds this wearisomeness. Julio, in Castillo-Puche's *Con la muerte al hombro* (1954), describes his 'aburrimiento de animal lisiado, este cansancio milagro que se ha apoderado de mis pulsos' (118). Stiff and half-baked, social realist comedy is a persistent *rallentando*, perpetually out of step. Its

characters may move, slowly, but they never advance, folding in on themselves. One character in *Con la muerte al hombro* (1954) says that life itself is ‘una broma de tan pésimo gusto’ (246). As Marcus Greil writes in his study of the twentieth century, ‘What could be more productive of an atomized, hopeless fatalism than the feeling that one is deadened precisely where one ought to be having fun?’ (2011: 50).

Spanish Humour Theory supports my reading of deflating, grey humour. Gómez de la Serna wrote of *humorismo*’s ‘dejo de amargura del que cree que todo es un poco inútil’ (1973: 270) and argued that it does not seek to ‘corregir’ or ‘enseñar’ because it accepts that some problems are insoluble (*Ibid*). Similarly, Miguel de Unamuno wrote in ‘Malhumorismo’ (1910) that Spanish humour features an ‘acre amargor’ that quickly becomes sarcasm, a ‘gesto de dolor y de asco’ (Unamuno 1968: 419). Wenceslao Fernández Flórez, following Unamuno, believed that in Spain ‘no hay humor, sino ‘malhumor’’ (1945: 20). ‘Y si no es tierno ni es comprensivo, no es humor’, he adds (15). Likewise, Julio Casares in 1961 used the word ‘antihumorismo’ to refer to Quevedo (1961: 27), which connects with my notion of humourless humour.

Moreover, the theory of comedy as based on *nothingness* and *emptiness* is well-established within Humour Studies. Marcel Gutwirth identifies humour built on the disappointment and disproportion of being ‘set’ to apprehend ‘something’, only to find oneself holding ‘nothing’ (1993: 85), and Schopenhauer writes of a laughter ‘occasioned by a paradox, and therefore by unexpected subsumption’ (1995 [1818]: 154). Grey comedy, it follows, reveals an Achilles heel, a chink in the armour. Its laughter is like the moment when a chair is pulled from underneath you: what you thought was solid, supported, tangible, and reliable is no longer there, engendering a sudden, laughing fall to oblivion. This is the humour that, when ‘¿Qué tal (ha ido)?’ after a disaster, responds ‘Bueno, eso.... lo típico, sabes, ¡lo normal!’ Of course, it was a catastrophe of epic proportions. Within Spanish social realism this leads to the wasteland of comedy, an entropic vacuity at the heart of humour. We can only laugh into the void, and persevere – but the tear is always near.

My archive will be local but my conclusions global. Whilst I argue that grey humour was a direct result of and reaction to postwar fascist, Francoist policies that limited individual

freedom, grey comedy of comedown and tedium can be decontextualized and applied more broadly within Humour Theory. It stems from specific sociohistorical conditions but retains profound implications for humour itself, in a similar way to Bakhtin's work on the carnivalesque in Rabelais's oeuvre (Bakhtin 1984b). This introduction has established the grey humour of impasse and dithering within Spanish social realism, demonstrating that it aligns both with the perspectives of Spanish theorists on Iberian comedy, who identify a disappointment therein, and with general theories of humour based on falls to nothingness. Relocating the *funniness* in postwar social realism, this thesis argues that the novels are so stale and desolate because of their humour: a doomed, failing, unfluctuating humour of the damp squib. Suffering and death are part of a larger, grimmer joke, provoking the *risus sardonius* or rictus grin. After analysing the novels' abundant paradoxes of laughless laughter limping out of step, and of humour devoid of authentic amusement, I shall examine whether a whole new category need to be created to account for moments that are neither totally funny nor totally tragic. The dimming of comic effect, when laughter evacuates a scene, leads to a more conservative emphasis on a humour not so much stagnant as dead in the water, powerless after the scars of multiple parries, blocks, and deflections.

## Chapter 1

### **‘A pesar de todo, hubo algo cómico en aquellos, chica... Un poquitín cómico’ – *Nada* (Carmen Laforet, 1945)**

Titus: Ha, ha, ha!

Marcus: Why dost thou laugh? It fits not with this hour.

Titus: Why, I have not another tear to shed.

– Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus* (III.i.1405-1407)

When Ena observes Román’s ‘espíritu de pocilga’ (264) in Carmen Laforet’s *Nada* (1945), she encapsulates the aura of both the novel and of the entire genre of postwar social realism. In like manner, criticism on the text has emphasised lugubriousness, domestic disarray, and the disintegration of family values: ‘hambre, quejidos, desolación, ruinas, dolor’ (Graciela Illanes Adaro 1972: 21); ‘air of sour hatred’ (Barry Jordan 1993a: 108). Andrea describes herself as ‘sola entre la suciedad de las cosas’ (8), and the opening, paratextual poem by Juan Ramón sets the tone: ‘un gusto amargo, / Un olor malo’ (5). Indeed, including this epigram, the word ‘olor’/‘olores’ appears 37 times, almost always in an unpleasant context, and ‘gris’/‘grises’ appears 19 times. Vilanova (1995: 179) identifies ‘un fondo sombrío de odio, de horror y de muerte’, and the semantic field continues: ‘el mundo, viejo y caduco, puede ser sucio y corrompido, despiadado y cruel’, ‘un clima humano y vital del vacío, frustración y desengaño’ (*Ibid*). One might well be led to conclude from these readings that *Nada* is entirely devoid of humour.

However, such interpretations fail to account for *Nada*’s beguiling mixture of lightness and weight, advancing with a tottering yet restless, spirited drive and a personal punch that defy a straightforwardly mournful reading. Its dejected rallentando re-animates only to de-animate. Both nimble and blandly lame, awkwardly stop-start, social realist humour follows a kind of ‘tempo rubato’, which Mary Bryden defines as the rhythm that says ‘[h]old back;

but go ahead' (Bryden 1998: 36). Indeed, although contemporary commentators noted 'el espíritu deformado, los sentimientos en un grado de tremenda exasperación, los nervios rotos' (Melchor Fernández Almagro (1945) and a 'drama sombrío, violento, impresionante' (unnamed critic of *Mundo*, 1945), the latter also deemed *Nada* to be 'llena de juventud, de fuerza, de originalidad espontánea'. The 'nota de ternura', he continued, is 'casi infantil', and in what follows we will explore precisely this blend of misfortune and quizzical, high-strung *irony* in Laforet's work. Later critic Jorge Semprún may find 'la expresión de una sociedad moribunda y sanguinaria' and, after reading the novel, feel only 'vergüenza ajena [...] ganas de salir a pasearse al aire fresco' (in Manuel Aznar Soler, ed. (1998: II: 50), but this chapter demonstrates that *Nada's* aura of confinement and impression of being perpetually *bogged down* are intensified by a self-consciously ironic, derisive approach.

Winner of the Premio Nadal in 1945, the novel was a best-seller yet incongruously out of place, for it is an example both of early postwar social realism and of late *tremendismo*. Like its contemporary *La familia de Pascual Duarte* (Camilo José Cela, 1942), a heavy dose of violence and fractious class division is combined with the psychoanalytical introspection of an unreliable narrator. Just as many of Pascual's remarks on his own viciousness are darkly comic in their deadpan portrayal, so Andrea's bitterness, resentment, and experience of inhumanity in *Nada* are faintly amusing in their po-faced, matter-of-fact description.<sup>12</sup> As both Ilie and Asís attest, both novels belong to *tremendismo* – an aesthetic of violence that is 'based on an unmediated description of brutality' (Altisent 2008: 4), deploying pared-back 'stylistic and structural devices' (Jones 1979: 111) to depict the anguish and agony in the years following the Civil War. As María Dolores de Asís notes of *La familia...*, in a comment that could well apply to *Nada*, its violence 'is a reaction against frustration and claustrophobia, exacerbated by the contrast between the miserable living conditions endured by all and the possibility of overcoming them and fulfilling one's own potential' (1992: 30). For Brioso Santos, *tremendismo* and *feísmo* 'se apartan [...] de lo socialmente convenido –el llamado buen gusto– y se acercan al mal –fealdad moral– y a lo horrible –

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<sup>12</sup> Although, for Pérez (2008: 66), *La familia...* is written 'in the neorealist vein', the portrayal of Mario preposterously drowning in a 'tinaja de aceite' is comically deadpan and emotionally blank, with the verb 'desgraciar' ('se desgraciara de nuevo') almost blaming him, as though 'up to his old tricks again'. The 'hillo' from his mouth becomes a grotesque umbilical cord: 'una hebra de oro que estuviera devanando con el vientre'. If, in life, Mario was turned *off* ('apagada color [sic]', hair the colour of 'ceniza'), in death he is grotesquely switched *on*, rising from the ashes like a phoenix ('hebra de oro', 'tan lozanos', 'brillaba... brillos').

fealdad física' (2002: 195). However, I shall show that *tremendismo* is blended with tragicomic *funniness* and the grey humour of tedium, springing from an uneasy balance between impassive social realism and the deadpan portrayal of coarseness and crudity.<sup>13</sup> This gives new significance to the 'tono desacorde' of Juan Ramón's paratextual verse.

First, I explore *Nada's* humour of hardship, for the comic works to underscore rampant poverty and misery. Next, I argue that its narrator Andrea is crucially *absurd* because both she and others are acutely aware of their imbroglio, yet powerless to change it. Thirdly, I discuss theories of comedy penned by women to analyse the splicing of the self, giving name to a *comic-kazi* humour of self-sabotage based on the fundamentally *unfunny*. Lastly, I reflect upon the usefulness of, and readerly anxiety generated by, an unreliably ironic narrator within social realism. After each manifestation of a deadpan, muted, flattened funniness that lacks explosive, explicitly humorous bursts, winks, or smiles to the reader, I shall argue that this jaundiced, naysaying, even *humourless* humour is ultimately unable to land a genuine blow on Francoist oppression.

As noted, existing criticism has mostly treated *Nada* as a straightforwardly unsmiling, downbeat text. One is reminded of Jeffrey Palmer's observation that, for modern audiences, silent film comedies often appear childish or silly due to their 'implausibility'. Yet several contemporary spectators fixated rather on the plausible – that is, culturally relevant – aspects of the films and thus 'found them excessively "black", too abrasive to be funny' (1987: 57). In the light of Palmer's reflections, one might explain the critical neglect of Spanish social realist humour by replacing 'abrasive' with 'serious' or 'tragic' and by reiterating the anguished postwar context of the miserable *años de hambre*. The assumption is that black (or grey) funniness is not suited to a harrowing, doleful narrative. After all, in 1945 *per capita* income was still at one-third of pre-war levels, with earning levels at 40% below postwar Italy (Radcliff 2017: 232). Yet, as this chapter will demonstrate, *Nada* is at pains to identify, deconstruct, and recreate humour. Indeed, it is remarkable that, in 1947, comedy filmmaker Edgar Neville chose to adapt *Nada* for the big screen. Clearly, the novel's earliest audiences could perceive its wealth of humorous devices. Recent

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<sup>13</sup> For more on this *crudeza tremendista* see Álamo Felices (1996), Gullón (2007), and Alvar (1972). See Chapter 2 for a similar tension played out in *La colmena* (Cela, 1950)

alternative readings, such as Barry Jordan's psychological interpretation (1993a), conclude that university student Andrea 'is actually marking time, running on the spot and in the end, going nowhere' (108), but it is grey humour that provokes this. The totalising unhappiness threatens to suffocate the novel, but there pervades a sombre amusement of foreshortening, regret, surrender, and the already-obsolete. There is nothing to gain and everything to lose.

### **Humour of Hardship**

Firstly, we shall examine *Nada's* ironic, offbeat humour of hardship, intensifying pathos. Having travelled eagerly and expectantly to Barcelona to study at the university and live at her grandmother's house, much of the novel constitutes her amusingly shocked, confused reactions to bizarre, impoverished phenomena at Aribau. Bathetic humour proliferates as she enters a household in which traumatic wounds from the Civil War are fresh in the memory: her two uncles, Juan and Román, had aligned themselves respectively with the liberal Republican and conservative Nationalist causes. Her deflated tone is a kind of glum, bathetic, disappointed idealism (grey humour), snorting at the rumbling aftershocks of failure. She immediately likens the house to a 'casa de brujas' and notes that its inhabitants and house-cat 'presentan un aspecto excéntrico' (8). Phantoms, darkness, and death soon replace her hopeful, curious amalgamation of sadness and defiance. The chandelier is covered with cobwebs, Juan 'tenía la cara llena de concavidades, como una calavera' (14), the 'piso' has an 'aire [...] estancado y podrido', women are 'fantasmales', the maid has a 'verdosa dentadura', and the black dog that follows them around is 'una prolongación de su luto' (7). Her companions resemble 'luces de un velatorio' (7). Andrea's pain and grief are fundamentally *interesting* because, instead of staid, unmediated transcription, she employs a wry, rueful, alternately playful and recalcitrant humour as she revisits, rehashes, and reelaborates her memories. When Juan approaches Andrea at the start of the novel, 'se quedaron los dos en actitud, al mismo tiempo ridícula y siniestra, de gallos de pelea' (11). It is this paradox, 'ridícula y siniestra', that underpins *Nada's* stylistic disjuncture, laughing until she aches.

Juvenal wrote that 'Poverty has nothing in it harsher / than that it makes one funny' (*Satires* 3, 1.152-3, trans. Rudd. 1999: 19), and humour of hardship continues through Andrea's impassive, wooden, stark rendering of everyday images and her monotone, steady, expected pacing of delivery. The still life of 'besugos pálidos y cebollas' (8) is faintly amusing – a forced, incongruent image of (comically pale) renewal amid sordid decay – and humour is emboldened because the reader genuinely believes the ordinariness. Its placement '[s]obre el espejo, porque no cabía en otro sitio' is faintly comic for the reader through its sheer, clarifying, mundane honesty. Humour theorist Max Eastman argued that 'humor at its best is a kind of heightened truth – a super truth' (1937: 270), and that we laugh 'with a sense of sudden reality' (272). However, this comes just after the terrifying image of walls complete with a 'huella de manos ganchudas, de gritos de esperanza', a grotesque torture chamber. Margaret Jones (1985: 23) observes that 'ordinary objects are charged with negative emotional values', but there is a tenuous tremor of the comic. Indeed, this battered, hollow comedy is not conciliatory but spiritless and stupefied, denoting despair.

Although Spain would be excluded from the United Nations on December 9, 1946, Franco continued to emphasise the nation's self-sufficiency, writing in the script of *Raza*: 'Podrá el extranjero difamarnos, pero no puede robarnos gloria' (Franco 1942: 71-2). As Pavlovic (2003: 16) demonstrates, such propaganda was ubiquitous, and Sopeña Monsalve remembers that whilst Holland's 'rosas' or France's 'peras' might have looked more beautiful ('más lúcida apariencia en los escaparates del mundo'), 'son más verdad, más honradas, más sabrosas y fragrantes las peras de Galicia, las naranjas de Valencia o las rosas y claveles de Sevilla' (Monsalve 1994: 210). In sharp contrast to this doctrine of sumptuousness, Andrea's penchant for hyperbolic, sharp, jittery humour of hardship is presented as a *direct result* of her decrepit conditions, undercutting Francoist propaganda that dismissed poverty: 'Ni siquiera se me ocurría pensar que estaba histérica por la falta de alimento' (132). In this misery, Andrea can do nothing else but laugh, and the social critique is clear. Likewise, on Christmas morning, Andrea's grandmother resembles 'una pequeña y arrugada pasa' (27). The amusing simile indicates malnutrition, and *Nada* becomes a series of faintly sadomasochistic games of witnessed suffering, stuck in compulsive repetition. It may be funny, but it is not joking, and the brutalising pressures of Francoist oppression and the impact of the Civil War are keenly observed. The benumbed comedy strikes a deadening

tone and *expands* the realism (a substantial comic element without being outright 'comedies'), which perhaps explains why Carlos Feal Deibe called *Nada* an example of 'realismo íntimo' (1976: 233).

The only *gingerly* ironic, stony, blank narrative voice thus makes the truth *more real*, wrenching authentic verities from unnatural distortions. It channels the spirit of Roland Barthes in blending comedy and actuality: 'What I claim is to live to the full the contradiction of my time, which may well make sarcasm the condition of truth' (1972: 12). As Charlie Chaplin noted of the comic's audience: 'I make them conscious of the reality of life. "You think this is it, don't you?" I say. "Well, it isn't, but this is – see?" And then they laugh' (quoted in Eastman 1937: 273). Other humorous facets of life at Aribau include *tía* Angustias, who attends church solely to criticise how other members of the congregation pray and dress, and Antonia, who, taking pleasure in the pain of others, is agreeable only towards her dog, Trueno. In truth, the tough, sobering humour shows, misery was prevalent in the *años de hambre*. As Martínez (1990: 49) demonstrates, in one week in March 1940, 'una persona tenía derecho a comprar 300 gramos de azúcar; un cuarto de litro de aceite; 400 gramos de garbanzos y un huevo'. In *Nada*, Andrea is forced to drink the water reserved for boiling vegetables and spends her meagre allowance in a few days to impress her friends, only to go hungry for the rest of the month. Yet, even here, a dingy, cheerless derision emerges, both bolstering (through unflinching representations of impoverishment) and diluting (through an overwhelming aura of hebetude) the socioeconomic critique.

Nevertheless, as we shall explore through social realist humourless humour, whilst Andrea's remark and Angustias' hypocrisy parody Francoist attitudes towards poverty and religion, this humour never makes life easier to bear, offering no safe haven or alternative.

Moreover, *Nada* cannot offer analysis that might lead to action or change because it never clarifies the objective reasons for the hardship. American writer Fernanda Eberstadt (2007), one of the only critics to identify the funniness in *Nada*, believes the novel's 'unlikely freshness' derives from 'the contrast between the melodramas to which Andrea is witness and the humorous restraint of her narration'. Crucially, the humour is rooted not in theatrical excess – comic features that would later become typical of the Spanish novel of the 60s (*Cinco horas con Mario*, *Señas de identidad*) – but in caution and self-limitation. The

ironies of grey humour abound: this self-control, calming *and* unnerving, is both vivid – piquing our interest – and bathetically anodyne. *Nada* may reveal what Juan Emilio Aragonés, in theatre, terms ‘verdades tan ásperas que no pueden ser [...] expresadas sino en un tono de farsa’ (1966: 277), but, as it rhythmically bangs its head against the wall, disabled by fear and threat, its negative, incapacitated comedy reveals only bugbears, bêtes noires, and worst-case scenarios.

### Andrea’s Absurdity

Having outlined the humour of hardship, we shall now explore theories of the absurd, which can usefully be applied to Andrea because she is increasingly *mindful* of her ludicrousness. Albert Camus posited that Sisyphus (condemned interminably to roll the boulder up the hill, only for it to roll down again) was the definitive ‘absurd’, as well as tragic, ‘hero’ because he ‘conscious’ of hopelessness. The ‘workman of today’ –again, grey humour of ordinariness – ‘is no less absurd’, and the ‘tragedy’ lies in those ‘rare moments’ when the worker becomes ‘conscious’ of his inescapable fate (2005 [1942]: 97). Ultimately, ‘The absurd depends as much on man as on the world’ (*Ibid*). Thomas Nagel, building on Camus, argues that a mouse is never absurd ‘because he lacks the capacities for self-consciousness and self-transcendence that would enable him to see that he is only a mouse’ (1991: 21). Andrea’s yearning for a firm grip on what she terms a ‘realidad verdadera’ (9) – a somewhat tautological conflation – is forever thwarted by her harsh, berserk conditions. As Camus notes, the absurd stems from the ‘divorce between the mind that desires and the world that disappoints’ (*Ibid*, 37).

Alongside this critical gap between mind and body, the second facet of Andrea’s absurdity is her perennial role as *spoil-sport* or *party-pooper*. She is one of multiple characters in Spanish social realism who are unable to achieve amusement even in *fiestas*. As John Huizinga theorises of the spoil-sport, ‘[s/he] reveals the relativity and fragility of the play-world in which he had temporarily shut himself with others. [S/he] robs play of its *illusion*’ (Huizinga 2016 [1938]: 11). There is no convincing alternative and no workable plan. In his reading of comedy in Beckett’s theatre, Shane Weller writes that, without a ‘fall into

alterity, were life to remain unremittingly mindful of itself, purely self-identical, there would be nothing comic, no laughter at all' (2006: 90). This is because 'laughter, as a mechanical effect, is always laughing at itself, and in so doing dividing itself from itself, producing or being produced as its own other' (2006: 96). Laughter vocabulary concerns fractures and fissures: we *crack up* in laughter, *break up* in laughter, laugh until we *split*, are *beside ourselves*, and Spanish social realism exploits this doubling through self-reflexive division. Likewise, *Nada's* laughter, emerging through the process of *dédoublement*, replicates the laughable in the very act of laughing.

We shall now examine how these two facets of absurdity – self-consciously hopeless and killjoy – are played out within Andrea's account. The beginning of the novel foregrounds a self-conscious preoccupation with how *others* see and judge her, and this continues throughout the narrative. Although her 'piernas' are 'entumecidas', she wears 'una sonrisa de asombro', and crucially she is aware that this mixture is probably amusing for any onlooker: 'una figura extraña con mi aspecto risueño y mi vuego abrigo' (6). This irony, joking and hurting, is emphasised from the very start. Our forlorn, melancholy anti-hero is weighed down by misfortune and injustice, ultimately unable to *make a game* of life. During the Christmas dinner scene towards the start, Antonia, laying the table, puts a 'plato grande con turrón' in the 'centro, como si fueran flores' (28). Yet Andrea, noting the incongruous 'mantel a cuadros deshilachado por las puntas', remarks that this is one 'extraña comida de Navidad'! Juan rubs his hands together, 'contento' and 'muy animado', and shouts '¡Alegría! ¡Alegría!', desperately willing for some semblance of joy. We laugh along as the 'abuelita reía, dichosa, con la cabeza vacilante después de haber vino' (28), and Juan engages in the self-deprecating laughter of misfortune: 'No hay pollo ni pavo, pero un buen conejo es mejor que todo'. Perhaps the group have finally achieved some long-awaited happiness.

This appears to be a carnivalesque comedy, containing what Bakhtin identified as a 'life-creating and transforming power, and indestructible vitality', a 'second life' outside officialdom 'hostile to all that was immortalized and competed' (1984b: 107, 9-10). However, in the Spanish postwar context, ought festivities become disproportionate a lacerating tone will erupt to proclaim (to borrow from Larry David's sitcom from this century) 'Curb your enthusiasm'. Indeed, Andrea breaks off from the (false) merriment and

turns her attention to Román, who ‘parecía, como siempre, lejos de la comida’ (28). In a burst of the bleakest, plainest humour, she undercuts the ostensible jollity: ‘Teníamos semejanza con cualquier tranquila y feliz familia, envuelta en su pobreza sencilla, sin querer nada más’. The family put on a good face, laughing through gritted teeth. But now:

Un reloj que se atrasaba siempre dio unas campanadas intempestivas y el loro se esponjó, satisfecho, al sol. De pronto a mí me pareció todo aquello idiota, cómico y risible otra vez. Y sin poderlo remediar empecé a reírme cuando nadie hablaba ni venía a cuento, y me atraganté. Me daban golpes en la espalda, y yo, encarnada y tosiendo hasta saltárseme las lágrimas, me reía; luego terminé llorando en serio, acongojada, triste y vacía. (28)

It has become the glum ‘carnival’ of the downtrodden. The absurdity of delayed clock and ever-present parrot make Andrea explode suddenly into a fit of what Descartes called ‘the inarticulate and explosive cry’: laughter (Descartes 1988 [1647]: 83-4). As weeping interweaves with guffaws, ‘me reía’ is physically encased between ‘lágrimas’ and ‘llorando’: laughtears. When the psychological reaction is over, she is left with that final tricolon of adjectives, concluding with categorical bareness: ‘vacía’. This is the saddening end to all humour in postwar Spanish social realism, as an overload of sorrow laughs at itself, exposing a vacant chasm. The dynamics of humour are such that she finds broken amusement within the story-world, but never does the reader laugh aloud. As Douglas Haynes (2010: 96) writes concerning bathos within surrealism, self-conscious humour demands a bathetic ‘fall’ typically *into* the body, with all the connotations of abjection thereby entailed. The descent reaches what Hegel calls ‘unhappy consciousness’ (Hegel 1977 [1807]: 124), torn halfway between its contingent and transcendent sides, its experience of itself as both object and subject.

Morevoer, this dampening tragicomic scene became a central depiction of comic agony in Edgar Neville’s cinematic adaptation (1947). When Juan offers a ‘pedazo de turrón’ to the *lorito*, because ‘tú eres de la familia, toma...’, both Andrea and the *abuela* burst into uncomfortably loud, grating laughter (Figure 1). The *abuela* soon stops, however, leaving Andrea to laugh unnervingly *on her own*. The comedy does not end in placid blitheness, and

the scene interrogates the leftovers of laughter, a laughter of let-down. As theorist Anna Parvulescu has written, 'Once laughed, a laugh persists' (2010: 18). The camera focuses in, straightening up onto Andrea's face as she continues, stridently, to cackle to herself and wallow in giggles for what feels like an eternity (15-16 seconds). The camera shifts to Ramón, who, adjacent to his dog (an absurd touch), stares her down disapprovingly. We turn back to Andrea through an intrusive, extreme close-up and, with a slow, aching decline, tears of joy become tears of sadness. If there is a time and a place for humour, this is certainly not it. These are deep, lengthy sniffs, and the eye-level shot offers no respite: the vignette lasts a full 47 seconds (minutes 45-46) before Andrea stands up and, still crying, moves away from the table. The camera begins with a medium close-up, centres in on a close-up, and then breaks away once more, thus mimicking the balance of attraction and repulsion so fundamental to the novel and its genre.





Figure 1 – Andrea's 'laughtears'

Andrea experiences *Gluckschmerz* – sadness at others’ good fortune. To cite Michel Houellebecq, writing on visual arts and communication in general, ‘[t]he tragic cuts in at that precise point where the derisory can no longer be perceived as *fun*’ (Houellebecq 2001: 50, my translation). This explains why the text both provides and withholds its comic cues, stressing generic instability, in a feature found throughout social realism. As Houellebecq notes, the process engenders a ‘brutal psychological reversal’ (*Ibid*). The laugh is a smile that bursts, but the pleasure it generates is deceptive. Caught in *laughtears* at Román’s ludicrous attempt to impose merriment (‘las familias se ponen alegres y contentas, se perdonan sus pequeños agravios y ríen juntos, ¡ja, ja!’) on a desperate situation, she finally apologises to Román: ‘¡Qué tontería! ¡No sé lo que me ha pasado!’ We laugh first and wince second. This is a microcosm of *Nada* (and the genre) as a whole: a recognition of (a miserable, dampening) absurdity gives rise to laughter, but said amusement leads merely to slow, aching heartbreak. The laughing body – however ungainly – is vulnerable and inescapable. As Tolstoy remarked, ‘[It] is only my position that is absurd’ (1987 [1882]: 35). Laughter both absolves and incriminates; in the words of laughter theorist Nancy, ‘It is in laughing that it is known, it is in laughing that laughter *is* this truth. The one bursts with the other and from the same burst, truth withdraws into laughter, into “the dim glistening of the mystery”’ (1993: 376). Andrea notes (in the text) that the tears flow ‘en serio’ (28), which signals that laughter was a ruse. Andrea exudes numbness and confusion, aiming to shut jokes down.

The scene is akin to Nuñez Alonso’s contemporary novel *Segunda agonía* (1955), when Ramón notes that ‘Y sufro, sufro mucho, Patty. Sufro y lloro a solas. Sufro y río a solas y sin saber por qué. Yo estoy muerto, Patty’ (329-330). Laughing through the hurt, Andrea’s absurd self-appreciation does not give rise but *fall* to laughter. In the postwar environment, all appeals to comedy to ‘laugh away’ the pain ultimately fall short. As the sound of glee becomes almost indistinguishable from that of wailing, Laforet may expose the hollowness of Francoist fantasies that publicised a boundlessly flourishing environment<sup>14</sup>; however, the nightmarish, Kafkaesque comedy merely wallows in the mire. Shared failure may provide opportunities for social bonding, but laughter fails to lift the gloom and ultimately cannot

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<sup>14</sup> In the script of *Raza* (1942), Franco himself wrote: ‘¡Qué hermoso es ser español!’ (Franco 1942: 71)

protect Andrea from pain.

Humour theorists often elide Thomas Hobbes' statements about superiority of viewpoint in humour<sup>15</sup>, stressing the aspect of superiority over *others* (e.g. Roger Scruton in Morreall 1987: 168), but Hobbes specifies that it is as much about ourselves in relation to our *former selves* as about others: 'Men laugh at the follies of themselves past' (1962 [1840]: 47). This laughter is often Andrea's last resort *that still* backfires, emphasising merely blockage, cancellation, and entrapment. When Ena's first questions to Andrea are not about *her* at all, but rather about Román, she recalls 'la pregunta me pareció absurda y me hizo reír' (23). Laughter reveals her rejection and ostracisation. To cite Kurt Vonnegut in *The Sirens of Titan*, '[Unk] was laughing at the ferocious mess he was in – at the way he had pretended all his army life that he had understood everything that was going on, and that everything that was going on was just fine' (2006 [1957]: 185). Andrea is 'casi defraudada' (23) by Ena's questions. The architect of her own misfortune, she is both laughing subject and puppet whose strings are pulled by the gag.

Self-consciously laughingstock and spoil-sport, Andrea cannot take a joke. Ena smells of 'suave perfume' and sports a 'bien cortado traje', but Andrea is embarrassed: 'al sentirme yo misma mal vestida, trascendiendo a lejía y áspero jabón de cocina' (23). This juxtaposition is clearly humorous, but the 'evaluative edge of irony' (Hutcheon 1994: 2) is vital. '[J]abón' propels us into daily life, stripped of affectation, and the funniness stems from a starkly desolate image of extreme hardship. Andrea's greatest fear is a lacerating derision, the 'burla de sus [Ena's] ojos' (23) were she to observe the truth of Andrea's deprived existence. Likewise, when Pons confronts Andrea, it is this crueller humour that leaves her 'dolida', a laughingstock:

–Antes, ¿cómo podías vivir, siempre huyendo de hablar con la gente? Te advierto que nos resultabas bastante cómica. Ena se reía de ti con mucha gracia. Decía que eras ridícula, ¿qué te pasaba?

Me encogí de hombros un poco dolida [...] (23)

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<sup>15</sup> in one of the three major strands of Humour Theory, alongside Incongruity and Relief

Moreover, Ena fears lest Andrea look at her ('no me mires así, no me mires así') precisely because 'me das muchas ganas de *reír* esa cara que pones' (40, my italics). We imagine Andrea inquisitively – and comically – cocking her head to one side while searching for clues on her face. As a *gelotophobe*, Andrea's greatest fear is being laughed *at*.<sup>16</sup> She finishes a *bandeja de dulces* all by herself in a cinema, only for a couple to whisper behind her back and laugh at her (47), and later Ena says: 'Tenías los ojos brillantes y andabas torpe, abstraída, sin fijarte en nada... Nos reíamos de ti' (62). We read of a surprising amount of laughter in *Nada* but rarely ourselves laugh aloud, and this links to an overriding sense across Spanish social realism of a humour that is fundamentally based on nothingness, or on the essentially *unfunny*. In laughing, with what one villager in López Pacheco's social realist *Central eléctrica* (1957) calls 'una risa sin alegría, desesperada' (53), readers *backed the wrong horse*. We are therefore awkwardly complicit, having entrusted our instincts to comedy. By the end, the false wager is revealed: tragedy and barrenness prevail. *Nada's* failure gap, diluting humour, and neverending 'oh-so-nears' uncover but the negation of a negation.

Next, we will discuss how Andrea persists in finding the funny side to life, even in moments that call for a different response. When Juan screams at her whilst she clears up a lot of mess on the floor, her hands tremble and '[h]acía un esfuerzo por ver el lado cómico del asunto' (77). In the same way, Spanish humour theorist Fernández de la Vega defines *el humorismo* "'mala conciencia do riso", riso reprimido ou riso forzado, pudo do riso, esforzo por non se rir ou rirse por non chorar' ("mala conciencia de la risa", risa reprimida o risa forzada, pudor de risa, esforzo por no reírse o reírse por no llorar') (1995: 49). Andrea seeks comic *relief* by 'imaginando a mis hipotéticos amantes, y no lo conseguía bien' (77). The semantic field of artifice and self-deception, when on the ropes, is unremitting: 'hacía un esfuerzo', 'imaginando', 'hipotéticos'. Andrea is fully aware that to view her situation comically is a kind of dishonesty in itself, yet she pursues such an approach all the same.

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<sup>16</sup> As Louis C. Pérez comments on *Lazarillo de Tormes*: 'Never does he [Lazarillo] himself laugh' (1960: 531).

It is crucial that Andrea separates her mind from her body to perceive the comic, with distressing results. Antonio Altarriba writes of an analogous splicing of the self, *cracking up*, in forbidden comics under Franco: ‘aun en las peores circunstancias, el ser humano es capaz de manifestar un cierto *desapego de sí mismo*. Quizá, correcciones políticas y pensamientos bienintencionados aparte, la mayor grandeza del espíritu consista en hacer burla de la miseria con lúcido, con elegante distanciamiento’ (2001: 23, my italics). Humour theorist Simon Critchley argues that comedy derives from the fact that a person *is* their body but also *has* their body and reflects upon that relationship of master and slave (2002: 41). Humanity is a ‘strange medley of the physical and the mental’, as Bevis (2012: 20) notes, and it is only when looking at her ‘manos temblorosas’ that Andrea finds herself ridiculous, quite literally *beside herself*. Baudelaire terms this a ‘*dédoublement*’ (1975-76: II: 543), both object and subject – suffering observer and laughable target – of one’s own ludicrousness, and Paul de Man, building on Baudelaire, calls it a ‘self-escalating act of consciousness’ (1983: 220). The comic might be described as the reverse of the inscription at Delphi: Know not thyself. This self-alienation indicates that, in the postwar environment, young women like Andrea found themselves at a crossroads with little or no hope for a brighter future.<sup>17</sup> The ironic distance accentuates the despondency, but the danger is that the passivity of representation leads to a passivity of reader-response.

Andrea catches herself in the act and sneaks a glimpse in the mirror. However, as she takes the bucket to clean up the mess, finally unable to access the ‘lado cómico’, Juan’s screaming questions are telling: “¿No ves cómo se calla la muy tal? —gritó Juan—. ¿No veis cómo no puede contestar?” (77). Bereft of her power to find humour amid tragedy, Andrea is voiceless. Only the quiver of comedy remains. At Pons’ party, Andrea admits to herself that ‘No me divertía nada’. It is here that she catches sight of her own reflection: ‘Me vi en un espejo blanca y gris, deslucida entre los alegres trajes de verano que me rodeaban. Absolutamente seria entre la animación de todos y me sentí un poco ridícula’ (84). The priceless comedy of Andrea’s grey drabness, contrasted with the lively ‘animación’, is palpable. The novel sits between spoof and self-spoof, between being and having a body. As the laughingstock *takes stock*, the one is eccentric in relation to the other. Indeed, Helmuth

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<sup>17</sup> This is also explored in Carmen Martín Gaité’s *Entre visillos* (1957), another novel replete with grey humour

Plessner begins his study *Laughing and Crying* with 'Ich bin, aber...' ('I am, but I do not have myself') (1970: 4). Humour reminds the reader of mortal artificiality, the frailties of the flesh, and the instability of human psychology.

This sense of a self that laughs uneasily at its own comic appreciation is evident throughout the genre. Pedro, in Fernández Santos' *Laberintos* (1964), recognises his quandary with a sharp *memento mori* ('Se nos acabará antes de lo que pensamos'), but then proceeds to *laugh* 'tristemente de sí mismo' (77). '¡Qué sentencioso estoy!', he declares, in the archetypal, comic image of social realism. Through its belatedness and double postponement, laughter lingers, ominously. If '[l]aughter [...] offers us the void as a pledge' (Haynes 2006: 36), it also collapses into it. Both Spanish literary criticism and Humour Studies must expand their generic frontiers, encompassing the slippery moments wherein characters perceive a comic potential that refuses to blossom into laugh-out-loud humour.

### **Women's Comedy**

Having established the humour of hardship and absurdity, it will be useful to compare broad critical approaches to women's comedy. If we consider *Nada* as representative of comic narratives – or narratives interested in perceiving and interpreting comedy – penned by women, its humour intensifies a prevailing textual ambiguity. On the one hand, Regina Barreca's study of humour in British women's literature finds that '[b]y simply repeating the sometimes mild, sometimes grave, atrocities directed toward women in everyday life, the woman writer assumes the tasks of the satirist' (Barreca 1994: 21). To make comedy at all – even brief snippets of dissatisfied humour – from this misfortune is an act of defiance. However, on the other, Nancy Walker writes that female comic authors reject a 'lighthearted feeling' for a 'subtext of anguish and frustration' (1995: xii), and, for Gilbert and Gubar, they 'dramatize [...] their desire both to accept the structures of patriarchal society and to reject them' (2000 [1979]: 78). In *Nada*, Andrea's humour tolerates and even reinforces her troubling predicament. We modulate our mirthful reactions to her just as she does the same to her environment, but the endgame of laughter is conservative.

Similarly, several critics on women's humour have discussed the splicing of personal identity that we have just scrutinised. For Gilbert and Gubar, 'Female authors dramatize their own self-division' (2000 [1979]: 78), Naomi Schor (1985: 250) speaks of 'reading double', and Diana Fuss notes that women are trapped in a 'doble lectura' (Fuss 1999: 141). Andrea appreciates and enacts the limitations of her medium, unsuccessfully yearning to be the survivor and controller of the joke, not merely the brunt of it. She is forever pursuing gateways to laughter, even when jests are no longer forthcoming. For Barreca, humour by women is 'dangerous' precisely because it 'refuses to stop at the point where comedy loses its integrative function. [... It] is about de-centering, dis-locating and de-stabilizing the world' (30). However, whilst Barreca's interpretation is positive, *Nada* is a novel of anti-vision and an all-encompassing void. Andrea is held in check by opposing forces: what in one moment can produce irresistible laughter can, in the next, produce a pang of grief.

Andrea's subdued, listless attitude is perpetually at one remove from her surroundings. At the start of Part II, when Gloria confides in her about the 'puñetazos en la cabeza' she endures from Juan, we expect compassion and kindness. Sobejano perceives Andrea's 'presencia, auxilio y vigilancia del corazón' (2005: 98) here, but in truth she fails to grasp the tenor:

El cuerpo de Gloria estaba helado y me enfriaba, pero no era posible huir de él; sus cabellos mojados resultaban oscuros y viscosos como sangre sobre la almohada y me rozaban la cara a veces. Gloria hablaba continuamente.

[...]

Algo así como una locura se posesionó de mi bestialidad al sentir tan cerca aquel cuello de Gloria, que hablaba y hablaba. Ganas de morder en la carne palpitante, masticar. Tragar la buena sangre tibia... Me retorcí sacudida de risa de mis propios espantosos desvaríos, procurando que Gloria no sorprendiera aquel estrechamiento de mi cuerpo. (49)

We find what Inmaculada de la Fuente calls an 'ausencia de culpabilidad notable' (2002: 71) in Andrea, for her vampire-like inclinations ('bestialidad', 'cuello', 'morder', 'masticar', 'Tragar'), as well as the inescapability and gracelessness of the physical body, are roundly

hilarious. We laugh through gritted teeth at this 'sacudida de risa', entirely inappropriate in the painful context. Nagel argues on absurdity that because another 'point of view' is always accessible 'from which the seriousness appears gratuitous', the two perspectives 'collide in us, and that is what makes life absurd' (1991: 14). The jarring friction asks us to step back and survey ourselves as 'arbitrary, idiosyncratic, highly specific occupants of the world, one of countless possible forms of life' (*Ibid*: 21). Because 'unsettlable doubts' (which, as discussed, many critics observe but treat seriously and/or tragically) are simply part and parcel of human experience, 'absurdity is one of the most human things about us: a manifestation of our most advanced and interesting characteristics' (23). *Nada's* absurd humour breaks away from realism only to return us to the human<sup>18</sup>, leaving *in* the surreal, nonsensical qualities of life. Social realism shows that the fratricide of the Civil War, and life under a subsequent oppressive dictatorship, can make usually sensible people do totally absurd things. The backfiring, *comic-kazi* comedy derives, in turn, from the characters' ardent efforts to play this fall into delirium somewhat *seriously*, to derive even a scintilla of nobility from a world that denies them even the illusion of decorum. Andrea is separate from everyone around her, and her 'risa' (like that of several novels of this period) is Bakhtin's 'laughter that does not laugh' (1984b: 45).

Moreover, even when Andrea has the chance to dominate and express herself as heroine, *comic-kazi*, self-lacerating humour implodes on itself. Grey humour establishes Andrea as both (lonely) jester and butt, central and marginal, duper and duped. She admits to being toothless ('Yo tenía un pequeño y ruin papel de espectadora', 86), and her account fosters uncertainty over whether the humour is presented purposefully as a joke, as an attempt to mirror real life, or as a form of social critique. Called upon to reassure Juan about Gloria's fidelity, 'No hice nada' (67). Afforded a chance to defy Angustias, 'Yo no concebía entonces más resistencia que la pasiva' (13). '[U]na gota entre la corriente' (6), her 'único deseo de mi vida ha sido que me dejen en paz para hacer mi capricho' (41). When she '[c]orría por la ciudad', she is 'debilitándome inútilmente' (108), even exclaiming, in a prime example of grey humour, '¡Cuántos días sin importancia!' (43). In this space between the said and

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<sup>18</sup> This aligns with Jordan's view that it is an example of psychological realism (c.f. Illanes Adaro 1972)

unsaid, humour reveals a detached, dampening halfheartedness, uncovering but the negation of a negation.

Andrea negotiates her stance as a woman locked within a Francoist, patriarchal tyranny by frequently interpreting her surroundings through a fairytale, fantastical lens. However, she acknowledges her former inadequacies with a dose of self-deprecating humour. Slippage becomes part of the reading experience, and the revolutionary and the reactionary, the comical and the crushing, are frozen in agonising tension. Around halfway through the novel, Andrea decides to leave the oppressive family and seek liberation with her university friends. At a party, she identifies herself implicitly with such underdog fairytales as the Ugly Duckling and Cinderella, yet she still yearns to be a 'rubia princesa' (83).<sup>19</sup> Her first suitor, Gerardo, is a grotesque subversion of Prince Charming whose ungainly attempt to kiss her triggers an overblown reaction of hilarious disgust: 'me subió una oleada de asco por la saliva y el calor de sus labios gordos' (54). Andrea accuses him of being a 'semental' (54) and accepts her ridiculousness: 'Yo era neciamente ingenua en aquel tiempo'. Later, attending a first dance party at Pons's house (a young, affluent student), he rejects Andrea, telling her that cousin Nuria is in love with him. The bathetic humour is signalled through a series of ellipses, illustrating his frantic desperation not to hurt her feelings: 'Bueno, me hizo una declaración de amor..., no....'. As Andrea tells us:

Se detuvo y tragó saliva.

Me dio risa. Todo aquello me parecía ya cómico. (86)

Once again, her desire to substantiate and clarify humour is evident. Pons' risibly hurtful 'reasoning' or 'apology' ('una chica seductora. Tiene miles de pretendientes. Usa un perfume...'), is followed up by Andrea's curt, hilarious 'Sí, claro'. Andrea notes the putrid smell of his mother (amusing in itself), and fears that her gaze be 'dirigida a mis viejos zapatos' (84). She feels 'ridícula' (84) and 'angustiada por la pobreza de mi atavío' (84).<sup>20</sup> In

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<sup>19</sup> See Higginbotham (1986) for more on the 'Cinderella syndrome' in *Nada*

<sup>20</sup> For more on this self-reflexive, absurd comedy in other social realist novels, see the appendix. E.g. Miguel, in Juan Marsé's *Esta cara de la luna* (1962), realises that he is wearing the wrong tie and notes 'Soy una calamidad' (176)

this grotesque parody of Cinderella, glass slippers become rugged, timeworn shoes, which she compares with Yturdiaga's 'zapatos brillantes como espejos' (84). She wants attention, but when her plan backfires, she realises that 'quizá era culpa mía' (85). Feminist critic Emilie Bergmann argues that Andrea ultimately rejects these patriarchal role models to forge her own identity, citing Kolbenschlag ('we know that for the Prince we should read "Patriarchy"', 1979: 75)) and emphasising that Andrea chooses 'to be the knight in her own book of chivalry' (1987: 143). However, her comedic portrayal of rejection leaves little room for personal growth and development. Indeed, Andrea is painfully aware of her own status as fool: '¿Es posible que sea yo –pensé– la protagonista de tan ridícula escena? [...] ¿Por qué digo tal cantidad de idioteces?' (85). If the joke 'bombs', it is because Andrea killed it. One is reminded of a Tommy Cooper gag, which neatly encapsulates this sense of the self implicated as laughingstock: '...the phone was ringing. I picked it up, and said "Who's speaking, please?". And the voice said, "You are"'.

### Comprehending the Comic

However, as well as being self-consciously absurd, cognisant of her pain and ridiculous aspect, Andrea also demonstrates a willingness to explore the figure of *irony*. Amusement – albeit a despairing, often grievous kind – derives from asymmetries between two opposing world-views: a naïve young girl with romantic ideals, experiencing Barcelona for the first time, and a wiser authorial standpoint that debugs the errors, undercuts the futility of hope, and emphasises the sordid reality. After all, as Laforet wrote in *La mujer nueva* (1955), life is 'aquella ardorosa, vulgar, pequeña intriga' (in Laforet 1956: 236), and Andrea's efforts to recast her memories, self-manipulate her perspectives, and undermine her erstwhile sanguinity are unnerving but also comical. It is as though she were saying 'Well, it's funny now, but at the time...'. Humour is a testing ground; indeed, Ena considers Aribau a 'campo de experimentación' (100), and Andrea is in a state of becoming, interrogating her own precariousness. She is determined never to mix her 'dos mundos' – her university friends, 'con su fácil cordialidad', and 'el sucio y poco acogedor' home-life (23) – but, of course, overlap between these comically antagonistic frames is inevitable, and bathetically amusing. Furst (1984: 9) called irony 'an inquiring mode', and the nebulous phrase 'algo así como' is

repeated a full six times in the novel (10, 23, 24, 49, 65, 103). The protagonist of social realism is typically either tedious observer on, or unfortunate victim of, circumstances beyond his or her control. *Nada* foregrounds both at once, apprehensively fumbling in the darkness.

Critics have often disagreed about the role of unreliable narration in social realism, although few have analysed its humour. Whilst for John Butt, who traces a 'natural development' from Baroja to Sánchez Ferlosio, objectivity requires 'the disappearance of the author' (1978: 58-60), for Brad Epps the social realist author is 'not so much "dead" as self-effacing, a figure who eludes the mirror in order to turn it elsewhere – as if its self-reflexive glare were too troubling, or too inconsequential, to bear' (2003: 195). We should acknowledge that Andrea may be suffering but also probing and quizzical, as well as self-consciously daft or indiscreet, testing her own ironies and giving name to new emotions. Sandra J. Schumm argues that Andrea explores *metaphor* to 'define the unknown' (1999: 26), and Molinaro (2008: 165) observes her 'interiorization of contradiction', but it is *humour* and *irony* that she finds so intriguing. For instance, when backed into corners, she fixates childishly on a rival's negative trait. Upon arriving at Barcelona, she observes a 'casa de brujas' (17) and, when intimidated by Antonia, Andrea focuses on her 'fea cara' and her 'mueca desafiante, como de triunfo' (12). Threatened by Angustias, who wants to restrict her newfound liberty, Andrea desperately 'le buscaba un detalle repugnante' (27), finding her 'dientes' to be 'un color sucio' (28). When Angustias moves in for a kiss Andrea reacts with amusing disgust; however, as we shall explore later, this irony leads nowhere at all, for she still feels 'oprimida como bajo un cielo pesado de tormenta' (28).

Indeed, what has rarely been credited is that a central part of Andrea's development – if she develops at all, as we will explore – is her endeavour to take *ownership* of this amusement: to ascertain what humour is, how it functions, and when it is appropriate. Angustias rather amusingly accuses Andrea of being perpetually 'callada, encogida, con aire de querer escapar a cada instante', such that 'das risa' (13), but Andrea wants to *control* this laughter through employing a self-consciously ironic voice. In the *barrio gótico*, 'Los anuncios guiñaban sus ojos en un juego pesado' (66), but she, too, is playing a game. For instance, she deliberately contrasts comic scripts of cleanliness and filth when taking her first bath at

Aribau. '¡Qué alivio el agua helada sobre mi cuerpo!' (8), she exclaims, but what ought to be pleasant, purgative, and cleansing becomes a grotesquely squalid parody ('manchado', 'macilentas', 'verdosas', 'sucias', 'roñosa') of the same. Tello García (2010: 339) even links this scene to a method of 'tortura durante el franquismo, llamado "la bañera", consistente en sofocar a la víctima en agua llena de excrementos'. If such an image evoked this practice for contemporary readers, the dark irony of Andrea's outcry is deeply unnerving.

Indeed, more often than not, her irony backfires (*comic-kazi*), making no inroads at all. Whilst Ena controls the technique with skill and determination, maintaining a look 'cargada de brillo y de ironía' (23) and later calling herself 'una niña terrible y cínica' (99), Andrea hesitantly explores but never masters it. Later, despite knowing full well that Ena is exploiting her to cover for her excursions with Jaime, Andrea proudly calls this 'una dicha concedida a pocos seres humanos' (52). Yet she is once again the butt of the joke. When Ena reveals the real motives behind her decision to see Román, she confesses to revelling in 'el juego apasionante en que se convertía aquello para mí' (100). When Andrea imagines that 'fuese a mí y no a Jaime a quien ella [Ena] hubiese burlado y traicionado', Andrea even 'tenía ganas de llorar' (76). Likewise, Samuel Amago observes a range of 'suggestively voyeuristic statements' (2002: 72) in the chapter where Ena finally confides in Andrea, explaining the situation with Ramón, but irony is untrustworthy and equivocal, and Ena's proclivity for sarcasm and mickey-taking makes it 'impossible' for Andrea to 'creer en la belleza y la verdad de los sentimientos humanos' (76). The reader is in a parallel position with respect to *Nada*. Barry Jordan (1992b: 93) notes that Ena is the perfect antagonist; however, whilst I agree that her 'uso de la ironía y la coquetería la separan de Andrea' (*Ibid*), Andrea's own, increasingly confident command of ironic humour has often been overlooked.<sup>21</sup>

Critics have often downplayed the novel's ironic potential. Robert Spires believes that Andrea's transformation is a result of the 'dimensión lírica y no irónica de la narración' (1978: 341), and Yates argues that Laforet 'evades or possibly systematically eliminates this potential [that of humour, irony, or satire] of her narrative form' (1976: 15). On the

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<sup>21</sup> Caragh Wells only refers to it in passing: 'older narrator may be relying on subtle irony to cover up her earlier naïve attitude' (2012: 1135)

contrary, she is fond of using this very figure. Angustias often refers to Gloria as a 'serpiente', but Gloria is clearly not a sinister, malevolent figure. Hence when Andrea conveys that 'la mujer serpiente durmió enroscada' (104), she is clearly employing a critical, ironic tone. Whilst it is true that Andrea does not make fun of the conceited pretentiousness of the 'hijos de papá' and Pons's friends, she does offer an ironic comment on Pujol: 'El único mal vestido y con las orejas sucias' (57). Moreover, when the 'bohemios' attribute a quotation to Homer, Andrea laughs aloud: 'Demos gracias al cielo que valemos infinitamente más que nuestros antepasados – Homero' (159). However, her self-deprecatory stance is key, for she reflects bitterly on the naiveté of her childish illusions: 'En realidad, mi pena de chiquilla desilusionada no merecía tanto aparato [...] A mi lado, dolores más grandes me habían dejado indiferente hasta la burla' (224). Those final words – 'hasta la burla' – highlight this curious, self-derogating, and almost masochistic approach to irony, as she redraws her memories as a distancing device and wallows in the tumultuous misery of turmoil. She is the dupe and sport for others' jesting, but her own attempts at comic irony always flounder.

For Vilanova (1995: 180), Andrea knows a lot more than she lets on, and, for Domingo Ródenas de Maya, 'como narradora, Andrea es poco digna de crédito' (2001: 229). Yet, whilst Ródenas de Maya latter attributes this untrustworthiness to a youthful naivete ('impresionable e inestable'), Andrea's command of irony suggests a more discreet, ambivalent figure. As Laforet wrote elsewhere, '*Nada* es una interrogación, viva, anhelante' (1956: 13). This is not the open laugh, or the 'laugh outright', but it is nonetheless caustic. In this sense, *Nada* is a prime example of *deadpan* humour, and of what Mark Twain called the definitive 'humorous story [...] told gravely', as opposed to the 'comic story'. In the former, 'the teller does his best to conceal the fact that he even dimly suspects that there is anything funny about it' (Twain 1992 [1897]: 201-02). Instances of transparent comic mirth are strategically concealed or muffled by the predominant atmosphere of grime, but the 'listener must be alert' for what Twain calls a 'nub', 'point', or 'snapper', often dropped in 'in a carefully casual and indifferent way'. 'No signals are given – no winks or smiles' (*Ibid*): this is the key to deadpan humour.

In Chapter 11, when Juan returns to the house, incensed at his failure to earn at least 10 *duros* for his nude portraits of Gloria (“¡Sólo en tubos y en pinceles he gastado más en él!...” (50)), Andrea amusingly fixates on appearance instead of content: ‘Estaba despeinado y unas sombras tremendas le comían los ojos y las mejillas’ (50). She reads our thoughts, specifying two types of humour: ‘Tenía un tipo algo cómico [...] una especie de ironía feroz’. Andrea can determine when comedy and irony are in attendance, or within reach. Like a magician, she reveals her tricks to an audience/reader nonetheless continuously beguiled and captivated, yet the indeterminacy of her language (‘algo cómico’, ‘tener su comicidad’, ‘una especie de ironía feroz’) illustrates an uncertainty concerning why – and how – it occurs. Is she genuinely joking, in this rapid, fluid back-and-forth between comedy and tragedy? In English we talk of *finding* something funny, for we *locate* its presence, as though lying dormant in the text, and several theorists of irony note a similar ambiguity. For Ducrot, it is the interpreter who “ironizes” (Ducrot *et al.* 1980: 200), and Muecke argues that ‘Until an ironic message is interpreted as intended it has only the sound of one hand clapping’ (Muecke 1970/1982: 39). However, in *Nada* we provide that other hand tentatively, put off by the inaptness of the comic amidst such pervasive dejection.

Half tongue-in-cheek and breathlessly paralysed in comic inquiry, Andrea becomes her own self-parody. As Edgar Neville noted, the humorist is ‘un espectador de todo lo que ocurre alrededor suyo’ (1969: 475), but here the inverted confession booth consumes itself, rendering the confessor *less* knowable. For Ralph Waldo Emerson, comedy is ‘a well-intentioned halfness ... a non-performance of what is pretended to be performed, at the same time that one is giving loud pledges of performance’ (1884: III: 123). Andrea’s humour originates in a partially-depicted agency, couched in the language of subterfuge and taboo. Profoundly liberating, it is also forbidden and licentious. When people-watching amid intense ‘confusión’ and ‘movimiento’, she is fascinated by a ‘señora gorda [...] parada en mi recuerdo con la cara congestionada de risa en el momento de llevarse a la boca un pastelillo’ (84). Whereas her own laughter is forced and experimental, ‘esa imagen eternamente quieta’ bewitches Andrea because, contrary to her contrived hilarity, it is a genuine, spontaneous outburst of delight (‘los mayores se dedicaban, principalmente, a alimentarse y a reír’). Down on her luck, deck stacked against her, she can only ‘What have I done to deserve this?’, wondering why she too cannot surrender to the spontaneous

overflow of mirth. Roland Barthes wrote of Flaubert's irony as 'salutory discomfort', for 'one never knows if he is responsible for what he writes' (1974: 140), and irony is proven wholly incompetent in *Nada*. As absurd, unregenerative, grey humour bourgeois, the urge to relinquish is far more potent than the urge to reform. Amusement in *Nada* is narrow, guarded, and, at heart, conservative, always comparing even the most watered-down ideal with the joyless limits of human behaviour. Laughter is no medicine.

Andrea confesses the overwhelming temptation to 'vestir todo esto con hipótesis fantásticas en largas conversaciones' (23), and is aware that her words are open to interpretation: '¿Cómo serán nuestros actos y nuestras palabras intepretados por cerebros así?' (70). Unsurprisingly, Bakhtin deemed irony 'a special kind of substitute for silence' (1986: 148). The novel flaunts its truth whilst parading its omissions and lacunae: 'He hecho tantos juicios equivocados en mi vida, que aun no sé si este era verdadero' (27). Indeed, Kierkegaard even wrote that true irony (distinct from rhetorical irony) 'does not generally wish to be understood' (1989 [1841]: 249). Her narrative opens up but also seals off. The abiding paradox is its persistent invitation to the reader to pierce its supposedly unknowing mask and perceive the deadpan leer behind.<sup>22</sup>

Andrea-as-narrator broadcasts her *failure* to provide accurate testimony. Alan Yates writes that 'the first-person narrative form is especially endowed to explore [...] an epistemological problem' (1976: 16), although he does limit this to *La familia de Pascual Duarte*, and Roberta Johnson, on *Nada*, likewise comments that 'creating a work of art [...] becomes a way of understanding the world for the narrator; it has an epistemological function' (1981: 54). We must ask ourselves how faithful Andrea is (how would we ever know?) to her younger self at Aribau, writing from an unspecified vantage point at an unspecified future time. She almost falls asleep during one conversation between the *abuela* and Gloria (43, 52), and hears but 'un confuso murmullo' (190) of another between Román and Gloria. Gloria affirms but retreats from reeling her knowledge, which is amusing for the reader: 'No te contaré de una vez las cosas que me ha hecho porque son demasiadas; poco a poco las sabrás' (37). Likewise, when Gloria tells Andrea of her own eavesdropping on another

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<sup>22</sup> Which, as we recall (Holm 2017), deliberately eschews straightforward comic categorisation.

party, the levels of narrative refraction are compounded: 'Como se oía el mar, muchas frases se me perdían' (48). Her constant *muletillas*, such as 'A ti te diré la verdad, Andrea' (49), parodically undermine her genuineness. This is a novel of piecemeal delivery: 'Historias incompletas, apenas iniciadas' (42). Our narrator Andrea is curiously shrewd, aware of her dreadful surroundings ('prisión correccional' (64), 'ambiente opresivo' (57)), yet deeply immature (these stories are 'el único interés de mi vida' (42-43)), lurching between idealization and disappointment.

Bakhtin once dubbed irony the 'equivocal language of modern times' (1986: 132), and in *Nada* it is subdued but constantly bubbling under the surface. If social realist novelists were, in their *compromiso*, guilty of falling into lifeless, unserviceable 'naturalismo', as Juan Goytisolo contended (1976: 111), it prompts the question why they decided to make use of irony at all. Having scrutinised Andrea's interest in the figure, we can provide an answer: her interrogation of narratological ironic devices underscores the titular nothing, revealing a heartbreaking discrepancy between what is and what ought to be. In endless cycles of memory and hope, Andrea is stuck inside her own mind, desperately trying to 'see the funny side' in an attempt to stay sane. Yet, in the final analysis, the process reveals an impassive, flattened void at the heart of the postwar environment that preserves the status quo and can only laugh at its own lethargy.

Moreover, Andrea is not the only character to perceive dark humour on Aribau. In a passage from which my thesis title derives, Ramón loses his temper after discovering that Gloria has sold his nude paintings, simply to make ends meet. The paradoxically non-amusing humour of hardship returns, for she argues tenderly, 'tenemos que comer [...] para que no nos muriéramos de hambre' (92). Even here, Gloria is aware of the humour of calamity and affliction but, again, comic comprehension does not provide release:

–[...]¿No me dio la razón delante de ti, no me besaba llorando? Di, ¿no me besaba?  
Se enjugó los ojos y sus menudas narices se encogieron en una sonrisa.  
–A pesar de todo, hubo algo cómico en aquello, chica... Un poquitín cómico. Ya sabes tú... (92)

Gloria's words are incongruous because her toddler is on her lap, severely injured by a shard of glass just moments earlier. The original meaning of the Spanish word 'comedia', encompassing comedy *and* tragedy, entails a dark irony. The jarring juxtaposition of 'me va a matar, y yo no quiero morirme' and 'La vida es muy bonita' (49) cuts the chortle short, for Gloria turns on a sixpence, seemingly oblivious to her own contradictions. The narration pauses for a moment on the highest seat of a Ferris wheel, lingering before its turn.

Alongside the miserable humour of social conditions an altered, comically self-reflexive repetition through 'poquitín', immediate ellipsis, and softened, self-doubting 'algo cómico' enacts an uncertain, meditative response to laughter, as though ashamed at finding mirth and desirous to redress the instinct. The comic crossover traverses its own generic borders with a strange brush. To relate Gloria's impression to modern stand-up, one 'bit' by comedian Tig Notaro describes the unsettling 'siren' after a laugh, the 'aaah' moment immediately following an initial, reactive chortle: 'It's like you're reminiscing about one second ago. [Laughter] Remember one second ago? [Laughter]' (Notaro 2014). In her immediate reprisal, perhaps Gloria should *not* have found it funny; to paraphrase Hamlet, perhaps she desires to 'mock [her] own grinning' (*Hamlet* V.i.186). As 'cómico' becomes 'un poquitín cómico', so the reader, too, performs a retroactive interrogation of their initial reflex. Laughter's 'blind discharge' (Dewey 1922: 65) is misguided and haphazard, and *Nada* is perpetually interested in what makes a situation, by rights harrowing, fundamentally funny. As the German saying goes, 'Humor ist, wenn man trotzdem lacht' ('You have a sense of humour if you laugh anyway, despite the circumstances').

Federico Bonaddio (2014) examines silence and trauma in the novel, but does not mention humour or irony. However, a central part of Andrea's account is her constant blend of beauty and catastrophe. Her first description of Ena is contradictory: 'una agradable y sensual cara en la que relucían unos ojos terribles' (60). Likewise, although the *abuela* is a 'viejecita decrepita' (14), Andrea later identifies her 'sonrisa de bondad tan dulce' (44). Moreover, Angustias has 'cabellos entrecanos' but retains 'cierta belleza en su cara oscura y estrecha' (15), a 'gran belleza de líneas' (27). Andrea first says that she simply cannot stand Angustias' 'autoridad', which 'me había ahogado' and 'mataba mis iniciativas' (9), yet Angustias is also 'un ser recto y bueno a su manera entre aquellos locos. Un ser más

completo y vigoroso que los demás...' (99). As Illanes Adaro notes of Andrea, 'Algunas cosas le parecen risibles y, miradas con otro cariz, trágicas. Va de la risa al llanto con gran facilidad' (1972: 27). Reality is pleasurable *and* unpalatable, humorous *and* horrific. As she writes, 'Pensé que cualquier alegría de mi vida tenía que compensarla algo desagradable. Que quizá esto era una ley fatal' (75). For theorist of the absurd Thomas Nagel, absurdity flourishes in any 'clash between internal and external views of human life' (1991: 207) because the same individual is simultaneously 'the occupant of both viewpoints' (208). To 'shut out of existence' (212) either outlook would be to misunderstand the central contradictions inherent to reality itself: 'an irreducible fact of life' (213). *Nada's* comic irony makes realism *more real* by providing space for such variance. As the adage has it, *Entre broma y broma, la verdad asoma*.

On the other hand, at times this humour provides a stark challenge to the practices of realism, blending a *tremendista* focus on harsh conditions with a deadpan, comically flippant attitude. For Illanes Adaro (1972: 22) *Nada* '[e]s una obra muy realista' (22), yet recent criticism challenges this dispassionate reading. As Vargas Llosa noted, 'lo que se calla es más importante que lo que se dice, y que mantiene al lector sumido en una angustia indescriptible' (2007: 3). For Gustavo Pérez Firmat, *Nada* is a 'virtuoso scriptive performance', and 'Andrea is a narrator whose language insistently calls attention to itself but who is equally insistent in covering up or dissembling the act of narration' (1991: 28). This act of irony feeds into the novel's metafictional qualities, but *Nada* is always on the brink of resigning itself to tragedy. Similarly, both Walsh (2014: 35-6) and Sainz (1999) observe textual gaps, 'those tantalizing spaces where information is withheld' (Walsh: 35). The novel offers not passion but silence and tepid, half-baked ineffectuality – all with a patina of truth. It is a darkly amusing examination of what is *not* reported (for example, the 'larga trenza de pelo negro' of Andrea's dead mother<sup>23</sup>), flaunting its own compromise and 'accidental' insufficiency.

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<sup>23</sup> See Wells 2012 on *Nada* as incomplete mourning process, perceived through Andrea's complex psychology. The humour I have analysed here is a useful contribution to studies such as this, depicting a confused mentality exploring irony's potential and reach.

Nevertheless, this section has shown that comic realism, however paradoxical a first glance, is more poignant than a dispassionate, testimonial approach. Life switches genre on Andrea; however, by adhering to and deviating from the expectations of *apologia*, *Nada* foregrounds the struggle of articulacy. Irony cuts both ways in this ‘macabra danza de cosas muertas’ (98) – neither fully brutal nor fully rib-tickling. Just as Ramón’s music ‘iba hilando [...] una alegría tan fina que traspasaba los límites de la tristeza’ (16), so the benumbed laughter transcends both hilarity and sadness. Andrea is integral part of, and wry observer on, the society in which she operates. Laforet herself referred to Andrea as ‘una sombra que cuenta’ (1956: 13), and the novel is a running commentary on her strained, inadequate efforts to uncover reality. Tensions between empty confession and social therapy (writing to exorcise the ghosts of her past), and between genuine and manufactured sincerity undergird the text. In this light, the coinage *The Odd One In*, by humour theorist Zupancic in her Lacanian reading of humour (2008: *passim*), is a fitting description of social realist humour in our Spanish postwar context. Given the complexities of the reality it aims to depict, it is unexpected, a challenge to realism, *and* wholly suitable.

### Tragicomic ‘Cleansing’

The obvious helplessness of the characters is intensified through the juxtaposition of levity and gravity. In Chapter XXII, towards the end of the novel, Andrea finds Gloria in tears on her bed and suddenly hears ‘un chillido lúgubre, de animal enloquecido’. She locates Antonia ‘tirada en el suelo del recibidor, con las piernas abiertas en una pataleta trágica, enseñando sus negruras interiores, y con las manos engarbitadas sobre los ladrillos’ (103). Finally coming to after fainting from shock, Antonia screams that Ramón has slit his own throat, the ultimate, tragicomic reversal of Andrea’s early elation: “¡Está muerto! ¡Está muerto! ¡Está muerto!” (103). However, even here, after the ‘trágica’ darkness, the very next sentence radically shifts the focus onto the ‘puerta... abierta’ and external observers: ‘empezaban a asomarse algunas caras curiosas de los vecinos. Al pronto tuve sólo una visión cómica de la escena, tan aturdida estaba’. The language is amusingly distant, as though Andrea observed *herself* as comic observer. She is not simply the butt of her own joke but keen to deconstruct the humour as it happens; however, the humour stumbles with the

finishing tape in sight. The limping gag without a punchline staggers toward a close, and the veneer of jocund play crashes into silence. Antonia retreats into comedy as an escape from the tragic, but it offers no catharsis. On a structural level, tragedy envelops comedy, progressing from the 'pataleta trágica' to the 'visión cómica' (now, we realise, cruelly inappropriate), and finally to the thrice-repeated death knell, which rids the scene of all humorous vestiges. *In the midst of life we are in death*, and that is no joke. The irony of silence plays a crucial role, for Andrea decides for herself how *she* will interpret the death: 'Era más verosímil figurarse que Román había sido el espectro de un muerto. De un hombre que hubiera muerto muchos años atrás' (105). '[V]erosímil' is a key word, with an uneasy relationship to truth, and once again Andrea seeks but does not find help from a comic angle. *Nada's* humour endeavours to crack a joke about the breakdown of a family unit but ultimately gives that very idea the last laugh. It is more disinterested than incendiary, more sick and tired than subversive.

Attempting to fend off the encroaching pessimism, Andrea also tries to scrub herself clean, just as she did upon when first entering the sordid house. She clammers into the bathtub 'Maquinalmente', as though a dehumanised puppet lacking agency. She *finds herself* (strangely passive) in the 'sucia bañera', an evidently incongruous image like before, and looks at her reflection, only to *laugh*: 'creo que me entró una risa nerviosa al encontrarme así, como si ese fuese un día como todos. [...] "Ya lo creo que estoy histérica", pensaba mientras el agua caía sobre mí azotándome y refrescándome' (104). Once again, the facilities are not clean but 'sucia[s]', stimulating but also begriming and even *flogging* her, just as another shower from before was 'incapaz de refrescar mi carne ni de limpiarla' (77). The moment is similar to Manuel Arce's *Oficio de muchachos* (1963), in which protagonist Nacho, finding his wretchedness ridiculous, chuckles merely out of some 'necesidad de escucharme' (104). Absurdism becomes both a description of and a response to life under Franco. Comedy offers no way out of tragedy: Andrea may play, but the process offers no redemption. When she is done, she is painfully aware of her limited position in a cruel world.

Her skinny body paints a tragic picture with comic colouring: 'miserablemente flaca y con los dientes chocándome como si me muriera de frío' (104). Yet, even here, as we have seen

throughout the novel, she sees herself as ‘histérica’, even ‘idiotizada’ (104), because Ramón is only a few feet away, ‘tendido, sangriento, con la cara partida por el rictus de los que mueren condenados’. As she experiences ‘extrañas visiones’ (106), she sees only ‘un trozo de mi propio cuerpo’ (108) reflected back. Once again, the threat to the body and the splicing of the self, key elements of Camus’ and Nagel’s theories of the absurd, are central to postwar black humour. Her laughter is more Bronx cheer than blissful elation, deepening – not neutralising – the fear. In a telling line, ‘era todo tan espantoso que rebasaba mi capacidad de tragedia’. Ultimately, Andrea indicts comedy for its failure to change the situation. She has shifted genre from the tragic to the comic, but her recognition of something fundamentally *unfunny* – which, as we have demonstrated, is crucially different from outright tragedy or *tremendismo* – renders the scene even more harrowing. Her wisecracking is fundamentally unwise, as she is *gagging* for self-sabotage. The comedy in *Nada* reveals not ‘a narrow escape into faith’, as per Christopher Fry’s definition (Fry 1950), but rather a blundering vacillation, and the uneasy balance between innocence and guilt creates a powerless, stumbling, and ultimately conservative humour.

It is appropriate to compare such absurd, dismal humour of self-identification with a contemporary novel, Fernández Santos’ *En la hoguera* (1957), in which protagonist Miguel, conjuring up ‘la imagen del tío en su mezquino ataúd’ (hilariously dark), gets into the bath and looks in the mirror: ‘se vio flaco, triste, agotado, tan digno de lástima como el tío, como los dos *Rojos*, como el ser más desgraciado de este mundo’ (186). He is struck by an ‘irritación sorda’ that comes from the knowledge that he is acting out ‘aquel papel ridículo’. The theatrical motif recurs with a paradox that is perhaps the defining note of the novel as a whole: ‘...que aquella triste comedia acabase cuando antes’ (39). Likewise, Lucas, entering ‘la calle vacía’ and struck by ‘la realidad’, acknowledges that ‘el despecho, la sensación del ridículo, el miedo, estuvieron a punto de hacerle volver’ (102-3). This ‘sensación del ridículo’ is at the heart of social realism. Thinking everyone else a fool, he suddenly acknowledges – and laughs at – his *own* insignificance.

Hysterical pretensions give way to a despair and loneliness that jar strikingly with our feel-good notions of comedy and the widespread supposition that it is a social bonding activity. DiNubila observes a common thread of *nothingness* in Fernández Santos’ novels

(1978: *passim*), Constance Thomas Zahn refers to a 'painful loneliness born of each one's psychological isolation' (2000: 17), and Spencer Gordon Freedman notes that 'Miguel is a Barojian figure – itinerant, *abúlico*, and haunted by a personal sense of failure' (1972: 63). However, it is the *humour* – a comically rueful acceptance of one's predicament – that is key. As Pirandello (1960: 88) writes of the Knight of the Woeful Countenance in *Don Quijote*, 'He sees who he is and laughs at himself. All his sufferings burst into laughter'. Likewise, within *Nada*, as material that should by rights be harrowing is rendered funny so the novel becomes a series of non-answers to complex questions about whether humour can offer an escape from Francoist strife.

### The Void of Humour

Having examined several expressions of humour with *Nada*, we can conclude that *tremendismo* and *feísmo* are insufficient, focusing solely on crude, unpleasant, savage portrayals. An additional running thread throughout our analysis has been a numbing void, a dimming of comic effect, at the heart of funniness. Forcefully unamusing, aggressively unglamorous, *Nada's* deadpan aura of grey humour suggests – even more unnervingly – that laughter had long since evacuated the scene. Never emanating from revelation or delightful surprise, the laugh has decamped and withdrawn, yet it leaves behind a ghostly, sobering trace. This links to what laughter theorist Nancy has termed laughter's characteristic 'disappearing in its coming' (1993: 388), and Immanuel Kant similarly posited that humour stems from a sudden evaporation of expectation to (in this case, titular) nothingness – 'the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing' (Kant 1952 [1790]: 196). Caragh Wells' study of unspecified trauma in *Nada* notes a great irony<sup>24</sup>: that 'it does represent nothing; or, more precisely, [...] the non-expression of the protagonist's feelings about her mother's death' (2012: 1129). However, it is the grey humour of hiatus that provides this gap, and the text's comedy *rejects* comedy. Indeed, at the start of the novel, as Román's music floats in from below, Andrea enumerates her emotions: '...agudas alegrías, tristezas, desesperación, una crispación importante de la vida y un anegarse en la

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<sup>24</sup> However, irony is mentioned in one brief, passing comment.

nada' (16). Juxtaposed with the cheerful 'alegrías' come 'tristezas', closely followed by 'desesperación', and all leads inexorably the titular 'nada'.

In Part III, Margarita is desirous to prevent her daughter Ena from making the same mistakes she did when infatuated with Ramón 20 years previously (another instance of the past repeating itself, which should make us doubt Andrea's apparent turnaround at the end),. She begs Andrea to intervene between the two, and Andrea is initially excited to throw off her confessed halfheartedness: 'acostumbrada a dejar que la corriente de los acontecimientos me arrastrase por sí misma, me emocionaba un poco aquel actuar mío que parecía iba a forzarla...' (96). Yet, predictably, she returns to fairytale tropes, desperate to rescue the abandoned 'princesa' Ena from the clutches of the 'monstruo' only to find her in a state of unhurried relaxation: 'parecía muy tranquila, sentada y fumando' (96). The outward gravity of the situation is preposterously subverted when she thinks she sees a 'negra pistola' (97) in Román's pocket, hurls herself onto him, and screams at Ena to run to safety. Although Molinaro (2008: 164) suggests that she 'rescues [...] Ena from the malevolent grip of Román', the irony cruelly exposes her romantic fantasies, and she becomes Ena's laughingstock: 'Andrea, ¿por qué eres tan trágica, querida?' (97). The scene misses its cue. Andrea snatches comedy from the jaws of tragedy, and her 'misión providencial' (62) – absurd, hilarious hyperbole – is revealed to be a nothingness.

*Nada* is a series of approximations to jokes that are nearly there, but not quite, revealing an empty space to humour. The novel retains something of 'El abismo de la nada, del no ser' (152) to which Alexis perturbingly alludes in *Cuando voy a morir* (Fernández de la Reguera, 1950). This is akin to what Shane Weller identifies as comic 'indecision' in late Beckett, a 'voiding that is neither liberally nor illiberally humorous, but anethically posthumorous' (2006: 133). Wondering whether there is any laughter left at all, in Spanish social realism a bathetically comic emphasis on radical hesitation and perpetual subsiding moves beyond compassion or hatred to engender instead an insistent negligence and nonchalance, caught between irony and earnestness and almost aggressively undistinguished.<sup>25</sup> As Kierkegaard (1989 [1841]: 278) put it, irony leaves a hollowness ('infinite absolute negativity') in its

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<sup>25</sup> See Chapter 2 for a similar analysis of Camilo José Cela's comic narrator

wake. The yawning gap of laughter is never filled, electing instead to quash, rebut, disaffirm, and countercheck until nothing more is left.

This notion of laughter evacuating a scene is well-supported in Humour Theory. For humorist and theorist Gómez de la Serna, humour uncovers an underlying oblivion: ‘donde cojea todo... de qué manera cae en la *nada* antes de caer’ (1988: 205, my italics). In laughter, the mouth is opened, its *inside* touches the *outside*. Physically opened as though to communicate something, one articulates only a cavernous abyss. Laughter in social realism constitutes, on a buccal level, what some theorists refer to as the ‘gaping nonplace’ (*la béance d’un non-lieu*)’ (Nancy 1979: 161), an ‘indefinable gaping [...], something mortally wounded’ (Bataille 1988a: 203), or a ‘yawning gap’ (Bataille 1988b: 59) – the titular *nada*. Walter Benjamin called laughter ‘shattered articulation’ (1999: 325), for black humour engages and focuses uncertainty. *Nada* doubles the aching void, reinforcing the subject as glorified buffoon, and finds a troubling emptiness both to existence under Franco and to humour as a potential flight from that very wretchedness. Are we merely laughing *to laugh*, to make ourselves feel better? This comedy is more destructive than constructive. As the breakdown insists upon itself, both novel and film ask: at wit’s end, when the humour stops, what is left? Mihura speculated that, ‘debajo del humor’, perhaps ‘no hay nada. Lo cual también, en humorismo, es muy respetable’ (Interview with B. Mostaza 1965: 19). In the final reckoning, although Wells (2012) and Jordan (1993a) argue for a journey into the unconscious, the endgame of laughter is pure emptiness.

### ***Comic-kazi* Humour**

This blend of self-sabotaging, self-undermining, *comic-kazi* humour and deadpan grey humour of boredom reaches its zenith at the end of the novel. Now ‘viendo las cosas a distancia’ (central to comedy), Andrea is mortified that she sank to ‘tal capacidad de humillación’ (89) – in itself a humorous admission. The self-aware absurdity reaches new heights, patent and paradoxical in its masochistic *happiness*: ‘cabe una tan grande cantidad de placer en el dolor’. The confession of *Nada* becomes a confidence game, a play of surfaces that exploits dissimulation, non-revelation, and sleight-of-hand. Both absolver and

absolved, Andrea falteringly stage-manages her own reform (or, as we shall explore, final collapse), remaining paradoxically content with her lot. Indeed, earlier she had pinpointed the incongruous ‘descuidada felicidad de aquel ambiente’, which ‘me acariciaba el espíritu’ (60). This relates to Camus’s observation of an outrageous *contentment* in the absurd, for, in *The Stranger*, although Meursault notes the ‘benign indifference of the world’, he also knows he is ‘happy’ and experiencing ‘joy’ – indeed, ‘as happy as it is possible to be’ (1988 [1942]: 117). However, this gladness is crucially transient and insubstantial. As Don Mateo warns (speaking for great swathes of the postwar generation) the young boys in Delibes’s *El camino* (1950): ‘Hacen falta años para percatarse de que el no ser desgraciado es ya lograr bastante felicidad en este mundo’ (67). When this is the only ‘victory’, we have a prime example of the dejecting comedy of comedown.

Applying these readings of deadpan humour more broadly, it is constructive to observe that several contemporary stand-ups have acknowledged deadpan as a useful but flawed means of managing immature stress and expectation. Shazia Mirza agrees began ‘very deadpan’ only because she was ‘very scared’ (Interview 28/06/2004, *Ibid*), much like Andrea’s youthful naivete, and Dave Gorman describes deadpan as a ‘defence mechanism’ signalling a *façade* of indifference: ‘If I appear not to care, then if it doesn’t go very well, it hasn’t hurt me. But if I appear to care about this and it doesn’t go very well, then I’m fucked’ (Interview 29/06/2004, in *Double* 2014: 384). Likewise, Andrea avails herself of deadpan irony, drawing from herself a wistful, plaintive laugh, but finds it wanting, ephemeral, and ultimately unable to guarantee enrichment. Powerless to overcome the tragic, her perception of funniness renders it momentarily – and just barely – enduring. In this light, Andrea’s self-conscious comi-kazi humour reminds us of Mara in Juan Goytisolo’s *Fin de fiesta* (1962), who, confiding in Bruno, captures the essential duplicity of the comic despite her outward peace of mind: “No quiero que los demás me vean de mal humor y bromeo y me río de mí misma; pero sé que tú me comprendes... Te aseguro que no puedo más” (152). The play-frame of humour may offer temporary escape, but it conceals a bleak void in the contemporary Francoist landscape.

However, despite this prevailing atmosphere of gloom and misery, criticism has often

burdened Nada with the requirement that it anticipate later, more progressive concerns.<sup>26</sup> Several scholars (Villegas 1973: 178-9, Del Mastro 1997, Spires 1978: 52) have worked hard to ensure, at the conclusion, that Andrea achieves a secure identity. In the *deus ex machina* ending, almost too good to be true, Andrea receives a letter from Ena promising a new life in Madrid, with employment, accommodation, and a nuclear family to welcome her with open arms, and Ena's affluent father drives her away at the close. Accordingly, Michael Thomas observes 'mature action and thought', a woman transformed 'from an unrealistic dreamer, an unassertive, unforgiving, self-centred child into a hopeful, compassionate, decisive adult' (1978: 58, 72). Other critics agree, positing confidence: 'un sentido claro de dirección y autosuficiencia' (Schyfter 1983: 90); 'the gradual acquisition of self-hood' (Collins 1984: 298); 'self into which she has matured' (El Saffar 1974: 119).

However, given our analysis of the humour of hardship, unreliable narrator, and *comic-kazi* absurdity, we should interrogate what it at *stake* in our interpretation of this ending. Readers almost require that *Nada* offer Andrea a pleasing escape from misery; however, its miserably tepid humour illustrates a more defeatist perspective. Given her multiple failed attempts to render tragic circumstances amusing, we cannot take this return to yet another fairytale ending at face value. Whisked away by a powerful, financially-stable man, Andrea is still severely constrained by a patriarchal society that denies her financial and social agency. Moreover, the vocabulary betrays a continuous blend of hope and despair. Ena's letter details 'todas sus preocupaciones y esperanzas' (111), Andrea '[e]ncontraba idiota sentir otra vez aquella ansiosa expectación que un año antes' (111), and, as she descends the stairs, she cannot shrug off her suspicions that this be just a false dawn: 'Recordaba la terrible esperanza, el anhelo de vida con que las había subido por primera vez' (112). Her words retaining the same reservations as the reader and, like us, fail to find a satisfying answer. What is more, Juan's final advice preposterously suggests, despite the conspicuous wretchedness, that blood is thicker than water (!): 'Ya verás cómo, de todas maneras, vivir en casa extraña no es lo mismo que estar con tu familia' (111). The amusement ruffles feathers, rendering the text a contested space and a meta-commentary on what it means to

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<sup>26</sup> Nina L. Molinaro (2008: 164-65) is an exception, casting doubt on frictionless optimism: '[...] her permanent sense of doom, stagnation, and victimization. And in order to become a woman, she learns to conform, compromise, and endorse the status quo' (165).

be funny.

Returning to our analysis of women's humour, for Barreca a defining feature is 'that women write comedies without "happy endings"' (1994: 8). *Nada's* finale similarly eradicates the comedy, unearths the horror on the other side of the joke, and reminds the reader that this has been a nightmare rather than a laugh. *Nada* is a novel of anti-vision and an all-encompassing void. Andrea has illusions not so much of grandeur as of basic decency, yet even this is contravened in every quarter. The 'papel de espectadora' (224) is a highly untrustworthy source, for it remains unclear why Andrea has penned this narrative, and where she is/was whilst doing so. From the safety of afar, she laughs *down*, derisively, finding her juvenile antics and optimism ridiculous in reminiscence. Across the novel she calls herself 'idiota' four times (23, 28, 70, 111), and 'necia'/'neciamente' twice (43, 54). Despite her youthful faith in a 'vida nueva' – repeated four times (22, 37, 45, 82), and each time coming to nothing – the self-lacerating humour likewise leads nowhere at all.

Ironically, *Nada* comes full circle (in a line heavily contentious but, in light of the comic, Kantian in its nothingness): 'De la casa de Aribau no me llevaba nada. Al menos, así creía yo entonces' (112).<sup>27</sup> Sartre describes the ironist's stance as 'perpetual negation' (Sartre 2000: [1943] 206), and Andrea, out on a limb, remains deadlocked. She is never totally in or out of control. A prisoner of her own play, accelerating unwinnable battles, she and the novel finally reject the humorous response as a remedy for the ills of life. Hollowed-out jokes seem to be drawing near to mirthful release, only continuously and indefinitely to defer that very resolution. Juan Herrero Senés writes that the Spanish comic *vanguardista* seeks to "ahogar" la melancolía, la tristeza, la pena, apartarla del discurso, "taparla" con risa, celebración, jolgorio, regocijo' (2006: 290). However, as the ludicrous and the calamitous merge in social realism, the (both literal and metaphorical) yawning gap of laughter works not in spite of the tragedy but in conjunction with it, laying bare and exacerbating the gloom.

In conclusion, this chapter has explored several types of humour in Laforet's *Nada* (1945), curdled with awkward disillusionment, soul-crushing intractability, and a cheerless recital of

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<sup>27</sup> 'sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing' (Kant 1952 [1790]: 196)

regrets and grievances. Contrary to existing studies that exclusively focus on its dismal sobriety, it analysed the novel's studiedly discordant comic realism and humour of hardship, proving that Andrea is captivated by comic comprehension yet amusingly frustrated by its inability to defuse the rampant stiffness. Next, it situated *Nada* within scholarship on women's comic writing to argue that the first-person female perspective, whilst qualitatively different from objectivist novels discussed in subsequent chapters, reveals identical warmish, half-hearted comic spaces that meet with disaster. Cognizant of her ineptitude, Andrea's novel-writing provides a forum in which to confront and demythologise failure; however, she can merely lick the wounds of her misfortune, incapable of change. The individual – Andrea as inquisitive, woman, but also every jaded malcontent in social realism – is amusingly criticised for her flaws while the oppressive Francoist system in which she is caught remains intact, assumed, and inevitable.

## Chapter 2

### A Sting in the Tail –

#### *La colmena* (Camilo José Cela, 1950)

“My dear fellow”, said Sherlock Holmes, “life is infinitely stranger than anything which the mind of man could invent. We could not dare to conceive the things which are really mere commonplaces of existence. If we could fly out of that window hand in hand, hover over this great city, gently remove the roofs, and peep in at the queer things which are going on [...] it would make all fiction with its conventionalities and foreseen conclusions most stable and unprofitable.”

– Arthur Conan Doyle, ‘A Case of Identity’ (1891)

Like *Nada*, Camilo José Cela’s *La colmena* (1950) emphasises the degradation and dreariness of Spanish livelihoods during the *años de hambre* (1939-1952). However, Cela’s structure is rather different, with its segmented form of terse, truncated chapters or ‘trozos de vida’ registering over 300 characters over a few winter days in the early 1940s and building an effective aura of alienation and isolation. The narrator hurtles through the bustling Madrid metropolis at breakneck speed, capturing a sense of brief, trifling communication. This chronicler or reporter becomes a ramped-up version of Holmes’s Edwardian drone, hanging over the throbbing, faceless conurbation and peering periodically into its seediest dwellings, finding interest in ‘mere commonplaces’, however dull. He also resembles the *diablo* of Luis Vélez de Guevara’s *El diablo cojuelo* (1641), who flies around the world with a young student, his rescuer, and playfully dislodges the rooves of several houses to reveal the cruelty and vice within. However, it is that very aloofness that we shall explore in this chapter, arguing that Cela’s style becomes too mimetic of the very maladies it so fervently deplores. His novelistic technique decries the failings of the modern world as detachment, hollowness, and atomised dwelling, but the values of the novel are very far from warmth, compassion, and depth. The hard, crucially *sardonic* edge to the portrayal mimics the characters’ mutual indifference, but the narrator comes across as equivalently

noncommittal and metallic. Given Cela's remark that 'En España, el humor está siempre rozando la herejía' (Vilas 1968: 181), this chapter will theorise and explore his *deadpan* humour and peculiar, alarming, meddlesome irony, showing that *La colmena* persistently questions if it is (yet) the right time to laugh.

Although many critics have observed the presence of humour in Cela's oeuvre, remarkably few – especially in recent years – have examined it in detail. Critics of the late 60s and 70s (e.g. Ortega 1974: 10) labelled Cela a humorist, with Vilas's study of Spanish humour (1968: 180) including the section 'CELA: HUMORISTA ANTES QUE NADA' and Eugenio De Nora calling Cela 'un lírico disfrazado, frecuentemente, de humorista' (1970: III: 112). Further, passing comments were made about his penchant for the grotesque: 'deformación humorística, a veces irónica' (Gil Casado 1973: 262). Vilas (1968: 194) wrote several decades ago that 'Cuando los ánimos se calmen todavía más, seguramente se hablará del humorista Camilo José Cela', but the overwhelming majority of more recent studies on *La colmena* have concentrated on existential freedom (Fernández-Medina 2014), sociology (Barboza 2004), or day-to-day suffering (Gallardo 1991), rather than its biting comedy. Manuel Regueiro (2009: 112) briefly outlines the types of humour in Cela's work, importantly noting the potent influence of 'Wenceslao Fernández Flores, Enrique Jardiel Poncela, Miguel Mihura, Edgar Neville' (113) on his style. Further smatterings of humorous acknowledgement are found in Neuschäfer ('acusada tendencia a lo grotesco', 'dotes para la caricatura' (1994: 355)) and Vilanova ('perfiles de bruja goyesca', 'reacción paródica y burlesca' (Vilanova 1995: 113, 106)), and Janet Pérez argues that the funniness destabilises realist pretensions: 'Caricature, degradation, exaggeration, dehumanization and deformation distance him from the mimetic approach' (2008: 66). However, despite this comic identification, critical *analysis* of the humour is conspicuous by its absence. Accordingly, my methodology is to read the collected evidence of failure, misery and hopelessness in two Celian novels – *La colmena* (1950) and, more briefly, *Pabellón de reposo* (1943) – through an appreciation that takes their resolutely anti-sentimental comedy as seriously as possible.

Luis Oyarzun (1982) is one of the only critics to have explored amusement in *La colmena*, yet he writes solely on its onomastic features. For instance, Robles ('Oaks') and his partner

Soledad de Castro ('Solitude of the Fields') are 'ironic in the face of the fact that they have procreated quite a crowd' (1982: 170). Of their eleven children (Ámparo, Socorrito, Asunción, Piedad, Trinidad, María Auxiliadora and María Angustias), three enter a nunnery (complying with their names), two are housewives, Socorrito lives with a painter, and María Angustias runs away with a banker (!). The narrator toys with the reader, just as in *La familia de Pascual Duarte* (1942) where Pascual's name, charged with religious significance of the Paschal lamb, provides a darkly ironic counterpoint to his brutality. Returning to *La colmena* (1929), Ventura Aguado Sanz's name is amusingly – and rather cruelly – oxymoronic, destabilising his aspirations, for 'Ventura' signifies risk or hazard but 'Aguado' comes from 'aguar' ('water down'). Victorita fails miserably, Purita is a prostitute, and the beautiful, delicate connotations of doña Rosa contradict her insensitive actions and ugliness: 'manchas', 'dientecillos' [...] renegridos', 'se saca virutas de la cara' (4). Whilst, for Oyarzun '[t]he names break us up with laughter and we overcome the horror or the disgust' (1982: 173), in each example the humour brutally undermines its characters' dignity. This chapter will argue that Celian humour does not transcend the inhumaneness but reinforces the characters' complex entanglement within it.

### **Ironic Distance**

Firstly, the text's short chapter structure and crisp vignettes feed into this aloof, unsympathetic humour. Like the hexagonal structure of titular beehives, in which each incommunicative cell is hemmed in on all sides yet only partly attached to any one partner, hundreds of individuals connect only transitorily with their neighbour.<sup>28</sup> We are continually rushed past the climax, unable to savour its sweetness. Given the rapid, rebuslike shifts of movement and perspective, one recalls John Mortimer's assertion that 'farce is tragedy played at a thousand revolutions per minute' (1992). 'Connections' are often darkly, devastatingly ironic, such as the structural intermingling of the affairs of Ventura and Julita, and don Roque and Lola, when the reader discovers only gradually that father and daughter occupy the same bed on respective afternoons at doña Celia's brothel.

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<sup>28</sup> Although see Dougherty 1976 for a different reading of the structure, emphasising the persistence of social ties.

Cela's comedy inheres in a plethora of human bonds that are missed or cut short, and critics have often seen Cela as an entomologist who portrays a teeming zoological abjection, an interpretation which hints at this distance: 'una visión himenóptera de la humanidad' (Kirsner 1978: 55); 'entomólogo para enseñarnos el estúpido ir y venir de unos lejanos insectos' (Chirbes 2002: 106); '[details] están cuidados con mimo de entomólogo' (Dibildos, quoted in Minguez Arranz 1998: 138-9); 'entomologist [...] classifying a new colony' (Dougherty 1976: 9). For Sarah Kerr, the characters are 'fluttering moths' (1992: 35), and, for Montetes-Mairal y Laburta, these 'hombres-insectos' acquire 'un perfil animalesco' (2014: 77). Is Cela more detached forensic than sympathetic observer? It was once remarked of Flaubert that he 'holds the pen as others do the scalpel' (Letter from Saint-Beuve, in Flaubert, ed. Wall 1997: 7), and Hippolyte Babou criticised Balzac and the *roman d'analyse* school for turning the novel into 'moral chemistry' (quoted in Nochlin 1990: 44). Yet this notion of scrutiny and dissection is central to the comic vision. Pivotal theorist Bergson employs the very same metaphor: the humorist is an anatomist who 'ne ferait de la dissection que pour nous dégoûter'/'who practises dissection with the sole purpose of filling us with disgust' (2002: 128). King of the colony, the narrator's inglorious smirk is evident, rubbing salt in the wound and enjoying the confusion it sows.

Moreover, an ironic, grey humour stems from a direct contrast between the competent connotations of workmanlike drones within a *colmena* and the novel's overwhelming drabness and lethargy. In lieu of their apparent drive and determination, Cela is inspired by their buzzing – a homogenised sound, with little individuation or variation of character. The novel's voices are overlaid and overlapped, creating an unmistakable impression of sameness. Characters never find their place, driven down 'caminos inciertos' (the novel's working title), and as with *Nada a tremendista*, comically deadpan presentation of stark matter-of-factness makes us snort at desolation: 'Nadie piensa en el de al lado' (303). The authorial voice may swoop down to embody a new soul, but this popping-in-and-out rejects thorough access to a sympathetic mind. Ricardo frankly 'siente un asco tremendo por su mujer' (266), José Sierra grunts at his wife in a 'manera de darle a entender [...] que era una imbécil' (80), and Pepe 'no trata a su mujer ni bien ni mal, la trata como si fuera un mueble al que a veces, por esas manías que uno tiene, se le hablase como a una persona' (242). The

additional clause, a comic afterthought, further imbrutes and barbarises him. The narrator flies both too low, for his constant keyhole-peeping is uncomfortably voyeuristic, and too high, stalled by distance and thus nullifying sympathy or pity.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, Saul Bellow accused Cela of 'spread[ing] himself too thinly over too many characters' (1953: 116). Deadening grey humour flattens all aspiration, and the narrator dehumanises Elvira by repeating 'mueble': 'casi como un mueble más' (154) and 'ya como un mueble en el café de doña Rosa' (261). The dashing pace of the narrative camera is hectic but also strangely lifeless: we are bystanders to shiftless victims of oppression. Forever out of reach through the dizzying rush of the portrayal, they are doubly damned.

### Tenderness and Cruelty

As well as structure and narratorial irony, *La colmena* delights in fusing seemingly sympathetic and even tender depictions with a final blow of amusing, *tremendista* effrontery. For instance, the novel starts 'No perdamos la perspectiva' (1), yet the very next sentence focuses hilariously on doña Rosa's 'tremendo trasero' as she 'va y viene... tropezando a los clientes' of the café. Other nuggets of humanity illustrate this sudden shift from pathos to bathos, from fondness to caustic meanness:

Hay quien dice que a doña Rosa le brillan los ojos cuando viene la primavera y las muchachas empiezan a andar de manga corta. Yo creo que todo eso son habladuría.  
(4)

A Martín Marco le preocupa el problema social. No tiene ideas muy claras sobre nada, pero le preocupa el problema social. (38)

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<sup>29</sup> This is a pervasive quality within social realism (see appendix). For instance, one character in Alfonso Grosso's *La zanja* (1961) even admits an overwhelming 'necesidad de ser inconsecuente' (68), and in García Hortelano's *Tormenta de Verano* (1961), Amadeo revels in his own worthlessness: 'me alegro mucho de ser un inútil' (161).

Although Kirsner (1978: 55) writes that ‘rige el amor’ in *La colmena*, here the narrator laughs *at* rather than *with* the characters, literally making fun of them. He clarifies in no uncertain terms, interrupting Martín’s own thought-stream, that Martín lacks the economic know-how to concoct a solution to this ‘problema’, and his grand plan is preposterously naïve: “—Eso de que haya pobres y ricos —dice a veces—está mal; es mejor que seamos todos iguales, ni muy pobres ni muy ricos” (38). Later, the narrator explains that Martín’s most recently published article is entitled ‘Razones de la Permanencia Espiritual de Isabel la Católica’ (208), plainly ironic in its aggrandisement (championed by Franco) of the link between postwar Spain and the supposedly heroic values of the nation’s birth. Martín’s own life is very far removed from the principles and codes he espouses in his writing; as humour theorist Alison Tyler writes of the typical black comedy protagonist, he is a ‘non-hero’ whose existence represents no ‘wholesome lifestyle’ or ‘suprasocial code’ (1974: 54). Martín and the others at the café believe merely that ‘las cosas pasan porque sí, que no merece la pena poner remedio a nada’ (10). This humour of hostility, cynicism, and scepticism provokes no jungle roar of triumph and does not reliably fetch a chuckle.<sup>30</sup> As Regueiro (2009: 121) reminds us, Cela’s satire is usually ‘dirigida contra lo que él consideraba la estupidez humana’, a ‘tema recurrente’. Cheerful joy-bringing becomes cringe-worthy despondency, perhaps more comfortable punching *down* than lifting *up*.

The city’s remoteness and lack of partnership – despite its density – is comically expressed by doña Rosa in this characteristic fall from benevolence to ruthlessness: ‘...Aquí estamos para ayudarnos unos a otros; lo que pasa es que no se puede porque no queremos. Esa es la vida’ (25). Led down the pathway of kind-heartedness, we hit a sudden brick wall and we laugh at the grey humour of apathy. As Cela wrote in the Prologue to the sixth edition (1965: 8), ‘Nada importa nada, fuera de la verdad de cada cual’. The closest thing to a protagonist, Macario Martín, is a convenient focus of observation through the cityscape only because he is homeless, lacking his own ‘cell’ in the *colmena* and wandering the streets aimlessly. Later he forgets almost entirely about his dead mother, and ‘Nadie se acuerda de los muertos que llevan ya un año bajo tierra’ (280). We recall that to ‘humour’ someone is

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<sup>30</sup> Satire theorist Polhemus (1980: 155) identifies this mixture of hostility and friendliness as key to the satirist’s relationship with his/her audience.

to enjoy their charms but also, crucially, to seize on their limitations. As Geoffrey Grigson notes of satire specifically, 'one can gravely say that [it] postulates an ideal condition of man or decency, and then despairs of it; and enjoys the despair, masochistically' (quoted in Hirsch 2014: 560).

What is more, *La colmena* is replete with desperate, anguished, and frequently comic eruptions, which challenge the expected smooth, even-tempered tone of realism. Humour theorist Alenka Zupančič writes of comic splicing, the 'sudden intrusion', 'material *cut*', and 'surprising short circuit between the two sides' (2008: 55, her italics) as incongruous scripts – dispassionate and idiosyncratic – are suddenly thrust together. Similarly, theorist Howard Bloch asserts that 'that which provokes laughter always involves a cutting short, a foreshortening' (1986: 111). Don Leonardo Meléndez looks well off, and his admirers 'le sonrían y le miran con aprecio, por lo menos por fuera' (20). Yet the narrator first underlines this false flattery before vehemently condemning it: 'La gente es cobista por estupidez y, a veces, sonrían aunque en el fondo de su alma sientan una repugnancia inmensa' (25). Cela is both romantic and cynical, sentimental and satiric. Inconsistency, unpredictability, and contradiction are central to his technique.

Cela comes close to the humour of hardship discussed in *Nada*, shedding light on misery. To borrow from Elaine B. Safer's work on Philip Roth's humour, he '[p]resent[s] situations that appear bizarre and then make[s] us aware that we are really looking at a microcosm of our own world' (Safer 2006: 24). For instance, Doña Rosa's fatness – itself a comic staple – provides a grotesque contrast to the widespread hunger, and the social critique is unambiguous: 'la imagen misma de la venganza del bien nutrido contra el hambriento' (20). Likewise the wealthy doña Visitación thinks that working-class poverty will be solved by her organising 'concursos de pinacle', with the narrator adding 'no cree que a los obreros se les deba matar de hambre, poco a poco' (9). This flippant flourish should of course be unnecessary, yet its placement is morbidly amusing amid such suffering.

However, Cela's ironic, caustic presentation makes the novel's funniness into what Zupančič terms an 'impossible sustained encounter between two excluding realities' (2008: 57).

There is a definite sense of the essential *tearing* of comedy, springing from a fine line between tenderness and mercilessness. Doña Rosa has ‘ojitos [...] de un pájaro disecado’ and ‘[l]os pelitos de su bigote se estremecieron’ (13) as she sweats heavily. Pablo wears a ‘sonrisa de beatitud’, but ‘si se le pudiese abrir el pecho, se le encontraría un corazón negro y pegajoso como la pez’ (20). Prostitute Elvira ‘lleva una vida perra, una vida que, bien mirado, ni merecería la pena vivirla’, ‘ni come siquiera’, and she only ‘se echó a la vida para no morirse de hambre, por lo menos, demasiado de prisa’ (11). The additional embellishment towards the end is monstrously glib and throwaway, blending the seriousness of poverty with a disconcerting playfulness and making us doubt whether to laugh or cry. Similarly, don Jaime is mocked for his ignorance, marvelling at his own heartbeat (‘Tas, tas, tas, tas’) and at the mere existence of mirrors (10). Humour scholar Hernández Muñoz (2012: 5, 6) writes that the grotesque depends on ‘animalización o cosificación’ (we recall that Elvira was called a ‘mueble’) and features an ‘ausencia de emoción [...] e] indiferencia sentimental del autor [ante situaciones] que en la vida real provocarían compasión’. Peter Berger has spoken of ‘the fragility of the comic’ (1997: xiii); is Cela’s prose *ternura* disguised as cruelty or cruelty disguised as *ternura*?

Moreover, criticism has struggled to make sense of this synergy of grossness and condolence. Firstly, emphasising the former, for Paul Ilie ‘no hay a la vista no un solo aspecto redentor de la existencia’ (1963: 149), and Gemma Roberts points (discussing *Oficio de tinieblas*) to the ‘bajo concepto que Cela manifiesta del ser humano’ (1976: 69). Perriam et al. (2000: 140) likewise note that viciousness is only ‘rarely relieved by examples of affection, loyalty, and love’ in *La colmena*. This chapter has analysed plentiful examples pointing to such a callous, exacting portrayal. On the other hand, whilst noting that Cela is not an ‘escritor tierno, por supuesto’, Sagrario Torres perceives a ‘fina compasión, una secreta y reprimida ternura’ (1978: 279), and Kirsner (1978: 55) asserts that ‘[e]l humor modifica su visión’, preventing the ‘crueldad’ from overwhelming the ‘ambiente por completo’. Vilas concurs, arguing that Cela ‘parece reírse de todo, aunque con ternura’ (1968: 192). This critical confusion is revealing, for should the narrator ever veer too close to outright reproof, he will squirm back amongst the impassive urban sprawl, shielding himself with a coiling irony. This is the cop-out of comedy. Indeed, in what follows we shall explore how his cheek and nerve frequently fall into disdain and malice.

Humour rejects all dignity and nobility through harsh mockery, regularly grounded in the graceless body. During Ibrahím's pompous rhetorical speech in front of the mirror, his longing for grandeur is absurdly undermined by his neighbours' interruptions as they discuss their infant's bowel movements: '¿Ha hecho su caquita la nena?', '[él] preguntaba por el color. Su mujer le decía que de color natural' (150). Returning to our discussion of bathos, clearly evident here, M. H. Abrams defined it as a 'descent [...] when, straining to be pathetic or elevated, the writer overshoots the mark and drops into the trivial or the ridiculous' (2011: 25). Stature and scatology are uneasy bedfellows, but ripe material for comedy. Humour philosopher Simon Critchley discusses laughter at an orator who sneezes at the most moving part of his speech and finds humour in a funeral eulogy beginning 'He was virtuous and plump', for our attention 'is suddenly recalled from the soul to the body' (2002: 93). As Bergson wrote, 'Napoleon [...] noticed that the transition from tragedy to comedy is effected simply by sitting down' (1999 [1900]: 26). Ibrahím's ostentatious, flowing bombast 'mis palabras son claras como las fluyentes aguas de un arroyo cristalino' (59) jars with the bodily excrement's 'color' (not, of course 'cristalino'). The tautness of the stern expositional scene – carefulness, dignified bleakness, and efficiency – is suddenly re-framed by this mischievous, effervescent aura of drollness, a shrieking, dissonant *rinforzando* amidst *legato* and *sotto voce*. *Humorismo*, here, is not so much 'soplo delicado' (humour theorist Catalá-Carrasco's description, 2015: 27-28) as blistering whirlwind. Comedy's bathetic turn offers no temperate, therapeutic outlet for a weary, wounded nation.

Cela's interweaving heteroglossia presents an 'heroic' framework and then undercuts it with a mixture of cynicism and matter-of-factness. Indeed, for humour theorist J. L. Styan, the 'hero' of twentieth-century dark comedy 'is the character who makes the grand speech, but who has to clear his throat and scratch his nose' (1968: 275). As 'la señorita del 14' puts it in Cela's *Pabellón de reposo* (studied later), unmasking the truth behind layers of idealism, 'Los últimos instantes de los tuberculosos no son, en verdad, tan hermosos como han querido presentárnoslos los poetas románticos' (63). *La colmena's* comedy denies full empathic engagement, demanding what Bergson beautifully called 'a momentary anaesthesia of the heart' (Bergson 1999 [1900]: 10). Cela fans the flames, stimulating a vulgar, corrupt gland in

the reader and goading them to join the fun. The narrator fuels himself with our laughter, but the comedy slumps and hangs down, redoubling suffocation and sluggishness.

### **Black Humour**

Humour scholars Chapman and Foot devote one whole chapter to what they term 'Decommitment' (1977: 14), and Cela certainly presents himself, to use Breton's phrase from *Nadja*, as 'agonised witness' (in Haynes 2006: 27) of ghastly proceedings. However, he is by turns cajoling, lecturing, backpedalling, saving face, and shirking responsibility. Despite this *honnête homme* ruse, his depictions of violence – just as in *Nada* – are *tremendistas* but also *comic* by virtue of their precision and economy, which contrasts with the long sentences just before:

El niño no se cayó al suelo, se fue de narices contra la pared. (35)

Está ahorcada con una toalla. (48)

Dicen que han hecho un crimen, que han matado a puñaladas a dos señoras ya mayores. (50)

La pobre [Dorita] paría al revés: echaba los hijos de pie, y, claro, se le ahogaban al salir. (121)

Registering direct impression and abstaining from embellishment, Cela makes comedy from undeviating bluntness. Understatement can aid the author, in Trollope's telling words, in not 'seeming to have a design upon the reader' (quoted in Polhemus 1980: 193), but of course he does. Breton defined black humour as the dark shadow to Enlightenment sentimentality, 'the mortal enemy of sentimentality' (2009 [1940]: *xix*), and suggests that its practitioners (Swift, Marquis de Sade) are reacting against the 'cult of feeling'. Building on Freud's 1928 paper 'Humor', he argues that humour's fundamental glory lies in 'the triumph of narcissism, the ego's virtuous assertion of its own invulnerability' (*Ibid*: *xviii*). The black

humorist is therefore ‘impervious to the wounds dealt by the outside world’, not denying the existence of misery but rather turning it into subversive *jouissance* for his own pleasure. Accordingly, in the ‘Nota a la cuarta edición’, Cela wrote that ‘historia, como la vida, también sigue cociéndose en el inclemente puchero de la sordidez’ (1962: I: vii). Perhaps these his vignettes are just as ‘inclemente[s]’. This makes it extremely unnerving when the narrator calmly veers back to earnestness or professed objectivity. For instance, when Fidel Hernández kills his wife with ‘una lezna de zapatero’, just before his execution he merely says “si la mato a sopas con sulfato, no se entera ni Dios” (18). In this titillating play of reticence and revelation, we are offered a window onto salacious, scatological phenomena and then pulled away by the vital aura of concealment, or apathy. The next line tells us matter-of-factly, albeit with an ironic diminutive, that ‘Elvirita, cuando tenía once o doce años, se quedó huérfana’. This shifting funniness becomes uneasy camouflage – irony’s refuge or ‘get-out-of-jail-free’ card – working to cover up a malicious laugh.

Such pitch-black humour is rife throughout Cela’s oeuvre. In *Tobogán de hambrientos* (1962), ‘El don Ramírez tiene un ojo de cristal; el otro, el de carne y hueso, lo perdió en Puerto Príncipe, Haití, de un puñetazo explosivo que le arreó un negro’ (30). Moreover, Ramón Sorbas ‘es aficionado a descincharse el cinturón y a liarse a repartir estopa a diestro y siniestro’ (57). Similarly, in *Nuevas andanzas y desventuras de Lazarillo de Tormes* (1944), ‘en cada pueblo de España, hay un hombre en los huesos, al que apedrean los mozos, llaman tonto las mujeres y dicen los demás que lo que quiere es vivir sin trabajar’ (99). Cela’s novels ask what it might mean to dodge censure, to be ‘just joking’ – both in the sense of *only* in jest but also fair and morally upright. With blunt, unflinching irony that relishes revulsion, the texts contend with themselves at every turn. Cela’s technique evinces what Lauren Berlant (2015: 195) has termed ‘flat affect’: the underperformance of passion, a withdrawal from energised engagement. Presentation is bland and blasé, so restrained as to appear aloof, and extremes of joy or grief are difficult to determine in a resolutely unflappable aesthetic that is nevertheless *comic* in its deadpan, straight-faced approach. F. H. Buckley (2003: 49) spoke of the satirist as wearing a ‘perpetual frown’, and whilst *La colmena* is not as vicious, personal, or aggressive as outright satire, its humour is often excruciatingly grim.

We have established Cela's fondness for transgressing generic boundaries through pitch-black humour, but such fluctuation is quite deliberate. This comedian *sets out* to offend. As theorist Noël Carroll writes: 'you can be sure that there are others who will find it annoying, even extremely so. And you revel in their discomfort' (2013: 36). Whereas early critic Ortega wrote that Cela's humour 'equilibr[a] muy certeramente el especto realista y trágico de sus personajes' (1964: 98), the fabric of the narrative world accentuates ambiguity, boundary-crossing, and *imbalance*. As Cela wrote in *Mazurca para dos muertos*, 'Unos mueren [...] defendiendo heroicamente un blocao, enarbolando una bandera y gritando patriotismos', but others die because 'se les para el corazón mientras se masturban con la mente poblada de ensoñaciones' (77). Humour is of course subjective, but clearly there is a promise of a funniness here, emphasising the base, the mundane, the material, and the arbitrary nature of human pain. The laughter wants an echo, yet, as Ríos Carratalá puts it elsewhere, 'Sonreímos, pero con puntos suspensivos' (2005: 65).

### Comic Realism

Having discussed the ephemeral, impermanent connections as exacerbated by the novel's transient structure and the deadpan presentations of brutality, we shall now discuss how comedy crosses swords with social realism. Both *Nada* and *La colmena* feature narrators who are faintly comic in their bathetic anti-sentimentalism, building an aesthetic of constant neutralising, nullifying, and subsiding. Yet whereas *Nada* foregrounded its narrator's own misgivings, apprehensions, and lacunae, *La colmena's* swelling mirth-rate clashes in a text that otherwise advertises and aggrandises its own grave, naturalistic, 'factual' voice. Cela has made several overt claims to unbiased, testimonial intent, swearing and even flaunting, to paraphrase Shakespeare's Sonnet 138, that *La colmena* is made of truth. For instance, in the prologue to *Mrs Caldwell habla con su hijo* (1953), he wrote of his earlier novel as 'tres días de la vida de la ciudad [...] que es un poco la suma de todas las vidas que bullen en sus páginas, unas vidas grises, vulgares y cotidianas' ('Algunas palabras al que leyere', in Cela 1969: 976-77). In 'La miel y cera de *La colmena*', he depicted travelling to the 'plazuela con mi maquinilla de fotógrafo', calling his text a 'cuidadoso y modesto trabajito ambulante'

(1951). Sobejano took him at face value, calling *La colmena* is 'un documento de sensibilidad existencialista' (1975: 118).

However, such authorial disclaimers somewhat overstate the case, presenting what Sartre, elsewhere, called a 'flaunted intention of telling the truth' (Sartre 2000 [1943]: 207). Cela pitches his tent in realist territory but pivots to a *tremendista*, deadpan humour of filth, motivated by disgust, that pillories and blisters. Contrary to Morán's view that 'Cela es fiel al objetivismo' (1971: 325), *La colmena* works with long-shots and close-ups, and little in-between, thus achieving what Cela himself called a '*pálido* [i.e., not vibrant] reflejo'.<sup>31</sup> Contemporary critic Rafael Vázquez Zamora (1946) wrote that Cela had 'pintado personas del Madrid de 1942' and had expressed 'cosas de la vida cotidiana' (both of which suggest unadorned realism), but then criticised his 'cosas desnudas y, a menudo, implacablemente despellejadas'. Too *much* realism veers into callousness.

*La colmena's* intrusive, flagrant asides – 'Yo creo que', 'A mí no me parece que' and 'Digo todo esto porque' (56, 57, 68) – proliferate at an off-kilter, playful pace, emphasising that words are filtered through a mediator: 'Un hombre baja por Goya leyendo el periódico; cuando lo cogemos...' (114); 'Ya dijimos en otro lado lo siguiente' (315). The first-person plural doubles the act of relation, complicating appeals to realism. As G. H. Lewes warned the realist painter, 'Either give us true peasants, or leave them untouched; either paint no drapery at all, or paint with the utmost fidelity; either keep your people silent, or make them speak the idiom of their class' (1858: 493). The witty fizz and sparkle provide a brief *frisson* of pleasure when circumventing the expected manner. In Chapter 1, an otherwise neutral voice relates how 'los clientes ven pasar a la dueña, casi sin mirarla ya, mientras piensan, vagamente, en ese mundo que ¡ay! no fue lo que pudo haber sido, en ese mundo en el que todo ha ido fallando poco a poco' (5). The cry of anguish is in direct juxtaposition with an otherwise dispassionate tone, and the danger is that the composer might himself decompose. As Kundera puts it elsewhere, we say 'There he is again, the man-in-revolt-against-violence! He is being sarcastic! He is being provocative!' (1996: 204). The novel

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<sup>31</sup> 'Nota a la primera edición', in *La colmena* ed. Urrutia 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (1990: 13, my italics)

features two comic movements: the sudden jerk (a jaded outburst of disappointment) or the protracted glide (the slow trudge of tedium), but both end in oblivion.

However, whilst comedy and realism are intriguingly merged, and Cela's work is far more complex than staid, straightforward social testimony, the funniness both bolsters and undermines its claims to authentic reportage. In the words of Bert O. States (1987: 171), the 'comic aside [...] suggests a generic liberty', at odds with the realist impression. The ostensibly realist air establishes a stable, textual border; however, it ends up widening – not reigning in – the possibilities of slanted interference through a ripple effect. The effect is analogous to humour theorist Henri Bergson's image of the jack-in-the-box, which may explode at any moment: 'You squeeze him flat, he jumps up again. Push him lower, and he shoots up still higher. Crush him down beneath the lid, and often he will send everything flying' (Bergson (1999 [1900]: 68-9). Jové Lamencá, writing on Cela's *Mazurca de dos muertos*, argues that although the 'pensamientos en voz alta del narrador que es Cela, en tono melancólico' may well *surprise* us, they 'cobran una dimensión de "naturalidad", de límites justos, precisos', and the 'seriedad de los mismos no ha sido puesta en duda' by the 'tremendo humor' (1991: 81). On the contrary, in *La colmena*, the rude awakenings of subjective humour, juxtaposed with tedium, provide a loud, interruptive, proliferating gloss – reportage within reportage, both reactive and active, that flaunts its own artifice and refuses to stay quiet. Indeed, to return to Cela's image of himself as a 'fotógrafo' (Cela 1951), capturing life *as it is*, we should interrogate the degree to which this medium is truly realist. A photographer freezes a moment in time, immortalising but also stiffening its subject, who may well be unaware that they are being filmed – or, in a delightfully double word, *shot*. As camera becomes gun, the device illuminates and elucidates, affording the photographer an enhanced, privileged view. Yet it also blurs and obscures his or her own face, thwarting the opportunity for the captured subject, in turn, to capture a glimpse of the snapper.

Ultimately the humour works to undermine and destabilise its own realist credentials, for if realism endeavours to match up and marry together, comedy intervenes and pulls away. Theorists Krutnik and Neale (1990: 93) even argue that '*all* instances of the comic involve a degree of non- or anti-verisimilitude', and in *La colmena* comedy is often more rule than

exception. When don Roque reads in a magazine about a priest who requests extortionate sums of money for various 'milagros', even from 'una viuda gran devota', his response is perhaps the same as the reader's: "esto no es serio" (60). In interview, Cela defined *el humorismo* as 'la proclamación de la irrealidad de la cotidiana irrealidad' (Vilas 1968: 182), which is clearly at odds with realism but also indicative of the fact that postwar Spanish reality *was* absurdity and improbability. He also advocated the rejection of canonical literary realism in favour of impishness: 'El novelista –hoy– tiene la obligación de desatenderse de madame Bovary y el deber de prestar atención, mucha atención, al Lazarillo' (Cela et al. 1969: 52). Ortega considered Cela's humour 'realismo exagerado' (1964: 92), and Mantero and Tesser entitled their study 'Camilo José Cela: The Rejection of the Ordinary' (1995): both examples create a distinction between comedy and realism. Upon the release of Mario Camus' 1982 film adaptation, Diego Galán (1982) wrote that, at last, the 'auténtica realidad española' had been depicted (suggesting that the censored novel conveyed but a distortion).

To illustrate with examples from the text, Cela vents his spleen animatedly, targeting his objects of scorn, before turning his attention to a grotesque bodily orifice and its functions. Martín Marco passes a bath shop and thinks:

...elegantes sisternas bajas donde seguramente se puede apoyar el codo, se puede incluso colocar algunos libros bien seleccionados, encuadernados con belleza: Hólderlin, Keats, Valéry, para el caso en que el estreñimiento precisa compañía; Rubén, Mallarmé, sobre todo Mallarmé, para las descomposiciones de vientre. ¡Qué porquería! (38)

Perspicuous scatological humour of *shiterature* is followed by the bathetic 'sonríe, como perdonándose, y se aparta del escaparate'. The Celian technique of inciting disgust only to stand aloof – outrage, then instant dispassion – leads to what Robert Spires calls a 'tonal paradox' (1978: 873) but is also decidedly *funny*. Humour gestures in the disparity between yearning for nobility and unrelenting misfortune. Martín is gleefully decimated, mocked but also menaced. Readerly laughter is enfeebled and wary of committing, and the humour, joking to *cause harm*, is paradoxically not very funny at all. With venom and wit, the surfeit

of comedy oversteps the mark, and Martín becomes a punching bag. Bleaker than ever, the biggest joke of all is that Martín is still smiling.

Ilie believes that Cela 'registra sus impresiones directas sin embellecerlas, absteniéndose de recursos que puedan realzar su efecto' (1963: 147), but documentation is in constant, nervous conflict with the penchant for humorous extension, enlargement, and amplification (which ironically and mordantly belittles the characters). The comical voice must be most vivacious in the moment of its absolute vanishing. Indeed, perhaps the narrator in postwar Spanish realism became just as ironic and slippery as the transcriber-translator-editor of *La familia de Pascual Duarte*: 'pero dejemos que hable Pascual Duarte, que es quien tiene cosas interesantes que contarnos' (50). When doña Juana insists that her late husband Gonzalo Sisemón was a righteous man to the end, the narrator's scathing remarks drip with irony: 'había acabado sus días en un prostíbulo de tercera clase... Sus amigos lo tuvieron que traer en un taxi por la noche, para evitar complicaciones' (136). Doña Juana is told that 'había muerto en la cola de Jesús de Medinaceli', lest her feelings be hurt, but Cela adds the truth: 'El cadáver de don Gonzalo venía sin tirantes, pero doña Juana no cayó en el detalle' (287). The absurd detail creates poignancy, but these personal, idiosyncratic details make the novel feel oddly *disconnected* from the reality that surrounds and informs it, treading a fretful line between humility and humiliation.

Moreover, Doña Juana riotously clings to virtue: '¡Lo único que me reconforta es que se ha ido derecho al cielo!' (136). The diminutive form hammers home the caustic humour; however, the words ring false, as though the narrator appropriated her idiolect for comical ends. Ventriloquism, as Brad Epps (1996: 55-56) defines it, is 'an act of speech that hides its sources and throws itself, disembodied, into the bodies of others'. Requiring the dumb compliance of those sources, it 'entails a violent silence' on the part of the other, as is put to humorous use in Delibes' *Cinco horas con Mario* (1966). *La colmena* asks to what extent the social realist author becomes a pasticheur – which Paul Maltby (1991: 5) defines as 'a trafficker in others' meanings'. After all, the word 'gag' means both a joke and a means by which to smother and suffocate speech. Cela is fond of throwing grenades, but some go off in his hands.

Surveying scholarship on the novel, it is clear that critics have struggled with this uncertain narrator, and the symbiosis of comedy and realism. Sobejano (2003: 178) refers to the ‘point of view, appearing “almost” objective’, but the tentative vocabulary and scare marks indicate a troubling hesitancy. José Ortega notes a ‘deformación grotesca de la realidad’, but, almost in the same breath, also stresses ‘[e]l realismo naturalista’ (1964: 21), as though there were no inconsistency. Likewise, Foster (1966: 246) speaks of Cela as an objective ‘fotógrafo de pueblo’ yet defends his grotesquerie: ‘no se burla de ella y si señala sus defectos es porque le obsesionan, porque los siente como algo muy suyo, de lo que se burla pero que sin duda no vería con buenos ojos que las burlas partieran de alguien que no participara del parentesco’. It is unconvincing to argue that it be acceptable for Cela to make sport of the *madrileños*, but not for anyone else to do so. Larraz has even argued that *Las últimas horas*, *La colmena*, *La noria*, and *El camino* demonstrate an ‘*atenuación del feísmo para dar más verosimilitud a la mezquindad y miseria*’ (2014: 209, my italics). If true, it is absurd to think that Cela’s novel, despite its grotesque decay and filth, artificially *alleviates* the depravity in order to *increase* both realism and ‘compasión’. This begs the question of whether it is the novelist’s right to soften social conditions, rendering the responsibility of ‘telling the (unvarnished) truth’ in the postwar landscape heavily ambiguous. Instead of ‘asco o espeluzno’, he argues, these novels ‘despiertan la compasión’ (*Ibid*). However, this chapter illustrates that the narrator is by turns apologetic and combative, coyly innocent and devilishly knowing, and that the deadpan depictions of brutality negate genuine fellow-feeling.

*La colmena* is at once a self-effacing, unassuming project *and* a self-serving, immoderate one, complete with the smile of superiority and a self-delighting *volte-face*. For Cela, humour is ‘tanto lanza como escudo’ (1966 questionnaire, in Vilas 1968: 182) – as offensive as defensive, as murderous as suicidal, combining hurt and hostility. Indeed, this game of muteness is expertly parodied in Luis Lucia’s 1952 film *Cerca de la ciudad*, which amusingly demonstrates the ridiculousness of artwork purporting to depict a ‘slice-of-life’.<sup>32</sup> Cela remembers a time in the Senate, after Franco’s death, when he was asked to vote on the

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<sup>32</sup> This film parodies social realism’s claims to authenticity by announcing its ‘propósito’ as a ‘documental’ yet undermining its own truth. The narrator praises the ‘fortuita presencia de este caballero’ whilst immediately noting ‘¿He dicho fortuita? Tuvimos que pagar diez duros y cinco de alquiler por el pajarito...’

literary style of the inchoate democratic constitution. Responding to President Fontán, Cela said 'No, señor presidente, estoy ausente' (Haurie 2015). Absent whilst obviously, unabashedly *there*, Cela's humorous voice is as inescapable as it is slippery, self-consciously searching for attention.

Joke-telling provides for simultaneous disavowal and indulgence ('Only joking', we say, just as we make the joke), and Freud described 'the Janus-like double-facedness of the joke', for comedic wit is a 'double-dealing rogue who serves two masters at once' (1991 [1905]: 148-49). Rather than 'sending up', or 'taking off', Cela is putting *down* his characters, conveying events now unswervingly, now diffidently. For Álvaro Ruibal (1957), 'Camilo sabe nadar y guardar la ropa, dar una de cal y otra de arena'. Perhaps Cela is merely pretending to pretend, but the scarring humour of uncontrolled effusions threatens to pull down the realist façade. As Julian Barnes writes of Flaubert's "booby-trapped" ironies: 'That is the attraction, and also the danger, of irony: the way it permits a writer to be seemingly absent from his work, yet in fact hintingly present. You *can* have your cake and eat it; the only trouble is, you get fat' (1985: 87). Humour leaves its fingerprints behind. Cela may *have the last laugh*, but it rings shrill and hollow.

Cela cannot leave his text alone, playing with retention and rejection. His caustic captions, pop-ups, and ejaculations are like embedded clues for the reader, possessing little objective authority over their adjacent, 'core' text. When don Leonardo rants and raves at his cleaner, he exclaims 'Nosotros los Meléndez [...] hemos sido otrora dueños de vidas y hacienda. Hoy, ya lo ve usted, ¡casi en medio de la *rue!*' The narrator interrupts ironically: 'El limpia siente admiración por don Leonardo'. Moreover, 'El que don Leonardo le haya robado sus ahorros es, por lo visto, algo que le llena de pasmo y de lealtad' (41). The 'por lo visto' implies that the cleaner's response is frankly bizarre, but the humour of narrative nesting is once again conservative, preserving the status quo. It does not call for courage, slumping to the conclusion that cowardice will suffice.

## Onion Suicide

We shall now discuss the fragment that crystallises most intensely the unnerving humour of *La colmena*. Appearing in the fifth section of six, the man who ‘se suicidó porque olía a cebolla’ (144-145) features a distinctive balance of tenderness and cruelty, a fault-finding funniness, both grey and black humour, and a peculiar challenge to realism.<sup>33</sup> For Sobejano, this vignette, fewer than 40 lines in length, is the ‘quintaesencia y cima del pesimismo’ (1978: 126); however, it is the *humour* that accentuates hopelessness. The fragment begins in a recognisably social realist key, with extensive poverty condensed into one piercing image (the smell of a miserable kitchen) and one suffering man: ‘Estaba enfermo y sin un duro’. However, the dismal, toned-down poverty is followed by the suddenly disastrous ‘pero se suicidó’, which in turn leads to the absurd, outlandish shift: ‘porque olía a cebolla’. As the married couple preposterously converse, the man’s initial repulsion (‘que apesta’, ‘un horror’ (144)) quickly gives way to a more personal and unnerving connection: ‘¡No quiero que se vaya el olor a cebolla!’ (145). ‘[H]uele a cebolla’ is repeated twelve times, and the smell amusingly overtakes his senses. It creeps ever closer as we move from ‘las paredes’ to ‘las manos’, to ‘el corazón’, and finally ‘todo me huele a cebolla’, ‘cada vez me huele más a cebolla’. The sudden, petulant acceleration is jarringly outrageous and surrealist, convulsing the reader out of tedious stupor (*La colmena*’s pervasive atmosphere) and fingering the jaded edge of consummate denunciation. Humour and hardship are combined to emphasise that the situation is, in the final analysis, no joke at all.

Structurally, the fragment stands apart from the majority of the novel, demanding a response through its conspicuous absurdity. Ilie (1963) only mentions it in passing, but it is the only suicide in a novel whose characters are so frequently condemned to commit it. ‘[A]lgunos vecinos’ (145) come out onto their balconies, but it is impossible to match them with individuals elsewhere. Moreover, whereas most of *La colmena* is narrated in the present indicative, here all interjections are in the *pretérito perfecto simple*. Moreover, given the anadipolosis from the preceding segment, which ends with Don Roberto’s joke about ‘lo mal que olía’ a fat man, both the characters and the segment of which they are

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<sup>33</sup> When I delivered a paper on this fragment at the 2018 International Society for Humour Studies conference, there was widespread astonishment that its hysterical humour be found in a novel considered ‘social realist’.

part are doubly isolated in the novel. Sobejano (1978: 125) identifies the source as Galdós' *Torquemada en la cruz* (1893: Part 2, chapter VIII), in which Rafael rejects the sisters' food because 'me persigue el maldito olor de la cebolla' and commits suicide by the same method: 'Bajaron todos... Estrellado, muerto'. However, within *La colmena*, there is no underlying congruence to the passage, only an aftertaste of hopelessness and defeat.

On the brink of nonsense, instead of synthesis we find succession – one and one and one, instead of, in theorist Elizabeth Sewell's words, 'one big One' (1952: 51). The logic of a Nonsense universe would be 'the sum of its parts and nothing more' (*Ibid*: 98). We may strive for coherence and correspondence, like bees desperately struggling to extract honey from surrounding flora; however, the fragment forces us to rein in our longing and accept that full revelation is unattainable. With a tormented, caustic bitterness, Cela sells us down the river for yet another laugh. As M. Mantero writes of Cela's humour (in later novels), '[it] does not go very far, especially when human lives are irretrievably damaged or lost' (1995: 250). With cultivated dissatisfaction and a certain delectability, Cela does not simply partake of the forbidden fruit; he positively gorges on it. In this way it is similar to the end of Miguel Delibes' amusing but also broadly social realist *Mi idolatrado hijo Sisí* (1953), in which Paulina tells Cecilio that she is pregnant with his son Sisí's child. Cecilio grabs her cheeks and screams '¡Dime que es un absurdo eso! ¡Dime que me has engañado!' Unable to access comedy ('absurdo'), the last lines – one brief paragraph, as though a farcical afterthought – have him commit suicide by jumping from a 'balastrada' (334), much like this 'cebolla' passage.

Returning to *La colmena*, although the fragment is darkly compelling in its gracelessness, as the novel develops there is less and less relief in comedy, and, just as in *Nada*, no catharsis is forthcoming. Following the suicide, the wife 'no podía hablar' (145). Had she been able to, she would have said 'Nada, que olía un poco a cebolla'. After the laughter comes an undertow of crushing, crippling doubt, and the strain of slapstick wanes and fades, taking its toll. The joke ends with such a deadpan anti-climax that it becomes funny in its own right, funny because it *isn't* funny. The lack of punchline *is* the punchline, making the reader feel a deep sense of regret. As comedic actress Aubrey Plaza asserts of deadpan, 'Being funny with

doing nothing at all is a skill' (Singh 2017) – a skill that this thesis takes seriously. It is a key instance of *grey humour*, expressing apathy in the face of wretchedness.

Significantly, in a crucially comic – and as yet overlooked – connection, Jesús López Pacheco uses his social realist novel *Central eléctrica* (1957) to rail against the nihilism of this fragment, specifically censuring the 'personaje [...] que se suicidó porque olía a cebolla' (344). In its explicit rejection of Cela's *most comical section*, it proves that social realism's earliest readers were evidently alive, and reacting, to humour. López Pacheco desired to retaliate against Francoist authorities, rather than fold in the face of torment, later affirming that his novel contained 'más luz que sombra, escrita cuando en España había más sombra que luz' (1982: 10). However, he employs similarly benumbed, apian imagery to describe, in his case, the increasing capitalist appropriation of workers' rights and social development. Here the innocent village 'poblado' becomes a 'gran panal múltiple, a cuyas abejas les hubieran sido cortadas las alas, el dinamismo transparente de sus alas y, por tanto, su ir y venir, su inquietud, hasta su alegría' (244). Bereft even of '*alegría*' is social realism in a nutshell.<sup>34</sup>

Returning to *La colmena*, the passage gives the reader tacit permission to stop caring, to look away from the man's pain. The pleasure and paradox of Cela's work is its incitement to the very desires it seeks, at least on the surface, to keep at bay. Contrary to humour theorist Peter Berger, who argues that in comedy 'the limitations of the human condition are miraculously overcome' (1997: 210), its presence in Spanish social realism sheds light on the folly, weakness, and insufficiency of *this world*, offering no redemption. Cela builds a deeply *derisory* atmosphere based on gulfs, disproportions, and dislocations widening the between the characters and their world. This mockery becomes increasingly unpalatable given the predominant heartache, and soon degenerates into tragedy, ultimately negating the small capacity for resistance that remained. If the fire is burning, the social realist novel does not rouse us to put it out.

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<sup>34</sup> See the appendix for more on this novel

With regard to comic realism, in a postwar world in which the bizarre (rife injustice, massacre, poverty) is now the usual, this fragment combines the two frames. On darkly humorous Spanish neorealist cinema, Pavlovic (2003: 17) observes ‘the more surreal and fictitious the moments, the closer one got to rendering the “truth of reality”’. Cela’s ‘cebolla’ segment is a winking meta-joke, an absurd non-sequitur, the integration of the silly and the serious. ‘Is this (meant) in jest?’, we ask, ‘atento a averiguar’ (Sobejano 1978: 122) how and why suicide could have been committed for such an absurd reason. The agonizing surrealism of everyday life leads to a numbing dislocation. As Ionesco put it in a note on Kafka, ‘Est absurd ce qui n’a pas de but...’ (The absurd is that which has no goal) (1957: 27). However, whilst the fragment shows that, under Franco, the absurd, nonsensical, farfetched and fantastic were *common features of everyday life*, it does not soften the harshness, leading to what I call the cop-out of comedy. Fatigued humour of failure – a flattening, deadpan disengagement – itself *fails*.

### **A Comic Conscience?**

We have established, through our discussion of comic ‘splicing’ (Zupancic 2008: *passim*), that Cela’s deliberate, deadpan display of a lack of emotion is a form of comedic articulation that contrasts with the ridiculousness and inhumanity of the subject matter. However, we shall now ask whether this blunt, ironic, laconic, and apparently unintentional delivery or presentation is so frequent as to become monotonous. Stand-up Jerry Seinfeld describes the comedian as ‘standing against a wall blindfolded, with a cigarette in [his] mouth’ (Weiner 2012), and the cigarette is the official accessory of the comic and the insouciant dandy: a symbol of laid-back, nonchalant contemplation. But might readers grow as idle and languid as he?

For instance, when Isabel Montesa talks with don Jaime Arce, the narrator treats her harshly: ‘es como una tonta que no dice nada; [...] Limita a mover la cabeza, para adelante y para atrás, con un gesto que tampoco significa nada’ (19). The reader is encouraged to laugh at the barbarities and banalities of life, with a quashing, emptying, *grey* humour of fatigue. Contemporary critic J. L. Alborg agrees, criticising Cela’s penchant for ‘sucesos tremeundos

y palabras gruesas' which which 'se impresiona a los ingenuos y enmascara a maravilla la falta de contenido, la ausencia de verdaderos problemas, la carencia de auténtico valor para encararse con realidades' (1958: I: 84). Celian humour negates the possibility for genuine critique ('ausencia de verdaderos problemas'). Humour theorist Scott Weems (2014: xvi) distinguishes between two reactions to humorous phenomena: 'Aha!' ('insight problem' of recognition) and 'Haha!' (amusement tickled). But *La colmena* encourages more of a chiasmic 'aaah-haha-aaah-haha-aaah', a boomerang between laugh and groan. Postwar humour, the 'laugh-groan-laugh' pendulum, provokes but the nod of scandalised, dismayed, benumbed assent.

Moreover, on four separate occasions (12, 24, 29, 118), characters explicitly *prefer* 'no pensar en nada', resigning themselves to the prevailing passivity and provoking the reader, to paraphrase George Bernard Shaw, to 'laugh with one side of his mouth and cry with the other' (Letter to Archibald Henderson, 1918, in Henderson 1932: 616). The novel elicits half a laugh, or even the epitaph of a laugh, for jokes gradually stretch out until they are no longer jokes at all. As theorist Eric Bentley has written, the cruel, embittered implication of the phrase 'Let's not go into that: this is a comedy!' is 'That won't bear going into' (1991: 299). Indeed, this comic apathy recurs throughout the postwar novel, for in Enrique Náchér's *Cama 36* (1953), Maria notes 'No pienso, no pienso. No deseo pensar. Pensar es desesperarse y dejar de vivir' (123). Anita feels the same way: 'Tengo miedo al pensamiento' (104), and Pedro, in Nacher's *Buhardilla*, notes that 'Pensar es desesperarse' (109).

Cheerless humour may amplify in a snowballing effect, but it also depreciates and downgrades, staying true to a base reality. It is fundamentally conservative. Martín 'traduce algo de francés' and 'hay algunos folletones de *El Sol* que todavía podría repetirlos casi de memoria' (42), but the ironic 'algo', 'algunos' and 'casi' devalue his intellectual accomplishments at the very moment of their presentation. Cela portrays the *inhuman* condition through a bleak, dejected comedy; however, the funniness constitutes nothing more than a vague, passable escape valve, and soon runs out of steam. To return to Nicholas Holm's study of deadpan, perhaps it hinders humour's ability to express purpose, becoming at best apolitical and at worst implicitly supportive of the status quo (2017: 118).

The lack of 'clear attribution of satirical or critical qualities' (*Ibid*: 119) to the comic import negates and suffocates any subversive intent. Even dawn, often a symbol of hope, is supremely futile: 'esa mañana eternamente repetida' (124).

Whereas Mengo, in Lope de Vega's *Fuente Ovejuna*, is confident that 'la miel / cubrirá la burla y la risa' (2.1528-29), ensuring a laughter never too cruel to be kind, Cela's apian honey is intermittent. Clipping wings, the sting hits hard, and the wound becomes infected. Cela pretends that it is the world – not his mood – that is distorted; however, given the narrator's lofty remoteness, there is more *hiel* than *miel* in *La colmena*. A prime example is the episode in which Martín addresses Juan Ramón Jiménez's 'Imagen alta y tierna de consuelo' (*Sonetos espirituales*, 1914-15) to Pura, for the ironic reversal of Catholic sexual morality poetically transforms the prostitute into idealised Virgin. Pura calls Martín 'un romántico', and he 'sonríe, casi con tristeza' (the perennial image of social realist prose):

Martín le acaricia la cara.

–Estás pálida, pareces una novia.

–No seas bobo.

–Sí, una recién casada...

Pura se puso seria.

–¡Pues no lo soy!

Martín le besa los ojos delicadamente, igual que un poeta de dieciséis años.

–¡Para mí, sí, Pura! ¡Ya lo creo que sí!

La muchacha, llena de agradecimiento, sonríe con una resignada melancolía. (164)

This blend of humour, misfortune, and tragedy (smiling with 'resignada melancolía') is key to social realism, as is Martín's determination to believe in a reality that he knows is false. One stanza ends 'lis de paz con olores de pureza / ¡precio divino de mi largo duelo!' (164), which contrasts with the novel's stench of squalor; however, in a comic masterstroke, Martín misquotes the sonnet. It should read not 'precio' but 'premio divino'. The humour of hardship, near the knuckle, strikes a harsh blow at the radical falsity of the scene. This is not a *reward* but a sacrifice, dryly accentuating that Pura is paid for sex and companionship. '¡Qué triste es, qué bonito!', she cries, neatly summarising the novel. However poignant

their chemistry, both parties know that it is both contrived and transient. This is why Baudelaire, in his essay on the comic, called laughter ‘essentially contradictory’, for ‘at once a token of an infinite grandeur and an infinite misery’ (1956) [1855]: 219). The latter relates to ‘the absolute Being of whom man has an inkling’, the former ‘in relation to the beasts’. In this plunge from high (Catholic dogma) to low (sex-work), between what is and what ought to be, laughter flares up. Cela’s favoured technique is *accismus*, a feigned coyness, and the playful, intrusive comedy leaves a trace, risking its own collapse. His face is pressed up against the glass, and his breath obscures the view.

This prompts the question of whether *La colmena*’s comedy is subversive – an ‘assault on routine’, as M. Mantero (1995: 248) argues elsewhere in Cela’s oeuvre – or conservative. Is comic realism an efficient tool for rebellion? Torrente Ballester found in contemporary narrative a ‘referencia inmediata a la realidad española hecha de la única manera que podía hacerla quien, como yo entonces y ahora, vivía en España: quiero decir de una manera indirecta o por parábola’ (Amorós 1977: 117), but his language is astoundingly paradoxical, as ‘inmediata’ contrasts with ‘indirecta o por parábola’. Perhaps it is humour that provides this oblique, devious window onto lived experience. This is the white lie of black humour, and no truth matters more. As one character puts it in Eulalia Galvarriato’s novel *Cinco sombras* (1947), ‘su narración está hecha por igual de palabras y silencios’ (44). Such interstitial spaces reveal the wiggle room in reality – more dotted line than sharp contour.

However, *La colmena*’s comedy is more exasperating and infuriating than insurgent or dissident, and its overriding aura is the dampened sadness of bathetic humour. For example, when Julita notes that her daughter, Visi, smells of smoke, the comedy is clouded:

–Entonces... ¿Te habrán besado?

–Por Dios, mamá, ¿por quién me tomas?

La mujer, la pobre mujer, coge a la hija de las dos manos.

–Perdóname, hijita, ¡es verdad! ¡Qué tonterías digo!

Se queda pensativa unos instantes y habla muy quedo, como consigo misma:

–Es que a una todo se le imagina peligro para su hijita mayor...

Julita deja escapar dos lágrimas.

–¡Es que dices unas cosas!

La madre sonr e, un poco a la fuerza, y acaricia el pelo de la muchacha.

–Anda, no seas chiquilla, no me hagas caso. Te lo dec a de broma.

Julita est a abstra da, parece que no oye.

–Mamá...

–Qu e. (130)

Repetition of ‘la pobre mujer’ and clarification ‘de las dos manos’ create sympathy, but the dark, dramatic irony is that Visi has been forced into prostitution. The sudden total shift of ‘Qu e.’ is amusing, the play on ‘broma’ is deadly serious, and the comic twists and turns aggravate the sorrow. For George Orwell, ‘[t]he aim of a joke is not to degrade the human being, but to remind him that he is already degraded’ (quoted in Landrum 2008: 46).

Likewise, the humorously named ‘angelitos’ (the diminutive signals an involved narrator) at *la casa de do a Celia*, a brothel, ‘cuando llega alguna pareja, gritan jubilosos por el pasillo: ¡viva, viva, que ha venido otro se or!’ They know that should a man enter with a lady, ‘significa comer caliente al otro d a’ (89). The humour of hardship, as with *Nada*, emphasises the extreme atomization of urban dwelling but can only surrender to hopelessness. As Colletta puts it (2003: 11), ‘The point [of dark comedy] is to wrest from pain a momentary victory in laughter; it makes no other claims’. The whisper of a laugh is heard, riding a razor-thin line; however, given this ever-increasing number of daily defeats, comedy implies that everything will just get worse.

From time to time Cela suggests a more subversive, politically-engaged form of humour, but this is always more conducive to despair than hope. Bar-owner Celestino learns entire passages of Nietzsche’s *The Dawn of Day* (1881) from memory and recites them to military *guardias*, only for these openly to mock insights such as ‘la compasi n es el ant doto del suicidio’ (41). Like ‘los curas’, Celestino insinuates that it would be ‘muy peligroso’ for the masses to read Nietzsche, presumably because they could question the political, oppressive regime. Celestino labels them ‘incultos’, and the hint at rebellion against authority falls by the wayside. Moreover, although do a Rosa’s caf e is the one constant meeting-point in an otherwise structurally disjointed novel, it is no carnivalesque party atmosphere but rather a grotesque distortion of Bakhtinian liberatory, community spirit (Bakhtin 1984). On the

contrary, Cela caricatures the 'incompatibles' cliques within the café, 'los de la merienda [y] los de después de almorzar' (54), as the ironic 'Two Spains' at loggerheads with one another. Were the café well-organised, such as 'la República de Platón, existiría sin duda una tregua' (55); however, in contemporary Spain such divisions are entirely irreconcilable, a subversive point entirely the product of *humour*, but one which essentially ends in continued disconnection and disinterest.

Lapiente (1992: 171) draws on Bakhtin for a different purpose, examining violence in Cela's oeuvre and arguing that the enunciation of such brutality is subversive and progressive: 'acentúa el sentido bajtiano de la tensión existente entre las múltiples voces de una sociedad complicada', emphasising the 'ruptura entre el poder que domina y la oposición que resiste'. Amid a repressive regime intent on homogenizing communities, it could be argued, *La colmena* reveals a rich cityscape, a wealth of individuals each with a story of their own. However, it is difficult to concur with Lapiente when the narrator observes, for instance, 'Las putas de lujo abortan y, si no pueden, ahogan a la criatura en cuanto hace, tapándole la cabeza con una almohada y sentándose encima' (241), for the repugnant content is rendered grotesque by the cavalier, *esperpéntico*<sup>35</sup> tone.

Indeed, Fernando Morán writes of *tremendismo* that the distance between real problems and the 'propensión a la flatulencia' meant that in reality 'nadie queda muy alarmado, sino reconfortado y seguro' (1971: 324), and perhaps readers of the social novel anticipate, and grow less responsive to, this prevailing, benumbed humour. Cela's impairing, devitalizing comedy is part of a hopelessly terminal process, and we laugh with a lump in our throat at timeworn, battered characters stuck in despairing limbo. Later, when Martín prays alone beside his mother's grave, although 'hubiera dado diez años de vida por acordarse del Padrenuestro' (289), he forgets it halfway through and resorts to improvising a prayer: 'Madre mía que estás en la tumba, yo te llevo dentro de mi corazón...'. At last, we assume, he pays his respects in a dignified and sincere fashion. Yet he is so satisfied with his invented supplication that he repeats it, only to forget the words once more. The jab of humour hits

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<sup>35</sup> Alonso Zamora Vicente defines this as the nightmarish, deathly, 'universal mueca' (1969: 18), building on Wolfgang Kayser's understanding of the grotesque as '[l]aughter combined with bitterness [...] mockery and cynicism, and finally becomes satanic' (1968: 313).

its mark, pulls away, and then strikes us when we are most vulnerable. For G. K. Chesterton, in humour one finds ‘the idea of the eccentric caught in the act of eccentricity and brazening it out’ (1999: 135). *La colmena* is a mock-epic of blunting noughts, whose long-suffering laughter bows out and hits rock-bottom. At its very best, postwar humour is a means of residing *in* the world, not an avenue out of it.

### **At Whom Are We Laughing?**

Having analysed the narrator’s dejected, unenterprising, deadpan humour, I will now turn to the *reader’s* complicity in laughter. However fretful and dispiriting the novel may be, and however tarnished readers may feel, they are nonetheless hooked by the surreal, hilarious spectacle. John Boorstin, writing on cinema, identifies the *voyeur’s eye*: ‘the mind’s eye, not the heart’s, the dispassionate observer, watching out of a kind of generic human curiosity. It is not only sceptical, it is easily bored’ (1991: 13). Such lassitude is fundamental to the fatigued, *grey humour* of *La colmena*. As Boorstin continues, ‘they are not your friends, and you do not feel their embarrassments, fears, or losses. This emotional disconnection is exactly why you can laugh at their antics and experiences – their mistakes do not matter to you’ (*Ibid*: 141). This is intimately linked with the Superiority Theory of humour, which holds that we laugh *down*, with an aggressive ‘sudden glory’, at inferior individuals, comparing our ‘eminency’ and ‘own good opinion’ with ‘another’s man’s infirmity of absurdity’ (Hobbes 1962 [1840]: 46-47). This reading is of course reinforced by the detached vignette structure. For example, Doña Asunción works at a dairy (in reality a brothel), and asks Ramona to read out a letter from her daughter:

–“La esposa de mi novio ha fallecido de unas anemias perniciosas”. ¡Caray, dona Asunción, así ya se puede!

–Siga, siga.

–Y mi novio dice que ya no usemos nada y que si quedo en estado pues el se casa.

¡Pero hija, si es usted la mujer de la suerte!

–Sí, gracias a Dios tengo bastante suerte con mi hija. (140)

Humour derives from the sharp disconnect between what is and what ought to be, but laughter is uncomfortably targeted at ignorance and weak-mindedness. The greatest of stakes – poverty, death, destruction – chafe against the silliness and puerility of their presentation, and the horrific import fades away amid the giddy senselessness.

*La colmena* grapples with the question of whether laughter, as Bergson put it, is the ‘foe of emotion’ (Bergson 2002 [1900]: 4). Indeed, the *nota* to the eighth edition of *La colmena* (1966) (which Cela never amended afterwards) substitutes the former Quevedo quote concerning mirrors and angles (‘arrojar la cara importa / que el espejo no hay por qué’) for one by Llull, crucially on *laughter*: ‘Paciència en lo començament, e riu en la fi’ (Patience in the beginning, and laughter at the end) (1966: 7). Whilst ‘riu’ can also mean ‘descanso’, in the Freudian comic sense of *release*, Cela changes a crucial part of Llull’s original *Mil proverbios* (1925: 355): ‘Paciencia en lo començamente plora, e riu en la fi’. ‘[P]lora’ – *tears* – is missing in both this and, as Montetes-Mairal y Laburta proves (2014: 190), in ‘todas las demás ediciones que habrían de publicarse después’. Having analysed his mordant humour, we can determine that Cela excludes tears because he rejects vulnerability, weakness or overt sympathy with his characters. This aligns with what Jardiel Poncela (1967: 146-7, italics his) observed of the Spanish *humorista*: ‘no llora, sino que muerde’.

Paratextually at least, tears are replaced by the sole act of laughter. Just as Cela warned us in the ‘Nota a la segunda edición’, ‘no merece la pena que nos dejemos invadir por la tristeza’ (1969: 958). This connects with what Juan Herrero-Senés asserts on the *novelas ‘nuevas’* of the *vanguardia*: that the humorous position, instead of surrendering to the heartbreak, ‘parecería transfigurar el abismo de la vida humana pero que en realidad lo hace aun más patente, *sin lamentarse por ello*’ (2011: 402, my italics). This is key: comedy offers no flight or escape, reminding us how deeply rooted we are within the injustices and oppressions of the world. Yet Herrero-Senés also notes that frequently ‘se nos narra [...] sin pena ni lamento, al contrario, con jovialidad y buen humor, con una alegría nihilista que rechaza el gesto trágico y se congratula en la voluptuosa recreación de su propio presente, para así asirlo de alguna manera’ (*Ibid*: 403). Cela certainly *grabs hold* of the contemporary situation in Madrid with an unflinching, unblinking focus; however, perhaps he also basks in ‘recreación’, catching targets in his crosshairs and lampooning them pitilessly. Indeed, in the

final sentence of his aforementioned 'Nota a la segunda edición' Cela writes that, since '[n]ada tiene arreglo', the optimal attitude is that of 'los más elegantes gladiadores del circo romano, con una vaga sonrisa en los labios' (1969: 959). Gladiators are *spectacle* artists, as much showmen as warriors, fashioning entertainment out of death and destruction. Cela makes comic hay through the grey humour of calamity and pennilessness; however, he provides no release valve for wretched tension.

Ethologist Konrad Lorenz observed that 'laughter forms a bond' but simultaneously 'draws a line' (1963: 284), and the reader must decide whether to give Cela a blank check or 'ludic alibi' as sanctioned truth-teller – the immunity, unique to comedy, of 'only joking, only horsing around'. When the drunk Madame Pimentón breaks her nose by running into a door, black humour abounds as a man 'ya metido en años' relates: "Echaba sangre como un becerro. Decía: Oh, la, la; oh, la, la y se marchó escupiendo las tripas. [...] ¡Bien mirado, hasta daba risa!" (12). Perhaps the novel's savagery, 'bien mirado', should also make us snicker. Do we, in effect, pardon the pun? Neale and Krutnik note that, if comedy can occasionally go too far, 'the latitude allowed it is generally – and necessarily – quite considerable' (1990: 4). Are there no limits to the jester's license? Sarah Blacher Cohen outlines the pledge of writers on conflict (in her case, the Holocaust):

Thou shalt respect the monumental nature [...] and faithfully represent the barbarous event without manipulating the facts for artistic effect. Thou shalt in no way whimsically treat or mockingly undermine the serious nature of this subject matter which would diminish its importance or detract from its gravity (1994: 146).

However, *La colmena* and much of social realism do not adhere to these regulations, working rather to 'kill the spirit of gravity' (Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra* [1891] in Nietzsche 1971: 152-3). The anarchic, free-wheeling edge to humour tangles with its grim and desperate qualities, and verbal play, foregrounding artifice, detaches from its mimetic referents. This section has illustrated that Cela's fault-finding funniness engenders *louche laughter*, both appealing *and* despicable, and then turns that laughter back onto its readers, forcing them to confront why they found it funny.

On the other hand, reflecting the stylistic mixture we have explored in this chapter, when asked which ‘elementos o condiciones fundamentales’ are necessary for the humorist, Cela responded ‘Escepticismo, siempre. Y crueldad y caridad en teclas alternas’ (Vilas 1968: 182).<sup>36</sup> Perhaps *La colmena*’s humour is akin to its promising wind that, ‘lleno de esperanza’, opens, ‘por unos segundos, un agujerito en cada espíritu’ (48-49). Indeed, even after pummelling the ageing prostitute Elvira with a number of cutting asides, sympathy is salvaged through dotted examples of touching eloquence: ‘La señorita Elvira tiene un aire débil, enfermizo, casi vicioso. La pobre no come lo bastante para ser ni viciosa ni virtuosa’ (30). Likewise, in Chapter 4 the Guardia and Petrita finally enter their (erotic) ‘paraíso directo donde no caben evasiones ni subterfugios’ (90), and Victorita sells herself to Mario de la Vega in order to purchase medication for her tubercular lover, Paco. As Saul Bellow noted in an early review of *La colmena*, Cela’s characters are ‘less ignoble maybe than starved’, ‘[t]hey stun more than they horrify’ (1953: 117). There is certainly more bile and bite than beauty or bliss in *La colmena*; however, forever pulling away before a full-blown tirade, perhaps Cela achieves the same, gently comic, and perhaps even endearing disequilibrium – ‘ni vicios[o] ni virtuos[o]’, neither too callous nor too caring.

To cite humour scholar Bercovitch, writing of Huck’s voice in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), perhaps irony masks real pain: ‘it is pseudo-deadpan; it sounds comic, but actually it’s troubled, earnest’ (2002: 95). Indeed, in interview, Cela begged the ‘clear-sighted reader’ to see that what ‘was presumed cruel was written with compassion’ (Beardsley 1972: 42):

[...] the only way one can salve the violence in the world all around us is by injecting into it a few drops of something – call it charity or sympathy or love or tenderness or whatever you like. Always trying to see to it that the individual is conscious of

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<sup>36</sup> Indeed, the earliest reactions to Cela’s *La familia de Pascual Duarte* (1942) displayed a similar double bind between affection and harshness, for while Enrique Azcoaga praised its ‘ternura insondable’ (Azcoaga 1942), Manuel Iribarren railed ‘¡Demasiados elementos de terror para ciento cincuenta páginas!’, deeming it ‘desagradable’ and ‘truculento’ (Iribarren 1943).

himself as an individual, that he doesn't end up as a number in a file drawer (*Ibid*: 43).

Critics have largely taken him at his word, reluctant to endorse a reading that portrays Cela as essentially a cold lampooner, laughing *to scorn*. Ortega observes that he ‘provoca una actitud de desprecio, burla y superioridad’ (as we have seen throughout this chapter) but feels compelled to add that this ‘no excluye en modo alguno la compasión’ (1964: 169). Lamenca, on Cela’s *Mazurca para dos muertos* (1983), points out that ‘la atmósfera aterradora y macabra ha sido satinada por el humor, un humor lingüístico que deshace el misterio de la historia contada’ (1991: 77). On the other hand, this chapter has shown that in *La colmena* the humour *lo rehace*, making the ambiguity linger. Individuals are indeed presented as dehumanised, insect-like, anonymous, lethargic, file-drawer ‘number[s]’ of satirical censure. Indeed, the danger is that corrosive mockery obliterates indiscriminately, becoming what Kundera (1996: 226) called ‘a rust that corrodes everything’. Cela as lampooner takes the moral high ground, beckoning readers to join him on a virtuous mission to scour vice; however, he displays such delight in enmity that he ends up flogging instead of facilitating Madrid’s victims. Once the comic dust has settled, the wreckage examined, what is left? *After* the laughter comes a benumbing void.

Coupled with this fine line between resistance and reinforcement, several humour scholars have often perceived a tight threshold to funniness. Jean-Luc Nancy observes that ‘[laughter is] the joy of the senses, and of sense, at their limit’ (1933: 390), and Linda Hucheeon explored ‘irony’s edge’ (1994: *passim*). But humour, comedy, irony and deadpan also force readers to the tip of that brink – and sometimes over it. Moreover, as Gutwirth (1993: 144) notes, irony has a ‘sting’, too. Caro Valverde, writing on Cela’s use of the figure, asserts ‘una vez que [el lector] añade el guiño irónico a la denuncia, banaliza lo desconcertante, volviéndose cómplice y aliado del autor’ (1991: 262). On the contrary: this ‘guiño irónico’ does not trivialize or assuage the disharmony but actively aggravates and redoubles it through stylistic misalliance. One 2012 RTVE documentary observed that in Cela’s novels ‘amor y muerte se dan cita’<sup>37</sup>, and he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature for his

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<sup>37</sup> ‘Cela, Nobel de Literatura’, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JNt9r0RF6X8>

‘restrained compassion [that] forms a challenging vision of man’s vulnerability’.<sup>38</sup> Yet *La colmena* asks how ‘restrained’ one can become before falling over the other side, to a cold shoulder.

Indeed, the humour of the novel’s final pages points to this uncertain space between fondness and mercilessness. Although critics observe optimism – ‘esperanza’ (Ilie 1964: 147), ‘caritativo’ (Sobejano 1978: 118) – the reality is that Martín is arrested, and the novel ends, before anyone comes to his aid. When he reads the newspaper, the dark *humour* makes us wince: ‘¡Qué chistoso! La vida... tiene unos matices más tiernos, más delicados’ (177). It is excruciatingly ‘chistoso’ that he overlooks the very section that would reveal his misfortune: the police will soon arrest him. Ultimately, Martín remains unable to escape this Madrid environment full of ‘esos mirares que jamás descubren horizontes nuevos’ (124). His *unworried* chuckle clashes with the reader’s *troubled* laughter, certainly neither ‘tierno’ nor ‘delicado’. Although Terrence Des Pres has argued of Jewish ‘Holocaust laughter’ that humour can ‘embrace’ (people, ideas) so as to ‘diffuse hostility’ (1988: 216, 232-33), Cela’s relationship between subaltern and dominant powers is more nuanced than simple defiance, opening up a space for compliance and overlap, and giving the lie to the common misconception that comedy is somehow inherently optimistic and/or subversive. Cheerfully condemned, Martín trudges, smiling, towards his own destruction, his capacity for ‘heroic opposition’ to Francoist injustice reduced to a series of grimly predetermined pratfalls. This is the cop-out of comedy, and the bathetic humour sinks to the depths.

This chapter explored *La colmena*’s humour through structure, grotesque vignettes, narratorial asides, and challenges to realism. It analysed a louche laughter that, far from ‘aire limpio’ (Lamenca 1991: 87), savours disgust and implicates the reader as complicit in the brutality. It demonstrated how a bodily humour focused on the inescapability of the lumbering human form denies all pretensions to stateliness. Cela blends childish mischief with narratorial wisdom and disguised hostility, finding where the line is drawn and deliberately, scandalously transgressing it. In an unabashed celebration of the unappetising and perverse, the security from evil that comedy typically provides is perturbingly

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<sup>38</sup> as quoted on the Nobel Prize website for 1989, at [https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1989/](https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1989/)

undermined. The humour starts badly and goes downhill, never freeing itself from the shackles of deadness. *La colmena* teems with life but retains an arid, desert-like, conservative feel. The comic backfires on itself, steering the reader in and out of a serious message and ultimately reaffirming the status quo.

### **A Note on *Pabellón de reposo* (Cela, 1943)**

Having discussed *La colmena*, I shall turn briefly to Cela's earlier social realist novel *Pabellón de reposo* (1943), finding a similarly uneasy relationship between compassion and coarseness, and an ironic examination of whether happiness is at all feasible in the postwar environment. The characters' ultimate failure to orient themselves in a ruthless world and to acquire any semblance of satisfaction is the cause of much bitter, remorseless, grey comedy of tedium within the titular rest-home. As jokes falter and stumble under their own weight, the novel features 'lo habitual y torpemente y aburridamente cotidiano' (2) – stale, regressing grey humour – and extreme dehumanisation, for the patients, bereft even of names ('el 52', 'el 14', 'la 40', etc.), are defined entirely by their status as sufferers, in a technique employed by Clarín in 'El dúo de la tos' (1865).

Indeed, this tenderness-cruelty balancing-act is signalled immediately, when the Prologue (added in 1952) requests 'perdón por disfrazar la ternura de crueldad' (1).

Cela emphasises, with characteristic irony, a paradoxical attraction to and disengagement from the text: 'prohibido en los sanatorios antituberculosos'; 'los tuberculosos gozan con su lectura' (1). The work will appeal and appal, seduce and repel, in equal measure, and there were genuine calls for Cela to halt its publication. In the years before the discovery of *estreptomicina* (October 1943), without the hope that antibiotics would bring, palliative care was the only option for patients such as these. The book itself was prohibited in several medical institutions, and often the boundary between sarcasm and sadism, bantering and barbarity, is decidedly thin. As throughout Cela's oeuvre, the off-the-cuff dash of wit engenders a spirit of contradiction. When one patient remarks that every 'enfermo se cree un consumado tisiólogo, un especialista de primer orden. La señorita del 37 es en esto terrible; emplea unos términos enrevesados y crueles, que me espantan y cuyo recuerdo no

me deja dormir' (63), the humour laughs at the pain of existence, refusing to buckle. All pretensions to dignity and honour are roundly subverted, for the patients are of course far from consummate professionals.

A drab comedy derives from the characters' determination to seek contentment despite the vast spiritual barrenness. The first page foregrounds what is the unanswerable question of Spanish social realism, posed by 'un amigo mío, Claudius van Vlardingenhohen, verdugo de Batavia': '¿Qué camino –decía– nos lleva a la felicidad?' (3). It is absurdly incongruous given the prevailing aura of decay, and moreover the questioner is an *executioner*! One patient notes of another (like Cela's docted quotation from Lull in the preface to *La colmena*) that 'suele estar triste, a veces muy triste, pero no llora'. Instead, 'sonríe siempre con su graciosa y triste sonrisa de florecilla silvestre' (37). One detects a similarly oxymoronic 'graciosa y triste sonrisa' behind much of Cela's oeuvre, once again uncomfortably ventriloquising the characters with dark irony. For instance, when one patient observes that a dead friend's 'alma estaba sana, muy sana, tan sana como una manzana' (52), the rhyming words provoke a laugh that disorients the reader, who expected a more tragic rendering of illness. One sufferer even laughs openly at another, noting that 'Los gordos no pueden correr [...] Su gordura excesiva no es en modo alguno natural; a veces da risa' (35). Cela humorously appropriates the discourse of the anguished sufferers, but in these examples the costume of comedy retains a certain harshness.

Furthermore, *Pabellón's* dark humour illuminates the rapidity with which an impression of bliss can degenerate into heartbreak. When two patients chat with one another for over 90 minutes, sharing jokes and witty anecdotes, their humour is initially pleasurable: 'Yo he reído con sus bromas y he sentido cómo mi espíritu descansaba' (43). Laughter 'a grandes y jubilosas carcajadas' gushes forth. Yet, in another twist of the knife, laughter leads to cheerless self-reflection:

También la felicidad es más fácil de conseguir de lo que parece; sólo que, a veces, el poseerla nos entristece; nos advierte:

–¡Qué feliz eres; aprovecha el instante!

Y una, preocupada por ese instante, desaprovecha esa felicidad que se va también mucho más fácilmente de lo que nos creyéramos cuando la teníamos al alcance de la mano. (43)

This is the laughter of surrender, a stunned, bleak acquiescence to the creeping horror of death. When attainment of happiness paradoxically ‘nos entristece’, the comedic shadow grumbles through, lacking any sense of rebellion or action against injustice.

As in *La colmena*, the comedy sometimes starts as its patients’ advocate but ends as their most withering critic. When one exclaims ‘¡Ah, si nosotros pudiéramos, de un salto, ponernos al otro lado del peligro!’, the cold truth is that they cannot. Letting her imagination run wild (‘Tu serías una joven rana verde, bella y brillante’, ‘Yo te galantearía con esa vez de bajo profundo que tienen las ranas mayores’), her fantasies are richly comic: ‘¿las ranas se ruborizan? –, con tu suave croar de ranita casadera’. Her make-believe, froglike world is so vivid that, when she comments ‘Sería una divertida escena, ¿no te parece?’ (70), we are inclined to agree. Curiously, she admits that such comedy allows her to feel, ‘En medio de la tristeza que me agobia [...] una leve sonrisa. Ahora, por ejemplo, cuando me imagino el ridículo aspecto que presentaríamos. ¡Vaya por Dios!’. Humour provokes a ‘sonrisa’, however ‘leve’, but then she zooms out, surveying herself and finding her body ridiculous – a pervasive feature throughout social realism. This is the liberating vision that ‘dans l’être humain’, as Baudelaire puts it in ‘De l’essence du rire’ (1855), there is a ‘permanent duality, the power of a being at once *itself and other*’ (1975-6: II; 543). The patients see themselves despite themselves, as was evident in *Nada*. Nevertheless, as we will see time and again in following chapters, we are immediately and distressingly thrust back to harshness: ‘Pero es mucha la pena, pequeña mía, mucha y muy triste, para que ese esbozo de sonrisa no acabe por convertirse en otra cosa que un amargo regusto que me queda en la boca’ (71). Suddenly the ‘pena’ is menacingly ‘mucha’, contrasting with ‘pequeña mía’ and the diminished ‘esbozo de sonrisa’.

Curiously, this very same idea is repeated almost verbatim in a later letter by ‘C’:

En medio de la tristeza que me agobia, hay instantes en los que se dibuja en mis labios una leve sonrisa. Ahora, por ejemplo, cuando me imagino el ridículo aspecto de nuestra boda “in artículo mortis”.

Tuyo, C. (160)

This is far from laugh-out-loud, gag-a-minute comedy, provoking merely the inward sigh of crushing, demoralising, and self-consciously rueful contemplation. It signals that it adopts a humorous ‘script’ (to employ the language of humorous linguistics professor Victor Raskin’s (1985)) but crucially does not seek a genuine laugh. To cite Adorno on Stravinsky, through casting a ‘spiteful look’ on that which it observes, the narratorial voice deforms it. ‘[G]rimacing, it is incapable of invention, it only ironizes’, ‘caricatures’ and ‘parodies’. It is nothing more than ‘negation’ (quoted in Kundera 1996: 32). This is the *unfunny* comedy of exhaustive despair and loneliness.

At times an excruciating humour negates all compassion. An ‘enfermera tiene la bata salpicada de sangre’ and tells a deathly story:

–¡Qué gracioso, Dios mío, Dios santo! Se destapó por completo para morirse; tiró la sábana al suelo y apareció en cueros vivos, bañado en sangre... ¿Sabéis lo único que tenía puesto en todo su cuerpo? No puedo casi ni hablar de risa que me da. Pues solo los calcetines y las ligas... ¡Ja, ja, ja!

El coro de mujeres rió con la enfermera el divertido aspecto del desgraciado que murió de una hempotisis con las ligas puestas. A alguna costurera quizás le corriese un escalofrío de remordimiento por la espalda... (107)

The violence (‘salpicada de sangre’, ‘bañado de sangre’) jar uncomfortably with the laughing jolts (‘¡Ja, ja, ja!’). Although the narrator observes ‘el divertido aspecto’ to this death, the reader balks at such a notion. After all, there is something sinister floating in the air, ‘algo que pesa [...] como una gruesa losa de granito’ (110). The image of nakedness, with only ‘los calcetines y las ligas’, is roundly farcical and distressing given the subject matter, and the very sound of laughter is chillingly defamiliarized: ‘A veces alguien ríe, pero su risa se rompe como un vaso, en un estéril alboroto, contra las paredes’ (110). This ‘alboroto’ is not a

carnavalesque celebration but rather an uncomfortable, chaotic, 'estéril' disturbance. Indeed, the 'escalofrío de remordimiento' casts doubt on the authenticity and appropriateness of a mirthful response, as we have seen throughout Cela's oeuvre.

The narrator informs us that there is a group of patients 'a quienes agrada el sufrimiento'. Whilst one section, the 'sufridoras', 'gozan en la propia desgracia con un aplomo que espeluzna', the 'mortificantes gustan de hacer sufrir a los demás, de decir la palabra hiriente, la aguda frase venenosa, de ensayar el gesto displicente, la mueca que lastima' (114). Perhaps, in making fun of quandaries and of characters trapped by circumstance, the author himself uncomfortably belongs to these 'mortificantes', with a 'mueca que lastima'.

Moreover, in a typically Celian move, the narrator is whimsically aware of this potential criticism. He toys with his reader when, midway through the novel, a 'NOTA DEL AUTOR ANTES DE SEGUIR MÁS ADELANTE' asserts – in light of comments from the 'conocido tisiólogo, el doctor A. M. S.' that some patients have (humorously) recognised themselves 'en el muchacho del 14' or 'se sienten desgraciadas con la señorita del 37' (88) – that no reader should think

que su desgracia es, realmente, ejemplar. Que no se identifique nadie con estos pocos afortunados tipos de mi ficción.

*La señorita del 37 es una entelequia; la del 40, un vacío, la del 103, una sombra esfumándose. El enfermo del 14 es una mera apariencia; el del 52, un simulacro; el del 11, un fingimiento. (90)*

Cela's defence, cited previously, of the importance of emphasising the individual as more than a 'number in a file drawer' (Beardsley 1972: 43) now comes crashing down, for he pulls our leg, hilariously flaunting his own *misrepresentation*. Characters are amorphous fragments of nothingness. He even cites Cervantes – '*Todo es artificio y traza –decía don Quijote*' (90) – as though taunting the reader who seeks sympathy with the characters.

Ultimately, *Pabellón* casts doubt on the efficacy of gallows humour in the face of both existential and socio-political darkness. Miserable humour may wrest a momentary victory

from death, but it is always and only momentary. In his analysis of humour, Freud writes of a man led out to the gallows on Monday morning who remarks 'Well, the week's beginning nicely' (Freud 1928: 3). Yet, even in Freud's comic example, the language is strangely subject-less, distanced, and dissociated from feeling (the *week* beginning nicely). However clever and pithy the statement, the final end is death. Cracking jokes on the journey out, we see the skull through the smile. As theorist Haynes (2006: 44) argues of Freud's image, our laughter serves to 'sanction the rogue's demise. Is this *why* we laugh?'. Perhaps, like Freud's prisoner, Cela's 'C' knows for certain that his own *wedding* – a celebration of unity and love – is on the brink of death (itself a comic notion), yet he smiles in spite of it all. He might go down swinging, but he goes down all the same. Come-Dy says 'Come–Die!', declaring 'Put your hands together for death!', with a 'graciosa y triste sonrisa' (37) on its face. Social realist comedy may puncture the preponderant triumphalist rhetoric of fascism, but it achieves no triumph of its own, surrendering to death.

In the final analysis, comedy is found wanting. When 'B' writes his letter, he makes no attempt to mollify the harshness of his impasse: 'A mi mujer, repito, dígame toda la verdad, toda la triste y desesperanzadora verdad. [...]¿Para qué seguir con este engaño que a nada conduce? ¿Para qué seguir representando una comedia cuando el drama se avecina?' (100). The conundrum is that 'comedia' – however defiant even in death – does not change the situation. As 'B' observes, 'El desenlace de la farsa de mi vida se aproxima. Dios ha querido que lo que empezó en vodevil acabe en tragedia. Más vale así' (181). This is the outcome of social realist humour: '[C]omedia' becomes 'drama', and 'farsa' and 'vodevil' end in 'tragedia'.

This chapter explored both *Pabellón de reposo* and *La colmena* through the lenses of attraction and repulsion, the speed with which euphoria turns to sorrow, and the ill-fated search for happiness. Cela's comedy of concealment plays with surface and depth, expectation and actuality, all with a studied, manicured disinterest, but there is no hidden happiness or fulfilment to be unearthed. If things look gloomy, comedy says, that's because they are. As Groucho Marx quips, 'He may look like an idiot and talk like an idiot, but don't let that fool you. He really is an idiot' (*Duck Soup*, 1933). With a curious mixture of vulnerability and chutzpah, affinity and loneliness, the Celian narrator cannot 'play nice'.

Acerbic grey humour of evanescent characters consumed with boredom – over 300 ephemeral individuals in *La colmena* and assorted mere numbers in *Pabellón* – is guarded, stagnant, and unchanging, negating compassionate insight. This chapter puts pressure on tragic readings that exclude anti-sentimental humour, instead exploring the fundamental cop-out of comedy. Unsuccessful even at papering over the cracks, it can only intensify the bleakness. Social-realist humour serves not to overcome the misfortune but, merely, to endure it.

## Chapter 3

### Grey Humour: The Comedy of Tedium – *El Jarama* (Rafael Sánchez Ferlosio, 1956)

Man is the only animal that laughs, or needs to.

– Mark Twain

Having discussed the unstable irony of *Nada* (1945) and the scathing humour of *La colmena* (1950), we shall now explore the grey humour of deadening dismay in Sánchez Ferlosio's *El Jarama* (1956). From the grim struggle of the postwar *años de hambre* we move to the tentative beginnings of *desarrollo*, in which the horror of the war and the hardship of the postwar are slipping into the background and are only vaguely acknowledged by the youth. Spain entered the United Nations in 1950 and, towards the end of the decade, was admitted to institutions such as the International Labour Organization (1956), European Atomic Energy Community (1957), and the International Monetary Fund (1958). However, tedium abounds because no significant social or economic change has yet taken place. First I will introduce 'grey humour', contextualising it within the Spanish postwar context and within existing models of Humour Theory. Next I will examine its prevalence with a range of social realist novels, before analysing *El Jarama* in depth.

Several scholars have identified a prevailing inertia within the postwar environment. For Antonio Lago Carballo, a whole generation found themselves 'frenada por los que por haber hecho la guerra se han sentido jóvenes para siempre' (1979: 194), and Ganivet (1996 [1897]: 131), referring to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and suggesting a national character flaw, likewise observed the 'padecimiento que los españoles sufrimos', which could be summed up as 'no querer', or what he termed 'aboulía' (sic), which 'significa eso mismo, extinción o debilitación grave de la voluntad'. This is a 'perplejidad del espíritu, nacida del quebranto de fuerzas o del aplantamiento consiguiente a una inacción prolongada'. Willpower 'permanece irresoluto, sin saber qué hacer y sin determinarse a hacer nada' (*Ibid*: 132). This sense of colourlessness and apathy is pervasive, for Ramón Pérez de Ayala (1964: 77-78)

wrote of this term 'abulia' in the postwar period as 'inacción, a causa de la indecisión del juicio: [...] el no saber querer'. In a lovely phrase, he portrays this as 'inacción por indecisión. By way of example, Fernández Santos' *En la hoguera* (1957) encapsulates this unrelenting world-weariness:

*El demonio del tedio, que se llama también el demonio de mediodía, es el más temible de los demonios. [...] Se esfuerza en mostrar que el sol es lento y hasta que no avanza nada; que el día es de cincuenta horas [...] (132, italics his)*

This 'demonio del tedio' is ubiquitous in the postwar novel, for 'La vida [...] en su fatal monotonía, flotando sobre el ambiente' carries an ennui that, in turn, brings 'un mensaje de muerte, el anuncio de que Dios va a morir, de que Dios ha muerto' (*Ibid*, 147). In the same way, in *Hospital general* (1948), Carlos sees his entire life 'como un largo aburrimiento' (207) and concludes 'Mi vida es solo fachada'. This extreme torpor and sluggishness would appear to be no laughing matter.

All the same, the mirth of mediocrity soon comes into view. If humour results, as previously discussed, from the resolution of 'strained expectation into nothingness' (Kant 1952 [1790]: 196), a kind of slow-burning bathos, this is also an apt definition of intense tedium, which deprived everything of its meaning *already*. Otto Fenichel's definition of boredom bears a striking similarity to this understanding of humour: 'we must not do what we want to do, or must do what we do not want to do... *something expected does not occur*' (Fenichel 1953 [1934]: 301, italics his). The novels bore us to death and to tears but also, oddly, to *laughter*. However, this is but the bitter jest of *horror vacui*, of characters locked in what Ortega y Gasset terms 'convicciones negativas' (in his definition of *aboulía* in the aftermath of a period of crisis): 'el no sentirse en lo cierto sobre nada importante impide al hombre decidir lo que va a hacer con precisión, energía, confianza y entusiasmo sincero: no puede encajar su vida en nada, hincarla en un claro destino' (*En torno a Galileo* (1933), in Ortega 1958: 70). Grey humour in the postwar context accepts that existential despair is a permanent feature of human existence but is exacerbated by the particular circumstances of a nation struggling to rebuild itself now almost two decades after its Civil War.

Comic tedium reaches its absurd, hysterical pinnacle in Juan Goytisolo's *Duelo en el paraíso* (1955), when Filomena, 'con espanto', asks Abel: '¿De modo que el aburrirte te parece un motivo suficiente para desear más guerra?' (100). Beneath a jesting surface lies a tragic truth; however, this chapters argues that the humour is existential absurdism but falls short of socio-political satire. Expanding existing understandings of Humour Theory limited to either white (unobjectionable wordplay and linguistic illogicalities) or black comedy (gallows humour in the face of imminent annihilation), this chapter introduces and thoroughly examines grey humour. Much comedy – both in the postwar context and in general – is fundamentally generated by and reacting against an all-encompassing tedium.

Spanish social realism, if not comedy *gold*, is comedy silver, for the dip of despair is always but moments away. This is the *humdrum humour* of the beige or plain vanilla, the Beckettian wit of 'The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new' (*Murphy* (1957) [1938]: 1). Circular efforts to pass the time are emphatically dismal, and the dull itch of comedy ends not with a bang but a whimper. As Camus put it in *The Plague*, 'The truth is that everyone is bored, and devotes himself to cultivating habits' (1960 [1947]: 4). There is a fair dose of self-deprecatory wit, but it serves only temporarily to conceal the terror of silence, the creeping perception that, when all is said and done, there is just nothing to do. Defined far more by failure than by victory, like prisoners the characters of Spanish social realism *do time*, but it would have passed in any case. Whereas much humour concerns heightened vitality (Langer's 'comic rhythm' of 'human life-feeling', 'felt life' (1965: 120)), this is the comedy of *comedown*. The resultant amusement is, to quote Charles W. Chesnutt in another context ('Dave's Neckliss', 1889), 'laffin' fit ter kill 'bout nuffin' (Chesnutt 2002: 729) – the title of Glenda Carpio's study of black humour (2008). This 'nuffin' (once again, *Nada* is a vital text) is fundamental to the flatlining comedy of changelessness in social realism.

To illustrate with examples from Spanish postbellum prose, Juan Goytisolo's social novel *La isla* (1960) grotesquely parodies genuine happiness through the absurdly regimented 'Boletín Oficial del Estado' commandments, which outlaw sorrow (!):

"Artículo primero: Queda terminantemente prohibida la tristeza.

“Artículo segundo: Los tristes deberán 110landesti el pais en un plazo de diez segundos”. (62)

Chico takes his ‘cornetín de juguete’ and counts to ten. When nobody moves, he declares unwavering – and clearly fabricated – support: ‘Todos somos alegres’ (63). As Vonnegut’s Rosewater tells the psychiatrist in *Slaughterhouse Five*, ‘I think you guys are going to have to come up with a lot of wonderful new lies or else people aren’t going to want to go on living’ (Vonnegut 1991 [1969]: 101). Whilst this could be an ironic subversion of Francoist propaganda, the prevailing grey humour of gridlock is a chill in the soul:

–[...] Te veo cada día más decentrado, como a la deriva...

–Magnífico... ¿También tú te has dado cuenta? (154-55)

Claudia longs to salvage something fertile (‘Bastaría con salvar lo que nos queda...’), but Rafael drolly dents her optimism: ‘Ya no nos queda nada’. Claudia can only conclude ‘es absurdo que todo se deteriore’ (155). This is the static, backpedalling, unprogressive comedy of curtailment, emphasising but the doom of the inevitable. Likewise, in another social novel, Manuel Arce’s *Oficio de muchachos* (1963), protagonist Nacho drinks a few *copas* and finally feels ‘a gusto’. However, ‘lo real’ is not invigorating action but, absurdly, its bathetic opposite: ‘Ahora todo ha vuelto a ser real y *anodino*’ (119, my italics). However, Salvador soon cuts down to size, in a build-and-deflation pattern, ending in comical cynicism, that recurs throughout the genre:

–Hoy está divertido esto.

–Sufrimos –espetó Salvador. (124)

Grey humour sighs deeply and concludes ‘Same old, Same old’, and this surrender to homogeneity and monotony ironically snuffs out its own promise of provocative purpose. The bumbler merely goes on bumbling.

It is important to stress that grey humour runs contrary to existing models of humour. If brevity is the soul of wit, grey humour is precisely the reverse. Charles Gruner (1997:

*passim*) introduced the 'game of humor', interpreting comedy as a 'succession of *games*' that imply 'fun, leisure, entertainment, recreation' (*Ibid*: 2), but Spanish postwar humour says the opposite: 'Pack it away, it's no use', or 'I can't be bothered. Whatever'. Down for the count, it throws in the towel: 'Game over. You win. I'm not playing anymore'. Moreover, as Huizinga writes, 'Play begins and then at a certain moment it is "over". It plays itself to an end' (2016 [1938]: 9). The trudge back to work is never far away. Grey humour is not a humour of 'winning' (Gruner, 7) but of *losing*, sorely. In María de Lera's *Hemos perdido el sol* (1964), Lucio, shrugging his shoulders, declares 'quién sabe si ganamos o perdemos...'.<sup>39</sup> Yet Ramón, 'de mala gana', hilariously punctures any lingering sunniness: 'Perdemos, no lo dudes' (271). In that reversal bait-and-switch, hesitant hopes and dreams come crashing down with an unceremonious 'Case closed'. Lucio can only shrug his shoulders once more and concede 'Pues a jorobarse. Peor es estar dando cabezadas contra la pared' (*Ibid*). Checkmate.

Indeed, if social realist characters are flat and generic stock representations, as Pérez (2008: 64) argues, this is prime material for comedy, which thrives on standard types. Grey humour – more weary shrug than thigh-slapper – laughs *para sus adentros* at the drab pointlessness of everything. It cannot 'roll with the punches'. It says 'might as well', 'let's get it over with, then', 'at least [we've got...]', 'even if...', but then checks itself: 'Ah. That's gone, too'. The only solution is to kick up the dust, hands in pockets, and while the time away, or perhaps, '*cuando parece que se va a poner sentimental*', to toss hats into the air with an '¡Hoop!', like the ending to Mihura's *Tres sombreros de copa* ([written 1932, first performed 1952], Mihura 2004: 168). Social realism illustrates the laughlessness of laughter and the humourlessness of humour. The stony-faced sobriety of comedy – extraordinary in and of itself – is lugubrious and heavy-going, disclosing but a soulless shell of a life. There are no peaks but just one, unending trough.

Having discussed this hollowed-out humour, we shall now turn to critics of literary modernism in English who have observed a similar comedy, blended with dehumanisation.

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<sup>39</sup> For Walter Kerr, the 'characteristic comic ending to a bit or to a play is a shrug' (1967: 189). Once again, grey humour is absolutely evident, and can be applied well beyond the specific context of the Spanish postwar novel.

Tyrus Miller emphasises a satiric strain in Late Modernism through ‘a general depersonalization and deauthentication of life in modern society’ (Miller 1999: 42), and Justus Nieland notes that laughter is ‘essential to any complete story of modernism’s affective energies’, for the ‘moderns [...] experienced [modernity] as an embodied affair that made acute and pressing demands on the body, the senses, the very life of the feelings’ (Nieland 2006: 84). Far from subversive, this deflating grey humour of drab impotence, world-weariness and ennui saps all energy, and these studies show that my understanding of grey humour can extend beyond the Spanish context. Moreover, the brilliant study *On Bathos*, by Sara Crangle and Peter Nicholls, likewise shows that in the twentieth century “sinking” has become the most deliberate of arts and perhaps the only one we have’ (2010: 6), and, for George Santayana, the modern world views ‘the power of idealisation steadily [in] decline’, and ‘the long comedy of modern social revolutions, so illusory in their arms and so productive in their aimlessness’ (1956: 149). Similarly, the novels studied in this thesis progress anti-climactically from an initial tedium, to a faint hint of desire or optimism, to a final, bone-weary denial.

Returning to the Spanish context, grey humour is particularly manifest in deficient conversation. In Goytisolo’s *Fin de fiesta* (1962), Ana twice implores others not to ‘hacerle caso’, because ‘[h]ablo únicamente por hablar’ (75), and a conversation in his *Fiestas* (1958) continues ‘en los mismos términos que de costumbre’, before both parties interrupt ‘de puro cansancio’ (20). The reader laughs into the void. In Delibes’ *La hoja roja* (1959), the bathetic laughter of flatness is central: ‘el señorito rara vez ponía interés. [...] El viejo había de meterse dentro del fuego para reaccionar. Le decía la chica: “¡Otra!, es usted más friolero que un gato agostizo”. El asentía sin palabras’ (39). In Romero’s ‘Encuentro’ (*La corriente*, 1962), Arístedes realises mid-conversation with a *friend* that ‘no tienen nada que decirse [...] necesitaban aliviar sus respectivas tensiones. Pero la laxitud ya está en ellos, la divergencia se irá acentuando’ (83). Indeed, Roberto notes that Arístedes’s expression is ‘tan entristecida’ that, humorously, ‘Casi se le escapan las palabras triviales de cualquier frase hecha’. They have nothing whatsoever to say, and language itself is futile. In *Con el viento solano*, Sebastián eavesdrops on a ‘conversación trivial, que ya es un símbolo para Sebastián’ (197). It is a symbol for the entire genre.

Likewise, in *Juegos de manos*, Uribe's conversation with Castro is so bland that 'ya no tienen nada que decirse'. Their 'amistad se nutre exclusivamente de recuerdos' (216). The boomerang effect begins as funny, pivots to tiresome, and then swivels 180 degrees back to funny. Similarly, in *Fin de fiesta*, although Miguel 'reía', 'en ningún momento tuve la impresión de que entrábamos en contacto. Nuestra anterior intimidad había desaparecido' (119). The pinnacle of this grey humour comes in Goytisolo's *Juegos de manos* (1954) when one character frantically asks '¿Acaso nos entendemos cuando hablamos el mismo idioma? ¿Acaso hay verdadera comunicación entre los seres?' (160). The grey, deflating humour emphasises the colourlessness of life, baring a troubling vacuity at the heart of the human. Even the dullest dialogue must be maintained, for it is their only defence against an encroaching ennui.

Grey humour also abounds in the recognition that tedium is the fear of the *self*. In *Fiesta al noroeste* (1953), the narrator exclaims of Juan Medinao '¡Era él tan distinto a todo lo que le rodeaba!' (535). Luis notes in *Cama 36* (1953) that 'quisiera huir de todo, de mí mismo' (72), and, later on, compounds the misery by calling himself 'un estorbo para todos' and asking '¿Para qué sirvo?' (292). In *Cuando voy a morir* (1950), Alexis even feels 'asco de mí mismo' (245), a recurring trope in the genre as a whole. If realism gives the characters room to breathe, they soon choke on their own dullness. The only option is, absurdly, *not to think* at all, and to accept that one's very existence is dehumanised, dishonest, and essentially hypocritical. As Romero puts it in Grosso's *La zanja*, 'Ninguno de nosotros es un muñeco, pero tenemos que parecerlo' (1961: 225). In a humorous twist, 'Puede que incluso que algunos días lo seamos de verdad a fuerza de disimularlo, no te lo niego'. Herein lies the ultimate absurdity: the strangely non-human façade may become more authentic than the reality.

The sentiment is analogous to Vonnegut's Introduction to *Slaughterhouse Five*: 'We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be' (1991 [1969]: v). The danger, as Matute puts it in *Pequeño teatro*, is that 'sustituís la vida por un trozo de madera' (107). We laugh at human beings who behave like automata, but if we accept that they really *are* automata, the funniness quickly subsides. The joke protects the non-joke, more hindrance than help, for the novel continually asks 'Still not funny? Not at all?' Rafael

observes this concern in Goytisolo's *La isla*: 'El tiempo nos gasta poco a poco. Vivir se ha convertido en una costumbre –sonrió–: Empezamos por escribir de encargo y acabamos existiendo de encargo también' (118). When life itself becomes a 'costumbre', to exist is to go through the motions; biding time, with a lacklustre, lethargic laugh.

Throughout the novels the grey humour of sour grapes is profound because entertainment and boredom are indistinguishable. In *El Jarama*, Miguel admits 'no sé distinguir cuando me aburro de cuando me divierto, te lo juro' (204), a line that is resonant of Goytisolo's *Juegos de manos* (1954): 'Me siento muerto. O lo que es lo mismo, me aburro' (151-2). Similarly, in Fernández Santos' *En la hoguera* (1957), the knowing chuckle of grey humour ('con cortedad') weighs us down and dampens our spirits:

–¿Tú no trabajas ahora?

–No hago nada –se encogió de hombros con tristeza.

–Entonces, como yo...

El *Rojo* rió con cortedad.

–Estamos los dos buenos... (117)

Contrary to existing theories of humour (e.g. Hurley, Dennett & Adams 2011, Ritchie 2018) that would emphasise surprise, here the comic surprise is that there is no surprise. Diluted, diminished, and de-fanged, this comedic cop-out does not aim for a corrective. Likewise, Jesús Fernández Santos' *Laberintos* (1964), the social novel of bourgeois artists, is replete with hysterical (albeit sapping and depleting) humour:

–...aquí, cuando llueve, ¿qué se hace?

–Ir al café. Lo mismo que en Madrid.

–¿Y con el buen tiempo?

–Al café también.

–¡Sí que es divertido! (119)

Lives shrivel up and turn in upon themselves, doing the bare minimum, for the journey is forever downhill. Like in *El Jarama*, even the dullest dialogue must be maintained, for it is

their only defence against an encroaching ennui. Celia is hilariously confused, for the laughter of lack leads to further stasis:

–Pero, bueno, ¿y la gente, dónde está?

–¿Dónde va a estar? En su casa...

–¿Y qué hacen en su casa a las nueve de la noche?

–¡Yo qué sé! Cenar... ver la televisión, leer el periódico.

–¿Y luego?

–Luego, irse a la cama.

–¡Vaya vida! No sé cómo no tienen más niños, con lo aburrido que debe ser acostarse a las diez. (72)

Moreover, this boredom disproportionately affects the under-stimulated youth. For instance, in Matute's *Primera memoria* (1960), Matia remembers Peter Pan: 'todos demasiado crecidos, de pronto, para jugar; demasiado niños, de pronto, para entrar en la vida' (112). Too old for the swings, too young for the daily grind. Nothing to do, nowhere to go. As Emilia chides Matia: 'Siempre me pides cigarillos, y ahora resulta que aún juegas con muñecos' (110). As Matute put it in *Pequeño teatro* (1954), in Zazu's eyes one finds 'demasiada infancia y demasiado hastío' (31-2). This *mélange* is central to the genre, for naivete is comically – and saddeningly – juxtaposed with far too much experience.

Paradoxically, in the postwar novel the comic flame burns brightest at moments of paradoxical restlessness amidst tedium, for vigorous (albeit perpetually thwarted) frustration is accompanied by, and somewhat antithetical to, sluggish deadliness. As Lewis Carroll wrote in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1992 [1865]: 161), 'it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place'. The characters – at once patient and restless, static and dynamic – lead lives of active inactivity and inactive activity. The novels play out in *largo*, but a sense of *agitato* or troubled insecurity underpins every turn. It is akin to the humour of playwright Samuel Beckett, who, when directing *Waiting for Godot* at Berlin's Schiller Theatre in 1975, demanded that the opening tempo be a (wonderfully oxymoronic) 'caged dynamic' (quoted in Graver 2004: 24).

To summarise, grey humour goes nowhere in particular and fizzles out just as quickly – and just as unexpectedly – as it began. To return to *Waiting for Godot*, a prime example of grey humour, Beckett told Sir Peter Hall ahead of the 1955 production, ‘Make them wait longer. Make the pauses longer. You should bore them’ (quoted in Worth 1990: 57-8). The terror of the void looms imposingly. As Styan suggests (1968: 52), ‘the real climax of a dark comedy’ is not ‘the place where the hero is pressed to a decision, the villain unmasked, the situation brought to a crux, but the place where the tensions are so unbearable that we crave for relief’. Grey humour is a vast, collective sigh, a shared, self-immolating chagrin at the waste of life, parallel to the dark message of Huxley’s *Antic Hay*: ‘Tomorrow will be as awful as today’ (1977 [1923]: 212). There is an overwhelming sense in social realism that laughter has evacuated the scene, shaped through a profound *dimming* of comic effects. Rather than outright tragedy, it is more failed, unfunny comedy. Indeed, as humour theorist Winston notes, dark comedy makes it impossible to say ‘This is intended only to be funny or only horrendous’ (1978: 37). An aesthetic osmosis is perpetually at play. If the great silent clowns (Chaplin, Keaton, Lloyd) immortalised the dynamic comedy of the jolt and the pratfall, the Spanish postwar novel offers the grey humour of the ache and the shrug. Caving in and bowing out, its comedy stems from paralysis, dissatisfaction, and defeat.

### **El Jarama (1956): (N)ever A Dull Moment**

Susan Sontag (2013, entry 11/20/1965) once wondered whether a ‘work of art had the right to bore us’, but Rafael Sánchez Ferlosio’s *El Jarama* takes this notion to its agonising extreme. Equating readerly ‘real’ speed with the ‘narrated’ speed of the novel – Genette’s ‘isochronic’ text (1979: 123) – this excruciating text is replete with anodyne dialogue that continues, devoid of real action, until one daytripper, Lucita, drowns accidentally in the titular river. We feel the weight of its trudge. Unsurprisingly, Sobejano (1975: 51) chose ‘invariabilidad’ as the novel’s predominant feature, and Carrero Eras deemed it ‘la gran epopeya de la vulgaridad’ (2006: 6). Conversations ring so true that early reviewers even supposed that the author had taped and transcribed exchanges with real people (see Pérez 2008: 70). Its ceaseless epimone tests the reader’s patience, for s/he perseveres laboriously,

and remorselessly, through page after page of insipid chitchat, as though stuck in the most strenuous, colourless conversation. Familiarity breeds contempt, and what we initially observe as unworthy of attention may well be just that. Freightened by its own despair, is *El Jarama* even worth persevering with?

However, amidst this dreary, garrulous work, this chapter locates inimitable, grumbling humour through clipped, unexpressive conversation and a grim, foreboding irony. Willing us to put it down, *El Jarama* is the *undivine* comedy, a novel of severe – yet dryly comic, endlessly deadpan – friction and attrition. We need a joke – and urgently, for there is something almost taunting about the novel’s staleness and pace. It comes to us as *already* fossilised. To return to theories of blank-face, dry humour, Nick Holm describes the form as ‘aggressively unremarkable’, with ‘nothing glamorous or ostentatious’ (2017: 118), which applies perfectly to *El Jarama*’s aesthetic of pedestrianism and vapidness. Indeed, modern stand-up Jo Brand unsurprisingly lost patience with the deadpan mode: ‘It’s impossible to keep that up for any longer than about 20 minutes without the audience getting bored shitless, to be honest. Because there’s something about that rhythm that’s slightly sort of narcoleptic’ (interview with Brand 01/04/2004, *Ibid*). This chapter explores *El Jarama*’s similarly tormenting, plodding funniness of flat aesthetics, which, like Twain’s ‘humorous story’, withholds comic cues and clearly categorizable ‘nubs’, ‘points’, and ‘snappers’ (1992 [1897]: 201-02) yet retains a bathetic, sinking amusement. Humour retains a sort of spectral half-life, perpetuated in irresolution.

The critical history of *El Jarama* reflects a certain ambiguity regarding its essential tenor. Early commentators focused on its testimonial intent: ‘es una novela realista cien por cien’ (Luis Caño 1954: 313); ‘Describe con morosidad y exactitud [...]. La fidelidad se parece a la del pintor que retrata con el realismo puntual de un fotógrafo’ (J. L. Vázquez Dodero 1956: 109). Alberto Gil Novales (1956: 71) went further (‘un hecho estadístico’), and José Corrales Egea (1971: 34) noted that ‘Si algo se le puede reprochar a esta novela es probablemente su excesiva autenticidad’. Similarly, Sánchez Ferlosio (interview with Mauro Muñoz, 1956) spoke of ‘muchos pequeños motivos, y la novela son los pequeños motivos, la vida cotidiana, el lenguaje vulgar, tienen honda significación a veces’. Even in 2003, Sobejano wrote that *El Jarama* is ‘the best example of the testimonial novel’ (2003: 183). There is

little to laugh about in this ponderous drag, we might assume. It is as though the novel were gulping and grimacing, delighting in taking up our valuable time. There is nothing to write home about, and *El Jarama* often seems too garrulous for gaiety, a comedy of irrelevance.

However, after Edward Riley's seminal article (1963), critical focus shifted onto *El Jarama*'s mythical and tragic elements. Indeed, for Robert Spires, Lucita's death 'para el lector representa la universal tragedia del hombre temporal frente a las fuerzas atemporales del universo' (1974-75: 98), and Maria Vittoria Calvi (1981: 496) spoke of the sacrifice of an innocent victim as representative of the destruction of humanity by nature itself. However, little attention has been given to the wider, draining *humour* of tedium that pervades the novel. Sánchez Ferlosio asserted that the challenge in writing it was 'abordar extremos contrapuestos: la infinita polifonía de lo posible y la perpetua monotonía de lo "real"' (quoted in *Tiempo de hoy* (Ediciones Tiempo, S.A., 2000), Issues 953-956, p. 239). The scare quotes around this word 'real' are key, however, for it is this constant, titillating inconsistency that drives *El Jarama* and retains dramatic tension for the reader. This chapter will argue that the novel is a kind of grinning tragedy, playing on this ironic gap between the 'posible' and the 'real'.

### **Joking on he Jarama?**

Moreover, the pledge of social realism necessitates that the author refrain from intrusion, let alone reactive interpretation. Yet, as Sánchez Ferlosio admitted in the same interview (Mauro Muñiz 1956), 'La dificultad está en saber prescindir de los puntos de vista propios'. Accordingly, subjectivity is riddled with suspicion. Epps (2003: 199) notes that 'something else and extra is required, something that will keep readers busy, if not entertained'. I shall demonstrate that the comedy of languor and disgruntlement, the disheartening drollness of doldrums, is precisely what supplies this very 'diversion'. Grey humour is deadpan committed to paper, paradoxically successful when it *fails* to raise a full-throated laugh.

*El Jarama* opens with 'Describiré', a first-person intent that cannot be attributed to any character, and when Lucio, at the bar, asks '¿Me dejas que descorra la cortina?' (7), the theatricality and artificiality of the text are foregrounded. Right from the outset, despite its objective stance, it is clear that perspectives and angles of refraction are central. The author's words in the 'Nota a la sexta edición' hint at fabrication: 'el comienzo y el final de un libro son lugares prosódicamente muy condicionados' (1975 [1955]: 4). What is more, when Lucio's question ('¿...la cortina?') is repeated ten lines later, the temporal ambiguity questions whether this is a reprise or a genuine reiteration. Perhaps the start of Sánchez Ferlosio's *Industrias y andanzas de Alfanhuí* (1951), 'esta historia castellana y llena de mentiras verdaderas' (17), is an apt description of *El Jarama*, too. Indeed, although Ricardo Gullón (1975: 3) argues that the text reads as though 'mostrenco' (ownerless), the narrator's aloof, distanced observations are frequently juxtaposed with staccato, precise dialogue. Here are Mauricio and Lucio:

–¿Por qué dices esto?

–¿El qué?

–Eso que acabas de decir.

–¿Qué tierra esta? Pues será porque estoy mirando el campo.

–Ya.

–No, no te rías. ¿De que te rías?

–De ti. Que estás un poco mocho esta mañana.

–¿Te diviertes?

–La mar.

–No sabes cuanto me alegro. (12)

In spite of the sharp stichomythia, stasis and inertia (despite the bar setting) make for rich grey humour, provoked by what Laura Salisbury, writing on Beckett's comedy, calls 'deftly timed mistimings' (2012: 196). This is the thrillseekers' day off (!), but free time is just as – if not more – mind-numbing than the working week. The banal 'Ya' and the wooden full stop after 'La mar' form an ironic, dejected recognition of futility after what commenced as an exclamation at the beauty of nature: '¡Qué tierra esta!'. The narrator intervenes now, providing a lyrical description of the landscape, yet the semantic field bespeaks ruin and

destruction. '[A]rdiente', 'inhóspito', 'borroso', 'impalpable' and 'sucio' culminate in the 'cáustico' sol. As one character comments later, with rich, dark irony, 'si un día se negara la gente a meterse en el río, saldría él a buscar a la gente' (234). Jeremy Squires contradicts himself somewhat, noting that the author's interjections do not 'in any way interfere[s] with the reader's ready comprehension' (1991: 609), yet conceding that they are 'ironic and baffling' (*Ibid*). This is indicative of how criticism has worked hard to omit all humour from its sombre interpretation of social realism. As we have shown, the genre features comedy that actively courts a colder reaction or disengages its audience, a comedy that readers may dislike, abhor, or simply be apathetic towards. It experiments with the textual space through the benefit of cumulative repetition, stretching the comfort zone with traction and friction. In the following example, dialogue is both crushing and comical:

–Nada; a disfrutar se ha dicho; pasarlo bien.

–Muchas gracias; adiós.

Lucio los vio perfilarse uno a uno a contraluz en el umbral y torcer a la izquierda hacia el camino. Luego quedó otra vez vacío el marco de la puerta; era un rectángulo amarillo y cegador. Se alejaron las voces.

–¡La juventud, a divertirse! –dijo Lucio; están en la edad. (16)

As the weariness continues, the style betrays the content, for there is a clear lack of enthusiasm in the verbs 'disfrutar' and 'divertirse'. Lucio believes that amusement is available *only* to the youth, but the irony is that the juvenile daytrippers are similarly unsatisfied, even at an apparent *fiesta*.

Thus instead of Bakhtin's reading of heyday, outdoor carnival, an inside-out, upside-down festival with its 'joyful relativity of all structure and order', 'opposed to official seriousness which is dogmatic and hostile to evolution and change' (Bakhtin 1984a: 124, 125), *El Jarama's* escapist 'celebration' is irksomely pedestrian. Instead of Bakhtin's 'free, familiar contact among people', a 'new modus of interrelationship... counterposed to the omnipotent hierarchical social relationships of non-carnival life' (*Ibid*: 123), its aura of tedium and listlessness negates the possibility for an unofficial, subversive, carnivalesque laughter of disruption. Likewise, in Romero's *La noria*, the seamstress Mercedes denies

*herself* more than one trip to the cinema per annum but is adamant that her children enjoy it more often: ‘ahora que son jóvenes, que disfruten’ (135). However, the distressing irony is that her 20-year-old son is equally as bored, and the repeated ‘cansado’ is comically dampening: ‘Está cansado de todo. De su casa, de su madre, de su ciudad, de su oficio... Está terriblemente cansado’ (142). There is a sense, in both novels, that this endlessly circular tedium could go on *ad infinitum*, and this provokes a pathetic, numbing comedy of forever *un-realised* potential.

Social realist humour of creeping annoyance – even at *fiestas!* – curtails fun through an angst-ridden decrescendo, the very antithesis of a drum roll. Contradicting comedy’s often implicit message ‘Life is fun’, the reading process often resembles a slow trudge through motor oil. Unable to summon creativity even in atmospheres of merriment, characters suffer *thaasophobia* – the fear of boredom – because they find no entertainment in existence and have nothing to live for. Likewise, in Marsé’s *Encerrados con un solo juguete* (1960), even when Andrés reminisces about playing dominos on Sunday afternoons, his memory is comically colourless: ‘cargando [solo] a medias con el tedio abrumador y dominical’ (87). Lacklustre laughter signals the obligation that one must do more with one’s life, as one conversation in Marsé’s *Encerrados con un solo juguete* (1960) suggests:

- [...] ¿por qué no haces algo?
- Pero qué. Qué se puede hacer.
- Ah, hijo, no sé... (152)

Every assertion is undercut, every insight qualified with a plaintive moan. Hurley, Dennett and Adams, who analyse humour from a cognitive perspective, argue that it *closes off* further exploration, saying ‘Nothing down these alleys! Save your time and energy!’ (Hurley *et al.* 2011: 107) Spanish social realism likewise terminates the reader’s search for enthusiasm or energy through grey humour, stimulating utter inaction. In this same novel, Tina merely wants what (she assumes) everyone does – ‘vivir feliz, ser amada, casarme y tener hijos y todo eso. ¿Es mucho pedir?’ – yet Andrés humorously cuts down to size: ‘Es mucha contradicción’ (153). Grey humour cuts down to size, downplaying and discrediting. It resigns itself to meaninglessness, never missing and opportunity to miss an opportunity.

Returning to *El Jarama*, this numbing humour, stemming from blankness, is ubiquitous. Ready to explode, it somehow never does, thwarting us with another squandered opportunity:

–Anda, cuéntame algo, Tito.

–Que te cuente ¿el qué?

–Hombre, algo, lo que se te ocurra, mentiras, da igual. Algo que sea interesante.

–¿Interesante? Yo no sé 122lande nada... (227)

The mundane becomes farcical, and *El Jarama* is the comedy of stalemate and of stale mates. Its focus is tight – one day of an enabling, carnivalesque party, an escape from the city-centre to frolic in the sunshine – yet the overriding atmosphere is one of disabling tedium, monotony, and sheer, dreadful impotence. As Daniel exclaims, ‘Chicos, aquí hay que divertirse’, because ‘¡Somos ricos!... ¡Millonarios casi!’ (134). Indeed, if *El Jarama* is *about* anything at all, it is about merrymaking and revelry. Yet the sarcastic ‘millonarios’ refers to how much wine they have left, and the humour derives from the fact that hedonistic pleasure-seeking brings only solitude, seclusion, and the reminder that, every year, one *bañista* dies in the river. This is the comedy that perpetually lowers the bar, stifling any rising laugh. As Sobejano notes, rather scornfully, ‘Los jóvenes no vienen para vivir más plenamente, sino para olvidar que no viven’ (quoted in Gómez Ávila 1998: 96). Small wonder that J. M. Castellet spoke of ‘una juventud cansada, aburrida, poco vital’ in the novel (citado en García Sarría: 326-327). *El Jarama* is the art of drivel, replete with phlegmatic irony.

### Comic Realism

Returning to *El Jarama*, next I shall discuss the comic realism of *El Jarama*, asking how the draining, debilitating laughter complicates an otherwise disinterested tenor. Firstly, it is important to note that early reception of the text was not universally positive vis-à-vis

realism. Rafael Manzano (1957) berated it as a ‘receptor y vehículo de vulgaridades y mediocridades’ and asked ‘¿Es que estamos buscando, en España, premiar el “antiquijote”?’ This final word implies that *El Jarama* is entirely devoid of comedy, but, as we have examined, it features abundant laughter of the left-behind. In particular, this critic disparaged its mundanity: ‘instalar la simple existencia sobre soportes mediocres’. Might unvarnished truth be reduced to mere flatness? Both unbearable and irresistible, titillating through unnecessary, prosaic detail, there is a certain charm and knowingness in the novel’s confidence in its own mimesis. Indeed, decades later, Juan Goytisolo would criticise social realism for its demand for ‘una novela tan real como la vida misma’ (1993: 83). Even the suggestion of a carnival atmosphere is deflating and stultifying:

–Luego dicen de Río. ¿Más carnaval?

–Perpetuo. Ya lo sabes, Mely, Río de Janeiro, nada.

–¿Nada, verdad? Ya guardarías hasta cola para ir. (127)

‘¿Nada, verdad?’ could be the motto of *El Jarama*: not revelry but isolation. There is nothing of importance here; the whirlwind fizzles out. Gibert Seldes once described the great virtue of the burlesque as ‘its complete lack of sentimentality in the treatment of emotion and its treatment of appearance’ (1962: 25), but *El Jarama*’s deadpan humour takes this to new, sinking depths. Ricardo Gullón noted that ‘la palabra esperanza sufre una reducción grotesca’ (1973: 15), but failed to analyse the distorted, disarming humour that intensifies the tight link between forced, disappointing hilarity and its inexorable conclusion: death. Likewise, when the characters enjoy the water (‘–No está nada fría, ¿verdad? –Está la mar de apetitosa’), the narrator interrupts with a lengthy description of the environment: ‘Daba un poco de luna en lo alto de los árboles...’. However, the portrayal’s blackness – ‘espejo negro’, ‘en lo oscuro’, ‘ráfagas rasantes de luna’ (a symbol of death), and the *río* as ‘un fluido y enorme y silencioso animal acariciante’ – creates a truly ominous image that directly conflicts with the thrill-seekers’ apparent joy. When the buoyant dialogue returns (‘–¡Qué gusto de sentir el agua, como te pasa por el cuerpo!’ (271)), the juxtaposition of sentiments carries the darkest undertone.

*El Jarama* also leaves hints at death with a dark, foreboding irony. Riley argues that '[s]olo un lector de insólita sagacidad' (1963: 211) could expect Lucita's sudden death, and of all candidates, Mely seems the most likely given her fear of a 'bicho 124landesti' in the river (44) and her walk through the cemetery. Yet Lucita wears a black swimming costume, is initially unwilling to bathe in the Jarama, and is eventually forced in, jokingly, by her friends. In hindsight, therefore, we find a truly 'ironic pathos' (Squires 1991: 606), and, for Patrick Gallagher (1974: 632), the novel is an 'obra de horror' of humanity obliterated by Nature's destructive forces, beyond his control. Despite the connotations of her name, Lucita dies in darkness. Indeed, when the other girls need '¡Una mano inocente para sacar bola!', they look at each other, 'riéndose':

–Aquí mano inocente no hay ninguna, ¿qué os habéis creído?

–Pues a ver –preguntó Sebastián–; ¿cuál es la más inocente de vosotras?

Mely puso 124landest maliciosa y dijo:

–¡Lucita! Lucita es la más inocente de todas.

–Pues claro, Luci –insistían entre risas–. ¡Que salga ella! (47)

'[L]a más inocente de todas' will be the one to die, of course, and these 'risas' are couched in a dark, agonising humour that already has one foot in the grave. Things are very funny, until they are not. There are several references to sheep led to the slaughterhouse, and a *contertuliano* remarks that such killing is 'mala sin remisión' (202). Moreover, when Tito jokes about Daniel, who has fallen asleep, 'Ése ya no hay quien lo menea. Mañana por la mañana se encargarán los pajaritos de devolverlo a la vida' (152), Paulina is nonetheless scared: 'No, Tito; eso sí que no. No 124landes dejarlo toda la noche en el río. Menudo cargo de conciencia'. The conversation continues with richly sinister irony:

–Como no mandéis pedir una grúa...

–Haz chistes, ahora.

–No te preocupes, mujer –dijo Tito–; ya nos llevaremos como podamos; a hombros, si hace falta, como un pellejo vivo.

–Y tan pellejo. (152)

The mention of 'chistes' and the repetition 'Y tan pellejo' are biting, and, significantly, 'Lucita callaba'. It is she who will be left in the river, her cadaver extracted. The humour compounds the tragedy, for *El Jarama* becomes a 'most lamentable comedy, and most cruel death' (*A Midsummer Night's Dream* I.ii.11-22). This is a novel of two generations: the younger, who do not wish to dwell on the Civil War, and the older, such as Lucio (a Republican fighter and prisoner of war) and the *hombre de los zapatos blancos*, who fought with the *franquistas* but fortunately possesses the gift of 'el seis doble en la vida'. The Civil War haunts and undermines all striving for present hysteria, exacting an uneasy influence that will not be shut away. Similarly, when Mely contemplates that 'esto era el frente' and that 'hubo tantos 125landes', the comedic underlay heightens both the tragedy and the torpor:

–Digo. Y nosotros que nos bañamos tan tranquilos.

–Como si nada; y a lo mejor donde te metes ha habido ya un 125landes.

Lucita interrumpió:

–Ya vale. También son ganas de andar sacando cosas, ahora. (26)

Again, Lucita – 'la más inocente', and unwilling to contemplate death – will drown in ridiculous, avoidable circumstances, her body exhumed ('saca[da]') from the Jarama. Miguel arrives and asks for an update, but the response is hysterical: 'Nada; Lucita, que no la gustan las historias de 125landes' (26). Yet Miguel could not be less interested: 'Bueno, y a todo esto, ¿qué hora es?' (26). We move from a grave, deathly tone to the most banal, quotidian concerns, and our laughter is a struggling, spluttering gasp of dejection. Once again, this is a conservative, stationary humour.

When Mely asks el Dani about the 'boda en algún pueblo', grey, hangdog humour is keenly felt:

–Será una cosa divertida.

–Divertida si tienes con quien reírte. Pero si, en cambio, te toca, como a mí me tocó, empotrada en la mesa entre dos paletitos que no hacían más que hacerme

preguntas si yo iba a bailar a Casablanca y a Pasapoga, lo que te mueres es de asco, te lo digo yo. Te agarras un aburrimiento, hija mía, que no se te quita en un par de semanas. (57)

The reader may succumb to a similar fate, almost willing for the novel to stop. The implications of 'una cosa divertida' are roundly subverted into 'asco' and 'aburrimiento'. Dani complains about 'lo pesados que se ponían', and twice repeats the notion of forced humour at *fiestas*: 'quieren hacerte reír y no lo consiguen', 'los esfuerzos que hacen por divertirte'. In an absurd, bleak development, 'lo único que te pones es más violenta cada vez', for the 'pobrecitos' have 'poquísimo humor'. In the final, absurd twist that encapsulates social realism, 'En mi vida pasé más malo en una fiesta, ni lo pienso pasar' (57). The ultimate irony of *El Jarama* is that it does not make pathetic 'esfuerzos... por divertirte': in the end, it forces its readers to take a bizarre interest in the banality of everyday life.

In an essay on *Anna Karenina*, Matthew Arnold complained of a scene in which Levin is late for his wedding because he cannot find his dress shirt. 'It turns out to import absolutely nothing', laments Arnold, because its true-to-life intentions fail to add to the 'significance' of the scene (1977: 285). In *El Jarama*, this is precisely the point. To return to Crangle and Nicholls' study of bathos, the anti-climax refashions potentially interesting concepts into 'bland, workable order' (2012: 11), with a 'perpetual sinking' (6). However, as they point out (74), bathos 'must to a degree aspire and fail'. *El Jarama* is therefore strictly more *banal* than *bathetic*, reaching for nothing at all. Despite Alicia's love of the 'vida tranquila' in the *pueblos*, where 'todo el mundo se conoce', Mely disagrees:

–A mí me aburre lo tranquilo –dijo Mely–, me crispa; la tranquilidad es lo que más intranquila me pone. Y eso de conocerse todo el mundo, ¡vaya una gracia! [...]; debe ser el tostón número uno. (57)

'¡Vaya una gracia!', indeed. The log-jam continues, unbroken, as Sánchez Ferlosio finds a falling, failing funniness in everyday triviality. Ironically, the 'tranquilidad' of *El Jarama* as a whole (as novel, 'el tostón número uno') leaves its readers equally 'intraquil[os]'. Absurdly,

despite longing for excitement and motivation, Mely is mindful of her own dullness and powerlessness. This is the mirth of the milquetoast. Fernando agrees: ‘no puede hacerte ilusión ninguna cosa, si sabes que mañana y pasado y el otro y el otro y todo el año vas a hacer lo mismo, las mismas caras, los mismos sitios, todo igual. Es una vida que no tiene chiste’ (57). This is the *ne plus ultra* of grey humour: benumbed existence is patently cheerless, no laughing matter. Yet, out of the depths of intense boredom and misery comes an unmistakable, woebegone funniness:

–[...] ¿Es que hace falta tener ganas de algo? Estás tranquila y a gusto con lo que tienes y se acabó.

–Sí, sentadita en una silla y mirando al cielo raso. Ideal. (57)

Mely’s dry, crucially *deadpan* wit comes in spite of Fernando’s uplifting reassurance (‘la gente se divierte en todas partes’), and is yet another instance of a disgruntled, ill-humoured humour in the social realist novel. Each and every time we laugh, the mirthful response is cut short, reminding us of the frailty of universal human pleasure.

Indeed, this interpretation of comic comedown, bathos, and disgruntlement is supported by humour philosopher Alenka Zupancic’s reading of joking, wherein the punchline ‘operates through the mechanism of what Lacan calls *le point de capiton*, the “quilting point” – that is to say the point at which an intervention of a Master-Signifier... retroactively fixes the sense of the previous signifying elements’ (2008: 133). This is a staple understanding of the incongruity-resolution theory of humour, whereby a tension is released when what seemed initially asymmetrical is shown to make a strange yet satisfying sense. For Lacan, this *point de capiton* is where the semantic slippage between meaning and interpretation is momentarily held in place and time: despite all the odds, ‘signifier and signified are knotted together’ (Lacan 1993: 268). However, in postwar social realist comedy, and specifically *El Jarama*, this payoff and culmination are unforthcoming, leading merely to what Wolfgang Iser, writing on Beckett’s theatre (1993: *passim*), termed the ‘stifled laugh’. Cut off from their source, purloined punchlines leave a bitterly disappointing return, and what began as comic is revealed as troubled and foreboding. American comedian Norm Macdonald has expressed an interest in writing ‘a book about how to be a stand-up without being funny’ (in

Marchese 2017), and deadpan and darkly satirical writer Nathanael West once referred to the ‘private and unfunny jokes’ in his novels (Letter of 5 April 1939 to F. Scott Fitzgerald, reproduced in Martin 1970: 334). *El Jarama* builds a similarly post-funny mood, and criticism should widen its boundaries to encompass this bathetic, sinking vacuum and generic cross-pollination.

### Mediocre Mirth

The social realist aura is analogous to Raymond Williams’ notion of ‘nedotepa’: ‘When the rot enters, [...] the unfinished and useless who are still human beings and suffering’ (1966: 145). Haunted by a creeping mortality, the characters are hardly ever, in Rollo May’s terms, ‘real, absolute, and concrete’ (1994: 49). Yet this humour of hardship (as opposed to Williams’ modern *tragedy*) stems from a seductively slow, languid acquiescence. We (and they) wallow in the mire of laughter, with a smirk or shrug of resignation. Juan A. Ríos Carratalá writes of ‘la sonrisa del inútil’, a disheartening, depressing humour grounded in ordinariness: ‘Pueden ser absurdos, arbitrarios o fruto de una ignorancia que nos incapacita para desenvolvemos en el *quehacer cotidiano*’ (2008: 88, my italics). Orr writes that ‘Play is tragicomedy’s elusive response to the moral void it perceives in modern culture’, and, intriguingly, names ‘boredom’ amongst its most prominent manifestations. (1991: 18) *Anything* will do ‘to ward off, however briefly, the loss of human control’ (*Ibid*). Through tepid amusement, realism is not erased but deepened.

Even the telling of jokes and amusing anecdotes is a self-defeating practice, overshadowed by the voice of discontent. Don Marcial tells Manolo a ‘funny’ story about a ‘tío [...] con el vehículo ese que se gasta para circular por el mundo, junto a otro carrito de esos de coca-cola’, who approached the group to joke ‘Si esto es la coca-cola, yo entonces lo menos soy la Coca-Coña’. Marcial guffawed with laughter:

–[...] la pechada de reír... Y es que se llama Coca de apellido; la doble coincidencia.

¿Qué le parece?

–Es humor, es humor –asentía Manolo. (103)

There is a melancholy to this craving for the comic, and Marcial's constant, absurd efforts to *explain* the joke ('la doble coincidencia') create a devastating conflation of wretchedness and funniness. We laugh with a sad sigh, for the unflustered Manolo diverges dramatically from the joke-teller's 'pechada de reír'. The laughter laughs, as Lisa Colletta puts it in the context of social satire, 'into the gaping maw of grim reality' (2003: 30). Comedian Mike Myers has observed that 'Comedy characters tend to be a \_\_\_\_\_ machine; i.e., Clouseau was a smug machine, Pepe Le Pew was a love machine, Felix Unger was a clean machine, and Austin Powers is a sex machine' (quoted in Friend 2001). Following this formulation, the social realist timewaster is a boredom machine, fatigued even by *fiestas* or joke-telling. Comedy and jokes are deficient and counterfeit, becoming what clown Macario Martín, in Ignacio Aldecoa's ship-based social realist novel *Gran Sol* (1958), calls 'el chiste encubridor de la tristeza, que fija la sonrisa de la marcha' (16-17).<sup>40</sup> The jester bears his scars, and there are no comic consolations.

Laura Salisbury writes beautifully of Beckettian gags, which bear a striking resemblance to my introduction of grey humour:

But because the gags seem to be subject to a decline in that they either go on too long or never really get going at all, there is also a sense in which they too, like everything else in the play, describe the slow and arduous passage of time rather than its flight. Tainted over by time, the incongruities and running gags may be funny, but this comedy already seems a little past its sell by date, or on the turn, as it were. And comedy that is going off, slapstick that doesn't really work, comes, like a slow hand clap, to beat out elapse rather than contract it; it becomes a form of walking on the spot in which waiting is first sloughed off, then measured and finally increased. (Salisbury 2012: 186-87)

In the same way, joking attempts wear extremely thin in *El Jarama*, and readerly tension, resistance, friction and hindrance, products of its endless garrulousness and tedium, lead to a mountain of pent-up pressure that is never fully or meaningfully released into mirth. For

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<sup>40</sup> See appendix for detailed analysis of the humour in this novel.

instance, when Manolo orders a glass of cold water, his register is absurdly proper: ‘¿Tiene usted la bondad de ponerme un buen vaso de agua fresquita?’ (101). The resulting misunderstanding with barman Mauricio, however, causes great consternation, escalating comically. ‘Agua fresca no hay’, he clarifies, and Manolo laughs ‘forzadamente’, explaining that ‘no era más que un decir’. The erstwhile formal language is a preposterous sham, and the dampening humour emphasises poverty. Yet Mauricio persists with amusing banality:

–Pues yo a lo que no es una cosa no lo llamo esa cosa. ¿Tiene sentido? Será una frase hecha o lo que quieras, pero yo cuando digo agua fresca es que la quiero fresca de verdad. Lo demás me parece como hablar un poquito a lo tontuno, la verdad sea dicha.

–Bueno, que quiere usted liarme, está visto. (101)

After a playful row, Manolo is keen to emphasise that he can *take a joke*, lest he be considered an agelast: ‘ya no me afecta la broma en absoluto [...] yo también sé divertirme cuando quiero’. As this fruitless cascade of empty points finally fizzles out, we can almost hear the tumbleweed spin. The scene is roundly absurd, but Mauricio agrees:

–Pues yo me alegro, mozo. Más vale así. Tener uno un poquito picardía, para saberle hacer frente a los trances escabrosos del trato con los demás. ¿No es verdad? ¡Pero mucha! Un rato largo de correa hay que tener. (101)

This is central to social realism: ‘un poquito picardía’ and ‘[u]n rato largo de correa’ with which to cope with the constant trials and tribulations of daily existence. However, the notion that humour offers respite is immediately undermined, as Manolo ‘puso de súbito una cara prevenida’. He has no need for ‘correa’ because he simply *ignores* ‘las situaciones escabrosas [...] vamos, que me las paso por debajo de la pierna...’. An archetypal feature of the postwar novel, *not to think* is the only bathetic solution. Manolo warns that ‘creerse uno estar por encima de las cosas’ is dangerous because one may suddenly find oneself ‘de pronto debajo de los pies’ (101-2). The dark irony is that Lucita, on land (‘por encima’), will find herself ‘de pronto debajo de los pies’. The grey humour here of unrelenting, unremarkable tedium brings to mind Bergson’s understanding of the ‘systematic

absentmindedness' (1999 [1900]: 146) within the comic, observable above all in Don Quijote: 'the most comical thing imaginable: it is the comic itself, drawn as nearly as possible from its very source'. The abstracted, preoccupied individual is somewhat distanced from his surroundings, 'as though the soul has allowed itself to be fascinated and hypnotized by the materiality of a simple action' (*Ibid*: 25). This recurs throughout *El Jarama*'s lose-lose situations, with characters who are abstracted and inattentive even when undertaking the simplest (and most ostensibly gratifying) of tasks, and the buoyancy typically associated with comedy reaches a dead end. This disheartening, disarming, low-spirited laughter of routine refuses to allow the characters to 'laugh off' or gloss over their menacing, miserable existence.

Indeed, *El Jarama*'s crushing ennui and drooping, sagging humour are so widespread as to threaten that, if an important Civil War battle can be forgotten with ease, 'so can a drowning' (Epps 2003: 197). Following Lucita's death, Marialuisa injects energy into proceedings: 'el domingo que viene nos venimos otra vez y armamos aquí un gatuperio de esos que hacen época'. However, a deflating, atrabilious humour immediately undermines her encouragement: 'Pues igual, hija mia, ¿qué más dará?; el domingo que viene pasará lo mismo, parejo a lo de hoy. ¿Por qué iba a ser más largo?'. Moreover, here the narrator observes the menacing moon 'como una gran cara muerta' (289). A hollow inarticulacy haunts the characters, and genuinely sympathetic conversation is always out of reach. The emotional significance of death and mourning often *does not exceed* that of anodyne conversation about the weather.

*El Jarama* forces its readers to ask just how much of reality they can bear. Spires believes that it works to 'distanciarle [al lector] del personaje' (1976: 246), but this distance is crucial to the *comedy* of the text. Indeed, towards the end of the novel, when the judge examines Luci's cadaver, black humour is unnerving for the language dehumanises her in a ludicrous, unemotional metaphor of 'fish-like' lips: 'Las pupilas tenían un brillo turbio, como añicos de espejo manchados de polvo, o pequeños recortes de hojalata. La boca estaba abierta. Recordaba la boca de un pez, en el gesto de los labios' (213). The funny catches us off guard, completely out of context, and surely at odds with the realist aura.

The judge is already upset (another instance of absurd, frustrated desire) at having had to leave a party in order to fulfil this obligation, and he concludes the investigation with a summary rife with incongruously formal vocabulary: ‘distinguiendo acto seguido desde la orilla el bulto de una persona’; ‘se hallaba el declarante’; ‘proferían las susodichas llamadas de socorro’; ‘lo azaroso de la situación, arrojáronse al agua sin más demora’; ‘en tal riesgo se hallaba’; ‘fue finalmente hallada’; ‘el anterior declarante’; ‘a cuyo aviso al punto acudía el que aquí comparece’; ‘se encontraba exánime’ (343-44). The repeated flaccid, passive tense demonstrates that emotion is kept at arm’s length, and this contrasts with the daytrippers’ *vivacious* reactions: ‘Mely se había cogido la cabeza entre las manos: “¡Lo sabía, lo sabía que había sido Lucita! ¡Lo sabía que había sido Lucita...!”’ (310). Absurdly, she seems more concerned with having correctly identified the corpse than with the drowning of a friend, and the daytrippers squabble over whether she is called Luci, Lucita, or something else entirely. Any dignity that the situation might have accrued is wilfully destroyed, death is comically unheroic, and *El Jarama* complicates realism by illustrating that a multiplicity of voices will interpret the same event in a number of ways. We are oddly – and grotesquely – glad for the death: at long last, something has broken the tedium.

Further interrogating the realist practice, Professor Riley (1963: 208) remarked upon the veritably Hitchcockian detail that the ‘primero en tocar’ (344) the cadaver of Lucita be a medical student called Soriano Fernández (a reverse-rhyming chiasmus of the author). When questioned by the authorities, Soriano’s response is incongruously stoic: ‘En lo que yo he presenciado, tengo sobradas razones para asegurar que se trata de un accidente’ (342). If a subtle intervention, a sneaky disclaimer of intentionality on the part of the narrator/witness, tongue is very firmly into cheek. For Squires, this is a ‘veiled clue warning the reader against any transcendental interpretation of Luci’s death’ (1998: 209). Comedy always has the potential to spill over its borders.

*El Jarama* is not a stable, objective monolith of the past but a living, breathing negotiation of the twists and turns of the present. When Amalio describes the ‘[a]guas estas’, with ‘siete capas’ and several ‘recovecos y [...] entretelas’, the alarming description likens the river to

una cosa viva; con más engaños que el jopo de una zorra y más perversidades que si fuesen manojos de culebras, en vez de ser agua, lo que viene corriendo por el lecho. Que no es persona este río. No es persona ninguna de fiar. Con una cantidad de hipocresía, que le tiembla el misterio— se reía. (321)

Under the guise of *comedy* ('se reía'), Amalio gives voice to the verities obscured beneath the façade. Yet the slippery humour complicates a stable, realist interpretation, for Lucio immediately ridicules the fantasy: 'Vamos, ya me parece que quiere usted crecerlo más que nunca no fueron capaces de crecerlo las tormentas' (322). As the *hombre de los zapatos blancos* points out, 'Usted nos hace pasar buenos ratos, Amalio, con todas esas cosas que nos pinta del río; pero hoy le está costando muchas lágrimas a algunas personas' (323). Amalio's desperation to mythify death through laughter, to impose comic harmony onto miserable disorder and arbitrariness, serves merely to exacerbate the grief. He laughs continually as he transforms the Jarama into fabulous beast: 'Igual te quita una oveja en San Fernando y organiza una merendola de amigotes en Vaciamadrid; [...] ¡Y vete tú a olerles la boca y los eructos, después que se la han comido, a ver si era tu oveja o si era otra, a los tragones de Vaciamadrid!' (322). This might be rough, he claims, but he is telling it 'like it is'. Yet, when this penchant for embellishment is once again criticised (322) by Lucio ('Mucho veo que le gusta engordarlo') and by Mauricio ('me estaba resultando ya mucha llena a mí también'), Amalio's response is amusing:

El pastor se reía.

—Viene siendo por las trazas. Se le añadían un par de ceros; la cosa es relatar. (322)

If 'la cosa es relatar', how can we reconcile the supposed authenticity of *El Jarama* with its status as fictional narrative? Where are the 'par de ceros' in this text? Amalio defends the account of sheep washed down the river 'por lo flacas que están todas, que un saltamontes un poquito gordo ya pesa más', yet his next answer hysterically undermines this dependable position, all the while couched in laughter ('[lo] decía riendo'): 'porque se trata de un invento. Verá usted, no es más que un cuento mío...' (322). As Santos Julia points out, whilst History seeks to 'conocer, comprender, interpretar o explicar bajo la exigencia de totalidad y objetividad', memory serves to 'legitimar, rehabilitar, honrar o condenar y actúa siempre de

manera selectiva y subjetiva' (2006: 17). In *El Jarama*, attempts to wrench comedy out of tragedy end in further 'lágrimas'. The pervasive tedium is so deeply painful – more tragic, in a sense, than death – because one has to *live* with the constant awareness of one's defeat. Indeed, Labanyi argues (1989: 43-45) that social realism of the 1950s loses its focus through 'an underlying mythical vision' that, despite potentially pricking the pomposity of national ideology, ultimately immobilises Spanish history in cyclical patterns of an unchanging 'destiny'. It romanticises as 'Paradise Lost' that which the regime regarded as 'The Fall' (44).

Realist fiction wishes to represent all groups by all groups, to be everything to everyone – '*pouvoir tout dire*', in Paul Éluard's words (1963: 457). Yet it must inevitably cherry-pick its 'slice-of-life' profiles, and the exaggeration (particularly of its grotesquerie) shifts focus onto the principles of selection and the figure who overstates. As Iser writes of Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), the 'unstructured material [...] is taken directly from life itself, but... it cannot be taken for life itself', pointing to 'when details no longer serve to reinforce probability or to stabilize the illusion of reality' (Iser, in Amacher & Lange 1979: 322). *El Jarama's* comedy serves not to 'stabilize' but rather to *interrogate* claims to reality.

Spanish literary criticism has often described the supposed objectivity of the social realist novel in rather ambiguous terms. Ramón Buckley (1968: 40) speaks of the 'objetivismo' of 1950s novels as 'una manera de enfocar la narración y afecta la relación del autor con su obra' (leaving space for this relationship to be potentially fraught), and Villanueva (1980: I: 596) notes specifically of *El Jarama* that 'utiliza una técnica objetiva no tanto como experimento cuanto como vehículo expresivo para la finalidad del autor'. However, this very 'finalidad' often comes over too piquantly. Pedro Carrero Eras (2006: 7) even calls Sánchez Ferlosio's narrator 'ese pequeño dios' who delights in 'sembrando su novela de toda clase de indicios y pistas'. We expect eyewitness accounts in the 'Actas' to be more loose, discursive, and subjective than the portrayal given by the (ostensibly) detached narrator (220); however, the opposite is comically true. Mauricio's 'aquí no se cuenta nada a espaldas de nadie' (361) and Lucita's 'Pues me gusta que sea en mis manos; ser yo la que lo enseñe, únicamente' (122) are ironic because the narrator frequently 'gossips' about Mauricio, and Lucia's desire for privacy is grotesquely denied when her cadaver becomes the only interesting thing in the novel. Even this is fodder for the joke.

Alongside this destabilising approach to realism, *El Jarama* also illustrates the perennial link between deadened, heavyhearted humour and crushing death. When 'Alguien' asks '¿Y adónde va este río?, ¿sabéis alguno adonde va?', the bathetic response signals the finality: 'A la mar, como todos' (26). All conversation ends thus, and García Sarría even calls the characters 'muertos-vivos' (1976: 328). After the drowning, a group of men are playing cards at the bar: 'éste marcha regularmente, una vez pierde, otra gana. Esto, pues, como la vida'. The *hombre de los zapatos blancos* replies 'Sí, como la vida. Salvo que menos arriesgado' (253). Ironically, Lucita's run of bad luck will see her lose at the game of life, with no obtainable rematch.

### After the Laughter

Regarding final conclusions, as with *Nada* and *La colmena* criticism has worked hard to circumvent a pessimistic reading. Tulia Gómez Ávila acknowledges *El Jarama's* despair ('la existencia está vacía') but also finds hope for 'un futuro progresista' (1998: 95). José-Carlos Mainer (1994: 42) goes further, arguing 'Nunca tanta vida y tanta esperanza se han agazapado tras tanta aparente vulgaridad', and Perriam et al. (2000: 143) perceive a 'tentative renewal of optimism' in Lucio's decision to seek employment as a baker the following day. Yet the constant, dark undertow of scatological, declining humour belies a critical instability ('tentative').

At the very end of the novel, after a short conversation with Mauricio, the middle-aged Lucio 'salió al camino y orinó interminablemente, a la luz de la luna, que allí casi tocaba el horizonte sobre las lomas de Coslada' (364). Whilst, for Perriam et al. (*Ibid*: 143), Lucio 'gains physical and symbolic release in prolonged urination', surely we should note a comical incongruity between the lyrical portrayal of the landscape and Lucio's prosaic action, which serves literally to muddy – not exalt – nature. Indeed, just before this 'discharge', tongue is very firmly into cheek when Lucio 'estiraba el cuerpo; ahuecaba los arrugados pantalones, que se le habían adherido a la piel; alzaba varias veces una y otra rodilla, alternativamente, para desentumecerse las piernas' (231). Far from a physical warm-

up (for but a day's graft), he is merely gearing up to pee (!). If a tiny triumph, a solitary act of freedom, one must ask how far we might be expected actually to congratulate Lucio for the otherwise mundane act of relieving himself. If he fashions his own river (potentially the subject of the final lines 'Entra de nuevo en terreno terciario...'), it is a river of (as Cela would say, 'con perdón') piss.

It is true that Lucio is in talks about a job, to 'masar para las fiestas de tres o cuatro pueblerinos' (364). Yet, if this novel's *fiesta* 'carousing' is anything to go by, such diversion will be worryingly disappointing. Moreover, Lucio repeatedly downplays the post ('una chapucilla eventual', 'nada más a lo que voy es a hablar con el hombre', 'una cosita reducida', 'a pequeña escala', 'cuestión monetaria no será nada muy allá'), fears that he is too old ('El único temor mío', 'ni le han dicho los años que tengo', 'el miedo mío; que a lo mejor el hombre me rechace, por parecerle que uno joven le rinda más'), and reveals that his employer has yet to meet him in person. We are marched up the hill of optimism, only to be marched down again. Small wonder that, when Lucio first announced 'Mañana tengo que hacer', a flabbergasted Mauricio reacted with befuddlement:

—¿Tú?

—¿Tanto te extraña? (364)

Mauricio wishes him 'suertecilla' (crucially diminutive), but it may well be cut short.<sup>41</sup> Lucio even employs the idiom 'caerse en agua de borrajas' (364), fully aware that everything may fall by the wayside. There is no happily ever after (the laughter). As the 'agua' fuses with the liquid urine, perhaps Lucio's dream, too, will leak away without a trace. Lucio's comic potential lies precisely in the fact that ambition, hope, vision and purpose have never been defining features for him, or, if they once were, they are so no longer because the hard knocks and seemingly arbitrary cruelties of life have extinguished them along the way. We miss the humour by a hairsbreadth, aware that it could crash and burn at any moment. There remains a ghost of a joke, for Sánchez Ferlosio deliberately reduces the scope of his

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<sup>41</sup> Likewise, in Aldecoa's social realist *Gran Sol* (1963), when Paulino Castro enthusiastically remarks 'Preferiría que fuésemos nosotros, tengo ganas de trabajar', the reply is comically bathetic: 'Se te quitarán en seguida' (61).

own materials, creating art that conceals art. The supremely artificial masquerades as natural, embracing the world, banality and all. It is not that we laugh, but that we laugh *anyway* – regardless, nevertheless, and in spite of everything. Here we should recall Nicholas Holm’s argument that deadpan humour necessitates an ‘aesthetic withdrawal’, a lack of ‘clear attribution’ of overtly comic qualities to a text (2017: 119), which can often implicitly support the status quo.

Criticism has nonetheless persisted in finding assurances for a brighter future. For Spires, *El Jarama* incites the reader to ‘buscar’ a ‘remedio’ to this ‘sociedad estancada’ (1976: 246). Portraying the ‘insensibilidad de esta generación de gente resignada a su propia pequeñez’, it instils within the *reader* a sense of ‘su propia sensibilidad’ (246-47). We *do* feel, despite an unfeeling narrative. Pérez Moreno goes further, imagining readers spurred on to ‘[e]l compromiso, la confrontación, el cambio, es decir, en el orden de la subversión de las ideas impuestas por el poder’, and even to ‘una nueva nación construida a partir de unos valores muy diferentes de los propuestos por el poder’ (2005: 122, 126). This is somewhat farfetched, certainly, but such impassioned interpretations render *El Jarama* far more complex than apathetic reportage of a slice-of-life. As Squires reminds us (1991: 602), ‘the novel has been recuperated, tragedized, allegorized, and read, finally, as a parable of historical dialectic’.

However, *El Jarama*’s (as yet unexplored) morose, clouded *comedy* generates a submissive nihilism and hollowness entirely at odds with these optimistic sentiments. Ultimately, social realist grey humour keeps the characters *where they are*. Comedians are often considered rebels or heroes, ‘icon[s] of human resourcefulness in the face of impossible odds’ due to their ‘ingenuity in freeing [themselves] from the predicaments that threaten [their] existence’ (Jenkins 1994: 1), but *this* comedy is unadventurous. André Breton referred to black humour as subversive, a ‘superior revolt of the spirit’ (2009 [1940]: 16), but *this* comedy does not have the energy even to fend off its own ennui, let alone truly to subvert the repressive regime. It constantly undermines human pretension to anything more than a deflating recognition of its own finitude and inadequacy. As humour theorist Roger B. Henkle has concluded, comedy’s perceived ‘radicalism’ often signals the power of dominant culture to *absorb* the rumblings of revolt as much as it signals the instability that comedy

can encourage (1980: 304). We are left with the shell, or the ghost, of a joke.

Several important works of Humour Studies stress comedic defiance: 'liberation or elevation' (Critchley 2002: 67); 'limitations of the human condition miraculously overcome' (Berger 1997: 210); 'protective filter of humour [through which readers are capable] once again – if only momentarily – of handling it and soldiering on' (O'Neill 1990: 154). However, such a view not universal. Although Egon Larsen titled his history of the political joke *Wit as a Weapon* (1980), Stanley Brandes (1977: 345) found little positive, direct effect in Spanish jokes in Francoist Spain. More broadly, Rudolph Herzog found that whispered jokes during Nazi Germany were 'a surrogate for, and not a manifestation of, social conscience and personal courage' (2010: 3), and even Christie Davies, who analysed tens of thousands of jokes, argued that they fail to have 'any significant social consequences or express profound moral or existential truths' (2011: 2) Gags are no 'sword', just 'decoration on the scabbard' (*Ibid*: 267). Perhaps postwar Spanish social comedy is more conservative than seditious, a stand-in for resistance rather than its outlet.

Indeed, *El Jarama's* grey humour does not crescendo or escalate but, on the contrary, exhausts and exasperates at an impasse. Might readers grow ironically *accustomed* to its wry pessimism? As humour scholar Mick Eaton writes, the comic always involves a 'transgression of the familiar' but also a 'familiarisation of the transgression' (Eaton 1981: 25). Laughter liberates but also limits, empowering but also disabling. The presence of comedy (however grey, lethargic or defeatist) alerts the reader to the suspicion that something lies beneath the tedium, and then checks itself: 'No, there's nothing there'. Fernando Larraz (2014: 209) has argued convincingly that Francoist censorship 'no reaccionó con radicalidad ante esos discursos literarios que refutaban el triunfalismo de la victoria', and 'la abulia, la hipocresía ambiental, la fractura social, el trauma interno, solo importaba mientras quedaran limpios de culpa individual los curas, los políticos y los militares'. Yet, despite this hint at subversion, if social realism was permitted under censorship, it was because its grey humour reveals the most stifling void (Weller's idea of the 'posthumorous' (2006: 133), eroding any inkling of fervency that might actively decry or assuage the hardship. In its lethargy, it neither comforts the afflicted nor afflicts the comfortable.

On the one hand, *El Jarama* constitutes a savagely funny obituary to Francoist dreams of splendour and flourishing, showing that only *grey* humour was possible given the harshness of Franco's Spain. The basic disgruntled joke is: Why are these characters so leaden and dull? Because the postwar landscape offers no alternative. They are cogs in the whirring machine of underachievement. On the other hand, its overwhelming impression of confinement signals but the cul-de-sac of comedy, a humour of exhaustive enumeration and agonisingly dull minutiae. Its formal circularity marches on the spot and brings all cheerfulness to a deflating, dragging halt. As Herzberger writes, 'the social realists realign the static structures of myth in order to alter the meaning associated with them, but do so without undoing the mythic paradigm itself' (1995: 44). Despite the façade of reassuring detachment, our laughter at this comic plight is muffled and fractured. As Kurt Vonnegut wrote: 'A dog cannot get through a gate to bite a person or fight another dog, and so he digs dirt. It solves nothing, of course, yet the dog must do something. Crying or laughing is what a human being would do in the same situation' (Vonnegut 1988: 256). Ultimately, *El Jarama* is a novel of accommodation under Francoist repression. Far from wish-fulfilment, this is the false step and the lead balloon. One early reader suggested that Sánchez Ferlosio only killed off Lucita because he became bored with his own story (quoted in Pérez 2008: 70). The ironies of tiresomeness abound, for he would abandon the novel form for over four decades. *El Jarama* is a work of stasis, indifference, resignation, and the briefest of pleasures, and its oddments of humour provoke a knowing laughter, a chuckling sigh of submission. This is the comedy of qualm and comedown.

# Conclusion

## A Hollow Humour

*I am never serious [said K.], and therefore I have to make jokes do duty for both jest and earnest. But I was arrested in earnest.*

– Franz Kafka, deleted fragment from *The Trial* (first published 1925)

This thesis expands the fields of Spanish literary criticism and Humour Studies by introducing two new concepts: grey humour and *comic-kazi* humour. Both are humours of tedium, curtailing fun, refusing to ‘play along’, and enshrining a deep malaise. Its findings have significant implications for criticism on postwar Spanish literature, which has classified social realism as insipid and dispassionate (though cf. Perriam et al. 2000 for an interesting re-evaluation) and overlooked its comedy. Until now this funniness had remained both unexamined and ubiquitous, worked into the very fabric of these novels – albeit lurking, hushed, beneath the surface. In what follows we shall encapsulate what this thesis demonstrates about its collection of 30 social realist novels as texts in and of themselves and as representatives of a supposedly well-known genre, before stressing what difference these new comic readings make to their literary embodiment of their world and their time. In what follows we shall summarise all chapters, review answers to initial research questions, and offer conclusions on 1) the viability of comic realism, 2) the success or failure of grey humour, and 3) a fresh understanding of humour as based on the paradoxically *non-humorous*.

The Introduction explored the critical commonplace that characterises Spanish social realism as tragic, rotten, and harrowing. Contemporary reviewers were almost unanimous in this view: William John Grupp (1956: 202) attacked the ‘banality and bitterness that most modern writers would serve up’, and Federico Sopeña (1951) feared that this generation of authors would be labelled ‘del asco y de la amargura’. It showed that Spanish literary criticism has largely upheld this interpretation ever since, focusing far too much on the novels’ misfortune and solemnity and very little on the comedy and absurdity that punctuate this cheerlessness. Contemporary scholar Castellet, citing Sopeña’s article, noted

that some readers had even begun to speak of 'lo insoportable que se está poniendo la literatura patria' (1955: 72-3), and reviewer R. Morales (1954: 25) deemed 'censurable' the penchant of writers to discuss 'ciertas funciones fisiológicas', which provoked both 'un irremediable asco' and even 'ya nos causa hastío'. Ironically, the genre had almost made a mockery of itself, fast becoming as tedious and as mind-numbing – a prime example of grey humour – as the social reality it attempted to convey.

This thesis has put the smile back into the ostensible unsmiling genre, emphasising a tragicomic overlap and a futile humour of loneliness. Contrary to critics who castrate the comic, it makes room for merriment, crying (like Ralph Ellison, to an interviewer who asked questions solely on the 'meaning' of *Invisible Man*), 'Look, didn't you find the book at all funny?' (1995: 17) Of course, the novels feature a numbing thickness, a sludge or mire that decelerates and detains, sapping all energy. But, as laugh lines form around tearful eyes, this is intensified and complicated by dark, grey laughter. Making fatigue funny, it encourages a mirthful response before asking why we did not react with a straight face. For humour theorist Nelson, comedy returns us 'to the awareness that life is a struggle in which nobody can always be on the winning side, and where each of us will sometimes fill the role of victim, scapegoat, or fool' (1990: 186). With no prospect of stimulation or invigoration, laughter flares up, shudders, and is quickly toppled. In a delicious paradox, the funniest aspect of the postwar social realist novel is – to quote Bercovitch (2002: 134) on Twain's deadpan humour in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* – its insistent 'denial of comic relief' through the humorous aesthetics of deferral. The well-timed quip raises but a slight smirk.

Chapter 1 examined self-reflexive irony – far from familiar joy-bringing, optimistic connotations of funniness – in Laforet's *Nada* (1945). Miserable humour sheds an oblique light on social conditions, speaking a wretched truth that cannot be said – or tends not to be said – by other means. I explored both the backfiring, self-sabotaging *comic-kazi* humour of the fundamentally *unfunny* and the ironic comedy of the killjoy or spoil-sport who experiences the chilling realisation that happiness is unobtainable. *Nada* is both a wretched, disconsolate tale (as criticism has established) but also a narrative at pains to dissect the functions – and failures – of humour. I scrutinised analyses of women's comedy, but argued that, as turgid laughter is perpetually hollowed-out, perils vastly outweigh promises..

Chapter 2 demonstrated Camilo José Cela's comically detached attachment, which flirts with paradox, ambivalence, a flicker of resentment, and a diabolical thrill at the perverse. As this conclusion's Kafkaian epigraph attests, the central concerns of what it means to be 'just joking', and whether irony is a 'get-out-of-jail-free' card, are crucial when death and destruction are involved. Cela combines the directness of accurate reportage of the life of the times with the indirectness crucial to his anti-sentimental comedy. Multiple voices oscillate deftly between sympathy and hostility, indifference and histrionics, raillery and rage. A narrator who purports to be dignified, reticent, diffident, and fond of keeping his cards close to his chest revels in a gleeful, impish, and often-perverse humour. His ambiguity is that, like a cancer, he erodes everything in his path, and his mock-critical apparatus makes no distinction between the blameless and the wicked. What leaves him cold in one moment may tickle his fancy or even drive him to splenetic fury the next. Irony is by turns protective armour and scathing weapon, never cosseting its readers, who derive a probing pleasure from this counterbalance.

Chapter 3 focused on Sánchez Ferlosio's *El Jarama* (1956), achieving a shift in the comic imaginary towards a feel-*bad* grey humour of hiatus, hardship, blockage, and delay. Laughing into a vacuum, this comedy under duress is conservative and limited, always retaining an undertow of failure and turpitude at something radically amiss.<sup>42</sup> Playful pain can only go so far, and the reader rustles and shifts in their seat. The comedy is of shame, indolence, and capitulation rather than social change, for malingerers are unable to laugh off their insignificance.

We shall now review the central modes of grey humour discussed throughout, following the five styles outlined at the outset (p. 11).

### 1.

The humour of hardship accentuates poverty and squalor, but generic boundaries are always unstable – if not falling apart, then certainly torn at the edges – when comedy and

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<sup>42</sup> See Appendix for analysis of a wide array of postwar social realist novels, and bourgeois social novels of the 1960s, focusing on a humour that pinpoints the absurdity that, even at *fiestas*, the pursuit of pleasure ends in punishment and sorrow.

realism are aligned. Although Eric Weitz argues that part of comedy *'effectively means knowing to take it as comedy'* (2009: 31, italics his), this thesis argues that generic hybridity is key to the postwar social realist novel, which both asserts and retreats from its own funniness. Grey humour of postponement and suspension is deliberately stultifying and unstable, displaying a certain unease in its own skin and taking the road of *most* resistance. Although Noël Carroll presents a dichotomy between horror, which 'turns the screw', and comedy, which 'releases it' (2007: 147), humour is not 'time out', comic 'relief', but an unsettling rejection of respite. Despite critical efforts to pin postwar Spanish social realism down to a set of straightforward features (dispassionate, sombre, monotonous), it incites dark, unnerving laughter through disorder, overelaboration, excess, parody, and the foiling of expectations. After all, both realism and comedy seek to expose artifice and to bring their audiences back to a common ground, fighting to face 'the awful truth', to use the title of a film comedy from the 1930s. Perhaps, to quote humour scholar Harry Levin, even comical literature can be 'complementary to life' (1963: 20-21).

## 2.

Postwar realist comedy intensifies the ambiguous role of the narrator, and critics on the genre have often struggled with this uncertainty. For instance, Janet Pérez writes that social realism both 'eschewed stylistic refinement... and authorial intervention' and 'permitted a measure of subjectivity' (2008: 65). The narrator's voice, predominantly in Cela and Laforet, is scheming and guileful, rocking the boat and swinging between composure (conveying despicable anguish without a flinch) and bursts of idiosyncratic humour. The humour plunges the characters deeper into their imbroglio. Moreover, although the novels purport to convey the organic language of bustling metropolises, ventriloquism often plays a cumbersome role. However half-hearted and hesitant, the comic spark is stubbornly ready to burst into flame and highlight – anti-realistically – the danger of taking everything at face (word) value. It represents and degrades its object, as though fumbling towards the most opportune method of transcribing lived experience. The Celian narrator, in particular, is caught between the Scylla of callous indifference and the Charybdis of overwrought paroxysm. The social realist smile of discontent interrogates its own practices.

### 3.

This thesis gives name to a comedy wholly overlooked both in Spanish literary criticism and in Humour Theory altogether: grey humour. This is the twitch, tug, and quiver of the comic; the funniness of the snag and stumbling block; the humour of hiatus, hindrance, and hold-up. Both fields must incorporate an amusement that is fundamentally cheerless, founded on bathos and absentmindedness (Bergson (1999 [1900]: 146). Vivacious turns vacillating, passionate turns perfunctory, and grey humour wins out – or rather, suffers a crushing defeat – in Francoist Spain. The women in *Fiesta al noroeste* (1952) speak ‘como si hablase el tiempo, más allá de la indiferencia’ (94), and Sebastián, in *Con el viento solano* (1956), breaks off from an engaging story about ‘cosas que no son de hoy’ because... ‘No tienen gracia’ (115). The protagonist of Celaya’s *Lázaro calla* (1949) puts it best, with an absurd paradox: ‘Cuanto más hablábamos, mayor silencio se hacía en torno nuestro’ (253). Moreover, the novels’ comic aesthetics of delay are always arresting (in both senses), for a diverting aura of restless, dynamic frustration – despite its bristling, galloping energy – is amusingly abrogated and reduced to nothing. The comic drives forward but also retards and slackens, sporadically. Grey humour unfolds thusly:

- i. A resigned monotony threatens to absorb readers into its world-weariness.
- ii. A dash of humour, however deflating, breaks through to encourage a sense of defiance and delight.
- iii. After this initial fizz, the hopeful ‘Yes!’, enthusiasm crumbles and implodes, lurching back to tedium. The comedy (analysed chiefly in chapters 3 and 6) plays out as follows:  
“Lo and behold...! Ah. No. False alarm.”  
“Oh, right. No matter, then... I’ll see myself out.”
- iv. A renewed emphasis on the grim, low-spirited cheerlessness of life.

The paradoxical urge to ‘pent’ and ‘vent’, to weaken and intensify, leads to nothing but a standstill. Contrary to Gaut’s theory that ‘sombre... picks out a demerit’ (2007: 36) within comedy, we argued, in line with Holm (2017:14) on deadpan, that the narrator deliberately purports to be unaware or uninterested in his underlying humour. This leaves the pitiable

funniness of what might have been, putting the accent on tedium. 'Here we go again', it says. 'On with the job'. Laughter, hinting at destruction, leaves but the deadening paradox of hopeless hope. Grey humour says 'Consider it done', but, inevitably, nothing happens.

#### 4.

Fourthly, this thesis has emphasised the self-reflexive, deeply physical, *comic-kazi* humour of characters caught in interminable inertia. For comedian Jerry Lewis, 'the premise of all comedy is a man in trouble' (quoted in Dale 2000: x), but in the Spanish postwar novel said figure derides all targets equitably ('equal opportunites mockery') with enough self-awareness to deride him- or herself. For Wilhelm Buch, echoing the title of this thesis, 'Humor es... cuando *a pesar de todo*, nos reímos' (quoted in Carballo 1966: 12, italics mine). The physical cleavage between mind and body erodes the binary distinction 'within' vs. 'outside' through the appreciation that the Other is the Self. These *anti*-performances are unduly aestheticized enactments of an ugliness not worn with chic but rather self-deprecation. Individuals follow Nietzsche's exhortation 'learn to laugh at yourselves as one must laugh!' (2003 [1883-1891]: 226); however, the articulation of alterity that humour provides engenders but the laughter of lamentation, more groan than guffaw. 'What the heck, I'll laugh anyway'. The interstitial space that humour opens up between the body and its own self-consciousness points to an absence and deficiency at the heart of being. To quote from *Encerrados con un solo juguete* (Marsé, 1960), as its characters contemplate their 'impotencia y su desidia', they 'acumula[n] ironía contra sí mismo', and '[s]onr[íen]' (11) at their absurdity. This is not wide-eyed passion but lacklustre laughter, the resigned Bronx cheer, the drowsy yawn of tedium.

#### 5.

Finally, genuine merriment at *fiestas* (Christmas dinner, café recreation, daytrippers' bacchanal) is unobtainable for the characters of the Spanish postwar realism. As Jesús Fernández Santos puts it in his social realist short story collection *Cabeza rapada* (1958), 'la cena, el teatro, una cita normal o clandestina, son incompatibles con el presente riguroso al cual están entregados' (214). Even at its most cavalier, humour carries a disturbing

*memento mori* through *Gluckschmerz* (sadness at others' good fortune). The rumour of humour says 'we're all in the same boat – and it's sinking'. Whilst theorist Gruner's 'game of humor' posits 'laughter equals winning' (1997: 8), this is the comedy of comedown, defeat and dull ache. Laughter – of the limited, not the riveted – briefly extracts us from plight only to ensnare us ever more tightly within it.

We shall conclude by reflecting on three core ideas: the feasibility of comic realism, the success or failure of grey humour, and the disturbing nothingness at the heart of the comic.

Firstly, comic realism demonstrates that nature is not neatly packaged and tied with a bow – in Zupancic's words, 'not as "natural" as we might think, but is itself driven by countless contradictions and discrepancies' (2008: 7). Humour is about the 'as if', a glimpse of the truth beneath the veneer. Furthermore, if storytelling involves a licence for elaboration ('se le añadían [al cuento] un par de ceros; la cosa es relatar' (*El Jarama*, 205)), the uneasy imbalance of tenderness and cruelty renders realistic fiction a contradiction in terms and *vraisemblance* an oxymoron. Yet, although comedy and realism are uneasy bedfellows, they coexist because, as theorist Elliott Oring makes clear, the former 'often benefits from some proximity to reality. That is what gives it its "edge"' (Oring 2016: 104). Realism is *all too real*, emphasising that we are *only* – barely – human, and nothing more. It is amusing, and terrible, because it's *true*. To paraphrase Harold Pinter on *The Caretaker* (1960), the social realist novel is funny, up to a point, but 'Beyond that point it ceases to be funny, and it was because of that point that I wrote it' (Pinter, Letter to *The Sunday Times*, 14/07/1960). My contribution has been to demonstrate an ultimate irony: that the works most commonly identified as canonical (*Nada*, *El Jarama*, *La colmena*), are the most humorous, lacking the aesthetic and affective markers (Twain's 'nubs', 'points', 'snappers' (1992 [1897]: 201-02)) that conventionally help guide audience interpretation regarding tragedy or comedy. This calls for both a radical re-examination of the genre within studies of the Spanish twentieth-century novel and for a brand-new category within Humour Studies of amusement based on *boredom*.

Secondly, this thesis interrogated the fundamental efficacy of humour in Spanish social realism. If there was place for social realism under *franquismo*, its essence was

noncompliance. Social realism strives to counter univocal Francoist propaganda, which disseminated the false image of an essentially prosperous, outward-looking Spain, with its own, *bona fide* truth. Its humour of hardship and grey humour, revealing that merrymaking is constantly hollow, shed light on postwar anguish and humiliating social conditions. Readers share a furtive accord – Bergson’s ‘secret freemasonry, or even complicity’ (1999 [1900]: 6) – with joker and fellow laughers, revealing what Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel terms ‘the malady of the ideal’ (1985: *passim*). Ultimately, the dark humour underlines that what was happening in Spain at the time was no joke at all, a dispirited attitude captured by one character in Goytisolo’s *Duelo en el paraíso* (1955): ‘Estoy harta de llevar hasta el fin esta comedia’ (179).

However, the nihilistic, tawdry realism also suggests that the comedy of accumulated frustration normalises the status quo, offering no upward curve after inaction. Whilst this pervasive, suffocating atmosphere could be viewed as another ironic commentary on Francoism, its overriding impression is lethargy, stasis, and death, leaving no space for insurrectionary impulse. Guffaw becomes grimace, and because grey humour fails to make the best of a bad situation or, through laughter, to become ‘master of that which is horrifying’ (Ionesco 1959), the novels skewer the cul-de-sac of comedy: its critical inability to enhance existence. This unhinged feel creates no call to arms but a misalliance between restless irritation and passive resignation, encapsulated in Luis Romero’s paradox in *La noria* (1951): ‘esta diminuta lucha, sin luchar, por la vida’ (81). Crushed, irresolute acquiescence is the only ‘refuge’ against despair. If this is a victory, its persistent underreaching resembles a defeat.

The leaden-footed characters that populate the genre helplessly yearn to matter and to be accounted for. Yet, addled by existence itself, they receive no such assurances. The generic tenor is not so much ‘Come on!’ as ‘Come off it’, ‘That’s enough, now’, ‘Call it off’. In this cocktail of anti-cathartic lethargy, futility, gridlock, and disinclination, everything plays out in slow motion. Midlife misery-mongers can see the trap into which they are falling, yet are powerless to stop the slow, aching slump to defeat. Freud described humour, as part of his ‘Release’ theory, as as a ‘triumph of narcissism [...] the triumph not only of the ego, but the pleasure-principle’ (Freud 1928: 3), but if a momentary victory is wrested back from the

jaws of defeat, the Spanish postwar novel takes one final, bitterly disappointing turn, heading *back* to that very failure. Enticing our amusement, it asks ‘So, who’s laughing now?’, leaving us at a standstill. It underscores the liability of laughter, suggesting that it is not *enough* to wink slyly at devastating anguish.

Social realist humour expresses hunger for an ameliorated world and then laughs at itself for such wishful thinking. If, as theorist Harral writes, the ‘mission of mirth’ is to ‘replace fear with faith’ (1962: 31), this humour accentuates the *dirth of mirth*, negating all attempts to ‘laugh away’, ‘laugh off’, or laugh one’s way back to humanity. As Critchley puts it, ‘The extraordinary thing about comedy is that it returns us to the very ordinariness of the ordinary’ (1999: 235-36). Social realism encourages a gallows amusement at the pathos of humanity’s foibles and woes; however, this grey laughter of the fair to middling – the sigh of the so-so, the ‘Fair enough’ – turns its ridicule upon us. *Comic-kazi*, self-sabotage humour backfires on itself through extreme dullness. The shifting sands of comedy affirm, as Hamm says in Beckett’s *Endgame*, ‘You’re on earth, there’s no cure for that!’ (1968 [1964]: 53). There is no (comic) relief for grief – for both character and reader. Social realist humour is noncommittal and tentative, inciting the smile only to wipe it off our face. At the end of *El Jarama*, *La mina*, and *Tormenta de verano*, for example, no significant change is present, or even in the offing.

Ultimately, this is a conservative funniness, saying ‘Things cannot continue like this’ before surrendering to fatigue. Evasive characters wallow in self-pity and the tempting allure of resignation. If the fate of Beckett’s (anti)heroes is to spin incessant webs of words against the silence, the fate of the social realists’ is to shake their fists at the world, kick their chair in frustration, and shrug, powerlessly, at their inescapable fate. It is no more effective than cursing the rain. To repeat the findings of Houllebecq, ‘[t]he tragic cuts in at that precise point where the derisory can no longer be perceived as *fun*’ (2001: 50). Characters strive to salvage a last crumb of self-respect but can only ‘patalear en el vacío lo mismo que muñecos’<sup>43</sup> (*Fiestas*, 126), and conclude, like Feste, ‘The rain it raineth every day’ (*Twelfth Night* V.i.383). As we have shown throughout, the only ‘solution’ available is not to think at

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<sup>43</sup> Goytisolo had used the same phrase in *Duelo en el Paraíso*, when Estalisláa warns Abel that killing a bird is as ‘absurdo como patalear en el vacío’ (190).

all. *Es lo que hay, qué se le va a hacer*. Comic realism dashes hopes, rains on the parade, and its 'defiance' merely *lets us down easily*. No sleep could cure this tiredness. When not even 'el chiste encubridor de la tristeza, que fija la sonrisa de la marcha' (*Gran Sol*, 16-17) can deflect the pain, this is the cul-de-sac of comedy. Humour failed in social realist novels, working not to sharpen perceptions but to dull them.

Lastly, moving beyond the specific Spanish context and into broader Humour Theory, this thesis extends the scope of existing models by emphasising the loneliness, isolation, and *boredom* in comedy.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, it illuminates an *unamusing amusement*, the humourlessness of humour, stressing the vacuity intrinsic to the *comedy of comedown*, the *humour of hiatus*, *hollow humour*, and the *laughter of let-down*. This comedy *about the failure of comedy* is often signalled as amusing but is deliberately non-funny through a frustrating narrative drag. I built on Von Wilpert's idea of 'humorloser Scherz' (in Bloom 2010: 81), the joke without humour, and Shane Weller's reading of Beckettian 'anethically posthumorous' humour (2006: 133) to appreciate that, in postwar Spanish social realism, life is a dumb-show or a dismal gag. Novelists find sometimes-suppressed, sometimes-cacophonous laughter in the general laughlessness, and their humour of shortfall, scarcity, and impasse laughs regardless, no matter what. Yet even the last roll of the dice leads to nothing in particular. The comedy laughs *without laughing* ('rió sin risa', *Central eléctrica*, 79), revealing a void at the heart of the amusing.

As broad laugh becomes rictus grin, the ironist often despairs of his metier, negating the opportunity for humour as critique. Indeed, comedian Garrison Keillor tired of the caustic persona, yearning to 'Quit comedy and just write irritation for a while' (quoted in Kaufman 1997: 147), and at times the reader of the Spanish social realist novel experiences comedic fatigue, buffeted and pummelled on all sides. Kurt Vonnegut observed a tendency for comedians to turn into 'intolerably unfunny pessimists' the longer they attempt 'to laugh rather than weep about demoralizing information' (Vonnegut 1992: 183). Familiarity with the comic breeds contempt, more bitter and bilious than genuinely sympathetic. In Manuel Arce's *Oficio de muchachos* (1963), bored protagonist Nacho *laughing* to himself, wonders

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<sup>44</sup> In contrast to theorists – e.g. Berger (1997) and Crichtley (2002) – who emphasise fellow-feeling and contagious bonhomie.

what lies behind the surrounding women: 'Uno buscaba bajo sus ropas esperando hallar algo; algo que llenase nuestro vacío y solo encontraba un vacío mayor, más profundo' (259). This is the ultimate absurdity: below the emptiness is... emptiness. Indeed, Jewish playwright Peter Barnes has said that on 'good nights', audiences of his bitterly comic *Laughter!* (1978) would have learned *not* to laugh at the jokes in his epilogue (see Dukore 1981: 38). If the heart of humour is something crucially *unfunny*, perhaps humour is its own vacuum, defined merely by that which it is not.

In conclusion, realism, refusing rose-tinted glasses, upturns stones to reflect quite directly the sordid undersides, flaws, struggles and failures of life. Yet the Spanish postwar kind, weaving funniness out of the thread of unvarnished, everyday life, proves that comedy at its best reflects all of that, too, while also then moving beyond it to echo the ways in which the individual seeks to deny, face down, or overcome the tragic. In some such comedy, the result is catharsis, resolution and even redemption or healing through laughter. However, in comic social realism, the result is laughter that comes from the ultimate futility of trying to *resist the tragic* – the absurdity of striving to bring sense and order to a world that refuses to conform to our grand solutions and schemes, that will confound our pretensions to resolve internal contradictions. The human condition, qua human, is ripe for debunking. Grey humour accepts the tragic as a default mode of human existence, and rebuts – mocking, in a comic fashion – the notion that by our own efforts we may overcome it. This rueful cop-out of comedy is Martín reciting 'Imagen alta y tierna de consuelo' to prostitute Pura, confusing 'premio' with 'precio' (*La colmena*, 164). It is Andrea's desperate search for 'el lado cómico del asunto' (*Nada*, 77) while so much within and around her is in meltdown, 'heroically' smothering the 'negra pistola' (97) but lampooned for her delusions (98). It is Julio 'reconnecting' with nature by urinating on it (*El Jarama*, 347), having decided, ever so hesitantly, to attend a preliminary meeting about doubtful, short-term employment. Desolate scenarios all, yet comic precisely because the protagonists are so earnestly labouring to fight, suppress and sublimate the tragic. Much could be achieved from a study of grey humour in neorealist films (*Surcos*, *La calle sin sol*, *La venganza*, *Cielo negro*, *Los golfos*, and others), which has likewise been overlooked.

The postwar Spanish environment seems 'una vida que no tiene chiste' (*El Jarama*, 57), but social realism finds comedy in the quotidian. If we cackle, we wear the false rictus grin, and the sunken laughter dies on our lips. The overspill of debilitating humour, deriving from the 'demonio del tedio' (*En la hoguera*, 131), asks what remains amid the titter's debris. '¿Para qué seguir representando una comedia cuando el drama se avecina?', asks B, preposterously *aware* of the saddening quandary (*Pabellón de reposo*, 100). Because... what else to do, except 'matar las horas porque sí, porque había que matarlas' (*Encerrados con un solo juguete*, 95) – to kill time, which would have passed anyway? The humdrum humour of hiatus is a stoic droop, an aching slouch and slump, fading into blankness. '¿Es posible que sea yo', asks Andrea, 'la protagonista de tan ridícula escena?' (*Nada*, 222). Life is a cruel joke, and she is the punchline. Herein lies the wan smile.

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## Appendix A

### The (Amusing) Dearth of Mirth in Social Realism

Nothing's more fatuous than a fatuous smile.

– Catullus, *Carmina xxxixi*

This thesis has offered detailed analysis of grey humour and its attendant challenges to realism in three canonical social-realist novels. In Appendix A I explore a broad range of further social-realist texts which contain humorous elements until now overlooked, in order to explain that this amusement is not isolated but rather widespread across the genre. Specifically, I analyse two central manifestations of humour: 1) the amusing, dispiriting failure of comedy itself, and attendant interrogations of realism, in four novels by López Salinas, Romero, María de Lera, and López Pacheco, and 2) the bathetic, deathly breakdown of Bakhtinian carnival celebration, in a range of novels by Suárez Carreño, Fernández Santos, Matute, Aldecoa, and Juan Goytisolo.

#### 1. Lacklustre Laughter

##### Luis Romero – *La noria* (1951)

Like *La colmena*, *La noria* features a multiplicity of voices that comically loop back on themselves; however, self-aware ruminations invariably end in a bitter, uncreative, unprogressive slump. For instance, when art critic Cazeaux ogles a young woman, he thinks 'Lindas nalgas; [...] El mundo marcha. Una generación y otra. Anclado. ¡No viene! Me fastidia estar solo... Parezco una de estas... ¡Uf!' (74). After the controlled, bawdy humour, he is suddenly struck by the fear that he be one of many. The comic agony is that his entire generation is 'Anclado', and he is also *seated* at this moment, passively observing. As we have seen time and again in this thesis, the body becomes self-conscious of its own physicality, leading to disinterest and submission. A *noria* is an amusement park Big Wheel (symbolising organised merriment), yet its plaintive, circular melancholy – round and round, going nowhere – captures postwar tedium. As the narrator notes of Miguel Ángel, 'Está

solo. Magníficamente solo' (77), and, when Roberto and Planell leave, Cazeaux thinks 'Me fatigan. Cansancio' (77). After a few staccato, stark remarks about another woman ('La mujer, sí. Inteligente. Coqueta, claro.[...]'), the parenthesis of thought ends: '([...]Fatiga. Desamparo. Solo. ¡Dios mío!, estoy solo.)'. Under the smokescreen of mirth and wealth, Cazeaux is unsatisfied. The humour of hardship focalises his mindset to highlight widespread misery, parting company with reality only to thrust us back into it.

However, these sardonic, inadvertent thoughts, lifted directly from characters' minds, present a challenge to realism. Contemporary critic Entrambasaguas criticised Romero's penchant for 'una escena nauseabunda o una expresión de ordinaria grosería o de escatológica alusión, con que ahora tratan de ser realistas y vitales escritores sin vuelo' (1952: 4). The ironic tone demonstrates that humour ('ordinaria grosería', 'escatológica') was perceived by early readers, *already* frustrated ('*tratan*') by caustic embellishment. Romero paints with conflicting brushstrokes, switching on a sixpence from touching compassion to lewd acerbity. Like Cela, he upsets the apple-carts of decorum: 'al catedrático se le ha pegado el pantalón a las nalgas. Ensayo varios procedimientos discretos para despegarlo, pues le produce una desazón inaguantable. Por fin lo consigue y eso le causa gran bienestar' (74). Ironically, these 'procedimientos' are not at all 'discretos'; the voice brazenly cherry-picks its comic moments with little concern for impartiality or objectivity. The comedy, showing no squeamishness, considers no cows as sacred.

Critics have often disagreed about the role of unreliable narration in social realism, although few have analysed its humour. Whilst for John Butt, who traces a 'natural development' from Baroja to Sánchez Ferlosio, objectivity requires 'the disappearance of the author' (1978: 58-60), for Brad Epps the social realist author is 'not so much "dead" as self-effacing, a figure who eludes the mirror in order to turn it elsewhere – as if its self-reflexive glare were too troubling, or too inconsequential, to bear' (2003: 195). In *La noria*, the objective, detached façade fades rapidly:

(—...¿Para qué apretarles en esta asignatura? "Diga usted, mancebo, ¿qué clase de estudios va a seguir?" "Ingeniería, medicina?" "¿Qué se propone ser, picapleitos, veterinario, arquitectoooo?" Pues al cuerno, con saber quién escribió el *Quijote* y leer

a don Rafael Pérez y Pérez, hay bastante. Aprobado. ¡Fuera! ¡A la mi...! Mesura, mesura; hay que cumplir con el deber y examinar a todos. A todos absolutamente sin dejar uno; a los necios también... Apurar el cáliz hasta las heces. Deber p-r-o-f-e-s-i-o-n-a-l.) (37)

The grey humour of setback, though rapid tonal shifts, is absolute: ‘([...]Sobresaliente por haber leído el *Lazarillo de Tormes* y sobresaliente porque le gustó.’). To paraphrase Nabokov and Gold (1967: 96), one discerns Romero’s sad smile as he walks hand in hand with his characters. The lag of laughter reveals an exasperated cantankerous, paradoxically ill-humoured humour, gridlocked and unvarying.

Contemporary critics concluded that Romero sympathised with his characters.

Entrambasaguas (1952: 4) found a ‘fuerza viril, humanísima’ and, for William John Grupp, whilst others ‘have sought to satirize or ridicule humanity [...] exposing man’s bitterness’, Romero was interested in ‘treating man with tenderness and understanding, on exposing his capacity for good’ (1956: 202). Once again, early critics were aware of the genre’s *humour* (‘satirize’). However, as with Cela, hostility and friendliness are united, and Romero prefers comically to denigrate rather than to extol. Following the portrayal of one character who finally pours his ‘ternura contenida años y años’ onto his daughter ‘Berta, su cordon umbilical con el mundo’ (92), pitiless humour suddenly drains the scene of warmth: ‘Berta no es guapa, es más bien fea, y lo que es peor, no tiene gracia, no tiene atractivo’ (92). Irony builds a chastening portrayal. Similarly, one woman is so disgusted by her dark thoughts that she visits Mosén Antón, ‘su confesor’:

Algunas épocas ha pensado que si su esposo hubiera muerto en acción de guerra, como por entonces les pasó a otros en África, ella cobraría el doble de pensión, con lo cual se hubiera podido arreglar mejor. Después de todo, hace tanto tiempo que ¿qué importaría que hubiera sido de un balazo o de unas fiebres malignas? (216)

The range of irony is riotous, rendering life and death a fruitless waste. Humour creates tension only to release it, but in so doing it neutralises all affinity with the characters. Accordingly, for instance, when a drunk man hugs the beggar el “Sardineta”, he takes full

advantage, checking his pockets for loose change: 'Hay que aprovechar esta ocasión' (223). To create comedy, more comfortable punching *down* than lifting *up*, Romero must emphasise disengagement and unscrupulousness. The serious is suddenly ridiculous, and what mattered so deeply disappears in a flash; however, the process exposes a sense of emptiness and subsiding within the comic.

The characters' wearisome struggles to survive and make light of grimness fall distinctly flat. When insurance broker Roberto drinks with friends, 'parece que renacen en él las viejas ilusiones. Sabe que es una trampa, un espejismo, pero por unos momentos sueña que otra vez es él mismo, en vez del pequeño fantasma un poco vergonzante en que le ha convertido esta diminuta lucha, sin luchar, por la vida' (81). Undoubtedly, the characters suffer 'insatisfacción con su vida actual' (Wehney 2009: 37); however, with paradoxical, droll *absurdity* ('diminuta lucha, sin luchar'), despite articulating an acute frustration with their predicament (aware of alcohol's 'espejismo'), they are too phlegmatic and docile to do anything about it. Too steeped in self-pity to make an active difference, grey humour gives the lie to our feel-good assumptions about laughter. Existence is insignificant – hostile, even – and they know it, but they stay put regardless. *La noria* features the prolonged comedy of shattered dreams, squandered opportunities, and broken punchlines. Jokes gradually stretch out until they are no longer jokes at all.

### **Armando López Salinas – *La mina* (1960)**

*La mina* is often hailed as the 'most representative' (Gonzalo Navajas 1987: 124) social realist novel, and critics observe 'intolerable working conditions in southern Spain, internal emigration patterns and their consequences, and the exploitation of workers' (Margaret E. W. Jones 1985: 59) and 'the shocking conditions of the mines [...] grave social and economic inequalities' (Julia Riordan-Goncalves 2010: 12) within its pages. At times the novel certainly highlights wretched social conditions, such as when Carmela repeats three times in the same paragraph 'Estas cosas no debían de pasarles a los pobres' (107). Likewise, Gil Casado (1968: 49), Pérez (2008: 69-70), Villanueva 1994: 111-123), Martínez Cachero (1985: 193) and Jones (1985: 35, 46-7) all examine the realism of authentically vernacular speech in *La*

*mina*, which often reads as documentary evidence of a previously neglected, tragic reality. In a 2003 speech dedicated to García Hortelano, López Salinas extolled the transforming power of social realism, praising those who ‘mantuvieron encendida la llama de la esperanza en tiempos de silencio’ (López Salinas 2007: 48). This leads Julia Riordan-Goncalves to conclude that the social realist novel ‘subvert[ed] the power held by the Franco dictatorship’ (2010: 149). Indeed, the 60s saw the working classes achieve a newfound voice. ‘Comisiones Obreras’ (CCOO) trade unions were generated, and a 1961 law allowed for labour conflicts (solely on economic issues) (Radcliffe 2017: 245).

However, I argue that rampant grey humour and grotesque portrayals of death complicate realism and break down the novel’s critique of social structures. A fraught, draining *comedy* renders the misfortune ever bleaker, yet remains stuck in a rut. For instance, García passionately denounces the *mineros*’ conditions: ‘Y el calor y el polvo agujereándote la piel. [...] Los sábados, si todavía puedes, te acuestas con tu mujer para divertirte, o te gastas los curators en la taberna’ (91). However, Pedro immediately *jokes* that, due to physical strain, ‘Tendrías que ser culebra y cambiar la piel cada poco’, and Pedro ‘echó la broma la perorata de García’:

–García se queja más que una preñada. En cuanto le vi caer por la cuarta con esa pinta de vago se lo dije: no te metas a minero, no te ganes el pan con las manos, métete a guardia o a sacristán.

–Bueno, dejarlo ya. No estamos en un velorio. (91)

What begins as socio-political critique sharply shoots off into dark humour, undercutting the message with comic punctuation and the wisecrack’s panache. García ‘murmuraba entre dientes’ that ‘Llegar a viejo es lo peor que a uno le puede pasar’ (113), but ‘El Extremeño’ bursts out *laughing*, and cracks a joke: ‘¿A quién le llamas viejo, García? Tú y tu mujer no calentáis un huevo siquiera. El Felipe, aprende de él, no hace más que colgar los pantalones en la cama y la parienta se le hincha como un panderó’. It is unsurprising that ‘Toda la cuadrilla se echó a reír’ (113). The humour intensifies anguish through the lag of laughter. Indeed, the common joshing comes to an abrupt end: ‘Vino el facultativo y dijo que ya está bien de puntales’. Suddenly reminded of their quandary, the ‘cuadrilla dejó de reír’

(repeated), and García's good-humoured demeanour was just a momentary façade: 'No tenía cariño a la carretilla [...]... Odiaba el trabajo. Notaba dentro de él una amargura que le comía las entrañas' (113). He appreciates comedy's defectiveness:

No podía aliviar su trabajo con canciones al igual que los otros compañeros. Dentro de él algo hablaba con mudo lenguaje, el de la opresión y la desesperación que le atormentaban al comprender que había dejado su vida entre montones de mineral.  
(115)

Once again, a jovial *fiesta* atmosphere leaves much to be desired, and Pedro ironically concludes 'estamos arriaos como los caballos de Joaquín'. Luciano makes light (or rather, *dark*) of his predicament: 'Cuando el minero va de farra no hay otro hombre en la tierra. A las mujeres les gustan los mineros. Lo único malo es que un hombre dura poco en la mina. Los hombres del hondo mueren pronto... ¡Y si al menos uno se pudiera llevar a la tumba a todas las mujeres guapas!' (214) The promise of *fiesta* suddenly swings to social critique – with a grisly bite. Yet the comedy is not life-affirming but merely laugh-affirming. For Gil Casado, *La mina* 'levanta en el lector un sentimiento de solidaridad humana con el proletario' (1973: 169), but the 'victory' is Pyrrhic, resembling defeat.

Moreover, as Gil Casado (1973: 347) has noted, a first draft concluded with a protest by several workers at the mine as a result of the tragic cave-in, but the censors forced López Salinas to provide a more innocuous ending (Gil Casado 1973: 347). Consequently, as Gonzalo Navajas writes, instead of 'presenting an alternative' to a repressive society, '*La mina* confirms the immutability of that society' (1987: 138). Characters are compelled to conceal that truth under false interpretation. All that Laura can do is hope that her husband comes home, 'temerosa siempre de la tragedia que como un ángel malo acecha a todos los mineros' (176-77). Any day could be his last.

### Angel María de Lera – *Hemos perdido el sol* (1964)

In a move typical of social realism, the author's note to *Hemos perdido el sol* foregrounds its realist credentials: 'misión informativa que le confiara el diario "A B C" cerca de los trabajadores españoles en Alemania' (15). María de Lera has 'recorr[ido] el país y habl[ado] con cientos de compatriotas y con numerosos empresarios', and his novel is legitimate 'fruto de tal conocimiento *directo* y de la emoción consiguiente' (my italics). Critics have likewise observed 'un gran estudio de uno de nuestros problemas más acuciantes' (Bosch 1970: 172), as well as 'much evidence' that the text 'bears characteristics of his observations while a reporter' (Thomas 1978: 108). The subtitle *La novela de los trabajadores en Alemania* suggests that it belongs to the objects of study. However, there is also ample room for a personal lilt: not a 'novela sobre Alemania', this is rather 'el relato de la aventura' of characters 'concebidos por su *imaginación*' (my italics). This section will demonstrate how the 'emoción consiguiente', imbued with grey humour, clashes with realism.

The novel's title highlights the funniness of failure, and despite the fact that Rafa is 'saliendo de su éxtasis' at the opening party, he exclaims '¡Qué pequeños somos!' (18). Eduardo even asks, '¿Es que se puede vivir a gusto en un país como este, donde no se ve el sol ni por casualidad?' (33) The answer is emphatically 'no'. *Fiestas* is rapidly corrupted, and a counterfeit, deathly aura haunts all merriment. Ramón disapproves of partying Spaniards who 'acaba[n] siempre haciendo el indio. Seguro que ese no ha estado nunca en los toros y que ese otro no ha oído más flamenco que por la radio... Pero tenemos que parecer todos toreros y gitanos...' (18-19). He hammers home the humiliating catch-22: 'Si te quedas, malo, y si te vuelves, peor. ¡Es como de gritar!' (119) Neither loitering nor highjinks lead to anywhere in particular.

As Regina asks Gonzalo, encapsulating social realism, 'Que vivimos a pesar de todo, ¿verdad?' (111):

–¿Es que es esto vivir? –Regina señalaba a la ventana–. Solo nieve y tristeza por delante... –luego le indicó discretamente el grupo de jóvenes que seguía riendo, para añadir–: Y, por detrás, una alegría que no es la nuestra.

Gonzalo sonrió tristemente.

–Es la vida –dijo moviendo la cabeza–. ¿Te parece poco? (111-2)

Melchor Fernández Almagro is correct that ‘lo que más importa’ in *Hemos perdido el sol* is the ‘condición humana’ (1964: 14), but grey humour keeps the characters frozen and unsatisfied. For theorist Bruce Janoff, black humorists resolve that ‘affirmation simply means continuing to live rather than committing suicide’ (1972: 19). The supposed ‘defiance’ of comedy is hysterically insufficient, failing to do anything with the grief. As the mirth misfires, the final conclusion is lethargy; ‘alegría’ is within touching distance but categorically unattainable. Eduardo frequently thinks of his loved ones in Spain (‘Aquella es mi tierra’); however, Ramón’s incessant dark humour ‘hería por su agrio sarcasmo’: ‘Tu tierra, ¿eh? ¿Cuántas fincas tienes allí? ¿Cuántas? Dilo’ (74). The hint of hope crumbles as soon as voiced. Eduardo and Lucio look at one other, assert ‘Por dondequiera que tiremos somos unos desgraciados’, and literally bury their faces in pillows. The scene is Beckettian in its droll futility: ‘a poco sus respiraciones fueron acompasándose en un dúo sosegado’ (77).

Once again, the bathetic humour of failed *fiestas* is comically deadening. When Eduardo mentions ‘San Pauli’, there is limited, humorously bathetic interest: ‘Gracias. No me he vuelto loco todavía’ (134). Ramón and Rafa do attend, but, after an extended enumeration of repugnant smells (‘a salchichas, a orines, a lupanar’) and faces (‘jóvenes, decrepitos, puros, carcomidos, bellos, horrorosos’) Ramón absurdly and knowingly announces ‘Esto es el célebre San Pauli’ (136-7). At the cabaret, Ramón suddenly realises ‘nos hemos metido en un nido de maricones. Las bailarines son tíos’. Rafa laughs, exclaiming ‘¡Vaya debut que hemos tenido! No se van a reír poco mañana los compañeros’ (141), but this is the wretched laughter of let-down. In a cruel reversal of the idyllic, pastoral fête, the black humour concurs with Withnail (*Withnail And I*, 1987): ‘We’ve gone on holiday by mistake’. The festivities soon end, leaving a grotesque wasteland: ‘la animación de feria había desaparecido y las aceras presentaban un aspecto desolado [...] un vacío de cansancio y de desilusión’ (148). As if the humour weren’t already dark enough, a drunkard shouts ‘¡Felices

Pascuas! ¡Felices Pascuas!', a preposterous mockery of involuntary 'entertainment'. When the dust settles, '[n]i fiesta ni llanto. [...] Solo una muerte pura y un puro silencio. En resumen: una bella muerte embalsamada en silencio' (268). This is a despair that cannot be played off as a joke.

### Jesús López Pacheco – *Central eléctrica* (1957)

Just like *Hemos perdido el sol*, *Central eléctrica* displays its realist credentials. The blurb to the 1982 Destino edition introduces an 'epopeya de sudor y muerte en la que sus tipos, costumbres, paisajes y caracteres son tan verdaderos como la realidad de la que fueron extraídos'. Isaac Rubio agrees, observing 'un realismo crítico y totalizador [...] voluntad realista' across the author's oeuvre (1985: 121), and early Spanish critics called it the best novel ever written on the world of work (Villanueva 1972, Gil Casado 1973, Sobejano 1975). Indeed, when the villagers raise torches, although '[p]arece una escena irreal, algo de brujería o magia', materiality is emphasised: 'Sin embargo, nada más natural: hombres, noche, fuego, piedras' (111). *La vida como es* (Zunzunegui's 1954 novel), not as it *ought* to be. Moreover, the epilogue self-announces as belonging to the "'generación de la realidad", y precisamente de la realidad más dolorosa y más extendida, de una realidad ante la cual un grupo de escritores, en lugar de taparse las narices, los oídos y los ojos, prefirió afrontarla con su imaginación literaria' (345). To paraphrase Shakespeare's 'Sonnet 138', social realism swears – even flaunts – that it is made of truth. However, 'imaginación' hints at subjectivity.

López Pacheco defends the subversive potential of realism, for defendants of the 'ideología dominante' loathe literature that seeks 'un conocimiento profundo y total de la realidad' (344). Whereas '[u]na clase ascendente ataca siempre con la realidad', a 'clase descendente' seeks to mythify and idealise ('eficacia mitificadora'). Yet humour is absolutely central to *Central eléctrica*, helping to come to grips (and terms) with precisely these 'malos aspectos, las malas palabras'. The problem, however, is that comedy fails to provide welcome respite. As Juan Herrero Senés writes of the comic *vanguardista* within Spain, s/he seeks to "'ahogar" la melancolía, la tristeza, la pena, apartarla del discurso, "taparla" con risa, celebración, jolgorio, regocijo' (2006: 290). Ironically, as laughter rings hollow in *Central*

*elétrica*, this sense of ‘drowning’ and ‘clouding’ obscures tragic social conditions, rife under Franco’s government.

Moreover, complicating realism, narratorial ‘nonintervention’ is a dangerous, elusive game. One man looks at his wife ‘como una cosa más’ (61) and, comparing the night they met to their present circumstances, jokes ‘Ahora se moriría’ and laughs ‘con un resoplido’ (61-2). As she *cries* intensely, ‘era algo más que asco o desprecio lo que sentía hacia ella. Había un sentimiento impreciso de terror [...]’. The inappropriate humour oversteps, grates, and exasperates, emphasising painful detachment. As Wayne Booth writes of irony, ‘There can be no intensity of illusion if the author is present, constantly reminding us of his unnatural wisdom’ (1974: 6). ‘Eran enemigos’, the narrator adds (!). When Manuela bemoans the lack of ‘¿[...] una autoridad que les prohíba echar a las buenas gentes de sus tierras?’ (92), her anguished cry of social injustice is undercut by Pascuala’s hilarious ‘No puede decirse que sea tonta, pero tampoco se puede negar que su cerebro es exageradamente reducido. En toda su vida no debe de haber producido ni una sola idea’. Jorge Campos (1959: 8) criticised *Central eléctrica* for its ‘fugaz tránsito a otro tema [que] no nos deja pensar en los problemas humanos y sociales’, but it is the *humour*, twisting from one mood to the next, that makes the zones of traversal indeterminate and unlocatable, leaving the reader continually off-balance.

At the novel’s outset, the affluent inspectors guffaw callously (‘risa abierta’) at the repugnant smell of Anastasia’s dilapidated home. She told them that the floor was covered each week ‘con una capa de excrementos frescos de bueyes, y que los quitaban cuando estaban bien secos. Ésta era la limpieza en aquellas casas’ (30). The humour is a pathetic, numbing droop. The men give Anastasia a packet of coffee, but she returns – twenty minutes later – ‘con una cazuela de barro’, complaining aloud “Cuecen y cuecen estas bolitas negras, pero no se ponen blandas” (30). If we snigger at her miserable ignorance, the novel asks, are we complicit? One villager describes the irksome siren – the unjust supremacy of mechanisation – as ‘una risa sin alegría, desesperada’ (53), a line which perfectly encapsulates social realist laughter. In the Casino rooms on Saturday nights, the agitated spectators chant ‘que fuera “cómica” (‘¡Co... mi... ca! ¡Co... mi... ca!’), 184) – a

pitiable, amusing yearning for something – anything – to laugh at amidst the gloom. The faltering funniness is always off the pace.

This cheerless, poignant humour recurs, stemming from innocence, when the children compare the ‘máquinas enormes y girantes’ to fairytale monsters: ‘Los gigantes de los cuentos hubieran resultado enanos para sus mentes acostumbradas a los cien metros de altura de la prensa’. They have grown up too soon, and the words they overhear, heartbreakingly, ‘eran mucho más asombrosas que las que podían leer en los cuentos’:

“alternadores”, “revoluciones”, “kilovatios”, “amperios”, “rotor”, “stator”, “turbine”, “interruptor”, “conmutador”, “circuito”, “alta tensión”, “voltio”... [...] Ciertas frases de sus padres les hacían gracia: “transformador de aceite”. Aceite era lo que se usa para freír los huevos. (122)

No wonder Meredith described the comic spirit as, paradoxically, ‘humanely malign’ (from *An Essay on Comedy* [1913], in Wylie Sypher (ed.) 1980: 48), for the bleak comedy illustrates that no child’s diversion should be contaminated in this fashion. If the aim of realism is to unmask veracity, this is the human – warts and all. However, an unmistakable weight hangs at the end of the laugh, and within seconds the joke ossifies.

Humour of hardship recurs when the reporters and camera crews arrive to document the village. Higinio’s inability to understand how Lobo’s camera works (‘¿esto para qué sirve? ¿Es para hacer retratos, como los que hay en el “cuadro” de la central?’) is bleakly comic *because* of social conditions – a life devoid of luxury. The reporter’s account of village life is grotesquely incongruous (the ‘caseta’ becomes ‘la acropolis del pueblo, el templo, el ara sagrada’), and he laughs cruelly at the shortcomings: ‘con una carcajada corta y sonora, casi explosiva’ (267). We react with the ‘chemical combination’, as Shaw wrote (Letter to Archibald Henderson (1918), that makes one ‘laugh with one side of his mouth and cry with the other’ (in Henderson 1932: 616). Later, when Chuchín and his mother recover scraps from the demolished house, he (grotesquely) ‘gozaba en aquellos momentos’ (!). A surprising benefit of finding one’s house blown to smithereens is the discovery of items that ‘jamás había visto en la casa: restos de abanicos, piezas de los apliques de las cortinas,

tuercas...' (278). This is the humour of Paul Valéry's comment that, although Sisyphus is condemned to roll the stone in perpetuity, at least he hones an outstanding set of muscles (1957: I: 1476). Likewise, when the *maestro* sees the first *pabellones*, he loses his 'sonrisa' and feels that he has entered 'un sitio cuando la vida acababa de dejarlo' (277). The comedy washes out, encapsulating Spanish social realism.

Moreover, the novel's pitch-black humour undermines strict realist boundaries. Pinilla's 'pobre marido' died suddenly, but she *laughs* while narrating with grotesque, excessively colloquial detail: 'todo el día poniendo pegas eléctricas en la ladera de allá, y pum, y pum y pum...' (152). Hilariously, she talks so much that she never describes what happened ('¿Que qué le pasó? ¡No lo sabe usted bien! Fue algo horrible [...]') and, despite the overlay of death, grey humour of tedium abounds: 'Era infatigable, parecía que hablaba sin necesidad de respirar'. The absurdity reaches its apogee when an injured dog Luis enters, named after the dead husband. All *la señora Lobo* can do is laugh, 'harta ya', and say aloud "Su pobre marido" (152). The obstinacy of social realist comedy through creeping annoyance drags us through the mud, leaving us immobile and stifled by banalities. Humour often says 'Life is fun', but here it reveals that life under Francoist Spain is a catastrophe, characterised by needless and often absurd loss of life.

The pendulum swings unnervingly between two extreme, and ostensibly conflicting, reactions: to laugh and to scream. As Andrés notes with macabre absurdity, the 'presa' itself is made of 'cemento armado y cuerpos humanos' simply because the 'ritmo del trabajo era tan rápido que sus cadáveres no podían sacarse del cemento' (293-4). Scott Weems (2014: xvi) distinguishes between 'Aha!' ('insight problem' of recognition) and 'Haha!' (amusement tickled), but *Central eléctrica* encourages what I term the chiasmic 'aaah-haha-aaah-haha-aaah', a boomerang between laugh and groan. La Pinilla explains that her son found his father's *heart* amidst the wreckage: 'latía todavía dentro de la carretilla cuando mi hijo me lo trajo, ¡ay!, Dios mío' (155). This is intolerably brutal *and* highly amusing, for the denied loftiness of the tragic leads to a fusion of giggles and screams: 'Sí, sí –dijo La Pinilla–, latiendo todavía'. Dark laughter may fall into scornful smirk or sardonic grimace, freezing the mirth in its tracks. What lies behind the leering mask of the jester? No wonder María needs to leave: 'le pareció demasiado absurdo aquello' (169). López Pacheco deliberately

flaunts the indelicate contrivance of his narrative, emphasises the absurd dimensions of poverty, comes dangerously close to laughing *at* La Pinilla, chokes the laughter in our throats, and finally underscores the desolation. However, this is the debilitating gaiety of grief.

Robert M. Greenberg, writing on Philip Roth, coins the term ‘antic correction’ to describe moments that elicit not only empathy but also a frightened, dismayed laughter (1997: 490). When a light breaks during a *fiesta* (hilarity again cut short), the colossal construction is brought to a standstill by... a mouse: ‘pequeño, semicarbonizado: un minúsculo cadáver’ (216). Buendía catches his breath and announces ‘Un ratón’ (because ‘No supo decir otra cosa’!), provoking hearty guffaws. Rafael reminisces: ‘para mearse de risa, figuraos, todos buscando algo gordo... y de pronto... [...] aquel ratoncillo, allí’ (305). Once again, Kant’s (1952 [1790]: 196) Humour Theory of ‘strained expectation’ (‘buscando algo gordo’) leads to *nothing* – a prime instance of deadening grey humour. It thoroughly illuminates destitution but, succumbing to the oblivion, it welters in the anguish.

As we will explore throughout this chapter, the dark comedy of failed *fiestas* is unmistakable. Whilst children run around in the street, one character comments ‘El circo, el circo...’, another remarks ‘Qué miseria’, and a young boy asks his mother ‘¿por qué le pegan a ese buey?’ (94). The juxtaposition of ‘circo’ and ‘miseria’ is poignant. The *plaza* is ‘donde los mozos bailan los domingos y fiestas’ (56) – unreserved mirth – yet also the place to ‘celebrar [a key, ironic word] conversaciones sin tema, o acaso con el vino y la venganza, ahora realizada, como únicos temas’ (56). For Jiménez-Fajardo, ‘the reader cannot but feel vaguely stirred by [the] abnegation’ in the novel (1972: 14); however, as this thesis has continued to emphasise, it is *humour* that dampens anticipation. They cannot even throw a proper pity party. In López Pacheco’s earlier “Alrededor de la fiesta” (1959), the protagonists Felipe and Juan, *pícaro* and apprentice, sell bullfighting tickets and posters but remain perpetually marginal to the action. In the end, they ironically contribute to the very system they wish to overthrow by sharing their takings with a businessman who exploits them completely. Their promise to one another ‘Que tú y yo vamos a hacer grandes cosas, ya verás’ (154) is darkly humorous through dramatic irony. *Fiestas* offer no escape from

destruction. After the umpteenth failed joke, this becomes an exercise in the exhaustion of comedy.

Returning to *Central eléctrica*, by the end it appears that a genuine atmosphere of festivity is acquired: 'La plaza está llena. Crece el sol, y el rumor de espera y conversaciones' (324). '[A]legría' is repeated thrice, and villagers applaud the arrival of a car: '[s]e ha convertido en un juego'. However, 'una voz profunda, un poco turbia' suddenly peals out, 'un ruido que araña el ambiente', announcing 'Uno, uno... Atención... Prueba número uno...'. The 'extrañas palabras' of the 'extraña' voice transforms carnivalesque laughter into satirical lampooning *back at them*: 'ríen los ingenieros y técnicos contemplando a los campesinos'. Is the reader similarly complicit, laughing at poverty?

A few pages on, in the bar, laughter is continual: 'una carcajada', 'se ríen también', 'ríen', 'ríen a cada frase', 'abatidos por la risa y el llanto nervioso' (335). However, the reader is caught off-guard, for after the laughter comes the savage rape of a girl in the fields: 'Los cántaros caen al suelo, quebrándose con un ruido hueco y triste, la muchacha ha gritado', 'gritos ahogados de ella'. It is insufferably grotesque that the perpetrators *laugh*: 'ríen', 'se ríen', 'se sujeta el estómago con las dos manos, riéndose hasta que le brotan lágrimas' (334). Their grim guffaws, monstrously juxtaposed with the victim's tears ('llora. Su llanto se hace sordo', 'sollozando de rabia'), horrifically ridicule the prior communal, restorative laughter. In *Central eléctrica*, laughter is always spurious and suspect. At the end, new teacher Martín has arrived and the village 'avanza' into the night, 'esperando un día nuevo que le traiga una nueva luz' (337); however, the atrocious rape scene strikes at the foundations of festivity. Moreover, when the workers' wives are handed a document to prove their contribution to the construction, wretched, grey humour arises when none of them can read or sell it.

In conclusion, social realists operate in, and shed light upon, what Paul Ricoeur terms (elsewhere) 'the sphere of the horrible' (1988: 188-19). They appreciate that the human condition is hollow and futile but recognise that this can be exploited for humorous effect. However, whilst they effectively illuminate harsh social conditions, their comedy of inertia is abortive. Comedy says 'Look! Here is the world, which seems so dangerous! It is nothing but

a game for children, just worth making a jest about' (Freud 1961: XXI: 166). In Spanish social realism, however, in so doing it falls foul of its own ends, distracting attention *away* from objection or opposition through a static, lethargic funniness. Moreover, the genre had little to no perceptible impact. Although the publication of Dolores Medio's *Funcionario público* (1956) did prompt a raise for Spanish postal and communications workers, this is one example amid a sea of broken possibilities. López Pacheco (1982: 10) affirms that *Central eléctrica* contains 'más luz que sombra, escrita cuando en España había más sombra que luz', and its epilogue rejects the 'cebolla' suicide in *La colmena* in favour of dedicated commitment. However, its passionless humour cuts down to size, striking at the foundations of festiveness, offering no more optimistic ending.

## 2. Failed *Fiestas*

Having discussed the inability of comedy to offer a meaningful escape under Francoism, this section will examine how a potentially rebellious, life-affirming self-expression (*fiesta*) is officially sanctioned and policed, thus depriving it of all spontaneity.

Mikhail Bakhtin found in carnival a 'life-creating and transforming power, and indestructible vitality', a 'second life' outside officialdom 'hostile to all that was immortalized and competed' (1984: 107, 9-10). However, in the Spanish postwar context, ought festivities become disproportionate a lacerating tone will erupt to proclaim (to borrow from Larry David's sitcom from this century) 'Curb your enthusiasm'. After all, according to folk etymologies, 'carnival' comes from *carne levare* ('farewell to meat/to the flesh') – both entrance and exit, invitation and dismissal. When social realism tackles *fiestas*, it repeats with Valentina (to Ricardo in Jardiel Poncela's *Eloísa está debajo de un almendro* (1943), when he suffers a serious attack from too much laughter): 'Pues no te alegres más, Ricardo, por Dios' (Jardiel Poncela 1963: I: 901). The title of Goytisolo's *Fin de fiesta* (1962) is exemplary, and Machadian *España de charanga y pandereta* ('El mañana efímero', 1913), and its concomitant fellow-feeling, are radically destabilised. In a further sting of irony, the resultant *taedium vitae* and deadpan responses to festival joviality are themselves

metahumorous. Bored even at a blowout, characters worthlessly stumble towards a mirage of happiness. A shattered, jaundiced comedy lingers.

Individuals are dogs in the manger, experiencing *Gluckschmerz* – sadness at others' good fortune. When Regina goes to the hospital in María de Lera's *Hemos perdido el sol* – 'Soy la esposa... Un accidente de automóvil...' (260) – the conversation is humorously deadening:

–[...] Ya, ya. Todo el mundo divirtiéndose y nosotras, aquí, para cuidar las víctimas de las borracheras.

–Todos los años lo mismo.

–¡Maldito alcohol! (260)

The tragic, sobering landscape signals the failure of amusement: underwhelming, second-rate, and always *elsewhere*. Happiness would be delightful – if not for us. Paraphrasing Prospero, social realism allows the insubstantial pageant to fade, leaving not a rack behind (*The Tempest*, IV.i.1885-6).

In Suárez Carreño's *Las últimas horas* (1949), Carmen humorously contemplates the multitude at the dance: 'aquello era un monstruo a la vez bello y ridículo. [...] La estupidez y la inteligencia coexistían' (154-55). Joy is wholly artificial, and this paradox ('bello y ridículo') is found throughout social realism. At a New Year's Eve party, she observes an 'alegría feroz' (signalling a brutal determination to have fun at whatever cost), 'el vino que es obligado beber para estar alegre' – a damning critique – and an 'alegría [...] que] en el fondo se parecía bastante a la desesperación' (199). When carnivalesque laughter is 'desesperación', and the 'fraternidad [...] efímera', *fiesta* corruption is complete. This prompts what we might call a 'sub-laugh' – inhibited, dispiriting, and belittling.

Such perversion of gladness, and heartache amid humour, emerges in Ignacio Agustí's *Mariona Rebull* (1943):

–Te pido lo que nos puede hacer felices.

Aquel «lo que nos puede hacer felices» no sonó a extraño a ninguno de los dos. No había habido necesidad de manifestar que no eran felices. (183)

The humorous clarification compounds the tragedy: ‘No lo hemos sido cuando hemos podido serlo, Joaquín, ¿cómo vamos a serlo gracias a esto?’ Flabbergasted by Mariona’s sincerity, Joaquín recalls what a previous conversation with Ernesto Villar:

¿No te parece más fácil similar toda una vida que se ama, que amar de verdad toda una vida?  
¡Qué sarcasmo! (185-6)

The agonisingly funny ‘sarcasmo’ illuminates the fallacy of contented existence. Characters prefer to live a lie rather than face their cruel reality. Later, Ernesto, Joaquín, and Mariona crucially appreciate their tragicomic ludicrousness: ‘Entre los tres pasaba algo raro, algo indescriptible. Tenían la sensación de haberse enfrascado voluntariamente en una absurda pesadilla, de la que era imposible salir, a pesar de conservar la plena conciencia de sí mismos’ (219). Fully conscious of their imbroglio, they stride headlong towards it. Towards the end, Mariona encourages Joaquín to dance a ‘vals’, desirous to know whether he is ‘feliz’. His response ‘Sí’ is, however, false, and she knows it: ‘había aprendido a mentir’ (228). Her ‘leve sonrisa’ is acutely duplicitous, and, as the ‘tortura del gozo reciente’ consumes her (a poignant mixture of horror and humour), the reader is precariously poised between the barrenness of life and the emptiness of a pathetic, debilitating humour.

### **Fernández Santos – *En la hoguera* (1957), *Cabeza rapada* (1958)**

In Chapter XV of *En la hoguera* (1957), a travelling group of players puts on a ‘comedia’, a ‘Gran Función Para Hoy’ that seeks to ‘deleita[r]’ (124). Yet the accompanying leaflet announces ‘ADAN Y EVA’, ‘MUERTE DE ABEL’, and ‘CONDENACION DE CAIN’. Very few readers interpret these as ‘comedies’! Moreover, despite the spectators’ excitement at this show (‘la escuela rebosaba’, ‘reían las mujeres’), protagonist Miguel is comically ‘aburrido

por la larga espera' and is told via telegram that his uncle has died (124). Celebration rapidly degenerates into burial, but even this suffers an absurd mix-up when no undertakers have been hired to 'llevar el cadáver hasta el cementerio'. Small wonder that '[a] Miguel aquel entierro le parecía muy singular' (!). The coffin-carriers, who 'parecían tener prisa por acabar' (186), rush the job. It is shocking that comedy should so rapidly eradicate the spectacle's happiness and decorum.

Similarly, *Cabeza rapada*, a collection of short stories, foregrounds characters present at festive occasions yet trapped in a downward spiral, more vanquished than victors. In "Pecados", instead of the 'verbenas de verdad' that our narrator has experienced previously, this current party is but a 'cucaña untada de sebo, con tres naranjas en la punta, que los quintos trataban de alcanzar'. Despite the boy's encouragement ('Ya verás cómo nos divertimos', 114), the narrator's response is downhearted: 'por más esfuerzos que hice no podía alegrarme'. Whilst *others* laugh ('riéndose') and clap along, 'a mí aquella música de gaita y tambor me ponía triste' (114). The 'cohetes' are 'mezquinos', and their 'fogonazo' is 'débil y mezquino' (114). But '[a]llí no había nada de eso'. For Erna Brandenberger *Cabeza rapada* demonstrates 'la incapacidad del individuo aislado' (1973: 95) to overcome their circumstances, and Ramón Jiménez Madrid writes of 'el mundo de tristeza' (1991: 92), but this heavyhearted *humour* emphasises the glum carnival of the downtrodden.

Grey humour is almost deliberately non-funny, experimenting with the tension-release dynamic but straining against the impulse to end every joke with a punchline. Instead, readers are forced to contend with unresolved angst, caused by existential despair, social alienation, and mental breakdown. Similarly, in "Este Verano", Pablo is at a beach *verbena*; however, predictably, 'Nadie sentía ganas de cantar como otras veces' (198). The extreme stasis and inertia are a collective yawn of displeasure that makes fatigue *funny*. When Tonecho asks for 'un blanco', he 'bostezó':

—¿Qué hay?

—Hay —repuso el dueño—, que no te andes exhibiendo.

—¿Pues qué pasa?

—Nada... Como pasar, no pasa nada. (205)

There is a glimpse of merriment – ‘Tras el último bosque la casa, el bar de Justo y los amigos’ (203) – yet, after the ‘primeras visitas, los primeros vasos, el primer baile’ come the despondent ‘calor y el recuerdo de los años anteriores, el hastío’. It is the ending of all *fiestas* under Francoism, curbing happiness. Moreover, the ironically entitled “Fiesta” features a group of boys who steal a *garrafa* and get drunk, but they are painfully aware of their ‘gran prisa por apurar su júbilo antes del alba, antes de que el día siguiente les sorprendiera trabajando’. Ultimately, the party is, as always in social realism, a decadent (with all the doubleness of that word) ‘paréntesis festivo’ (24). Moreover, despite the connotations of the title ‘El cóctel de hoy’, and its characters’ eagerness to enjoy the celebration ‘apresuradamente’, they will depart just as ‘apresuradamente, sin despedirse’, and ‘olvidarán a los demás’ (213-4). The symbols of merriment are unobtainable: ‘la cena, el teatro, una cita normal o clandestino, son incompatibles con el presente riguroso al cual están entregados’. As character Romero puts it, the guests leave the party both ‘satisfechos y defraudados’ (214). This humour of hindrances and nuisances, stuck in a deadlock, reveals that in Francoist Spain all attempts by the populace to harness etiquette, poise, and genuine happiness are denied at every turn by a regime intent on oppressing its citizens. A grey humour of surrender and capitulation is the only (failed) option.

### **Ana María Matute – *Fiesta al noroeste* (1952)**

Merrymaking is constantly connected to ruination in Matute’s *Fiesta al noroeste*: ‘en un pleno carnaval sobre la tierra indefensa’ (79). That sharp juxtaposition sets up an opposition between attacker and attacked, grossly at odds with benevolent comedy. Nomadic *entertainer* Dingo endeavours to pass smoothly through Artámila; however, one of his troupe falls, crashing into a drum. The horse is startled and spectacularly crashes the cart in the centre of the village square, flattening a child. Dingo’s whip ‘hablaba seco, como un relámpago negro’ (9) – a shockingly violent rendering – and his ‘carro fustigado’ becomes ‘una enorme risa de siete colores barro abajo’ (12). This grotesque parody of forced cheerfulness (‘risa’) jars with the grey, drab ‘barro’. In Artámila ‘la gente no está para dramas en verso’ (11): Dingo has stepped into the wrong genre, and as he unenthusiastically

'arrastraba su fiesta', forced constraint undercuts spontaneous joviality. We laugh and laugh and laugh – and then we laugh no more.

Modesto M. Díaz referred to an 'almost "esperpentic" existence' (1971: 543) in the text, but the scare marks belie unease regarding how grotesquerie conflicts with realism. The child's dead body is treated comically, a narratorial nuisance that must be removed as soon as possible. As dead child becomes dehumanised object, Dingo even comments 'se ha roto', worrying that it will snap in two. As Julia Kristeva writes of the corpse, when 'seen without God and outside of science, [it] is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject' (1982: 4). The cold, hard facts are appalling, and the shockingly brutal contents are not mitigated but conversely *intensified* by the comic manner of their presentation. For theorist Philip Thomson (1972: 35), there is something inherently grotesque about marionettes:

Human-like, animated yet actually lifeless objects, they are apt to be simultaneously comical and eerie – comical because of their imperfect approximation to human form and behaviour, eerie probably because of age-old, deep-rooted fears in man of animated and human-like objects.

In death, the body adopts positions and properties 'normally assumable by marionettes and dolls' (*Ibid*). The irony of *Fiesta al noroeste* is that the 'real' characters are just as leaden as the marionettes that play at human movement and emotion.

Dingo is 'otra vez hundido en su verdad, sin careta' (84). Masks built to entertain others do not distract *himself*, in a grotesque re-imagining of Groucho Marx's favourite joke.<sup>45</sup> Dingo knows 'muy bien que se le irían muriendo sus míseros compañeros, tal vez uno a uno' (81). As he asserts, encapsulating social realist humour: 'Tragado por aquella tierra, desnudo, absolutamente solo. Se le había muerto la fiesta de un golpe' (84). As the adage has it, *Al freír será el reír*. 'En aquella tierra de fuego, demasiado lujo era una sombra' (89). The 'niños' are 'sin juguetes', and both Dingo's mask and that of the girl by the window are

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<sup>45</sup> In my own words: A morbidly depressed man has given up entirely, convinced that life has no purpose. As a last resort, he visits a psychiatrist, who, to his surprise, has a solution: "You're in luck! The world-famous clown Grock is performing tonight! He'll be sure to cheer you up!" "Ah", comes the reply. "I am Grock".

ruined: 'se le cayó a trozos, con la noche' (86), 'La pintura, toda trazos caídos, lloraba hipócrita debajo del agua. Estaban en carnaval' (94). Dead marionette gestures complete the lethal festivities, and the cutting, final three words are an ironic death-knell to funniness. Similarly, in *Juegos de manos*, Uribe acknowledges that David has become a 'prisionero de sus disfraces' (the very same 'disfraces' he used to control) and bemoans his own farcicality: 'Soy un canalla, un perfecto canalla' (236). Returning to *Fiesta*, Juan Niño later interprets the 'carro espléndido' as, strikingly, 'un gran ataúd lleno de carcoma y gusanillos empolvados', and remarks upon the 'maldito carnaval' (155). Towards the end, when Juan Niño attends a show, 'Había algo en toda la función que olía a muerte, a flores podridas' (138). The impassioned exclamation '¡Qué miserable se había vuelto todo de pronto! Que falsa la luz de sus adornos! Sus jirones de colores eran andrajos, y su delgadez, hambre' illustrates the speciousness of the façade.

Stamped on when down, even Matute's *jesters* are engulfed by retrenchment and indignity. Even at *fiestas* they fail to stave off the worst-case scenario. To paraphrase from Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, their 'light and kindness' – their appreciation of the comic – is merely 'the jiggling of the doomed' (2000 [1973]: 544).

**Ignacio Aldecoa – *El fulgor y la sangre* (1954), *Con el viento solano* (1956), *Gran Sol* (1958), *Parte de una historia* (1967)**

Moreover, the novels of Ignacio Aldecoa demonstrate that youthful carousing – even of children – is infected by a tragic, violent aura. In *El fulgor y la sangre* (1954), Carmen remembers the little boys who would play at identifying cars by their noises. However, with comic poignancy, gunfire has now replaced automobiles: 'Es un quince y medio, un siete y medio, un ruso, un antiaéreo alemán' (255). The children remark: 'En la Guerra se divertirá uno mucho... Con una ametralladora, pa-pa-pa-pa-pa...' (95). Warfare itself becomes 'una diversión paradisíaca, como el mejor juego'. The reader laughs and aches simultaneously. When the death of one husband is announced, the very real tragedy is juxtaposed with children, outside, playing violent (yet funny) games: "No estoy muerto; ni

siquiera me has tocado. Me has pasado por debajo del brazo” (255). One boy’s ingenious way of getting out his predicament is to claim that ‘me doy una medicina que llevo en el bolsillo y me curo’, but of course, in real life, such fantastical remedies are unobtainable. Goytisolo likewise emphasised this grotesquerie: ‘La metralla y las balas han sido sus juguetes’ (*Duelo en el Paraíso*, 59); ‘Hay algo más triste que envejecer; es continuar siendo niño’ (*Fiestas*, 218, italics his). The otiose concerns of the supposed ‘springtime of life’ take on a troubling, grotesque hue.

Similarly, in Aldecoa’s *Parte de una historia* (1967), this grey, disheartening humour whittles away all attempts at high jinks. When Luisita notes that, in the shop, ‘Allí sí que hay alegría’, Antica undercuts her: ‘Demasiada alegría [...]. Los hombres jóvenes en el sur ganando el pan y los viejos como perros con los náufragos’. Our narrator speaks up and defends the women, but words fall on deaf ears:

–Hoy es carnaval –repito estúpidamente–. Quieren divertirse.

–Quieren divertirse... –dice, sin ironía, con brusquedad pensativa. (153)

‘[C]arnaval’ is no guarantee of contentment, triggering more long-suffering groan than good neighbourly guffaw. The narrator encapsulates social realist humour: ‘Tienen buen humor, cuando lo debieran tener malo’ (155). One man, observing that ‘mujeres de los chonis andan bailando con las tetas fuera’, even cries ‘¡Qué carnaval de Diablo!’ (165). The *fiesta* has well and truly failed. Moreover, Domingullo horrifically mutilates a dog ‘de un golpe sesgado [...] horrosamente [...] grotesco, sangrando la playa, de un lado para otro’, and the party atmosphere is roundly acidulated through juxtaposition: ‘tal vez las mujeres de los chonis siguen bailando con los pechos desnudos’ (167). The ‘embriaguez colectiva’ (206) ends with Jerry’s drowning, and, as the *cabilderos* note, ‘Ayer, tanta alegría, y hoy, lutos. Así es la vida’ (181). ‘Mal carnaval’, comes the response, encapsulating this humour. It is the cruellest of ironies that the island be called ‘La Graciosa’, almost taunting the characters’ inability to join in the entertainment. Only grey humour was possible, given the reality of Franco’s Spain, and the failure of comedy signals a constrained conclusion.

*Con el viento solano* also begins with habitual broken revelry when an inebriated Sebastián starts a fight in a tavern, attacks a stall owner with a broken glass, and flees the *guardia civil*. He imagines a range of absurd excuses: “Señor cabo, no tengo disculpa, se me fue la mano [...] yo solamente quería gastarle una broma” (22). Understandably, Sebastián concludes ‘aquello no tenía pies ni cabeza. Era absurdo’. He dislikes ‘conversaciones grotescas’ because he is never sure whether interlocutors are ‘burlando’, ‘bromeando’, or ‘si aquello era serio’ (91). The ironic tone of the novel places its reader in the very same quandary. Sebastián eavesdrops on the most trivial dialogue in a restaurant, which is nonetheless the cause for laughter amongst the guests: ‘no me traigas a *restoráns* que no estén de moda; me pongo muy mala. Hay tanto hombrón...’ (153). However, soon the funniness stops: ‘La broma se repetía, se hacía pesada’. The humour – poor in quality and ephemeral – is tragically short-lived, but the absurdity is that the individuals are desperate for more (however distasteful): ‘Todos ensayaban nuevas gracias a cuenta de los invertidos’. They know that comedy does no good, but they have no alternative.

When two men play ‘A cara y cruz’, although Sebastián watches ‘entretenido’, the dark, dismal humour has him imagine that ‘podían estar todo el día, todo el año, toda la vida, aburridos, jugando a cara y cruz, al chino, a las damas’ (158). In effect, ‘se jugaba la vida verdadera, que ya no tenían remedio’. Despite El Marquesito’s enthusiastic ‘voz [...] triunfante’ when suggesting ‘unas copas a los chinos’, even the very game thought up to fend off despair ‘le hizo [a Sebastián] concentrarse en su aburrida, estúpida, monótona limitación’ (164-5). This is the grotesque conclusion of postwar merrymaking.

Moreover, Aldecoa is fascinated by the notion of entertainers who grow tired of deadening, sobering performances, and how this challenges realism. At the *feria*, even the entertainers are found lacking. The ‘faquir era una pena, una desconsolación, una amargura’ (189), and the reptile woman sits on her suitcase, contemplating that, the following day, she will face the same squirrel cage – in another *pueblo* – just to ‘comer el mismo número de Paquito y Felisa’ (196). Although the *faquir* claims ‘vivo de milagro’, this optimism is juxtaposed with narrator’s ironic counterpoint: ‘los mal calzados pies [...] sus piernas alambrinas en los bolsones de tela del pantalón’ (215).

In the same way, although the 'vieja vendedora de coplas' (191) – yet another entertainer – repeats the grotesquely groundless 'Diviértanse, jóvenes, diviértanse', the cold, hard truth is that 'Sebastián estaba solo' (190). The *feria* becomes merely a 'mancha de vida', and he traverses the heartbreaking, tragicomic 'círculo de la miseria, del idiotismo, de las lacras' (191). Humorously, playfully self-conscious, he listens to his own rapid heartbeat: '¡Je, je, corazón! Anda, corazón. Ya, corazón. Quieto, corazón. Y ¿adónde ir?' (194) However, his childish behaviour leads nowhere, and his question goes unanswered. One man notes (again bathetically), 'No ha estado la feria como el año pasado' (197), and when another suggests that things could improve, the response intensifies the dark humour: 'De aquí al año que viene todos podemos estar criando margaritas' (197). Sebastián buys a drink for the *bobo*, Casimiro, but he refuses the offer, forcing Sebastián to acknowledge the absurd, dismaying truth that his entire life 'no vale el duro de Casimiro' (198). The pinnacle of this absurd, lonely humour is Sebastián's realisation that he is just as ridiculous as the very individuals he ridicules. He is the 'parte que no se integraba, la parte suelta que zigzagueando huía' (189-90).

Similarly, in *El fulgor y la sangre*, when María and Sonsoles gossip together, María 'rió picarescamente', and Sonsoles remarks 'No sé para qué cuento estas sosadas'. But Felisa adds, with abundant grey humour: 'En algo hay que pasar el tiempo, mujer'. Carmen bluntly tells María: 'Tú te aburras como todas nosotras aquí, y te tienes que divertir con algo. Ese algo con el que tú te diviertes es embarullar a la gente' (183-184). However, although it may embody a temporary escape valve, humour is ultimately stalled and unfluctuating. Carmen scoffs 'Que se aburran como tú y como yo, que se fastidien' (184), but María (sarcastically) underlines the importance of laughter, however wretched: 'Si yo no las divirtiese podían caer en esa melancolía que tú por ejemplo sufres, que las haría desesperarse a veces' (159). Very few critics<sup>46</sup> have observed its dark irony, but *El fulgor y la sangre* interrogates whether laughter is helpful, necessary, or merely a smokescreen that conceals the tragic everyday truth of harsh conditions under Francoism. It may stave off dejection, temporarily, but it is an invitation to apathy, not resistance.

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<sup>46</sup> Caballero Bonald perceives a 'matización retórica colindante con el esperpento', and makes a concerted effort to blend the grotesque with the realist objective: 'copias del natural, plausible' (1996: 15)

Critics have struggled to account for the humour of *El fulgor*. Marra-López wrote of the ‘Lirismo y esperpento en la obra de Ignacio Aldecoa’ (1965: *passim*) but failed to analyse the significance of this blend, which we have identified as stagnation. Conversely, Caballero Bonald argued that irony, which would have helped to ‘aliviar en cierto modo la rigidez del relato’ (1995: 15), is entirely absent. On the contrary, it is key to María’s often-grotesque storytelling. Like Macario in *Gran Sol*, María entertains with tales like ‘una muchacha que tuvo un hijo natural y que lo estranguló con una media’, repeated twice. Despite Ernesta’s reaction of ‘¡Qué horror!’, the ‘horror y la lubricidad de los relatos, los dos polos de María, la tenían en tensión, los sentía en el cuerpo...’ (101). Aldecoa metahumouristically dramatises the exact contemporary debate on the social realist genre, for in 1946 Carmen Conde asked: ‘¿Por qué estos jóvenes [...] eligen lo putrido, lo repugnante, lo hediondo, lo infrahumano, lo detestable, lo infinitamente inferior, en lugar de lo creativo, luminoso, hermosísimo?’ (1946: 663). The novel treads a fine line between comedy and cruelty, and the reader is both repulsed and seduced. Felisa complains of María’s ‘cosas desagradables’, and that ‘ya hiede tanto estiércol [...] No me horrorizan ni me divierten; me repugnan’; however, Ernesta defends María:

Solamente sirven para matar el tiempo. María las cuenta para hacernos más llevadero...

–Desde luego –interrumpió Felisa–, pero así y todo no está bien, ni medio bien, tanta suciedad. Todas sabemos que el mundo es así de sucio, pero en el mundo también hay cosas limpias y hermosas que esta nunca cuenta. (101)

Aldecoa points to the widespread knowledge that the postwar landscape is ‘sucio’ but asks whether *his own* novel must be so as well. To answer Carmen Conde’s question, when realism and black comedy coalesce, they portray the tumult and turbulence of existence, leaving *in* the loose ends of life. As the Yiddish proverb has it, ‘A joke is a half-truth’. However, Felisa complains that ‘Esta María es una pamplinera [...] detrás de sus palabras adivina una que se está riendo’, and the reader detects an identical flicker of a malicious, almost masochistic smile in the narratorial voice. Ultimately, ‘en sus risas había un dejo nervioso de insatisfacción’ (102) – typical of social realist laughter. The genre consistently

asks 'What kind of person would laugh at that?' It encourages not fight but torpidity, and can only reflect – not shape – harsh conditions.

*Gran Sol* (1958) likewise dramatizes the conflicting battleground between comedy and realism. It is dedicated with extreme specificity to the 'hombres que trabajan en la carrera de los bancos de pesca entre los grados 48 y 56 de latitud norte, 6 y 14 de 56 longitud oeste, mar de Gran Sol' (Aldecoa 1969), and critics have lauded its trustworthiness: '[Aldecoa] liv[ed] several months on a Spanish fishing boat' (Duncan 1965: 165), 'se acerca a la concisión, a la veracidad' (de Nora 1970: 333), 'tragic rendition of the fishermen's daily struggle' (Pavlovic 2011: 165). However, the novel also recognises, comically, that travels are circulated and reshaped by oral and textual accounts, negotiating an imperfect status between fact and fiction.

For instance, José Afá tells the story of Macario's 'golpe de mar' (37) as fictional, but Macario is adamant: 'creerás que es mentira, pero sucedió. No la cuento. No quiero choteos' (38). Afá narrates 'de una forma grotesca', making fun of Macario: '¿Te fuiste a reposar o a beber vino, Macario?' The rudder chain broke off and 'El traslántico iba sotaventeando mal [...] Subieron todos a cubierta'. Macario dislikes exaggeration ('Aparte del cachondeo de este gracioso...'), but the *contramaestre* continues: 'No me cachondeo, Macario, cuento tus aventuras. [...] "Capitán, el golpe de mar se ha llevado el casco y debajo de nosotros no hay más que agua". Macario is adamant ('mi palabra de honor, [...] por mis muertos'), and names an exact location ('barco *Chiclana*, de Cádiz'); however, his next comment hysterically undercuts the realism: 'Eso no lo he visto yo, pero me lo han contado cuando estábamos con la pareja en Cádiz'. Unsurprisingly, 'Dominó la risa' (!). Once again, the reader is amusingly provoked, in turn, to doubt the veracity of Aldecoa's novel.

The novel once again reproduces the contemporary debate on realism's authenticity for Venancio, telling anecdotes, '[a] los lances más ingenuos, [ponía] un dejo de socarronería que los transformaba, que los hacía difíciles e indefinidos, casi estúpidos, casi profundos y jocosos' (88). Might a 'dejo de socarronería' be found in *Gran Sol*? Sas is exasperated after Artola's dull story ('Bueno, ¿y qué? El marica ese, ¿qué?') but Venancio shrugs his shoulders: 'Nada. Ya lo he contado'. Sas 'hizo un gesto de extrañeza' and sighs, and when Venancio

tells another (the absurdity being that, however dreary, at least it passed the time), hilarity does *not* ensue: ‘¿Es que no tenía gracia o qué?’ His forced laugh of enervating strangulation ‘fue aumentando hasta transformarse en una carcajada’, but he laughs to fill the silence – at nothingness, not at humour. When Venancio defends himself (‘se llaman parábolas. ¿Tú no has oído nunca parábolas?’), Sas ‘no pudo contener la risa’ (88-89). The agony is less poisonous or lethal than just plain dull.

Furthermore, Macario Martín is crucially aware of his role as on-board clown. Constantly in search of a receptive audience, his stories inevitably fall to pieces. Sas ‘puso el punto amargo’, announcing that Macario ‘está ya de loco de puerto, para divertir marineros’, but Venancio disagrees, arguing that the jokes lighten the daily load: ‘le tenía, en el fondo, un gran respeto’ (80-81). Once again, Aldecoa directly probes the worth of comedy to effect change, emphasising its stupor. Indeed, when Macario plays at being a dog, sticking his tongue out (‘Estoy pidiendo perra’), O’Halloran finds his antics most amusing (‘se reía a carcajadas’): ‘Muy bien, muy bien. Podrías ganar mucho dinero en un circo’. The clown laughs and all cheer. But Martín, suffering *quiplash* and ‘repentinamente triste’, comments ‘Sí, en un circo’. No joke is allowed simply to *land*. The atmosphere shifts suddenly:

De la tristeza pasó a la seriedad.

–Ahora invito yo –dijo con rabia–. Viejo, ponnos a todos de beber. (114)

‘La mutación de humor le confundió [a O’Halloran]’: Macario is suddenly aware of his clownish role as laughingstock for others’ amusement. Although he returns to his ‘bufonadas’, re-performing the *perra* impression, there is a ‘bruma de tormenta’ in his eyes. ‘[N]o lo hacía alegremente, lo hacía casi odiándose’ (116), and the *contramaestre* ‘no contestó’. Macario acknowledges his absurdity: ‘¿Verdad, José, que soy una mierda de individuo?’, ‘¿Verdad que soy una mierda de hombre?’ (116) Terribly conscious of his ridiculousness, Macario has nowhere to go. When the *contramaestre* remarks ‘Cuando toca trabajar, toca trabajar’, Macario responds with acerbic, bathetic humour: ‘Y los demás de feria, ¿verdad?’ (144) Once again, genuine merriment is for *others*. Ultimately, comedy is shown to be deficient and counterfeit: ‘el chiste encubridor de la tristeza, que fija la sonrisa de la marcha’ (16-17). The jester bears his scars, and there are no comic consolations.

Social realist funniness is always late, delayed, or lagging behind. It misses a beat in its dithering and, despite an upsurge of guilt and anxiety, it demonstrates but the cul-de-sac of comedy. It comes as no surprise that Jacques Lacan heard a nothingness in laughter (1973: *passim*), *rien* (nothing) and *ri-en* (laughing), thus *redoubling* the oblivion. The strain of slapstick takes its toll on the impotent, impeding self. Without the circus, Macario is just a lonely clown.

**Juan Goytisolo – *Duelo en el Paraíso* (1955), *El circo* (1957), *La Resaca* (1958), *Fiestas* (1958), *Fin de fiesta* (1962)**

I will now focus on the novels of Juan Goytisolo, underlining how connotations of saturnalia are roundly subverted and humour, far from generating a spirit of anarchy, fails meaningfully to change the situation.

In *El circo*, Celia summarises this corrupt carnivalesque humour: ‘La atmósfera hogareña de felicidad por encargo, tenía la virtud de ponerla enferma’ (68). She even remembers that ‘su hermana se creía en la obligación de reír, pero su alegría era demasiado ruidosa para ser auténtica’ (68). Even laughter is spurious, delusory, and unable to participate. Celia engages in the ‘alegría de la fiesta’ but ‘sin abandonarse a ella’, a ‘turista que se debe marchar al día siguiente’. In a delicious paradox, she is ‘como íntimamente ajena a todo lo que pasaba’ (218). The odd one out, she is alone even in a crowd. In the end, with a ‘nudo en la garganta’ (219), she can only cry. Luz Divina goes to great lengths to organise a dinner party, but it becomes a ‘pesadilla endemoniada’, a ‘broma de mal gusto’, and ‘el peor sarcasmo’ (180-81) when everyone pulls out, leaving only ‘terribles habitaciones vacías’, ‘bocadillos sin tocar’. Even the final chapter’s *fiesta* – the Casino’s ‘Gala nocturna’, celebrated initially ‘con éxito extraordinario’ (245) – is suddenly interrupted: ‘inesperadamente, la atmósfera pareció agriarse’. Someone shouts wildly, and ‘Un malestar extraño se apoderó de los grupos en los pasillos y la alegre música del orfeón resonó, de pronto, inoportuna’. Whilst comedy may allow space for improvement and headway, as humour theorist Gerald Mast

notes, it certainly 'denies that men can be any better – or, rather, it denies that they can be anything but men, anything but foolish mortals' (1974: 322).

Likewise, in Goytisolo's *Duelo en el Paraíso*, Estanislao's sons both die at forced *fiestas*: David on carnival night, and Romano when performing a 'Commedia dell'arte'. This curmudgeonly comedy is insufferable and bitter, built upon bugbears, shortfalls, and chronic undersupply. Similarly, in Goytisolo's *La Resaca* (whose title also focuses on the comedown *after* the laughing carnival), Cinco Duros sells his son Antonio into the service of the icon-maker's wife, uses the money for a family feast, and grotesquely feeds Antonio food from this very banquet to convince him to adopt that path. Social realism strives to counter the official, propagandist realities with its own, *bona fide* truth, revealing that merrymaking is constantly hollow. But grey humour is humiliating and unwavering in its lethargy, offering no upward curve after inaction. Once again, it stops short of making connections between text and subversion of social context.

In *Fin de fiesta*, Ana goes even further, chiding her husband Álvaro: 'Hasta cuando eres divertido y brillante parece que cumplas una obligación' (46). Yet when she berates him – 'procura hacer un esfuerzo, por favor. Da la impresión de que bebes únicamente para soportarnos' – his response is hysterical: 'Es la pura verdad'. The chortle catches in our throats, as characters comically observe their own catastrophe. When we think it cannot get any lower, the novel worsens. Absurdly, he agrees to tell a story 'de humor feroz'; however, the tenor of the joke is worrying ('de dos gitanos en la época del hambre') and, although the others fall about laughing, like Macario in Aldecoa's *Gran Sol* he is 'agotado, con el cerebro completamente vacío' (42-3). Tere wants 'otra', more humour, but he replies 'Me falta entrenamiento' – lacking practice, of course, but also wanting in *joviality*. Indeed, although Miguel 'parecía rejuvenecido' when discussing old hunting trips, and even proposes a future outing, the narrator humorously demeans: 'Era la eterna conversación del bar'. As they declare that 'Éramos felices entonces', and Miguel repeats the words once more for effect (140), hilarity is firmly locked in the past. Mara confides in Bruno, capturing this distinguishing comic duplicity: 'No quiero que los demás me vean de mal humor y bromeo y me río de mí misma; pero sé que tú me comprendes... Te aseguro que no puedo más' (152). The play-frame of humour may offer temporary escape, but it conceals a bleak void in

human nature. The double meaning of *distraer* is fundamental. Although Feal Deibe sees an ‘actitud abierta, esperanzada’ (1978: 23) at the conclusion, Miguel’s final words capture the aura: ‘Hoy por hoy, la fiesta ha terminado’ (176). The greying of black comedy into the half-hearted the marginalised, the unimportant, and the surplus to requirements does not fill the emptiness but expands and perpetuates it.

In *Fiestas* (1958), an exercise in irony, the announcement of the titular festivities (indelicately prearranged by the ‘Junta organizadora’) is tainted by boredom, for a young boy pays no attention: ‘Por favor. [...] Creo que le estamos cansando’ (136). Moreover, the novel’s central twist is corrupt revelry: the sergeant plies Pipo with alcohol to incriminate el Gorila, his erstwhile friend. As he sobers up, Pipo’s ‘agradable sensación de fiesta’ is rapidly transformed into tragedy, hitting him ‘como una ducha de agua fría’ (198). As Jeremy Squires (1996: 402) puts it, alcohol is merely the ‘purveyor of illusion’. Desirous to remedy his error, at the end of the novel Pipo cannot cross the road because the *fiestas* quite literally get in the way.

Later, at another procession, Ortega bumps into Pipo, ‘vestido con el traje de los domingos y adornado con la escarapela del Congreso’. His expression ‘se alteró’, his blue eyes ‘se nublaron’, and his question retains an *Et tu, Brute?* tone: ‘¿Tú también, Pipo?’ Pipo bows his head in shame, sucked into the multitude, and cannot hold his gaze: ‘Es un día de fiesta, profesor’ (213). Whilst critic Feal Deibe observes ‘esperanzas de mejora’ (1981: 224) in Pipo’s behaviour, Ortega inspects him ‘tristemente’ and underscores the grotesque perversion: ‘Las fiestas de algunos no son las fiestas de todos’ (232). There is a duplicity to organised fun. Like *Fin de fiesta*, the novel ends with a negating, half-baked humour, for all outlets are blocked.

Having analysed several works by Fernández Santos, López Salinas, Aldecoa and others, we can conclude that social realist humour – even at *fiestas* – curtails fun through an angst-ridden decrescendo, the very antithesis of a drum roll. The genre is intrigued by what comes *after* the laughter – when readers perceive their complicity – and emphasises the void, oblivion, and yawning gap within the chuckle. We laugh at characters’ antics, stuck on an eternally meaningless roundabout from which they cannot alight, before weeping at their

plight and the pathetic poverty of their spirit. The doldrums will inevitably set in. With an ‘I told you it was no use’ spirit, comedy is the last resort that *still* backfires, signalling a lifeless failure. Grey humour, the ‘laugh-groan-laugh’ boomerang, provokes but the nod of scandalised, dismayed, benumbed assent.

Finally, we shall discuss the *comic-kazi* absurdity of self-recognition within social realism, using María de Lera’s *Trampa* (1962) and Luis Romero’s story ‘Louis Armstrong’ (*La corriente*, 1962) as case studies. In *Trampa*, when protagonist Álvaro is flirting with two women at the bar, he looks over at two others and remarks ‘Digo vaya un par de zorras [...] Pero zorras, ¿no?’ However, at this very moment of bragging the *morena* pinches his arm: ‘También lo somos nosotras. ¿Y qué?’ Suddenly he guffaws at his own hypocritical absurdity with a ‘carcajada tan agresiva e hiriente’ that everyone turns around ‘un tanto sorprendidos y molestos’. Álvaro laughs *on his own*, now knowingly the butt of his own joke. As Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen writes elsewhere, ‘if my existence is nothing more than an unspeakable farce, an improbable gag lost in the immensity of the universe, why not laugh at it...?’ (1987: 738). Yet, because ‘Álvaro seguía retorciéndose de risa, tonta y pacíficamente, dejaron de prestarle atención’. As the ‘morena trataba de taparle las carcajadas con la mano’, finally Álvaro’s ‘risa cedió’, and he mutters ‘Zorras, dólares, cabrones, yo... ¡Qué repertorio!’ (88-9). The ‘yo’ is central to this pathetic appreciation, laughing at the laugh. ‘Laughter’, writes Butler on parody, ‘emerges in the realization that all along the original was derived’ (2004: 113). Álvaro’s comic frustration comes from a world that constantly reminds him that he is a curmudgeonly buffoon, a tiresome subject unable to break away from himself.

The only possible is to drink, come what may. Yet even this brings temporary, and unsatisfactory, relief. In Romero’s ‘Louis Armstrong’, the characters speak uproariously about death. ‘You enter the bathroom for a quick shave’, begins one, ‘y de pronto, ¡zas!, caes al suelo. Ya no vives, estás muerto para siempre, a pesar de la cita y de la carta, de la entrada de fútbol’ (286). Nonetheless, one boy rejects this talk: ‘Calla y bebamos’. The side-splitting absurdity is that, despite *taking another drink*, he knows the truth: ‘Pero beber no soluciona nada’ (286). Pepe’s reaction is hysterical: an empty ellipsis. Finding one’s own existence nauseatingly inescapable generates more a crackle of thin amusement than a fully-fledged guffaw.

## Appendix B

### The Rumour of Humour – The '60s Social Novel

Nick: Do you want me to say it's funny, so you can contradict me and say it's sad? Or do you want me to say it's sad so you can turn around and say no, it's funny?

– Edward Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962)

Both the main body of the thesis and Appendix A have analysed a miserable, cheerless grey humour in realist texts of the 40s and 50s. Appendix B expands this understanding to the social novel of the under-stimulated bourgeoisie, published in the late 50s and early 60s. Juan Francisco Marsal labelled the 50s generation 'frustrada, desaprovechada, domesticada, enmudecida, quemada, frenada, silenciada' (1979: 48), and this gives rise to the grey humour of frozen, dispirited youth. We shall examine grey humour in Juan Marsé, García Hortelano, Fernández Santos, Juan Goytisolo, and Manuel Arce, but begin with a brief note on the pervasive, self-reflexive comedy of grim recognition, a staple of postwar Spanish social realism. We shall now discuss this splicing of the self, alongside tedious grey humour, in Juan Marsé and García Hortelano.

#### **Juan Marsé - *Esta cara de la luna* (1962), *Encerrados con un solo juguete* (1960)**

Next will analyse two novels from central social-realist writer Juan Marsé, arguing that the key to grey humour is a comic *lack*, an absence of something necessary at the vital moment. We will also examine a grotesquely leaden distortion of Bakhtinian carnivalesque laughter, for ostensibly convivial *fiestas* comically fail to bring any sort of authentic joy.

At the start of *Esta cara de la luna* (1962), protagonist Miguel Dot observes from the window an 'estatuilla rojiza [...] roída por la lluvia'. Armless, abandoned, bereft of its former beauty, this 'muñeca ridícula y triste' is left to contemplate 'su propia ruina allí mismo, a sus

pies' (16). It is a fitting illustration of social realist humour, absurdly self-reflexive and helpless. For López-Portilla (1987: 168), the novel is 'impregnado del espíritu pesimista'; however, it is also a probing examination of what laughter means. Dot, suspicious of overwrought, mirthful expressions just like Andrea in *Nada*, notes that what 'parecía una sonrisa' across a friend's lips 'no era más que una especial mueca irónica o un gesto de impaciencia y de aburrimiento' (30). Later, Julia is bored with another of Miguel's lengthy monologues: 'se esforzaba en reír, aburrida ya' (117). The stammer of laughter is the only language left, but Julia ultimately cannot 'laugh it off'. Likewise, when Dot likens Pedro's voice to 'la de un mal payaso esforzándose por hacer reír después de algún accidente en la pista' (17), the botched entertainment is akin to Macario Martín in *Gran Sol*. The residually comic small snigger does not so much ring out as die on our lips. It wears us out and leaves us cold.

As throughout the postwar novel, the struggle for happiness falls short. As Carmen Martín Gaité remembers of this period, the 'aspiraciones de los nuevos burgueses' had been reduced to 'pequeños placeres materiales que propicia la sociedad de consumo' (1994: 213). Dot asks Julia about 'la felicidad', but she 'soltó un leve chillido, riéndose', and talks about her young son and current pregnancy. The laughter of submission, setback, and deflation substitutes a proper resolution to 'felicidad'. She laughs again; however, '[I]uego se fue quedando pensativa, con velo nostálgico en los ojos, que le miraban como diciendo por favor, basta de bromas: he cambiado bastante, estás hablando con una perfecta desconocida' (116). The tongue-in-cheek dash induces wretchedness again: 'Pero todo ha muerto'. Miguel self-consciously portrays the scene as a 'lamentable comedia que está a punto de comenzar. Que ha comenzado ya', but Julia has no role to play except buffoon. If a 'comedia', this is grotesquely blunt:

Dejaste de ser algo muy bello hace tiempo. [...] Sí, en efecto, algunas noches llegué a imaginarte bajo la barriga mantecosa de este inepto que las circunstancias políticas han convertido en periodista. Pero no llegaba a sentir pena por ello. (118-119)

Julia will not accept his 'groserías': 'Soy demasiado feliz'. For Dot, this is precisely the problem: 'Exacto' (118-9). Happiness is perennially out of reach, just a façade. Here,

separating mind and body, Julia suddenly zooms out and observes the ridiculousness: ‘¡Dios, pero observa este espectáculo! [...] Mira. Es para echarse a llorar’. Miguel imagines spending the night with her, grotesquely dehumanising his interlocutor: ‘manosear un objeto que casi pertenecía al mundo de los Sagnier’. The idea ‘le hizo gracia y se rió en voz alta’, and when she asks why, he answers ‘De nada’ (139-40). The stale, infinitely regressing laughter is not sanguine but indicative of estrangement and coldness. It indicates a nothingness (‘nada’) at the heart of the human. Characters feel guilty for being transitorily happy, yet simultaneously guilty for not being happier. ‘Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose’ encapsulates this bleak funniness. Radcliff (2017: 234) confirms that direct foreign investment in Spain rose from 40 to 700 million dollars between 1960 and 1975, but this rapid growth is yet to have an effect on the characters’ lives.

Grey humour is so perpetually saddening because it points to the insufficiency of *being* itself. As philosopher Schopenhauer notes, if life had ‘any positive intrinsic value, there would be no such thing as boredom at all: mere existence would satisfy us in itself, and we should want for nothing’ (Schopenhauer 2014 [1891]: 22). Although Dot wants nothing more than to shrug it off, boredom is deep, devastating, and all too real:

–[...] ¿qué has hecho durante estos días?  
–Vagar, vagar y vagar. (168)

As the comedy wanes and fades, doing nothing is very hard work indeed. Furthermore, neither loitering nor high-jinks lead anywhere in particular. Guillermo remembers being urinated on (!) at a *fiesta* (‘una especie de cóctel gregorino’): ‘Yo berreando, ensangrentado y meado, mi mamá desmayada, ricos y pobres consternados, la junta organizadora santiguándose. ¡Aquello era el caos! ¡El fin de la juerga gregoriana!’ (159) Playtime is well and truly disappointing. Likewise, in the bar, Miguel finds office workers playing dominos but arguing ‘fuerte pero sin enojarse, en un hábito cotidiano impuesto por el vaho del tabaco, la ronquera y la misma vacuidad de los temas’ (176-7). Amusing wearisomeness might be just this side of despair, but the characters are more objects than subjects of leisure.

Similarly, when Miguel arrives at the Club, wearing the wrong tie, he realises (like Rafa and Ramón in *Hemos perdido el sol*) ‘No debía haber venido’. The self-deprecatory humour is central: ‘Soy una calamidad’ (176). He observes himself in a shoe-shop window, noting his ‘ojeras’ and ‘expresión de mala leche. Estaba blando y triste como una perra preñada y no tenía ganas de nada’. The comic pointlessness – simultaneously subject and object, wisecrack and butt has him ‘tomando mentalmente notas que nunca le servirán de nada’ (177). The final hammerblow is met with a blank resignation and incessant drowsiness. When Guillermo enters Miguel’s bedroom and makes a number of silly jokes, ‘retorciéndose de risa’, Miguel’s reaction is comic by contrast: ‘soñoliento, inmóvil, con una joroba de indiferencia y de soledad en los hombros’. Yawning twice, he asks Guillermo, ‘¿no te cansa esta vida de payaso?’ (183) The comedian’s life is lonely and bleak.

Guillermo seeks refuge in alcohol and complete and utter scepticism, Lavina uses drink and scandal to avoid her disagreeable reality, and Miguel is confronted with an assault on the senses as he wanders the streets. When Guillermo concludes ‘Vive su vida’, Miguel admits ‘Es difícil hacer feliz a la gente’ (251). Towards the end, Miguel observes that ‘volvía la esperanza idiota de todos los domingos’ (260), in the ‘pequeña ilusión perpetuamente burlada de la noche de domingo’. Absurdly, the inhabitants are *aware* of – indeed, able to make fun of – the fantasy, yet fully complicit in it. However, soon the darkness settles in, with Miguel exclaiming ‘El mundo era una soberana mierda’ and Guillermo concurring: ‘no puede uno mover un dedo sin hacer daño a alguien. Bien, así es la vida. [...] El mundo es un asco’ (260-61). Rampant grey humour signals that boredom is less their fault than their fate.

Moreover, Marsé directly lampoons social realist ideals, casting sardonic doubt on the possibility for political change. Soto attempts to convince Dot that their co-edited *revista* was futile: ‘de los manifiestos no queda nada excepto esa bella postura irrealizable y una vaga sensación de haber hecho el ridículo’. The humour (‘ridículo’) is poignant. Dot is adamant that ‘Fue testimonio, cuando menos’ (49-50), but, as this thesis has shown, ‘testimonio’ is the only possible outcome of the genre. Later, Soto visits his coworkers from the *revista* and attacks their idealism:

–Vosotros sois aquellos rarísimos ejemplares humanos que creen que la verdad

acabará por imponerse dentro de unos años. ¡Qué conmovedor! [...] Dime, Navarro, ¿aún publicas tus maléficis reportajes sobre las Hurdes y sus pobres gentes en aquella revista mejicana?

–Aquello no podía ser más objetivo, tú lo sabes. Puedes reírte cuanto quieras. –  
Sonrió con aire irónico–. (177)

Referencing the poverty of ‘las Hurdes’, Soto lambasts the notion that objective reportage is feasible or consequential, explicitly targeting its supposed compassion (‘¡Qué conmovedor!’). Navarro’s response acknowledges the comic ruse, deliberately employing irony when defending the report as ‘objetivo’. By 1962, we can conclude, the illusions of true-to-life social realism were well and truly derided.

*Esta cara de la luna* ends with the narrator’s aching, acerbic irony, which contrasts tedium and fantasy: ‘Este día iniciaron [Dot y Lavinia] una plácida vida de amantes que había de prolongarse hasta los primeros años setenta y que sus amistades envidiarían secretamente’ (272). The dryness echoes Fernando Rey’s bitterly mocking voiceover at the end of Berlanga’s *¡Bienvenido Mister Marshall!* (1953): ‘Los habitantes vuelven a la normalidad cotidiana y feliz’. Scenes fail and self-annihilate so spectacularly that they are funny on another level entirely. The mechanics of set-up and reversal are a final grave setback in this futile search for unreachable ‘felicidad’.

Marsé’s *Encerrados con un solo juguete* (1960) underlines a forsaken, barren kindergarten or playroom, an apt metaphor for comedy’s failure. In what follows we shall discuss the grey humour of tedium throughout, proving that it is a feeble weapon against the barbarities of existence. Perpetually listless, characters do not take a bite out of the Franco regime. They can only nibble, hesitantly and irresolutely, at impecuniousness.

At the outset, we learn that Andrés has abandoned his job at a jeweller. When he awakes and looks at the floor, ‘No veía nada, no quería nada, respiraba en el diminuto espacio donde se debatía su impotencia y su desidia de todas las mañanas, acumulando ironía contra sí mismo. Sonrió: [...]’ (11). Accumulating irony ‘contra’ oneself is central to social realist humour of procrastination and postponement. ‘[H]oy por hoy soy un inútil’, he concludes, self-defining as a ‘shmuck’ – the ordinary, un-aspirational, somewhat sad idler

who wallows in nostalgia for a time long past and employs laughter as a smokescreen. He loathes the 'confort cuadrículado y abrigado' of Matilde's boyfriend, Julio Puig, but his own existence is just as slothful. His comic potential lies precisely in the fact that ambition, hope, vision and purpose have never been defining features for him, or, if they once were, they are so no longer because the hard knocks and seemingly arbitrary cruelties of life have extinguished them along the way.

The only compulsion is 'a matar las horas porque sí, porque había que matarlas...' (95). They are so bored because of the barrenness of the Francoist landscape, which offers no hope for its youth. Even when Andrés reminisces about playing dominos on Sunday afternoons, his memory is comically colourless: 'cargando [solo] a medias con el tedio abrumador y dominical' (87). Likewise, when Tina jokes around with Martín, scolding him for his aloof attitude, she asks him point-blank '¿por qué estás siempre tan triste?', and then laughs 'con una risa breve, sin abrir la boca' (55). This is a kind of chuckle-to-the-self, a bathetic humour of discontent that almost answers the question for her. Grey comedy offers neither comic nor tragic release - just the postponement of pain.

Tina likes French music because she does not understand the lyrics (otherwise, she would lose interest!): 'Del mismo modo prefiero no comprender tus rollos más que a medias' (68). Prospects ruined and hopes dashed, humour leaves us in the lurch. Absurdly, characters absurdly prefer *not to think* – a worryingly regressive solution: 'No quiero saber nada más, no deseo conocer más detalles' (215). Unable to summon creativity even in atmospheres of merriment, they suffer *thaasophobia* – the fear of boredom – because they find no entertainment in existence and have nothing to live for. As theorist Eric Bentley has written, the cruel, embittered implication of the phrase 'Let's not go into that: this is a comedy!' is 'That won't bear going into' (1991: 299). López-Portilla is right that 'El ambiente del bar no podía ser más deprimente' (1987: 133), but *comedy* compounds the misfortune. When asked 'Y qué, chico, qué cuentas. ¿Nada?', Andrés responds with what is by now predictably bathetic: 'Eso. Nada' (89). Similarly, when Tina asks Andrés '¿Qué hacemos...?', the pedestrian conversation goes nowhere, unable to maintain interest:

–Nada. Esperar.

- ¿Esperar qué?
- Simplemente esperar.
- ¡Huy, hijo! ¿Pero qué?
- Cualquier cosa. Tiene que pasar algo. (121-2)

There is no obvious thrill in this humour. Tina spends the entire day in her bedroom producing nothing, serving no purpose, ‘haciendo algo completamente inútil: escuchando música en la radio, probándose algún jersey a rayas, leyendo una revista gráfica o mirándose las rodillas’ (122). As Patricia Meyer Spacks puts it, ‘Boredom presents itself as a trivial emotion that can trivialize the world’ (1995: 13). Bored and burnt out, suffering from self-inflicted wounds, *más que estar aburridos, lo son*. When Andrés explains to Tina that ‘estamos como en una gran sala de espera de estación, todo es provisional...’ (193), grey humour reaches its zenith.

Even the bar provides no space for entertainment. Martín pathetically tells his mother: ‘Las chicas no vienen a esos bares, madre. Nosotros no tenemos amigas, organizamos nuestras tertulias solos. Ellas por su lado y nosotros por el nuestro. ¡Puñetera ciudad! [...] No hay alegría, aquí, sólo hay orden’ (123). The tedium, even in a *fiesta* atmosphere, continues: ‘Decidamos pronto o de lo contrario no iremos a ningún sitio, como siempre’. Andrés is equally noncommittal: ‘Haced lo que queráis’ (123). López-Portilla finds ‘una visión completamente pesimista’ (1987: 145), but the grey *humour*, accentuating this tender agony, takes the wind out of our sails. Martín suddenly breaks off, screaming to Tina ‘¡Qué ridículo todo ahora! Ya ves, chaval, los dos aquí de nuevo, sin aliento, quemados, siempre como en un fuego o sobre un alambre haciendo equilibrios [...] y cruzándonos en el mismo hastío’. Stepping back to survey himself, Martín half-realises his own folly, struggling to fill the emptiness with *anything at all*.

Spanish social realism features an abundance of lacks, shortages and scarcities, and the narrative drag is itself relentless. The narrator lugs the story along, trawling through the workings of languor, but there is a definite ‘nothingness’ left in irony’s wake (as described by Kierkegaard 1989 [1841]: 278). Readers are on the verge of crying ‘Enough, enough! I can’t take it any more!’ Lacklustre laughter signals the obligation that one must do more

with one's life:

–[...] ¿por qué no haces algo?

–Pero qué. Qué se puede hacer.

–Ah, hijo, no sé... (152)

Every assertion is undercut, every insight qualified with a plaintive moan. This is an undaring, conservative comedy. Hurley, Dennett and Adams, who analyse humour from a cognitive perspective, argue that it *closes off* further exploration, saying 'Nothing down these alleys! Save your time and energy!' (Hurley *et al.* 2011: 107) Spanish social realism likewise terminates the reader's search for enthusiasm or energy through grey humour, stimulating utter inaction. Tina comically accuses Andrés – 'Es usted bastante aburrido...' (171) – and another woman speaks riotously of her dull husband: 'no fue porque con él me aburriese exactamente. Bueno, sí, me aburría a veces, me cansaba de no ser nadie' (211). Tina merely wants what everyone wants – 'vivir feliz, ser amada, casarme y tener hijos y todo eso. ¿Es mucho pedir?' – yet Andrés humorously cuts down to size: 'Es mucha contradicción' (153). He reprimands her for not thinking seriously, but Tina once again makes light of everything, laughing and teasing him: 'gran pensador'. He strives to preserve gravity: '¿Estás viendo cómo no hablas en serio?' (153), but prefers *not to think at all*, which is the only conclusion available within postwar social realism. Grey humour runs aground and comes to naught. Minimising initiative, it finds neither beauty nor grandeur in frailty.

Martín announces his desire to leave the city, but Andrés sceptically asks, 'con indiferencia', '¿Y cómo piensas irte?' Martín, smiling, injects some irony ('Con nocturnidad y alevosía, claro'), and the humour radically shifts the tone: 'Andrés también sonrió a pesar suyo: ese espíritu de burla era lo que antes les unía. Se miraban sonriéndose ligeramente, muy juntos, penetrados el uno del otro con una antigua conciencia juvenil que reptó entre ruinas'. This 'espíritu de burla', crawling 'entre ruinas', encapsulates social realist laughter, approaching what John Barth terms 'a cheerful nihilism' (1967 [1958]: 44). However, this inkling of hope is immediately crushed, for an ellipsis breaks the memory, and 'Luego dejaron de mirarse y quedó en sus rostros una mezcla de hastío y de temor' (236). The cheerful affability is replaced by vapid surroundings: 'hombres y mujeres salidos del trabajo, comprando el

periódico y corriendo luego hacia la parada del tranvía, una clase silenciosa, hermética, incomunicada' (237). Martín imagines that the entirety of humanity had formed a pact: 'vamos a no pensar en ello, a seguir trabajando como si aquí no pasara nada'. Caught in a web of inertia, *no pensar en nada* – to *grin* and bear it – is of course no solution at all. As laughter and trembling jostle for position, the final words achingly parallel the ending of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*<sup>47</sup>:

–Salgamos de aquí. No puedo más.

–No, mujer. Ahora no.

–Te digo que no puedo más.

Pero quedaron allí de pie. (256)

This is the laughter of let-down, and the vital point is that the reader contends with the nothingness and emptiness so central to grey humour.

**Juan García Hortelano - *Nuevas amistades* (1959), *Tormenta de Verano* (1962)**

Having discussed two novels by Juan Marsé, we shall now examine two more by social writer Juan García Hortelano. Critics have long perceived that his *Nuevas amistades* (1959) is a novel of 'condición abúlica' (López-Portilla 1987: 213); however, its bleak, exhausting humour has never been studied. This is a novel of blunting noughts – Julia was never pregnant at all, and the abortion was faked, effected by Emilia – and this provokes the reader to doubt the veracity of the titular *amistades*. Stultifying, hindering humour abounds, leading to a comical sigh of dejection. For instance, when Meyes snuggles up to Gregorio and notes lovingly that 'Todos necesitamos enamorarnos, ¿no crees?', his response is excruciatingly, hysterically insipid, a dithering hope that something – surely –

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<sup>47</sup> ESTRAGON: Well, shall we go?

VLADIMIR: Yes, let's go.

*They do not move.* (Beckett 2010 [1953]: 54, 94)

has to happen: 'Sí; todos necesitamos hacer algo. [...] Que ocurra algo'. This humour is quintessentially social realist, more passive yearning than active zeal. Absurdly, she agrees: 'Y el amor es lo menos molesto' (111). Despite the onset of catastrophe, tension derives from the sense that levity – amidst sinister death, thwarting, and hunger – is crucially *not* appropriate. When Leopoldo calls the *abortion* 'lo más excitante que ha pasado hace años' (200), it would not be out of place in a Rafael Azcona script. Like in *El Jarama*, at least *something*, however grim, has (temporarily) fended off the creeping ennui.

Moreover, *fiestas* and their accoutrements are easily corrupted and heavily disappointing. As Leopoldo tells Gregorio, 'Nos han jeringado con la fiestecita. Llegará mañana y todo sin preparar. Como siempre' (140-1). Stepping back to acknowledge his folly, Pedro exclaims '¡No conocemos a nadie!' <sup>48</sup> Pedro frantically rubs his forehead and acknowledges their pathetic existence: 'Nos creemos el centro de las relaciones sociales, porque vamos a tres o cuatro fiestas todos los meses. Pero no conocemos a nadie'. Leopoldo adds: 'No sabemos salir de un número fijo de sitios' (87). With a heavy dose of grey humour, there is nowhere to go. For alcoholic Isabel, gin is the 'asesina del tedio' (123); however, its ephemerality is tragic, and Julia resolves: 'No hay dónde ir. Quedémonos bailando' (*Ibid*). The *fiesta* is prolonged not out of enjoyment but solely because there is no preferable alternative. Gregorio attempts to inject some glee into proceedings, but his language is absurdly mechanical, as though a requirement: 'Ahora se fuma un cigarrillo, se bebe un trago y se es feliz' (237). Given this inertia, it is predictable that, despite Juan's desires to escape, Leopoldo comments 'No iré a Francia, ni hará nunca nada' (88). Grey humour is benumbed and paralysed, offering no hope whatsoever.

At the lip of the abyss, *Nuevas amistades* features the laugh laughing at the laugh, aware of the futility and ridiculousness of its own gestures. The monstrous doubling of the individual catches the 'I' in the act of *being itself*. During the debacle surrounding Julia's abortion, Gregorio notes that 'se podía descansar hasta de uno mismo' (25) – the ultimate absurd quandary. Throughout the social novel, individuals declare 'I should not have done that',

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<sup>48</sup> This is akin to Pepe's sudden exclamation in *En la hoguera*: '¡Verdaderamente, qué poca cosa somos los hombres!' (67)

and finally 'Why am I like this?', for they are foils to their own success, voices laughing in the wilderness. As Bateshaw puts it in Saul Bellow's *Augie March*, 'Boredom is the conviction that you can't change... the shriek of unused capacities' (2001 [1953]: 504). Under Francoist Spain, the consciousness of the gloom is unbearable, and characters are architects of their own misfortune.

Our laughter is a deep, audible groan, for grey humour is excruciatingly dull. When Gregorio finds Julia 'tendida de costado' and asks her '¿Te has aburrido?', her response is typical: 'Mucho'. He itemises his daily errands, she remarks 'Tampoco muy divertido', and he agrees: 'Tampoco' (214-15). Notwithstanding the overwhelming dissatisfaction, the tragicomic paradox is that Isabel desires to return to the 'ritmo de antes. Aunque me aburra' (216). This is the absurd comedy of delay and self-delusion.

Comedy encourages laughter before choking it off midthroat, haunting us with the admonition that what is funny should not be laughed at. The only available option to relentless melancholy is apathy – not to think at all. As Pedro recommends to Leopoldo: 'Si ves que hay peligro, no te comprometas. Tú no tienes por qué comprometerte' (90). Like a slow hand clap, time trundles on, but humour cannot weather the struggle. At once exasperated and apathetic, on-edge and submissively acquiescent, the characters of Spanish social realism are rooted in a rootless universe. Its comedy is both diverting (amusing) and *diverting* attention away from harsh social conditions.

In *Tormenta de verano*, the staples of revelry are profoundly dissatisfying, signalled by the title. As Javier notes, 'no hicimos nada de particular; bebimos unas copas, bailamos, nos acostamos tarde. Lo de siempre. Ya sabes que siempre es lo mismo' (161). Pavlovic observes 'considerable emptiness' (2003: 52), citing Javier on his own wife ('era un extraño ser que me hablaba desde el otro lado de la mesa', 40), but it is *grey humour* that underpins this statement. When Javier tells Elena that 'cada vez sé menos lo que sucede', her response incites a convulsive, collapsing splutter, a snort of deadened derision: 'Porque no sucede nada, Javier. Todo sigue igual' (177-188).

Moreover, immediately after a discussion of the woman's drowning on the beach ('No, no tenía aspecto de ahogada'), which is itself another instance of death infecting a party atmosphere, Elena suddenly proposes 'una gran fiesta, como la de hace dos años' (79). The juxtaposition of mortality and revelry is grotesque, especially given the double meaning of Javier's response: 'Sí, me acuerdo. Algo espantoso'. Boredom begets a draining, devastating laugh: 'Porque os vais a convertir en momias de tanto aburrimiento' (79). The absurd pattern of initial complaint, subsequent desire for change, and ultimate, self-conscious inertia is doubly deflating. Things are always worse than they seem.

As with much of social realism, Angus knows that she is the architect of her own misfortune: 'como si se me hubiera olvidado vivir. Me encuentro muy idiota' (200). Crucially, she finds her body ridiculous, concluding 'Tengo toda la pereza del mundo metida dentro' (*Ibid*). Likewise, when Elena departs, Javier swims in the sea 'hasta que los brazos me dolieron' (253) and is abruptly struck by self-aware absurdity. His acknowledgement of 'imposible sinceridad' and the 'imposibilidad de comprensión con la mujer que había venido acostándose con uno en los últimos años' leads to hysterical *laughtears*: 'daba risa y casi lágrimas'. He can only laugh wretchedly at this shortage of genuine communication.

Similarly, when Javier makes a mistake about the 'satélite', and the others laugh uproariously, he observes: 'En el centro de la atención general, comprendí que se me pedía la continuación de mi despiste, como a un clown'. Humour prompts an experiential gap between being, and having, a body. Later, Javier enters his expensive, brand-new house (another strained imposition of false happiness that backfires spectacularly) only to find 'Unos puntos marrones [que] corrieron por el suelo al encender la luz; se inmovilizaron'. Farcically, he is just as immobile as these 'animaluchos' ('no supe qué hacer durante unos segundos') and appreciates the debilitating comedy: 'el absurdo de las cucarachas por mi casa nueva' (310-11). Agonisingly aware of himself as butt, the comedy seeks not to challenge the tragedy but to enshroud and entrench it.

In the final analysis, this comic averageness and hollowness signals the impossibility of change. When Javier and Elena discuss socioeconomic justice ('¿Qué ha sucedido para que yo no esté de limpiabotas en cualquier bar de por ahí?'), Angus merely comments that 'Me

haces gracia' and resolves, with a comic double negative, 'No quiero saber nada de nada'. Likewise, fed up ('uno se pone enfermo') of the newspaper's constant stream of disasters ('guerras, revoluciones, accidentes, locuras'), the novel's grey humour has don Antonio simply retreat to the comic fantasy of a 'novela policíaca' (322), once again preferring *not to think*. Grey humour provokes a conservative conclusion, literally dismissing commitment for cheap levity.

### **Jesús Fernández Santos – *Laberintos* (1964)**

Having discussed four novels by Juan Marsé and García Hortelano, we shall now examine the deadening humour of *Laberintos*, the social novel of bourgeois artists. Whilst Nieves Wise-Cantero observes (2004: 186) a 'particularly obvious' irony in this novel, criticism has not explored this in detail. *Laberintos* is replete with hysterical (albeit sapping and depleting) humour:

- ...aquí, cuando llueve, ¿qué se hace?
- Ir al café. Lo mismo que en Madrid.
- ¿Y con el buen tiempo?
- Al café también.
- ¡Sí que es divertido! (119)

Lives shrivel up and turn in upon themselves, doing the bare minimum, for the journey is forever downhill. Characters suffer a slow death by waiting in a world that scarcely notices. Grey humour reveals an atmosphere less stagnant than dead in the water, but, despite her exhortations, Celia too is absorbed into the ennui:

- ¿Trabajáis?
- ¿En qué vamos a trabajar?
- Hombre, no sé... Quiero decir que si os dedicáis a algo.
- Así, en concreto, a poco.
- A nada, querrás decir –aclaró Celia. (76)

It is unsurprising that early commentator Batlló criticised contemporary authors for ‘repetiendo las mismas fórmulas, esperando vanamente que éstas les fueran de una utilidad eternal’ (1964: 451). Likewise, Marra-López found that *Laberintos* ‘deja perplejo y a la vez insatisfecho al lector’, with ‘un regusto amargo’ (1964: 9). When Pedro asks Julio ‘¿Qué tal tu úlcera? ¿Progresas?’, Celia reprimands him: ‘¡Qué bromas tienes tú!’, and Julio’s response ‘daba pena’. Once again in Spanish social realism, unnatural, hollow amusement leads only to further sadness: ‘Julio se puso aún más triste’ (33). Comedy either fizzles out or goes drastically wrong. Moreover, when the group finally select an excursion, it is

–A buscar fósiles.

Celia rompió a reír:

–¡Pues es para animarse! (34)

Final vestiges of lives that expired long ago, fossils are a potent symbol of dwindling energies and desires. It is raining, ‘las nubes [están] amenazando’, and humour gestates in the gaping chasm between laboured expectations – a year in the making! – and miserable reality: ‘Era como vivir aquellos días sin el fervor de entonces, como una infeliz caricatura de aquel viaje al que habían fiado, por un año, su mayor esperanza’ (69). Julio’s response to Wanda’s ‘aparte de escribir, ¿qué hacéis?’ is likewise riotous in its crippling indolence:

–Aburrirnos como tigres.

–¿Cómo dices?

–Aburrirnos mucho.

–¡Pobre! –Su voz se volvió más dramática–: ¿No beberás? (84)

Once again, alcohol is the only alternative. Yet, even in ‘algún whisky club [...] también allí el tedio les seguía’ (89). The grey humour of de-personalising discontent is so ubiquitous as to be hidden in plain sight. The novels’ backdrop is a dull *musak* of mirth, funny for its flatness. When Daniel suddenly exclaims ‘¡Es absurdo!’, and asks, desperately, ‘¿Qué hacemos?’, the bleakly humorous answer is painfully familiar: ‘Esperar...’ (208). ‘Esperar...’ for nothing at all. The coarsened comedy of heartbreak, alienation, and dissatisfaction cheapens, hardens,

and gives us the cold shoulder. This laughter is once again non-purifying and uncreative, despite the novel's subject matter of artwork.

### **Manuel Arce – *Oficio de muchachos* (1963)**

We shall conclude our analysis of the social novel with the most despondently hilarious text of all: *Oficio de muchachos*. Comedian Mike Myers has observed that 'Comedy characters tend to be a \_\_\_\_\_ machine; i.e., Clouseau was a smug machine, Pepe Le Pew was a love machine, Felix Unger was a clean machine, and Austin Powers is a sex machine' (quoted in Friend 2001). Following this formulation, the social realist timewaster is a boredom machine, fatigued even by irony. At the start, Mariona sighs and tells narrator and bourgeois idler, Nacho: 'Tú tienes que ser feliz a la fuerza' (44). This encapsulates the social realist approach to carousing: a contrived, false happiness that never approaches genuine joy:

–Tal vez eso que pensamos que es felicidad –meditó– es algo que no existe,  
¿verdad?

Se me quedó mirando.

–¿A qué viene todo esto? –protesté–. Hace sol y estamos en la canoa... ¡Entonces!  
(44)

Ultimate happiness (Nacho's pathetic 'estamos en la canoa...') is, comically, 'algo que no existe'. Nacho asks '¿Qué se arregla?' from these conversations, and Mariona can only admit 'Nada, ya lo sé'. The comic fails to land a punchline, meekly bowing out with an 'Oh. OK, then. Never mind'. Mariona makes light of the affair, joking that if one 'se apena de' oneself, 'es como si de pronto todo fuera diferente' (44). Jestings at the folly of *homo sapiens*, the rattle of nervous laughter hangs by the thinnest of threads. The characters perceive the heartbreak and setback with a wry detachment, yet, far from doing something about it, they can respond 'Same here'.

Returning to *Oficio*, Nacho is unbearably aware of his preposterousness: ‘Nunca me había encontrado tan ridículo como en aquel momento en mi diminuto bañador’ (94). The adjectives signal his insignificance, and despite ‘alardeando despreocupación’, his companion perceives that, ‘[e]n el fondo, estás lleno de pudor’. Absurdly, Nacho knows it is ‘absurdo saberse uno allí sentado’, in swimwear, ‘mientras afuera llovía’. Yet:

Sin querer me encontré sonriendo, como un tanto, y al advertirlo solté una carcajada como si tuviera necesidad de escucharme; de saber que era cierto que yo estaba allí, en aquella butaca, sin saber de qué modo poner las manos, los brazos, las piernas... Todas las posturas resultaban ajenamente cómicas. (94)

The semantic field of drollness (‘absurdo’, ‘sonriendo’, ‘carcajada’, ‘cómicas’) has Nacho able to reflect upon himself from a distance (‘ajenamente’) and laugh at his own absurdity. Peter Nicholls writes of a ‘spectacular disembodiment’ to the modern: no longer a ‘privileged object of representation’, the body becomes ‘a source of discrete sensory intensities which elude symbolisation’ (1995: 12). Crucially *beside himself* (in both senses) with laughter (‘absurdo’, ‘sonriendo’, ‘carcajada’, ‘cómicas’), Nacho chuckles merely out of some ‘necesidad de escucharme’ – a false, disappointing substitute for his desire to *break out*. As Ted Cohen suggests of the absurd, ‘When we laugh at a true absurdity, we simultaneously confess that we cannot make sense of it and that we accept it. Thus this laughter is an expression of our humanity, our finite capacity, our ability to live with what we cannot understand or subdue’ (1999: 41). It is as though Nacho were performing his own collapse, extracting a tired laugh by saying ‘So this is what it is to be a failure’.

Stymied at every turn, unable to find a way out of the bind, Nacho plays a part in his own degradation, feeling ‘cada segundo más y más empequeñecido...’ (104). He laughs because there is nothing else to do. The comedy pulls out with a ‘Fair enough. I’m sorry. I’ll just leave’. Nacho self-diagnoses: ‘cansado de no hacer nada y de saberme mimado por mi madre’. However, the real truth comes out: ‘Cansado de mí’ (104). Boredom is the fear of the self. As the idiom has it, *Bienaventurados los que se ríen de sí mismos porque nunca les faltará motivo de que reírse*. One character in Grosso’s *La zanja* even admits an overwhelming ‘necesidad de ser inconsecuente’ (68), a prime example of grey humour.

Again, lack of communication signals grey humour, for Nacho is unable to recognise himself in the 'conversaciones y situaciones que se habían sucedido durante el día'. He confesses: 'Terminaba arrastrado, sin lucha, por las aguas de mi propio asco. Era lo mismo que un sueño pesado: advertía el peligro y me precipitaba a él' (105). Fully conscious of the imminent danger (often of *the self*: 'mi propio asco') whilst striding headlong towards it, there is an absurd pleasure in reviewing one's own decline. Similarly, in Goytisolo's *Juegos de manos*, 'Todo conspiraba en contra de aquel momento turbio, del que uno y otro deseaban escaparse y, sin embargo, prolongaban' (120). Grey humour revels in the danger towards which it nonetheless hastens. In the same novel, Mendoza feels 'preso en el laberinto que el mismo se había fabricado' (63): social realist grey humour hints that characters may simply buckle under the pressure.

Returning to *Oficio de muchachos*, Nacho drinks a few *copas* and finally feels 'a gusto'. However, 'lo real' is not invigorating action but, absurdly, its bathetic opposite: 'Ahora todo ha vuelto a ser real y *anodino*' (119, my italics). Salvador, however, signals despondency:

–Hoy está divertido esto.  
–Sufrimos –espetó Salvador. (124)

This build-and-deflation pattern, ending in comical cynicism, recurs throughout the genre. As humour theorist Nagel observes, absurdity springs when 'pretension and reality inevitably clash for us all' (1991: 13). The group wish to take a canoe to sea, but Lucas announces:

–[...] En el fondo, somos unos conquistadores de vía estrecha.  
Me acordé de Elvira y sonreí.  
–¿Qué más se puede hacer? –bromeé. (137-8)

This is the narrowest victory, and Nacho's nervous gags simply wallow in the wretchedness. Claudette summarises this mocked happiness with a final, deflating flourish, rendering even the mildest pleasure impossible: 'Dora no te habla a ti, Marta no habla a Amadeo, Joaquín huye de su madre desde la mañana, Emilio grita a todo el que se le acerca y Santiago parece

que se haya quedado mudo. La pacífica felicidad se llama a eso' (175).

Moreover, Nacho finds his corporeality ridiculous when reminiscing about his relationship with Elvira. In this mis-relation of the self, the body-he-has(and-is) takes the lead. All at once he is *just* a body: '[I]os momentos íntimos y su afán insaciable por ser amada, y me vi a mí mismo como un muñeco, grotesco y vacío' (142). The joke is not only *on* him but *is* him. As Wyndham Lewis (1982 [1927]: 158-9) wrote, reacting to Bergson, 'all men are necessarily comic: for they are all things, or physical bodies, behaving as persons'. Viewing himself as laughingstock with the humour of hitch and hang-up, he acknowledges that these 'relaciones' are not 'canallescás o turbias, sino vulgares. Aburridamente vulgares'. Nacho embodies that absurd spirit, rife throughout the social realist novel, of hating oneself and simultaneously thinking one is better than everyone else. Near the end, he asks the fundamental question; '¿Cuál era nuestro oficio de muchachos?... ¿Buscar...?' (259) When the novel's *desconocido* finally comes into the light, his words are cutting because they comically expose Nacho's greatest fear: that he be as dull as his surroundings: '¡Aburres! – dijo con voz de falsete–. ¿O es que piensas echarme un sermón?' Twisting the knife, apathetic Nacho merely shrugs his shoulders, now miserable butt to another's joke: '¡Me das pena, Nacho, mucha pena! –se condolió cómicamente' (259). We shudder and wince and quiver and guffaw – all at the same time. This is the comedy of entrapment, but the trap wins.

Appendix B has interrogated grey humour in the bourgeois social novel of the late 50s and early 60s, finding an exercise in comic self-confession and self-deprecation and more middle-of-the-road conclusions. Sniggering at itself, laughter flounders in regret, devoid of genuine answers. The only option is to lose, ungracefully. Texts are more interested in wallowing in the amusing, bathetic tedium of strife than in offering political analysis or feasible answers. This is the only conclusion available to grey humour.