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A Tenth Anniversary and Something after Nada

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Mention the name of the inaugural recipient of the Premio Eugenio Nadal (1945) to those familiar with twentieth-century Spanish literature, and almost infallibly, Laforet's first novel is the consistent and almost exclusive association. Admittedly, there are similar examples of such steadfast links, with perhaps one of the more noteworthy and parallel in American literature being J. D. Salinger and his classic The Catcher in the Rye (1951). With both Laforet and Salinger, reference any of their works besides the aforementioned, and the reaction is often of surprise, confusion and/or disbelief, as if both authors published nothing more. In Laforet's case, this enduring perception can be traced to the often-cited characterization “Después de Nada, nada,” that Juan Goytisolo first penned in his 1958 article “La literatura española” (16); and such a misconception continues to be reinforced by scholars' persistent attention to a work that has proven to be a bottomless well for creative interpretations.

Although certainly not a complete index, the MLA Directory of Periodicals reflects this scholarly trend: of the 100 plus listings for Carmen Laforet, excluding doctoral dissertations, approximately two out of three are devoted to Nada. In his 2005 article “Releer Nada,” Javier Alfaya helps explain this focus by discussing the initial impact both Camilo José Cela and Carmen Laforet made with La familia de Pascual Duarte (1942) and Nada (1945) respectively, and that the subsequent literary production of both authors established different legacies: for Cela, it was one of a prominent twentieth-century Spanish writer admired by the academic world and the public, for Laforet, it was one of a one-hit wonder. Referring to Laforet, Alfaya notes, “aquella jovencísima escritora lo que había hecho era sencillamente dar a la literatura española de la época una obra maestra” (184). Often identified alongside Cela's La familia de Pascual Duarte as representative of Spain's tremendismo literary movement of the 1940s, Nada and its huge success in 1945 promised to forge a highly acclaimed path for Laforet's following contributions, yet the author fell short of her critics' and the public's expectations. Not until seven years after Nada did her second novel La isla y los demonios (1952) appear, and although garnering respect, it drifted from the tremendismo genre of its predecessor while also failing to participate in the social realism literary movement of her more successful contemporaries of 1950s Spain: Camilo José Cela, Luis Romero, Miguel Delibes, Jesús Fernández Santos, Ana María Matute, and Rafael Sánchez Ferlosio, among others.

Arguably even more problematic for Laforet's profile was the 1955 release of her third novel, La mujer nueva, which portrays the revival of the author's own Catholic faith through the protagonist Paulina. Although La mujer nueva earned the Premio Menorca in 1955 and the Premio Miguel de Cervantes in 1956, both recognitions were supported by Franco's dictatorship and associated with the regime's religious values, which further distanced Laforet from the stature of her critically acclaimed peers. Reinforcing the perception of Laforet's fading star, and one year prior to Goytisolo's proclamation of “Después de Nada, nada,” was the last article
that *Hispania* published on Carmen Laforet in 1957, where Cyrus C. DeCoster remarks that despite Laforet's talents as a novelist, the author failed "to live up to the promise of *Nada*" (191); and many today still concur with this nearly 60-year-old assessment. However, over the past 40 years some scholars have indeed noticed and highlighted the artistic merits of Carmen Laforet's works “después de *Nada*”: Barroso, Cruz-Cámara, de la Fuente, Del Mastro (“Gaining,” “Identity,” “Psychosocial Development”), Illanes Adoro, Johnson, Nichols, Quintana Tejera, and Ullman, among a few others. Yet Juan Goytisolo’s 1958 label survives.

Of Laforet's overlooked works is her fourth novel *La insolación*, which Planeta published in March 1963 as the first part of the trilogy *Tres pasos fuera del tiempo*. Although the author acknowledged the completion of both sequels, *Al volver la esquina* and *Jaque mate*, she retained the former until 1973, and when her editor later requested changes, Laforet adjusted but with-held the novel. It was not until May 10, 2004, and thanks to the assistance of Israel Rolón Barada and Laforet's two children, Cristina and Agustín Cerezales, Laforet's fifth novel, *Al volver la esquina*, was released posthumously. This unexpected publication came within just over two months of Laforet's death on February 28, and the timing motivated the press to reflect not only on the author's latest novel, but also on her broader life and work. Nevertheless, despite enjoying coverage by the Spanish press—*ABC*, *El Cultural*, and *El País*, among others—along with several laudatory book reviews and a few noteworthy critical studies, *Al volver la esquina* still faded.

With the tenth anniversary of its publication (2004–14), it is fitting to re-examine *Al volver la esquina* within the corpus of Laforet's literature. Studies such as Luis María Quintana Tejera's 1997 *Nihilismo y demonios* (*Carmen Laforet: Técnica narrativa y estilo literario en su obra*), Roberta Johnson's 1981 *Carmen Laforet*, and Graciela Illanes Adaro's 1971 *La novellística de Carmen Laforet*, for example, all note the psychological dimensions of the author's broader work, and I have repeatedly emphasized the importance of Laforet as an accomplished psychological novelist (“Deception,” “Gaining,” “Identity,” “Psychological Development”). With *Al volver la esquina*, Laforet validates this distinction with what is perhaps her most complex portrayal of the lifelong quest for identity that she attempted to reconcile for herself via her literature, beginning with *Nada*. Throughout Laforet's novels, the reader sees the author's personal search for self as she tried to reconcile her female roles as writer, wife and mother in Franco's Spain. In the psychologically intricate *Al volver la esquina*, the reader not only finds "something after *Nada*," but also a work that further develops the author's depiction of her own and her protagonists' difficult quests for identity. The following study argues the virtues of *Al volver la esquina* as a psychological novel, while it also aims to spark a greater appreciation for and interest in Carmen Laforet's contributions “después de *Nada*.”

WORKS CITED