

# An attempt at exhausting a place: Barcelona University Square

*Maria Patricio-Mulero*

INSTITUT D'ÉTUDES EUROPÉENNES

UNIVERSITÉ PARIS 8

[rmariapatriciomulero@gmail.com](mailto:rmariapatriciomulero@gmail.com)

ORCID: 0000-0001-5333-9727

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## ABSTRACT

Emulating the work by Georges Perec on the Saint-Suplice square, this article presents the University of Barcelona square as the backdrop for three different literary works whose fictional plots help us to reevaluate the social characteristics of the city. Based on the analysis of certain chapters from *Nada*, by Carmen Laforet, *Maletes perdudes*, by Jordi Puntí, and *Puja a casa*, by Jordi Nopca we can see the evolution of the space in relation to the expectations of Barcelona's youth during the grey post-war period, the 1960s and the absence of the social revolutions and the globalisation associated with the economic crisis of the beginning of the 21st century.

**Keywords:** urban literature, literary sociology, Barcelona, Francoism, globalisation.

**Corresponding author:** Maria Patricio Mulero, 23 Rue des Salenques, apt. 107 – 31000, Toulouse

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Beyond being a mere geographical location where stories unfold, cities have been a central theme in novels since the advent of modernity. Writers' fascination with the range of human conditions present in cities, the new social challenges of the contemporary era, and of course, the freedom and possibilities for artistic development within cultural capitals, have fostered urban literary production from the late 19th century up to the present day (Berman, 1988; Matas Pons, 2010; Williams, 1973). Literature allows us to reflect on modernity and its countless social challenges through the aesthetic filter of its writers. In fact, urban novels have experienced a diverse aesthetic trajectory throughout the 20th century. From realist

novels and the avant-garde, all the way to complex postmodernism, writers have transmitted the values of urban societies not only through background content (telling stories in metropolitan spaces about problems linked to the modern way of life and its capitalist interactions); but also in their form, whether trying to faithfully reflect urban realities as perceived by writers, or by experimenting with language as the highest form of social interventional commitment.

Cities in literature can be studied in several ways: we can assess each writer based on how they treat the city in applying their particular style and thus, in each case, understand their experience of the city; at the same

time, we can look at cities themselves, extracting the essential characteristics (urban, social, and cultural) of each metropolis in each time from the corpus of literary works that describe them. This option allows us to understand the characteristics of urban spaces and the societies that inhabit them that most interest writers. Indeed, some features may have changed over time, and so, have been immortalised thanks to these texts.

The tradition of representing cities in literature abounds in examples referring to large international cultural capitals, such as Paris, New York, London, or Lisbon. This does not mean that there is not a prolific literary tradition of works centred on more peripheral cities in the global system of cultural history—we can find good examples in Dublin, Naples, Montreal, or Barcelona. In every case, consolidation of the symbolic capitals of each city has helped create a corpus of works in which the presence of the urban space plays a leading role (Charle, 2009). Writers, who must necessarily first be qualified readers, know the local literary tradition and can interact with the influences of other authors when they write. Meanwhile, their readers embrace the literary imaginary of a city, constituted by a series of values attributed to the urban spaces which, in turn, can be experienced as citizens or as visitors. It is this city–literature binomial that allows the superposition of interpretations because it means that we can experience the city from our reality or through the literary filter of a writer.

Because of its experimental nature, a particularly interesting example of this city–literature binomial is Georges Perec's '*Tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu parisien*' [An attempt at exhausting a place in Paris], which appeared in 1975 in 'Le Pourrissement des sociétés' [Rotten business] in Issue 1 of the *Cause Commune* magazine (Perec, 1982 [1975]). In this text, the French writer tries to capture the essence of the Saint-Sulpice Square of the 6th arrondissement of Paris, not only by describing the physical space, but also by enumerating everything that happens in this place, as he puts it, in terms of the time, people, cars, and clouds. Over three days he digs into several points which he uses to give his perspective:

[There are many things in Saint-Sulpice, for example: a town hall, an executive hotel, a police clerk's office, three cafes, one of which is a tobacco store, a cinema, a church in which Le Vau, Gittard, Oppenord, Servandoni, and Chalgrin have served and which is dedicated to the chaplain of Clotaire II who was bishop of Bourges from 624 to 644 and who we celebrate on 17 January; a publisher, a funeral director, a travel agency, a bus stop, a tailor, a hotel, a fountain decorated with the statues of the four great Christian orators (Bossuet, Fénelon, Fléchier, and Massillon), a newspaper kiosk, a merchant selling objects of piety, a car park, a beauty salon, and many more. Many, if not most, of these things have been described, inventoried, photographed, narrated, or catalogued. My purpose in the following pages is to describe the rest: what we do not usually notice, what is not noticed, what does not matter: what happens when nothing happens, except time, people, cars, and clouds] (Perec, 1975, pp. 9–10).

Just as Georges Perec does in '*Tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu parisien*', one could analyse the construction of the literary imaginary of a space with a similar logic; in terms of methodology, starting by neutrally observing a point of urban geography, we can decipher its physical space, evoking the literary work that has been set there. Thus we can superimpose all the things 'that happen when nothing happens'—the material that we perceive as pedestrians—the characters and the plot of literary work and, by extension, the aesthetic power of novels (the most common genre set in urban spaces, although other genres do also capture cities); that is, the essential values that literature transmits in this space. We could do this experiment in an infinite number of urban spaces, for example in Barcelona, and we could choose, for example, a place that, because of its social function, by itself already maintains a dialogue with the city's writers.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This literary experiment was previously carried out by Enrique Vila-Matas with his *Tentativa de agotar la plaza Rovira* [Attempt to exhaust Rovira Square] (Vila-Matas, 2000), which, based on Perec, recreates the exercise of a writer observing a specific space, in this case, in Barcelona. This experiment, together with Perec's, were the inspiration for this article.

In this article, we will explore the superimposition of literary imaginaries onto a specific point to try to evoke its different texts in a space relevant to readers of Barcelonan novels, while simultaneously being a relevant space relevant to writers, even before they create their work. The location I have chosen is the Plaça de la Universitat de Barcelona [University of Barcelona Square]; this space reasonably present in literature (Carreras, 2003; Vila-Sanjuán and Doria, 2005; Soldevila, 2014) and has the added value that writers themselves have a relationship with this central square which borders different neighbourhoods and homes the University's Faculty of Philology<sup>2</sup>; it will serve as an example of the construction of an urban literary imaginary for a Barcelonan space. I have chosen three works from three different moments in contemporary history to make the contrast visible: the hard, post-war period of the 1940s; the 1960s when the youth heard about the social movements that were beginning to boil up in Europe; and the first decade of the 21st century in the era of globalisation—and economic crisis. In these three periods, Barcelona's youth dialogues with the University Square space from very different perspectives, according to the time and the society they live in.

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## THE TWO POST-WAR WORLDS IN BARCELONA

If we talk about the University Square, one of the most present novels in the collective imagination is *Nada* [Nothing] by Carmen Laforet (1945). Winner of the first edition of the Nadal prize in 1945, the novel covers Andrea's first year in Barcelona, where she arrives at a relative's home to study literature at the university. The arrival of the work's protagonist is a common literary device that allows the author to explain Andrea's first impressions of the city. In *Nada*, through Andrea's inner dialogue, we are shown that, from the first moment she arrives in Barcelona, its contrasts mark her life in the city; the protagonist comes to take on the tension resulting from the marked differences

between the two spaces that define and shape the life of the people associated with them. On the one hand, the university, where Andrea will feel pulled to enjoy her youth, especially because of her friendship with Ena, a young upper middle-class girl with bohemian inclinations. On the other, and very closely linked to the first, is the flat on Calle Aribau, as a setting for family repression and the heavy imposition of Francoist values according to which, essentially, women were expected to 'maintain their virtues' and that their education should be oriented towards family life within the confines of marriage. From the very beginning, the contrast between the two spaces is, initially, physical; the moral characteristics of each place are transferred to its material description and anticipate the tone of the whole novel, translating the features of each space into the psychological characteristics of each character. From Andrea's arrival, the university seems to welcome her, while the buildings on Calle Aribau are shown as inhabited by secret observers:

[I drove that night, in that dilapidated vehicle, by wide empty streets through the heart of the city always full of light, as I wanted it to be, on a trip that seemed short and that, for me, was charged with beauty.

The car turned around the University Square and I remember that the beautiful building touched me with a serious greeting of welcome.

We filed into Calle Aribau, where my relatives lived, with their Oriental plane trees full that October with a thick greenness and the vivid silence of the breath of a thousand souls behind dark balconies. The wheels of the car raised a trail of noise, which reverberated in my brain] (Laforet, 1945, p. 12).

The geographical proximity of the two spaces intensifies the paradox of the differences between them. Laforet published *Nada* aged 23 and has often speculated on the autobiographical origin of her work, starting from the coincidence of spaces: the Faculty of Philology, where the author studied, and the flat at number 36 Calle Aribau, where she lived. During the 1940s, in the post-war period, the limited

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2 The Faculty in which the authors of the three selected works, Carmen Laforet, Jordi Puntí, and Jordi Nopca, all studied in.

freedom imposed on women caused the few spaces of relative tolerance, such as universities, to become shelters where they could aspire to personal growth, while at the same time gaining access to academic knowledge.

[When I returned to start classes at the University again, to me the accumulated impressions seemed to inwardly ferment. For the first time in my life I found myself being open and consolidating friendships. Without too much effort I managed to connect with a group of classmates, both girls and boys. The truth is that I came to them with an indefinable desire that I can now specify as a defensive instinct: only beings of my same generation and with my same tastes could support me and shelter me against the slightly ghostly world of mature adults. And truly, I think that at that time I needed this support.] (Laforet, 1945, pp. 53–54).

The liberating and stimulating experience of the university is embodied by Ena, with whom Andrea forms a friendship as intense as it is ambiguous. Under Ena's influence, Andrea manages to take some steps towards liberation from family oppression and misery, by acquiring some hedonistic habits such as going to the movies or buying herself small treats. At first, the spaces of the relationship with Ena are confined to the university, which acts as a security bubble at the beginning of the nascent friendship but, as Andrea gets to know Ena more, it will come to be populated with questions and conflicts. This feeling is also experienced in new spaces, until [Ena] appears at the family flat on Calle Aribau, which is an distressing situation for Andrea: I liked walking with her through the stone cloisters of the University and listening to her talk, thinking that one day I would tell her about that dark life in my home, which, when becoming a topic of discussion, I would imagine full of romanticism (Laforet, 1945, p. 55). Andrea antagonistically describes the two worlds characterised by the "*fácil cordialidad*" [easy friendliness] of their student friendships, and "*el sucio y poco acogedor de mi casa*" [my dirty and unwelcoming home] (Laforet, 1945, p. 57).

As the novel progresses, darkness and misery gain ground in the protagonist's spirit, especially when Ena encounters [Andrea's] mysterious uncle Román. Like the house's other inhabitants—aunt Angustias and uncle Juan—[Román] is also living a life of decay, but his past as a virtuoso violinist distinguishes him; a golden age that serves as a refuge amid the squalor embedded into the lives of his siblings. The anguish of her family environment is intensified by the fact that most of the family scenes take place inside the apartment, which is impoverished after the war. However, in a scene of persecution, the disorientation of Andrea's family when faced with the real outside world—when Juan goes to look for Gloria, while their son debates [between choosing] life and death—is notable. The epicentre of Gloria's desperate search is the University Square, which Juan and Andrea pass through from different sides, first towards Calle Tallers, then towards San Antonio Avenue, to finally return to Calle Tallers and venture into Chinatown. The end of the search reveals a secret that will take the sombre mirage in which the family lives to even greater depths: Gloria's husband plays in clandestine card games—in a space associated with the underworld, the Raval—while Juan feigns as an artist and abuses her.

Finally, Andrea leaves Barcelona and leaves behind the leaden universe of Calle Aribau and her frustrated hopes of the university. Once the vital lesson is learned, [she has] no expectation of building anything else. The balance between the loss of the innocence of the inner space and the desire to experiment, typical of the university centre's youth, is ambiguous and although we can sense the protagonist's growth, nor does it give us any sign of hope.

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#### A PLACE OF CROSSING, FAR FROM THE EUROPEAN STUDENT SOCIAL REVOLUTIONS

Representations of the University Square of the 1960s do not seem to have changed much from that of twenty years ago, and precisely for this reason, it is another example of the immobility that had taken root in the grey Barcelonan society under Franco. In *Maletes*

*perdues* (Lost luggage) (Puntí, 2011), the University Square represents one of the confines of Barcelona's perimeters in which the protagonist, Gabriel, circulates. Orphaned during the Franco regime, Gabriel grew up in a children's home which later moved him to the Llars Mundet residences. During his adolescence he works at the printing house at the children's home and his love for the Raval causes him to perceive the square as a border to be crossed: "*Sortint de la feina li hauria agradat distreure's una mica pel seu barri de sempre; aventurar-se, ara que li deixaven més llibertat, cap a les Rambles o més enllà de la plaça de la Universitat, Aribau amunt. En canvi, havia de córrer per agafar el tramvia i l'autobús per creuar tot Barcelona i tornar a les Llars*" [After work he would have liked to have enjoyed his neighbourhood; to venture, now that they gave him more freedom, towards the Ramblas or beyond the University Square, to go up Calle Aribau. Instead, he had to run to catch the tram and bus to cross the entire city and return to the residence] (Puntí, 2011).

When he is old enough to emancipate himself, he chooses to live with his best friend in a hostel in San Antonio avenue, before becoming a truck driver and going on adventures in Europe, especially in Frankfurt, London, and Paris. There he would meet several women, and with each one he would have a son. Jordi Puntí came to Barcelona to study at the Faculty of Philology and chose [to explore] these European cities because some of [the great] social movements of the last half of the 20th century took place there during the 1960s: the Frankfurt School, Swinging London, and the May 1968 unrest. Each of Gabriel's foreign partners is linked to one of these movements, two of which clearly originate in universities. Sigrun is a Sociology student at the University of Frankfurt, an alumni of Habermas and an activist in the Socialist Union of German Students; and Mireille studies Literature at the Sorbonne, but leaves her studies to live in a commune in the Latin Quarter and participate in the student revolution:

[We're leaving Mireille, looking paralysed, in the Latin Quarter commune. It's the small hours. Cigarette in hand, a lost look, the mind ambushed between the desire for insurrection and the sting

of sleep, a smile for the possible victory. Alongside them, protesting students recapitulated the raids of the previous days, the police charges, the encounter last Monday at the Arc de Triomphe with some fellow workers. I check the 'history books'—because this is already history—and I read that the demonstration worked, the police left the university campus, the arrested students were freed, and Nanterre and Sorbonne had reopened, but the government still ignored them. Mireille and her colleagues review strategies for their next clashes] (Puntí, 2011).

In contrast to all the political rallies that Gabriel attends in his European travels, the Barcelona University Square is no more than a place of passage through Barcelona, far from the student revolts that would not reach Spain until almost a decade later. Paradoxically, it is also the first place Mireille goes when she comes to visit him in Barcelona, which clearly shows the contrast with her university adventures, because, for her, this is just one more stop on her tour and no more detail is given.

I must emphasise that Gabriel is an enigmatic character who, according to the author, represents the instability of the postmodern man (Patricio, 2017). He is a passive and attractive individual, incapable of deciding or letting himself be domesticated, in discreet rebellion; he is unable to choose one of the four families he has formed and all his tours of the city are repeated at the edges of bordering neighbourhoods, as if the character were comfortable in permanent ambiguity: the San Antonio avenue (joining onto the University Square) between Raval and Eixample, Via Favencia, or Calle Naples—between the Ciutadella park and the industrial Poble Nou. For him, the University Square is a place of passage, yet is another crossing; however, in the same way that his fascination with other cities highlights the mediocrity of Barcelona under the Regime, we can also apply this comparison to the University Square, which is just like any other square. It does not play the social function that other European universities had achieved at that time, which made them authentic participants in social movements.

In *Maletes perdudes*, the protagonist is not a university student, but a nomadic truck driver in an effervescent Europe, who comes from a city where, for most of the population, the external changes have not yet arrived. This contrast is accentuated by Mireille's experience in Barcelona, who, coming from the May 1968 revolts in France, does not pay the slightest attention to the Catalan university's headquarters. Given that, to her, the university is just another place of passage, it is interpreted as a banal and depopulated building, not occupied by the student activists who were the engines of change in other European countries.

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### THE 21ST CENTURY: THE UNIVERSITY OF DISENCHANTMENT

One of the most recent representations of the University Square appears in the compilation of stories *Puja a casa* [Come home] by Jordi Nopca (2015), another former Faculty of Philology student. Indeed, Nopca makes the presence of the University Square evident through this faculty which appears in three of the book's stories. In the story that closes the book, '*Túniques y espelmes*' [Tunics and candles], the narrator tells us that he studies the Theory of Literature and describes the routine of his classes while everything is about to change at the heart of his family. In contrast, in the first story in the compilation, '*No te'n vagis*' [Don't go away], the University Square is a point along Miriam and Robin's night-time journey, but implicitly appeals to their precarious situation as new graduates: she has studied art history and, while she works in a clothing store, hopes to be an associate professor; he is studying a master's degree in the management of creative and cultural industries, while living at his parents' house. It is in this democratic period, when access to universities is open, that the debate about the precariousness of young people emerges; this very well-educated generation is paying the consequences of the economic crisis that began in 2008.

This precariousness and doubts about the future populate the university institution in Nopca's third story set in the Faculty of Philology. In '*En Félix Palme*

*y l'Àngels Quintana tenen problemes*' [Félix Palme and Àngels Quintana have problems], Àngels, after a complicated start to her career, finds work as a waitress near the University Square:

[At the same time, Àngels also found a job. She served drinks in a bar near University Square, where most of the clients were students at the Faculty of Social and Human Sciences.

"They think they'll be famous writers, and yet they still have their milk teeth", she said at the bar one day to her colleague José, who always had a look of disgust on his face.

"The maths students are worse. Once one of them fell asleep in the bathroom while writing pages of formulas. I found him when I was cleaning... He gave me a fright."

At first Àngels thought the university students were a bit arrogant, but she would have liked to have interacted more with them. There were evenings that, when delivering them beers, she got caught up trying to catch threads of their conversations and she would imagine how they had continued when she returned to the bar] (Nopca, 2015: pp. 87–88).

The debate on the ambition of literature students is tinged with irony because the criticism comes precisely from one precarious generation and is directed at another potential one; the difference is that one of them has post-graduate qualifications, while the question remains if these can guarantee a successful professional career. To finish, the disenchantment of young people is again set in the faculty's cloisters where, the story informs us, a documentary about an innovative form of protest related to the *indignados* ['outraged' Spanish political movement] is being recorded.

In contrast to the absence of a local university movement in *Maletes perdudes* and the lack of university politicisation in *Nada*, in Nopca's story we clearly perceive the presence of the student movements in the University Square, as well as their relevance in

the protests of the *indignados* (close by in Catalonia Square). The innovative constant in Nopca's stories is that the University Square is linked to restless youth faced with an uncertain future. In these stories we witness the globalising impact of tourism on the city and, therefore, we can no longer speak of a city isolated from the world, even though this international openness makes the extreme precariousness of young generations even more evident—especially in Spain after the devastating effects of the economic crisis. The university is a point of contact for this precarious youth, aged between 20 and 40 years old, and who all share this characteristic of uncertainty.

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### THE INFINITE RECONSTRUCTION OF THE LITERARY IMAGINARY OF SPACES

Although Perec tried to exhaust the Saint-Sulpice Square by observing it for three days, the literary imaginary of spaces is a construct in constant development; this is probably because of its imaginary dimension, which allows us to simultaneously decode the material elements that inhabit it. The University Square was present in different societies during the 1940s, 1960s, and in 2010, even though its centrality as the centre for studying literature in the city tends to link it with the youth of each period and their position at the heart of society. If in the 1940s the

university was a 'dangerous' place for women because of the relative freedom they could enjoy within the faculty's walls; in the 1960s, some young people began to understand that universities were the source of important social movements which were far from the mediocrity of Franco's Spain; and in 2010, while virtually everyone can access a university, young people live with uncertainty about their futures. The elements that Perec could have recorded would have been very different according to each time: from the horse-carriages of the 1940s to the buses of the 1960s, and surely, in 2010, he would have mentioned its skaters.

Each of these writers set their work in Barcelona, and through their aesthetic filters we can perceive this city's social characteristics: literary palimpsests of great value that fix the spaces of each period. Perec, Vila-Matas, Laforet, Puntí, Nopca and every urban writer may try to exhaust each space in their creative observations but, fortunately, each frustrated attempt superimposes a layer of stories and of added value to the cities. Each work clearly fixes the urban space in its time and its historical and social context, and this is, perhaps, one of the most relevant characteristics of the literature of cities: to help readers with the volatility of memory and allow us to witness the evolution of the same space that we can experience in our present, except this time through the eyes of each writer.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Maria Patricio Mulero has a doctorate in sociology and culture management from the Universitat de Barcelona and Université Paris 8; her thesis was titled *La ciudad literaria. Representación urbana y creación literaria en Barcelona (1970–2015)* [The literary city: urban representation and literary creation in Barcelona (1970–2015)]. Her research revolves around literary and urban sociology and cultural policies, and she currently teaches Spanish language and civilisation at the *Institut d'Études Européennes* [Institute of European Studies] at the Université Paris 8.

