

# Ideology, Affect and the Body in Alberto Méndez's *Los girasoles ciegos*

Lough, Francis

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**Ideology, Affect and the Body in**  
**Alberto Méndez's *Los girasoles ciegos***

Francis Lough

University of Birmingham

The twenty-first century in Spain has witnessed a boom in the publication of novels on the Spanish Civil War and its consequences. Within this corpus, Fernando Larraz has identified three approaches: an historicist one which attempts to close old wounds and allow Spain to move forward; a universalising approach which views the war in terms of universal values, in particular man's propensity for evil; and, the largest group, works which 'se dedican a observar la guerra desde una pátina puramente épica o bien ingenuamente reivindicativa, en las que no deja de haber concesiones al melodrama' (Larraz 2014: 350). Larraz welcomes this continued interest of novelists in the Civil War and concludes that '[n]uestro éxito como sociedad depende en parte de ello' (354).

Many of these novels have been studied in the general context of Memory Studies, in particular Marianne Hirsch's concept of post-memory, an approach which Sebastiaan Faber has recently suggested needs to be re-examined. Faber points to the significant difference between Hirsch's interest in a shared intergenerational affective link between young people and their parents who had been victims of the Holocaust and the Spanish context which is complicated by deep political divisions (2014: 146-47). More importantly for this study, however, Faber also questions the value of some critical practices which use literary texts to comment on social issues like historical memory in Spain. His objection is that many such analyses value the literary text in relation to some extra-literary concept or theoretical framework (memory, postmemory or trauma, for example) which says nothing about the literary or fictitious nature of the text (139-41). Consequently, 'se suele dar por sentado, sin

necesidad de pruebas adicionales, la relación (de representatividad o de impacto) entre el objeto analizado y los fenómenos más generales que informan el análisis' (141). Faber accepts the idea that academic literary critics should contribute to, or intervene in, social processes and expresses concern over literary analyses which either lack reference to the extra-literary context or assume the relevance or impact of a novel without some form of quantitative research. Literary texts should be analysed 'precisamente, en función de su *voluntad* de intervención en el discurso social y en la percepción pública del movimiento de la memoria' (152-53 Original emphasis). The aim of this essay is not to explore the nature of the memory boom in Spain but, following on from Faber's observations, to consider how literary texts can be read as sites of potential meaning and therefore potential impact. In other words, it explores not just the question of what we want literary texts to mean but how they come to have meaning in any particular socio-historical context.

The studies by Larraz and Faber are grounded in the belief that literary texts matter, that the texts themselves and carefully crafted critical responses to them can contribute to social change, although the question of precisely how literary texts function in this regard lies beyond the scope of their discussions. Elsewhere, I have argued that modern literary and cultural theorists provide the critical tools to think of both literature and democracy as having a common ethical basis which derives from a recognition of alterity and the willingness of the subject as reader or citizen to alter, to become other (2012). While I continue to find this argument valid, I accept nonetheless that it operates at the level of ideas<sup>1</sup> and does not account fully for how readers engage with texts in practice or how a text might shape a reader's response. These issues, however, can be illuminated by what recent studies on affect and the emotions reveal about both the nature of war and literary representations of it.

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<sup>1</sup> In the article in question, I based my argument on Derek Attridge who talks of literature demanding in the reader 'a passive, although alert consciousness' (2004: 26); John Carey, who refers to the 'thought-content' of literature and to the notion that 'literature becomes part of our own mind' (2005: 259); and Jacques Rancière who thinks that art 'conveys a new intellectual adventure' (2009: 22).

Discussions of war often cite Carl von Clausewitz's dictum that it is merely a continuation of politics or policy. However, as Christopher Bassford has argued, what is often mis-represented or mis-understood as a simple statement of fact is, in reality, part of a dialectical argument:

His synthesis lies in his 'fascinating trinity' [*wunderliche Dreifaltigkeit*]. This synthesis resolves the deficiencies of the two earlier bald statements, indicating that war is neither 'nothing but' an act of brute force nor 'merely' a rational act of politics or policy. Rather, it is a dynamic, inherently unstable interaction of the forces of violent emotion, chance, and rational calculation. (2013)

Violent emotion, like anger or hatred, coexists with reason. As Hannah Arendt has argued, 'the opposite of emotional is not "rational," whatever that may mean, but either the inability to be moved, usually a pathological phenomenon, or sentimentality, which is a perversion of feeling' (1970: 64). On one level, then, understanding war is about understanding the role of emotion alongside chance and reason. However, wars are not only experienced on the front line but also invade the private spaces of those not directly involved. Mary Favret draws a useful distinction between 'war' and 'wartime': war can be defined temporally and geographically, while wartime is an epistemological state which conditions many aspects of social existence: 'If we take wartime less as an object of cognition bounded by dates – a period – and more as an affecting experience which resonates beyond the here and now, then wartime literature becomes an attempt to trace and give shape to such affect, to register its wayward power' (2010: 11). Favret explores 'how war becomes part of the barely registered substance of our everyday lives', in other words, 'how those at home find sentient ground for what often appeared a free-floating, impersonal military operation, removed from their immediate sensory perception' (9). Crucially, this distance can be temporal as much as geographical as the 'modern sense of "wartime" [is] something that includes but also supersedes dating' (49). Spain, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, for some if not all Spaniards, bears the hallmarks of Favret's notion of wartime. Thirty-six years of dictatorship, the 'pacto de

silencio', the 'tejerazo' of 1981, demands for reparation, the exhumation of mass graves and, finally, the 'ley de memoria histórica' of 2007 have all contributed to a long period of time during which Spaniards have continued to live with the war to the extent that, even today, it is generally considered to be a wound yet to heal, one reason for the continued popularity of civil war novels amongst writers and readers.

Favret draws on Raymond Williams's notion of 'structures of feeling' and his concern for 'the felt experiences or "senses" of history, before or beyond any clear, retrospective "idea" of history' (62-63). Structures of feeling relate to social changes whose immediacy or presence have not yet been formalised but which still impact on daily life:

They are social in two ways that distinguish them from reduced senses of the social as the institutional and the formal: first, in that they are *changes of presence* (while they are being lived this is obvious; when they have been lived it is still their substantial characteristic); second in that although they are emergent or pre-emergent, they do not have to await definition, classification, or rationalization before they exert palpable pressures and set effective limits on experience and on action. (Williams 1977: 131-32)

These structures of feeling are associated with present, lived experience rather than the past and are historically variable. Judith Butler also argues that 'affective responses are invariably mediated, they call upon and enact certain interpretive frames' (2009: 34). Structures of feeling, therefore, form a 'cultural hypothesis' which 'has a special relevance to art and literature, where the true social content is in a significant number of cases of this present and affective kind, which cannot without loss be reduced to belief systems, institutions, or explicit general relationships' (Williams 1977: 133). Lee Spinks takes a similar tack when he ties the affective force of literature to the production of meaning: 'Literature is not the expression or representation of a subject; it is the opening and differential production that makes subjectivity, presence and truth possible in the first place. Thus literature has a pre-human and inhuman force that marks the inauguration of sense before sense can be recuperated within the semantic regime of truth' (2001: 34).

This essay aims to explore further this notion of an affective social content and to consider how, therefore, a text like Alberto Méndez's *Los girasoles ciegos* might, as Larraz suggests, contribute to the success of Spanish society, which I take to mean the success of its democracy. The various elements in the equation – structures of feeling, affect, the value or function of any specific literary text and William's notion of social changes characterised as 'changes of presence' – have two common denominators: they are all characterized by indeterminacy and latency and they form part of a chain of events which, in no precise or predictable way, connects both the reading experience to the text and individual experience to the social. Any such chain only becomes knowable, if at all, after the event; causality here does not imply pre-determination, rather it is an *a posteriori* imposition, a belief in the fulfilment of a previously unknown affective potentiality.

Studies of affect, and therefore of bodily responses, can be illuminated by recent psychological and neurological research on the experience of reading literature, as '[i]n literature, embodiment can be explored from a thematic perspective by looking at literary representations of bodies or from a reader-response perspective by examining the audience's physical responses to literary representations' (Caracciolo 2014: np.). The body as a site of meaning is of particular interest in the study of war literature, as injury to or destruction of the body are central to acts of war, a context in which 'the incontestable reality of the body – the body in pain, the body maimed, the body dead and hard to dispose of – is separated from its source and conferred on an ideology or issue or instance of political authority impatient of, or deserted by, benign sources of substantiation' (Scarry 1985: 62). Moreover, the corpse, the body destroyed by the violence of war, represents 'the utmost of abjection' as it serves as a reminder to the individual of the fragility of the human body and life, the abject being caused by 'what disturbs identity, system, order, what does not respect borders, positions, rules' (Kristeva 1982: 4).

According to Gregg and Seigworth, what is generally referred to as the ‘turn to affect’ began in the 1990s as a reaction to the ‘linguistic turn of previous decades’ (2010: 7) and, for some, the limitations of post-structuralism, deconstruction and a long tradition of rationalist discourse built on a body/mind dualism which privileged intellect over emotions.<sup>2</sup> In 1996, Brian Massumi challenged the ideas that cognition was a matter for the mind alone and that affect and emotions are the same thing (Massumi 1996) which has led to on-going debates about the relationship between affects and cognition and between affects and emotion. Affects have been described in a variety of ways, but they are essentially considered to be bodily responses to stimuli from the world. For many theorists, affects are ‘independent of, and in an important sense prior to, ideology—that is, prior to intentions, meanings, reasons, and beliefs—nonsignifying, autonomic processes that take place below the threshold of conscious awareness and meaning’ which ‘influence our thinking and judgments but are separate from these’ (Leys 2011: 437). As Leys notes, this interpretation of affects can lead to a kind of mind/body dualism, one which theorists seek to overcome by claiming, as do Seigworth and Gregg, that ‘affect and cognition are never fully separable – if for no other reason than that thought is itself a body, embodied’ (2-3). What is generally accepted is that affects can be detected at times through bodily reactions which the individual does not control: ‘[they] are comprised of correlated sets of responses involving the facial muscles, the viscera, the respiratory system, the skeleton, autonomic blood flow changes, and vocalisations that act together to produce an analogue of the particular gradient or intensity of stimulation impinging on the organism’ (Demos 1995: 19). In the context of reading literature Jenefer Robinson defends two key hypotheses:

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<sup>2</sup> This privileging of the mind over the body has been noted by Leys and others: ‘According to Constantina Papoulias and Felicity Callard, fifteen years ago cultural theorists influenced by social constructionism, psychoanalysis, and especially de-construction tended to exclude the findings of biology from their models of subjectivity and culture for fear of falling into an essentialism they deemed hostile to the possibilities of cultural transformation’ (Leys 440).

First, emotional responses prompted by a thought of something-or-other do not require that the something-or-other exists. And secondly, the fact that emotional responses to novels, plays, and movies do not normally motivate us to take action to help the heroine or to punish the villain is the result of cognitive monitoring that succeeds the initial affective appraisal and results in the suppression of the relevant action tendencies. The emotion process is just the same in both the real life and the fictional case. (2013: 153)

Research on affects runs parallel to neurological investigations into mirror neurons which help to substantiate some of the claims made for them. Mirror neurons are 'premotor neurons' that fire when an individual observes an action being performed by, or, more significantly here, an emotional response in, another person (Gallese 2009: 520-22):

When I see your disgust, or when I read a narrative on somebody else's disgust, the same region within my anterior insula (a deep sector of the frontal lobe) is activated as when I feel real disgust. However, I am "disgusted" in my insula, which does not necessarily overlap with the disgust I experience when facing disgusting objects. I think you also learn through a top-down cognitive control to reduce the emotional impact of what the other is experiencing, because otherwise you wouldn't be able to cope with it. (Vittorio Gallese in Wojciehowski 2011: np.)

Such 'emotion simulation' can be produced by the emotional content of language. For example, '[u]nderstanding happy sentences activates muscles associated with smiling, while understanding sad and angry sentences activates muscles associated with frowning' (2009: 532).

All of this seems to confirm John Dewey's notion that engagement with a work of art is a form of experience similar to, but different from, any experience we have in everyday life (O'Leary 2009: 25). Although no firm conclusions can be drawn as yet, mirror neurons help in understanding a reader's response to texts: '[w]hat we perceive are words on a page; what we respond to are their content, the thoughts and images that they provoke. In either case if there is a genuinely emotional response, it is generated by an affective (non-cognitive) appraisal' (Robinson 2013: 115) which causes physiological responses and is then succeeded by cognitive monitoring' (2013: 97). The cognitive control exercised in reading corresponds in part to what is traditionally called our suspension of disbelief and it has been suggested

that the cognitive framing provided by the knowledge that we are reading a novel (or watching a play or film) may mean that ‘these staged events, passions, conflicts, etc., are more powerful than events happening in real life. Perhaps this happens because we can fully simulate them. In a sense we mirror the conflicts happening on stage more effectively than those happening on the street because we feel safe’ (Gallese in Wojciehowski 2011). Such research also suggests that what some claim, following Dewey, to be the transformative power of literature in an intellectual or moral sense (Attridge 2004: 24; Docherty 2006: xiii, 157-58; O’Leary 2009) also has its roots in affect.

Needless to say, much of this research is in its early stages and the authors recognise both the complexity of the issues and the importance of personal circumstances and contexts in how affects operate. As Seigworth and Gregg note, the ‘real powers of affect [is] affect as potential: a body’s capacity to affect and to be affected’ (2010: 2). Nonetheless, there is also some evidence that ‘repeated reading is related to empathic understanding’ (Koopman 2015: 76-77). In the analysis which follows, I aim to explore how affects can be managed in literary texts. The main focus of attention is on Alberto Méndez’s *Los girasoles ciegos*, a key text within the recent memory boom in Spain. Before turning to this work, however, I want to consider briefly some poems by Miguel Hernández which were written during the height of civil war and published in *Viento del pueblo* (1937). These poems are not by any means representative either of Hernández’s poetic output or of what is a multi-faceted and complex volume of poetry written at a very difficult time. My interest in them here is that they are representative of literature as propaganda, a kind of writing which, as will become evident, is critiqued in Méndez’s text.

Juan Cano Ballesta has described the tone of *Viento del pueblo* as one of ‘apasionamiento, fervor épico, jubilosa agresividad’ (1999: 19). Passion and epic fervour can be understood in terms of José Ovejero’s comments on those epic narratives or poems in

which ‘los hechos históricos no se analizan sino que se magnifican y reciben una carga emotiva que permita izar banderas o al menos enorgullecerse de un pasado legendario’ (2012: 81). The notion of a jubilant aggression, however, seems at times only to mask the reality of how propaganda works in a violent conflict, a context in which attempts can be made to control affective and cognitive responses in order to legitimise the killing of other human beings. Cano Ballesta describes Hernández’s poem ‘Alba de hachas’ as a failed attempt at writing revolutionary poetry because the metaphors are not convincing and the tone ‘desmesurado’ (1996: 137-38):

Amanecen las hachas en bandadas  
como ganaderías voladoras  
de laboriosas grullas combatientes

Las alas son relámpagos cuajados,  
las plumas, puños, muertes las canciones,  
el aire en que se apoyan para el vuelo  
brazos que gesticulan como rayos.

Whether the metaphors are convincing or not, death and destruction here remain abstract because of the metaphorical language and, importantly, the lack of any referent against whom the violence is perpetrated. The violence of war and the body as abject become more tangible in the poem ‘Sentado sobre los muertos’ which begins with an evocation of those who have died in the early months of the conflict: ‘Sentado sobre los muertos / que se han callado en dos meses, / beso zapatos vacíos’ (1999: 62). This image evokes a powerful affective response which combines the abjection of dead bodies and the erotic / emotive charge of the kiss. Importantly, however, there is no universalising impulse here as the poet’s concern is only for the ‘pueblo de mi misma leche’ (63). The poet then encourages the people to fight and to punish those who harm them ‘mientras que te queden puños, / uñas, saliva, y te queden / corazón, entrañas, tripas, / cosas de varón y dientes’. ‘Sentados sobre los muertos’, like much extreme ideological propaganda, rests on the premise that some lives are deemed, in

Judith Butler's terms, not grievable and therefore lacking in value (2009: 22) – 'some lives [...] are not quite lives' (Butler: 31).

One poem by Hernández seems to exemplify Cano Ballesta's notion of jubilant aggression more than any other. In 'Ceniciento Mussolini' the poet invites the Italian dictator to visit Guadalajara and to see

Banderas de tu ejército, carne de tus soldados,  
huesos de tus legiones,  
trajes y corazones destrozados.

Una extensión de muertos humeantes:  
muertos que humean ante una colina,  
muertos bajo la nieve,  
muertos sobre los páramos gigantes,  
muertos junto a la encina,  
muertos dentro del agua que les llueve. (101-02)

In this poem, the dead bodies of the Italian soldiers are not presented as abject because, in Butler's terms, the normative frame of propaganda is 'politically saturated' (1) to such an extent that it totally dehumanises the enemy soldiers such that their lives are no longer valued, no longer grievable. Consequently, 'the ethical problem of what it is to acknowledge or, indeed, to guard against injury and violence' does not arise' (3). This is not to say that Hernández was not aware of the tragedy of war. *Viento del pueblo* is a complex book which, amongst other things, also reflects his belief in the need to defend the Second Spanish Republic in the full and tragic knowledge that there are moments when, as he says in 'Canción del esposo soldado, 'Es preciso matar para seguir viviendo' (118). 'Ceniciento Mussolini' presents an interesting representative case of a poem which is likely to have a different affective charge depending on the ideological context in which it is read and provides an illustration of how affect and cognition can work together differently with different readers. On the one hand, the gruesome images evoked and the rhetorical repetition of 'muertos' read in the context of the war may be seen as an expression of jubilant

aggression; on the other, a reading which responds to the abject nature of the description may see such aggression as something which is not to be celebrated.

It has often been noted that the Spanish Civil War remains an open wound in Spain precisely because the ideological differences which motivated it have not been entirely eradicated, although Spain's peaceful transition to democracy indicates that the belief that such differences can only be settled by violence no longer holds sway. In this context, literary responses to the war are much less likely to promote any form of jubilant aggression and, even when ideologically motivated, are more likely to reflect on the effects of violence on the individual than to seek to promote or justify it. Alberto Méndez's *Los girasoles ciegos* serves as a good example. While the author's sympathies clearly lie with the Republican side and he is critical of the Nationalist strategies employed in the war, his work focuses less on the political beliefs of his characters and more on the impact of violence on them at an affective and emotional level. *Los girasoles ciegos* was first published in 2004 and by 2013 had sold more than 300,000 copies (Ryan 2014: 1), suggesting that it proved popular with the reading public in Spain. Previous studies have focused on questions of ideology and the female body (Di Giovanni 2012), ideology and space (Ryan 2014) and the discrepancy between utopian macro-narratives of violence and the reality of violence experienced by individuals (Gómez-López Quiñones 2009).<sup>3</sup> This study aims to explore further the question of violence in its most extreme form, the destruction of the human body, while arguing for the potential of literature to effect social change by linking the affective responses of characters and readers.

*Los girasoles ciegos* consists of four tightly linked stories which offer the reader 'un escenario coherente en el que acontecen episodios afines' (Gómez-López Quiñones 2009: 103), although each one can also be read as an independent story in its own right. Each story

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<sup>3</sup> The volume of essays '*Los girasoles ciegos*' de Alberto Méndez edited by Itziar Lopez Guil and Cristina Albizu Yerequi (A. Machado Libros: Madrid 2015) appeared while this essay was in the late stages of editing and so was not consulted.

involves the death of its protagonist as an expression of some form of defeat – the four stories are presented as four ‘derrotas’. This essay focuses on the first two stories which, unlike the others, centre on an exploration of the responses of their protagonists to death and the destruction of the human body caused directly or indirectly by war.<sup>4</sup> The first story, ‘Si el corazón pensara dejaría de latir’, tells the tale of a suicide in such a way that the body and its destruction, and the interpretive frameworks which give meaning to it, become the main focal points of the narrative. Carlos Alegría, a captain in the Nationalist army, lacks the qualities of a soldier when he first enlists (Méndez 2005: 15), is appointed as a supply officer and, therefore, to begin with, has no first-hand experience of the conflict: ‘Para él fue una guerra sin batallas, sin gestas ni enemigos [...]. Su guerra fue estibar, distribuir, ordenar, repartir y administrar todo lo preciso para que otros mataran, murieran y vencieran a un enemigo al que nunca vio de cerca’ (21). When he is sent to the front line, direct contact with death changes him profoundly: ‘un cansancio sumergido y el pasar de los muertos le transforma, según sus propias palabras, en un vivo rutinario’ (16). As he writes to one of his old Law professors, both sides are caught in the same situation of justifying violence: ‘entonan la misma salmodia el que mata y el que muere, la víctima y el verdugo; ya solo se habla la lengua de la espada o el idioma de las heridas’ (14). In the final days of the war, when a Nationalist victory is ensured, he decides to surrender – not to desert to the other side – and is imprisoned by the Republicans. When Madrid falls, Nationalist soldiers who find him in a cell treat him like a traitor and he is in turn imprisoned by the Nationalists. Alegría explains his surrender by accusing his ex-colleagues of wanting not to win the war but to kill the enemy (28), an aim which he did not share. As a Nationalist tried by Nationalists, Alegría feels he has become his own enemy and occupies a liminal space which frustrates both sides in the conflict (Gómez-

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<sup>4</sup> The third story, ‘El idioma de los muertos’, set in 1941, acknowledges the impending death of the protagonist and its effect on him but focuses more on issues external to his sense of self. The fourth story, ‘Los girasoles ciegos’, set in 1942, narrates the story of a Republican in hiding in his own home and his discovery by a priest who teaches his son, the narrative being divided between the voices of an omniscient narrator, the priest and the child, as they remember the events leading up to the father’s suicide.

López Quiñones 2009: 104). When he survives his execution he feels reborn but not in any positive sense: he ceases to be a 'vivo rutinario' – a form of metaphorical death – to become a living corpse.<sup>5</sup>

When he first awakes in a ditch Alegría is surrounded by bodily parts and excretions which represent the abjectness of the corpse: 'Estaba vivo. Un universo de médulas, cartílagos inertes, sangre coagulada, heces, alientos detenidos corazones sorprendidos por la muerte' (31). According to Kristeva, '[t]hese body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border' (Kristeva 1982: 3). Alegría describes his awakening as a rebirth (31), but while he extricates his body physically from the grave he does not do so symbolically. As he returns to his home town (his birthplace where he intends to die) others flee from 'aquel hombre sucio, macilento, con el dolor cristalizado en su mirada' (32). Farmworkers who find him asleep believe him to be dead and, ironically, consider burying him alive. Alegría remains symbolically in the abject, with no sense of identity, system or order. The tiredness which changed him when he was sent to the front is a moral, psychological and ontological tiredness which deepens when he discovers his home town is occupied by Nationalist soldiers: 'No sintió nostalgia ni arrepentimiento, pero sí melancolía', a melancholy which will lead to his suicide because he cannot move beyond 'el pasar de los muertos' and the desire of others to kill which he has felt in his own flesh. Alegría's suicide is only narrated in 'El idioma de los muertos' as he is imprisoned in the same Nationalist jail as the protagonist Juan Senra who reports that whenever Algeria was asked his affiliation he would reply: 'Me llamo Carlos García, nací en 18 de abril de 1939 en una fosa común de Arganda y jamás he ganado una guerra' (p. 89).

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<sup>5</sup> The prisoners in 'El idioma de los muertos' are described repeatedly as being metaphorically dead as death is all that awaits them, but the full subjective experience is not explored there as it is in 'Si el corazón dejara de latir'. The difference in the experiences of the protagonists is also highlighted by Juan Senra's ability to reflect on his attitude to death: 'su propia docilidad ante la muerte le resultaba cada vez más insoportable' (90), and by the fact that he is still motivated by his instinct for survival (92).

His suicide can be interpreted in terms of what Butler calls a livable conscience: ‘The difference between a livable conscience and an unlivable one is that self-murder, in the former case, remains partial, sublimated, and faulty; it fails to become either suicide or murder, which is to say that, paradoxically, only a faulty conscience stands a chance of countering destructive violence’ (2009: 175).

The title of this first story in *Los girasoles ciegos*, ‘Si el corazón pensara dejaría de latir’, effectively points to the fate of its protagonist in the realm of the symbolic. Unlike Juan Senra in ‘El idioma de los muertos’ who is aware of being spiritually dead because he has no hope of survival – ‘¿cómo se mata a un muerto?’ (p. 72) he asks at one point’ – but is still able to think clearly – ‘Se sentía muy débil y le costaba razonar por encima del dolor. (p. 73) – Alegría’s ultimate reaction to the violence of the civil war remains at the level of affect; in the end, weighed down by the abject, his melancholic condition makes him unable to exercise any form of cognitive monitoring or control which would allow him to develop a livable conscience. Worse still, the future will be little better than the war itself as many of the victors will eventually become victims too: ‘Se amalgamarán con quienes han sido derrotados, de los que solo se diferenciarán por el estigma de sus rencores contrapuestos. Terminarán temiendo, como el vencido, al vencedor real, que venció al ejército enemigo y al propio. Sólo algunos muertos serán considerados protagonistas de la guerra’ (36). The powerbrokers on the Nationalist side, those only intent on killing the enemy as opposed to winning the war and who will create the normative conditions which define the value of life in Spain after the war, will make victims of some of those who supported them and their lives, in turn, will cease to have value and to be grievable. If there is any hope in this story it resides in those who helped Alegría when he escaped from the ditch:

Que alguien sacara a un hombre agusanado, pastoso de excrementos y de sangre, levantara su cabeza y pusiera agua en sus labios suavemente, dosificase a cucharadas sopicaldos digeribles por los muertos y pronunciara alguna frase de consuelo, todo

aquello, pensó, era señal de que algo humano había sobrevivido a los estragos de la guerra' (33).

The charitable actions of these characters can be read in the context of both Kristeva's notion of a life which withstands the abject and Butler's idea of a livable conscience; they amount to a recognition of precarious life in spite of the imposition of the rigid ideological frameworks which were used to justify the civil war and its violence. They also illustrate what Stathis Kalyvas refers to as the false assumption in civil wars that 'elites determine automatically and unilaterally the course of group actions and that groups are monolithic and behave as such' (Kalyvas 2006).<sup>6</sup> Their position is summed up succinctly by an old woman, who comments that '[t]odos somos hijos de Dios, hasta éstos [i.e. the Nationalists]' (33), a recognition of a shared humanity in spite of ideological differences.<sup>7</sup>

The second story in *Los girasoles ciegos*, 'Manuscrito encontrado en el olvido', set in 1940 after the official end of the war, tells of the last days of a young man hiding from the Nationalists in the mountains in winter with his new-born son and his wife who, as the tale begins, has died giving birth to the child. The only record of their fate is the protagonist's hand written manuscript found beside his body and that of the child. Most of the story is composed of pages from the manuscript which are briefly described and commented upon by an editor who is also an unidentified third-person narrator. As the tale begins, the reader learns that the mother has died and that the father and child will die soon so that the whole narrative is constructed around reactions to the death of a loved one and the protagonist's awareness of the impending deaths of himself and his son. In the first page of his manuscript, the protagonist writes: 'he visto muchos muertos pero no he aprendido cómo se muere uno' (40). In effect, the reader will witness how both he and his son die after the father is forced to accept the transformation of his wife's body into a corpse.

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<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of this notion in relation to Antonio Labordeta's *En el remolino*, see Francis Lough 2013.

<sup>7</sup> This position is echoed by the father in hiding in 'Los girasoles ciegos' who declares: 'Yo no quiero que nuestros hijos tengan que matar o morir por lo que piensan' (129).

The first few pages of the story narrate the protagonist's increasing distance, both physical and emotional, from his wife's dead body. At first he spends all morning staring at her face which will slowly lose its colour; as her body loses warmth, he is compelled to stop holding her hand and, eventually, when he feels unable to touch her body he can no longer lie beside her and comes to realise that she is no more than a corpse: 'Repentinamente, la muerte era muerte, nada más que muerte, sin los candores del cuerpo, sin lo animal de la vida. Un cadáver, al cabo de tres días, es un mineral sin la humedad del aliento, sin la fragilidad de las flores [...]. Un cadáver, al cabo de tres días, es sólo soledad y ni siquiera tiene el don de la tristeza' (44). In the end, he has to bury her body, the sound of the earth covering her and the smell of her decomposing body provoking 'un llanto tan sofocante que por un momento tuve la sensación de que también yo iba a morir' (45). The narrator's tears – which he seemed incapable of shedding before (41) – are an automatic, affective, response to sensual stimulations associated with death, in particular the abject smell of decay. They become so powerful that they evoke the idea of his own death which he knows to be inevitable. The smell, sound and sight of death will return to him later when he kills a wolf even though it will provide food: 'Eso es bueno. Pero he vuelto a revivir el olor de la sangre, he vuelto a oír el ruido de la muerte, he visto otra vez el color de las víctimas. Y eso es malo' (50). The same experience is repeated later when he kills a cow, also for food: 'Todo huele, otra vez, a muerte' (54). His wife's death creates in the protagonist an affective, rather than intellectual, sense of his own impending death but her corpse is also associated with solitude as it ceases to be a social entity, the face no longer, as in Levinas, signalling intersubjectivity or the existence of an alterity which is necessary for our own identity as social beings. As the narrator becomes increasingly aware of his own solitude and the certainty of his own death, and as his emotions drain away – 'creo que el tiempo de la compasión ha terminado' (47) –, he becomes, like Alegría in the first story, although in different way, a living corpse. Also,

like Alegría, he suffers from ‘melancolía’ – the last word he imagines he will write with his pencil (56). His melancholy becomes so deep shortly after this that all he writes is his own name over and over again.

In spite of these similarities, the narrator of ‘Manuscrito encontrado en el olvido’ is also unlike Alegría in two main respects, both of which have to do with his writing. Firstly, while Alegría is weighed down by the abject and sees no value in his own life, the narrator here faces up to it and, although he believes that his situation is unjust, he accepts some responsibility both for it and for the deaths of others: ‘Con un lápiz me lancé al campo de batalla y de mi cuerpo surgieron palabras a borbotones que consolaron a los heridos y del Consuelo que yo dibujaba salieron generales bestiales que justificaron los heridos. Heridos, generales, generales, heridos. Y yo, en medio, con mi poesía. Cómplice. Y, además, los muertos’ (49). The protagonist is critical of his own use in the past of the affective power of poetry for destructive ends, as exemplified, for example, by a reading of Miguel Hernández’s ‘Ceniciento Musolini’ as an expression of jubilant aggression. In spite of this confession, the reader is invited to follow the protagonist’s suffering and respond affectively to it. Secondly, and in contrast, writing in the present serves a different purpose. To begin with he writes as a distraction, ‘porque no quiero recordar cómo se reza ni cómo se maldice’ (41). Later, writing allows him to fill the gap created by the absence of an interlocutor and to feel ‘cierto placer morboso pensando en que alguien leerá lo que escribo cuando nos encuentren muertos al niño y a mí’ (46). Although not addressed directly here, the reader is inevitably implicated in this comment and, forced to take on the role of the missing interlocutor, is invited to respond to the writer’s predicament in the full knowledge that he, his wife, and his son are already dead. This attempt to implicate the reader is reinforced on the second last page of the story when the protagonist declares that ‘[t]engo la sensación de que todo terminará cuando me termine el cuaderno. Por eso escribo solo de tarde en tarde’ (56). Like Scheherazade who keeps

herself alive by telling stories, the protagonist keeps himself alive by writing, but unlike Scheherazade whose life depends on her imagination, his is limited by the pages in his notebook. Reading these last few pages, the reader is fully aware that she is witnessing his death even though this is never narrated.<sup>8</sup>

Both ‘Si el corazón pensara dejaría de latir’ and ‘Manuscrito encontrado en el olvido’ are powerful stories which explore the reality of the Spanish civil war by tracing the affective responses of their protagonists to death and the destruction of the human body caused directly or indirectly by war and to implicate their reader affectively in this reality. This is, it might be argued, in Williams’ terms, ‘the true social content’ of these stories in which the attentive reader is invited not only to experience affectively the protagonists’ descent into melancholy but to respond emotionally and intellectually to their predicament when the text is set aside. Implicit in ‘Manuscrito encontrado en el olvido’ and explicit in ‘Si el corazón pensara dejaría de latir’ is a rejection of normative frameworks which devalue the lives of other human beings and an acceptance of the individual and social implications of what Butler calls the precarious life as the basis for moving forward. Neither story points to any particular way forward, but if, as Judith Butler argues, ‘[w]ar sustains its practices through acting on the senses, crafting them to apprehend the world selectively, deadening affect in response to certain images and sounds, and enlivening affective responses to others’ and that ‘war works to undermine a sensate democracy, restricting what we can feel’ (2009: 51-52), literary works such as *Los girasoles ciegos* can serve a vital purpose in creating structures of feeling within which democratic ideas which challenge the ideological divisions of the past, and which in

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<sup>8</sup> Although the context is very different, Juan Senra in ‘El idioma de los muertos’ is fully aware of the parallel with Scheherazade as he invents stories about Coronel Eymar’s son to forestall his execution (97). He also becomes aware of a link between writing and affect, although in his case, the context is more positive: ‘encontró de repente cierto parecido entre la escritura y las caricias, entre las palabras y el afecto, entre la memoria y la complicidad’ (78) and, in a letter to his brother, he asks affectionately to be remembered. While he anticipates that he will be dead by the time his brother reads his letter, he is still in control of his faculties and decides to take his fate in his own hands: ‘He intentado enloquecer pero no lo he conseguido. Renuncio a seguir viviendo con toda esta tristeza’ (98).

some quarters still persist in Spain today, might be developed. The ‘social content’ of such texts lies in their potential to generate affective structures of feeling in which all lives are deemed grievable and have, in turn, the potential to contribute to the development of new subjectivities which take account of the precariousness of life and which will allow readers, as individuals and social agents, ‘to make broader social and political claims about [the] rights of protection and entitlements to persistence and flourishing’ (Butler 2009: 2) that underlie the basic principles of democracy. It is this potential – and it is worth remembering here the success of a text like *Los girasoles ciegos* amongst the reading public – which justifies, in relation to some texts at least, Larraz’s claim that the continued interest shown by Spanish novelists in the Civil War in recent years is necessary for the future success of Spain as a democratic society.

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