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Mercedes Salisachs, Ideal Womanhood, and the Middlebrow Novel

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For Spaniards of this century, the Civil War provides the semantic axis around which social meanings have been organized and transmitted. The particulars of this process of organization and transmission are far from straightforward, however, for despite government efforts to control the production of meaning, to shape and direct understanding of social and sexual relations, there has clearly been a disjunction between the official image of Spain and the people's experience of everyday life. The Civil War in general serves as Mercedes Salisachs's historical subtext, but its particular effect in her work is felt through the overwhelming background presence of the Falangist "Sección Femenina" or "women's section" and its precursor arbiters of feminine behavior, the conduct books that specified the characteristics of the ideal woman for earlier generations of Spaniards. The women's section no longer enjoys the prestige or wide, official acceptance it had during the Franco period. Nevertheless, its influence has permeated Spanish society to the degree that virtually everyone recognizes the ideal of womanhood it proposes, and current women's magazines and advice columns continue its mission of preparing young women to catch and retain a man, to keep a beautiful house, and to prepare tasty meals. The Falangist socialization process still provides the grounding against which a Spanish practice of liberation must define itself and serves as one of the principal intertexts for Salisachs's fictional and nonfictional work.

With the description of "la escuela internacional femenina" [the international women's school] in her interesting and lamentably understudied collection of "estampas casi históricas" [semihistorical vignettes], *Adán-helicóptero*, Salisachs already serves up a ferocious parody of the wom-

en's section. Under the less-than-benign tutelage of the school's only teacher, Juana la Loca, young girls are taught what it means to be a woman. Juana's lesson has six basic points; each point is entitled "el hombre" [the man] because "en definitiva eso es lo único que cuenta para las mujeres" [definitively that is all that counts for women] (Salisachs 1957, 125; all translations are mine), and each point discusses some facet of the woman's subordination to her enemy, the man (father, lover, husband). Juana's advice is forceful, given in the imperative style of precepts or commandments that must be obeyed:

> Debéis reservar vuestro amor para los hombres que os hagan la vida imposible. (114)
>
> [You must reserve your love for men who will make your life impossible.]
>
> Cuanto más sufráis, más femeninas seréis. (116)
>
> [The more you suffer, the more womanly you will be.]
>
> Una madre ha de poder llegar, si conviene, a la santidad. (117)
>
> [A mother has to reach saintliness, if at all possible.]
>
> Escribid poco. Las mujeres escritoras pertenecen a la especia de mamíferas amputadas. (124)
>
> [Write little. Women writers belong to the species of amputated mammals.]

There is, for especially qualified students, an additional, elective course on "la incultura" [unculture], presumably to help society women learn to dislike Bach, to misunderstand modern art, to become ignorant about politics, and to appreciate fashion news and "historias del siglo romántico" [stories from the romantic century] (58).

Salisachs follows her vignette on the "escuela internacional femenina" with an equally pointed one describing the "escuela internacional masculina" along the parallel but sharply contrasting lines of this injunction to male students: "Prohibir a la mujer que os hable de los niños. Prohibirle que os hable del servicio. Prohibirle que os hable de la casa, de los amigos, de la situación internacional. . . . Prohibirle a la mujer que hable" [Prohibit your wife from talking about the children. Prohibit her from talking about servants. Prohibit her from talking about the house, about friends, about the international situation. Prohibit your wife from talking] (130). The implications of this satire are obvious enough. Living, breathing girls are turned into what Salisachs calls "cardboard children" in another of her books (*Derribos* [*Demolitions*] 1981, 67), and little boys are reshaped as monsters.

Mercedes Salisachs always felt the need to write, despite the pressures and discouragements of the Falangist society of her youth. In her more recent autobiographical sketches in *Derribos,* she reflects on the difficulty of embarking on her chosen career in the absence of support or role models: "La ignorancia era la gran enemiga de aquella vocación extraña que a veces pugnaba por abrirse paso. También lo era el hecho de ser mujer. Las mujeres no escribían. Las mujeres eran seres distintos que jamás firmaban libros. Era desalentador saber eso" [Ignorance was the great enemy of that strange vocation that at times fought to break into the open. So too was the fact of being a woman. Women did not write. Women were different beings who never signed books. It was discouraging to learn that] (Salisachs 1981, 97). The breakthrough for her is the discovery, in her hated convent school classroom, of Cecilia Böhl de Faber, better known by her pseudonym, Fernán Caballero. The young Mercedes, aptly tearing through the nun's moralizing half-recognition of the nineteenth-century novelist's talent, concludes: "No fue sólo aquella lección la que aprendí a partir de aquel momento. Fueron todas" [It was not just that day's lesson that I learned in that moment. It was all the lessons] (99).

Since that epiphanic moment, Salisachs has gone on to write at least twenty-five books, mostly novels, several of them translated into other languages. She has won numerous literary prizes, including the Premio Ciudad de Barcelona (1956, for *Una mujer llega al pueblo* [*A Woman Arrives in Town*]), the Premio Planeta (1975, for *La gangrena*), and, in an astounding 1983 sweep, the Premio Hucha de Oro (for *Feliz navidad, señor Ballesteros* [*Merry Christmas, Mr. Ballesteros*]), the Premio Ateneo de Sevilla (for *El volumen de la ausencia* [*The Volume of Absence*]), and the Premio Sara Navarro (for *Sea breve, por favor* [*Be Brief, Please*]). Not surprisingly, she has been a finalist for many more awards, and her works are perennial bestsellers in Spain.

Despite this public recognition, Salisachs's achievements are almost universally downplayed by those few critics who have looked at her work, who tend to see her as that dreaded and pitiful monster, the woman writer, with all that gender's typical limitations in terms of fictional output. In his famous survey of the contemporary Spanish scene, Juan Luis Alborg calls one of Salisachs's books "demasiado 'fácil' para ser un libro importante" [too "easy" to be an important book] (Alborg 1962, 388). He finds that another "arrastraba ya de por sí un lastre de cosas manidas y sentimentales. . . . se le desmaya en vulgaridades" [was already dragging along a millstone of sentimental tripe. . . . it fades away in commonplaces]; still another is "difícil de tragar" [hard to swallow]; and a third one "se diluye en una inacabable rueda de personajillos" [is

diluted by an interminable wheel of minor characters] (390, 399, 402).[1] Aparicio López, whose work is interesting mostly as a measure of its time and place—"todos estamos comprometidos con nuestro tiempo," he reminds us, "y el que no lo está es que ha renunciado a ser *hombre*" [we are all committed to our own time, and he who is not has renounced his manhood] (Aparicio López 1979, 191; my emphasis)—generally repeats Alborg's judgments, frequently without crediting his predecessor, and when he adds a note (presumably) of his own harvest, it is generally of a vacuous but clearly antifeminine sort: to wit, in reference to the characters in *La gangrena,* "Todas iguales, y todas distintas. Todas, al fin, mujeres" [All alike, and all different. All, finally, women] (200).

The particularly vituperative tone of these male critics in addressing an overwhelmingly popular series of books by a female novelist demands consideration. Salisachs implicitly thumbs her nose at such critics in *El volumen de la ausencia* by her choice of a woman's novel format, while she directly and ferociously attacks the male-dominated critical establishment in her novel's internal reference to the pathetic noncareer of an aspiring male writer who apes the style of the typical avant-garde man's novel. At the same time, the high art novel serves as one of this book's two major intertextual reference systems. The first and most important of these is Salisachs's direct homage to her predecessor, Carmen Laforet, whose novel *Nada* [*Nothing*], winner of the 1944 Nadal Prize, is cited in numerous obvious references and rewritings in *El volumen de la ausencia* (1983).

The formulaic novel geared towards a female audience serves as the second major intertextual referent for Salisachs's work. The romance novel, or "la novela rosa," is a frequent literary correlative of the Falangist women's section, since it shares with the social movement a profound, if covert, conservative ideology and a severely limited social agenda. The "novela rosa" does not challenge the sorts of conventional assumptions about male-female relations that Salisachs outlines in her satire; rather, it manipulates those assumptions in the service of a fantasy gratification that asserts the power of love to create a psychological space for a woman's victory over a man. The victory, however, is an evanescent one, since it is limited to the single instant of the man's declaration of his love, and it can only endure for the reader in the formulaic repetition of the paradigmatic moment.

In blending these intertextual referents to high and low fiction, *El volumen de la ausencia* figures as a model of a middlebrow, "círculo de lectores" [readers' club] type of book, both profound and accessible, voluminous and absent, as its title implies. It falls somewhere between popular fiction and high literature and is especially interesting because it

sits uneasily on the boundary lines between these two quite different modes of discourse. Since large numbers of people with the money and the leisure to afford and read books are clearly enjoying middlebrow works such as those by Salisachs, the problem for the critic is how to read and think about them.

It is my contention that Salisachs's novel, and other middlebrow novels like it, offers a particular challenge to the critic because it is constructed around two major intertextual nodes—high art and low fiction—and this intersection of cultural forms works for a vast audience of readers precisely because of these contradictory elements. Salisachs has cannily tapped into an audience that reads widely but without high cultural pretensions; her readers are proud of their love for serious books, do not need to be told who Cervantes or Laforet are, but they are not required by these works to have to know anything terribly specific or technical about them. As Janice Radway notes, and as a reading of the scant critical material on Salisachs confirms, critics tend "to dismiss the middle range as products of a fundamental insufficiency, therefore as the result of a certain incompetence." This conclusion, as Radway reminds us, is based on a presumed understanding of "a single set of criteria against which all works are measured, and thus [an insistence] that there is only one appropriate way to read" (Radway 1988, 518). In Radway's judgment, the critical dismissal of middlebrow works has everything to do with the system of values against which these works are judged as failures. More appropriate, she argues, would be to examine these works "as ways of writing rather than Literature, ways of reading rather than texts," since, for middlebrow readers, "books play a quite different role in their lives and serve other purposes than they do for people who make their living producing, analyzing, and distinguishing among cultural products" (519). While critics can and do write about almost anything these days, we seem to focus on the high and low ends of the cultural scale—precisely the two poles evoked and blurred in the middlebrow novel. In this respect, middlebrow fiction poses a kind of problem that does not occur when one considers either Laforet or Corín Tellado. *El volumen de la ausencia* is not low enough to appeal to popular culture studies or to receive a semiotic treatment, nor is it literary enough to be judged by the standards of high art (witness Alborg's objections). Like popular culture, this novel is a form of entertainment, but it is entertainment for at least moderately educated people who are aware that television and series romances are not art.

Feminist cultural critics have identified still another reason why the critical establishment is wary of middlebrow texts, a reason based on a long-standing and now much discussed discomfort with a perceived

feminization of literature that coincides with a feminization of reading.[2] When both the hierarchy of literary values and the privileged mode of critical discourse favor "masculine" referents, it is no suprise that critics like Alborg and Aparicio López evince acute dislike of any feminizing features—qualities that have to be all the more carefully guarded against because of the age-old suspicion that reading books is an effeminate (or feminizing) activity. The battle of the books between classical, masculine works and vernacular, feminine fictions has been refought on differing intellectual planes for hundreds of years as, curiously, an obsession of a masculinist literary establishment. David Simpson's concise formulation makes the point on a theoretical level:

> The feminization of literature was not, of course, uncontested. Wordsworth's famous outcries against popular novels and plays and high modernism's reaffirmation of sheer difficulty and massive intellectuality are just two instances of a masculinizing reaction. But the struggle has always occurred from within an already feminized general construction of the literary mode. Literary criticism, as an appendix or companion to literature, has experienced the same struggles. Its attempted diversions into theory have often been gestures of remasculinization, and have been resisted by an establishment whose lexicon is dominantly feminized: intuition, exceptionality, sympathy, empathy, lived experience, and so forth. (Simpson 1994, 62–63)

Simpson points to the complicated and invariably, if often unconsciously, gendered relation of the critic to the text, even in terms of the theoretical model he or she manipulates. Thus, the qualities of high art, as intimated by Alborg and Aparicio López, would include such masculinizing elements as a spare style and an intellectualizing or reflective mode of expression, while they explicitly reject such feminizing counterparts as lushness and appeal to sensation. The middlebrow woman's novel, in pointing in both directions at the same time, is particularly resistant to a remasculinizing intent and particularly threatening to the high-art value system. As Jennifer Wicke reminds us, "on a methodological level, this is to suggest the intimate relationship between 'high art' and its conditions of production, and its shadow partner, the mass communication form that constitutes its matrix" (Wicke 1988, 1). Wicke is exactly right in this observation, the more so because her use of the term "matrix" hints at the shadowy, feminized underpinnings of an overtly masculinizing structure. By playing off competing value systems in an intertextual, overdetermined, and theatricalized setting, the middlebrow novel also reminds us of the masculinizing nature of the assumption that there is but a single system of values.

In her book *Inventing High and Low*, Stephanie Sieburth brings this discussion specifically into the Spanish setting. While she does not address the middlebrow novel per se, she looks closely at the interrelationship of literature and social change in the context of the vexed—and often vexing—imbrication of mass fiction and high-art novels. As Sieburth points out, nineteenth-century Spain made a significant shift toward a more urbanized society, although still in a tardy manner and to a lesser degree than other European nations. The consequent growth of the working class, the increasing literacy and leisure of the bourgeois woman who looked to the popular press for cultural tips, and the greater freedom of the press following the death of Fernando VII all contributed to the rise of the novel targeted precisely, if somewhat duplicitously, at that upwardly mobile woman. This awareness of the woman reader is paradoxically tied to a concern for monitoring women's bodies and to a deep-seated conviction that women who show a tendency to stray from the time-honored model of the traditional housewife are also in some complicated way undermining the soul of the nation.

There is, thus, in nineteenth-century Spain, as in France and England, a delightfully quaint tradition of novelists trashing their (women) readers for reading serial novels exactly like the one they are at that very moment holding in their hands. In Spain, however, this polemic against the woman reader is tied to an uneasy sense on both the author's and the reader's parts that Spain itself is a weak or feminized (effeminate?) country when compared to the more potent, hence masculine, rival nations. Sieburth says it this way: "The kinds of dreams nursed by the protagonists who devour mass culture seem to flourish in unevenly modern countries, which see themselves as inferior to America or Europe and compensate with delusions of grandeur" (Sieburth 1994, 12). The move is strange and revealing. These writers and readers are particularly sensitive about the material conditions that allow for their own success; the great unwashed working class is, of course, an implicitly masculine threat, and one with the power to destabilize the scarcely established middle class. Likewise, the decaying upper class—the source of all that solid, masculine high art—seems distressingly effete. What can a writer manage to do to make a living and preserve good family values? How does a middle-class reader maintain her upwardly mobile trajectory?

For Sieburth, nineteenth-century writers like Benito Pérez Galdós establish a tradition carried on into this century in their very different ways by Juan Goytisolo and Carmen Martín Gaite. Pérez Galdós's solution to the immanent feminization of Spain is to invite his mass-culture-reading, middle-class female audience members to "immasculate" themselves (to borrow Judith Fetterley's term[3]) as a positive social and political gesture—that is, to identify with masculinizing values and social

forms and to maintain their feminine purity. Pérez Galdós does this by showing his bad female protagonists as indiscriminate, frivolous, or immoral readers of second-rate mass-culture fiction, the evil effects of which have serious repercussions on the national social fabric. Men who read or write novels in this world are similarly morally unsound. By the same token, Pérez Galdós's morally superior fiction must establish its distance from its own audience and its own publishing conditions so that good women will resist the temptation to read serial novels like his.

Martín Gaite is the author whom Sieburth uses to represent a resolution of this impasse. In *El cuarto de atrás* [*The Back Room*], Martín Gaite explores the liberating qualities of "low" fiction, and it is the popular art form that triggers the novel. Popular texts also serve as the medium by which memory is shaped, since the novelist salutes both the pre-Franco, romantic novels of her protagonist's youth and the Franco propaganda fiction of her adolescence and adulthood. Likewise, Martín Gaite points out the transgressive subtexts in popular music, where, for example, Conchita Piquer's bitter laments stand out against the sappy sweet lyrics of popular boleros. Martín Gaite focuses on the ephemeral, the ordinary, and the female, and in doing so creates a third term that demonstrates the falsity of the artificial dialectic prominent in the texts of the male authors Sieburth studies, a middle ground—if not a middlebrow novel—for deconstructing the high/low dichotomy.

While Martín Gaite plays off her high-art novel against a low-culture backdrop, Salisachs more nearly approaches profound intertextuality in her use of themes and images from popular women's fiction. With a readership of over 20 million women and more than 200 million dollars in sales per year (Christian-Smith 1990, 12), the romance market not only epitomizes "low" culture, it is, as the biggest paperback-sales sector in the world, coming close to epitomizing book reading in general. Corín Tellado, the undisputed queen of series romance in the Hispanic world, is, according to Cabrera Infante's unattributed quotation, "el escritor español más leído de todos los tiempos" [the most read Spanish writer of all times], with her formula fiction based on a series of invariable features that the Cuban writer roguishly identifies as follows: "La víctima que termina por amar a su verdugo. El incesto. El fetichismo. El masoquismo como prueba de amor. El sadismo que engendra frigidez que engendra amor que engendra celos que engendra sadismo" [The victim who ends up falling in love with her executioner. Incest. Fetishism. Masochism as a proof of love. Sadism that begets frigidity that begets love that begets jealousy that begets sadism] (Cabrera Infante 1975, 39, 45). Cabrera Infante is right in identifying these themes—or their toned-down versions—as constants in the formula romance, and many of them

appear in Salisachs's novel as well. Certainly, the narrative of the formula romance is not about happiness achieved but about happiness frustrated or deferred, and it would not be an exaggeration to say, paradoxically, that romance narrative is premised on lack (of happiness, of love, of the right man): in essence, a variation on a sadomasochistic theme. Once the woman receives acknowledgment of her man's love, the narrative ends with what could be called "the death of love." This inevitable conjunction of reciprocated love at the novel's conclusion leads to speculation on the proximity of death and marriage as the two traditional forms of narrative closure, but that would be another project.

Mercedes Salisachs's own disillusionment with the Spanish woman's condition does not necessarily lead her characters to a change in perception about the inevitable romance-novel trajectory, and much less to concrete action. Her typical protagonist, though betrayed and morally abandoned in her marriage, cannot generalize her experience to other human relationships. Quite the contrary, she places herself in the situation of being deceived again and again. Ida Sierra, the protagonist of *El volumen de la ausencia*, in a sad, funny, poignant, and true move, puts herself into precisely the same predicament with her lover as with her husband by handing herself over completely to his whims: "Mi casa era ya aquella casa tuya, Juan. Y mi único deseo, llegar a ella. Unirme a ti. Saberme totalmente tuya" [My house was already that house of yours, Juan. My only desire, to reach it. To unite with you. To know myself totally yours] (Salisachs 1983, 151). Ida is partly the victim of an overrich diet of romantic novels in which union with the beloved is bliss unimaginable. She is also the victim of a definition of woman that does not question the division of representable space into married and unmarried, material and imaginative, empowered and (almost) dead. Nancy Armstrong writes:

> If the marketplace driven by male labor came to be imagined as a centrifugal force that broke up the vertical chains organizing an earlier notion of society . . . , then the household's dynamic was conceived as a centripetal one. The household simultaneously recentered the scattered community at myriad points to form the nuclear family, a social organization with a mother rather than a father as its center. The very fact of its interlocking symmetries suggests that the doubled social world was clearly a myth before it was put into practice. (Armstrong 1987, 136)

Ida, in her faithfulness to this hoary myth, repeats with her lover the dream of the household economy she has been unable to practice with her husband; and at this point, Ida, like the myth, is practically gone, as

her punning name suggests. She has just been diagnosed with a fatal disease and has perhaps four months to live.

Ida does not question the values of her society in any profound way, yet Salisachs's novel suggests that society itself is in the process of rethinking its most basic rules for sexual relationships. What seems to be the plot—Ida's plot—turns out to be of secondary interest to the author's implicit plot, which conspires to teach a salutary lesson to a specific audience. The novel concerns itself covertly with the constraints of, and dissatisfactions with, a storytelling tradition that dictates that the woman's novel can only be some variant of a domestic drama and that the woman novelist's characteristic quality is her emotiveness. *El volumen de la ausencia* has a melodramatic plot line that tries at the same time to take itself seriously and to suggest a parody/pastiche of the limitations of melodrama. Ultimately, however, the novel questions its own need for the narrative controls and restrictions imposed by a melodramatic/romantic plot line. That need is all the more suspect because the subtext of the formulaic appeal to restriction and control typical of the "woman's book" is just too suspiciously similar to the social value that would contain women in the domestic space.

Noncoincidentally, the feminist reader-writer picks up the story where the romance writer leaves off. Many of the high-art variations on the woman's novel by women who constitute the Catalan Women's Renaissance group—writers like Tusquets, Moix, Roig, and Rodoreda—concern themselves with inevitable, postmarital disillusionments as women learn that love is not, after all, enough to empower them in social terms. Among the works written by women in modern Spain, however, Carmen Laforet's *Nada* (1945) is the one most specifically and clearly incorporated into the intertextual universe of Salisachs's novel. Laforet's novel retains the status of an ur-text capturing the dissonance between the official image of Spain and the people's experience of everyday life. In balancing *El volumen de la ausencia* against *Nada*, Salisachs is in some sense contributing to Laforet's project, weighing nothingness against absence, as it were. This modern rewriting of a prior text is borne out in Salisachs's many intertextual allusions to *Nada*: most obviously, Barcelona and the Calle de Aribau are the setting of both novels, and Laforet's protagonist, Andrea, appears in a less attractive guise in Salisachs's work. Then too, Salisachs's protagonist, like her predecessor, is characterized by her abstraction from quotidian reality. As Laforet's Andrea says, in terms equally appropriate to Salisachs's Ida, "Unos seres nacen para vivir, otros para trabajar, otros para mirar la vida. Yo tenía un pequeño y ruin papel de espectadora" [Some people are born to live, others to work, others to observe life. I had the small and insignificant

role of spectator] (Laforet 1980, 224).

Laforet's celebrated novel begins and ends in a vacuum. Andrea's unexpected arrival on a train—"no me esperaba nadie" [no one was waiting for me] (11)—leads, after almost three hundred pages, to an equally unaccompanied, though enigmatic, departure: "no me llevaba nada. Al menos, así creía yo entonces" [I took nothing with me. Or so I thought at the time] (294). Andrea's tremendous sense of alienation from her surroundings in Barcelona is played out in the context of desperate poverty and small-minded squalor. At the same time, and perhaps as a consequence of postwar deprivations, the woman's romance looms large as a touchstone while the romantic myth of a contented domesticity seems ever more fraudulent. Andrea continually references the stories of the women of the Calle de Aribau apartment to frustrated dreams of a romantic, happy ending. Andrea herself fiercely resists such willful reinscriptions of memory in the form of a banal romance but cannot help being fascinated by the gothic tales Gloria tells her: "te voy a contar una historia, mi historia, Andrea, para que veas que es como una novela de verdad" [I am going to tell you a story, my story, Andrea, so you can see that it is like a real novel] (48). Andrea comments at one point that "toda la historia de Angustias resultaba como una novela del siglo pasado" [Angustias's whole story turned out like a novel from the last century] (108). Román comes closer to expressing the open-ended quality of Laforet's text when he warns the protagonist: "no te forjes novelas: ni nuestras discusiones ni nuestros gritos tienen causa, ni conducen a un fin" [don't go building novels: neither our discussions nor our screams have any cause, nor do they lead to any conclusion] (38); yet, he too phrases his warning in relation to the expectations of a melodramatic plot structure. Laforet's novel and Salisachs's both take into account a similar awareness of the effects of popular culture on literary form; both are transcoded for a double reading of the key presence/absence in their texts. Wallace Stevens, in his famous poem "The Snow Man," captures this conjunction of illusion and substance: "For the listener who listens in the snow / And, nothing himself, beholds / Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is" (Stevens 1972, 54). "Nothing" becomes a substantive essence in all of these works and reflects back on the intertextual building of fiction upon other fictions.

While on a first level Salisachs's book may be read as a frivolous soap opera, on a second level, like many other contemporary women's novels with which it could be compared, it offers an ideological statement about the deadening life of the typical housewife and her futile efforts to escape societally imposed constrictions. The frequent comparisons of Ida's life to that of a fish in a tank, just floating along meaninglessly, point up that

statement. Equally significant is the author's tic of beginning sentences with the word "nada," as in "Nada en esa pecera tiene sentido" [Nothing in this fishtank makes sense] (Salisachs 1983, 11) or "Nada era soportable" [Nothing was bearable] (190). With these repetitions, Salisachs cannily codes her text for two different, if ultimately coextensive, ways of describing textual productivity and for two modes of mapping integration into the social system. One involves the romance plot's tight restriction of the woman into a recognizably domestic sphere; the other suggests a nebulous dissatisfaction with the woman's typical role; one hints at a high-art use of metaphor through abstract intellectualizing; the other reminds the reader of high art's conditions of production through repeated and unsubtle reference to Laforet's key term. If Salisachs does not resolve the tensions, she at least suggests forms of plot resolution that allow for social recognition of these forms, however they are defined. The melodramatic plot line may thus serve to draw in the reader, while the second level of plot, often overtly signalled in Ida's interpretive commentaries (this is not a subtle novel in that sense), provides a moral or ideological coding of events for a society in the process of change.

El volumen de la ausencia offers not only a highly colored view of the war between the sexes but also a dramatized portrait of the conflicts arising among three generations of women—mother and mother-in-law, daughter, and granddaughter. Here, mother-love is consistently used for emotional blackmail with no relief allowed the unwary. The mother's abnegation is a perverse form of pleasure; the mother-in-law's selfishness is culpable; the daughter's willed and socially approved blindness is shown to be as dangerous as her husband's self-absorption; and the granddaughter's flouting of conventional expectations in her open affair with an older, rich, married man leads to a wasteland beyond social redemption.

Salisachs writes in one of her early articles: "En otras circunstancias se ha venido disertando con acierto sobre la dignidad del libro como relación social y como vínculo intelectual en la comunicación de los seres humanos. La misión que me corresponde en estos momentos es tratar el libro 'como objeto permanente'" [In other circumstances, discussions have correctly noted the dignity of the book as social relationship and as an intellectual link in the communication among human beings. The mission that falls to my lot in these times is to treat the book as a "permanent object"] (Salisachs 1959, 13). In a world in which every other relationship seems disarticulated, in which too many things seem to float, the book—any book—serves, in Salisachs's optimistic view, as an index of culture, authenticity, weight. She continues: "lo que verdaderamente produce escalofríos, es comprobar la cantidad de gente que vive ignorando la existencia del libro como objeto, sea cual sea su finalidad" [what is really frightening is to recognize the number of people who live in ignorance of the existence of the book as an object, regardless of its purpose] (14), and for this reason, "no me asusto demasiado cuando se me objeta que Fulanito y Menganito han comprado libros a metros o a tanto el kilo. El hecho es bueno como síntoma y como probabilidad de mejora" [I do not get too upset when someone tells me that So-and-So and Such-and-Such have purchased books by the meter or at so much per kilo. The fact is good both as a symptom and as a potential for improvement] (18). For Salisachs, the weight (kilos) or volume (meters) of books suggests the possibility, at least, of a weightier attraction. So too with *El volumen de la ausencia*, whose frothy plot and platitudinous philosophizing might merge to form a solid, useful object. Her intuition was not wrong: 55,000 copies in the first two years alone is no mean sales volume in the Hispanic world.

El volumen de la ausencia tells the story of Ida Sierra, a middle-aged married woman with three children whose only real talent—largely unexpressed—is housekeeping. She lives in an apartment in the Calle de Aribau with her husband, Daniel, formerly an enthusiastic soldier in Franco's army and currently a publicity agent and author of several appallingly bad novels. Also sharing the apartment are her wicked mother-in-law, Soledad; her saintly mother; her deceased youngest son's dog, Hipo; and, intermittently, her daughter, Andrea, and her oldest son, Rodolfo. The novel's generating pretext is provided by Hipo, the dog, who has contracted a rare disease and passed it on to Ida. The dog is cured. Ida, however, is not so lucky. After the definitive diagnosis of her disease—an inoperable brain tumor—and a prognosis of only four months to live, the novel's heroine decides to spend the day wandering the streets of Barcelona, pondering whether or not to leave her husband for her lover, a mediocre and opportunistic painter named Juan Arenal. As she reviews her life, the reader participates vicariously in the following sequence of revelations: her husband is having an affair with Ida's feminist best friend (who, in a drunken driving spree, has accidentally killed Ida's beloved younger son); her older son is having an affair with his friend Carlos and is involved in a distasteful police sweep of homosexuals; and her daughter, Andrea, is having an affair—all very modern and financially motivated—with Andrea's best friend's father, an affair that everyone seems to know about but Ida.

Unsurprisingly, the novel's plot, with its highly colored concatenation of soap-opera-like events, is often in open conflict with its substantive concerns. The deep questioning of accepted beliefs is implicit in the title,

of course—the volume (in both senses) of the absence of people, spaces, and culture, the material presence of a city that in itself reflects a voluminous emotional absence: "¿Sabías tú que también las ausencias puede[n] tener volumen?" Ida asks her absent lover. "Un volumen cada vez más hinchado de ti" [Did you know that absences can also have volume? A volume ever more swollen with you] (Salisachs 1983, 213). As has been suggested, Salisachs overtly salutes Laforet's *Nada* by setting her own work, like Laforet's, in an apartment on the Calle de Aribau and by giving one of her young women the same name as Laforet's protagonist. More importantly, she recognizes *Nada* not only as the quintessential novel of "nothingness" but also as a novel that reflects Ida's (and Laforet's Andrea's) own activity, a kind of purposeless wandering in search of a meaning that has largely been preempted by an increasingly consumption-oriented society. John Kronik, playing off of Laforet's preferred metaphors, describes her novel as "una narración sobre la nada, una presencia que señala una ausencia, un texto ahogado" [a narration about nothingness, a presence that signals an absence, a drowned text] (Kronik 1981, 201). Each of these terms finds immediate resonance in Salisachs's tale. If Laforet's Andrea drowns in nothingness, Salisachs's heroine floats in absence. The phrase "Ida nada," playing as it does on "nada" as "nothing" and on "nada" as the third person of the verb "nadar" [to swim], compares the heroine's life to that of an aquarium fish and also signals her will-less floating through life and the undisturbed superficiality that characterizes human relations in polite society. Ida comments at one point that, even as the founding illusions are gradually being stripped away from her idea of the family, a protective flotation gear remains operative: "nada se había modificado en aquel lugar: desayunos, almuerzos, cenas . . . , recogiendo siempre comentarios insulsos que flotaban sobre los platos unos instantes (los suficientes para convencernos de que seguíamos siendo una familia normal)" [nothing had changed in that place: breakfasts, lunches, dinners . . . , continually picking up insipid commentaries that floated over the dishes for a few minutes (just long enough to convince us that we were still a normal family)] (Salisachs 1983, 195). Decent women like Ida pointedly ignore dangerous or disturbing undercurrents; conventional social arrangements discourage diving deeper into the morass of human sentiment. For Ida, that unprepared floater, to attempt such deep-sea exploration would be to risk drowning.

By antinomy, the metaphorical floating also suggests a certain weight, a specific gravity, a particular displacement of space. Thus, Ida describes, for example, the privileges of a deferred existence: "En el fondo . . . , vivir es sentirse esperado. Y esperar. Y ocupar horas, lugares, recuerdos"

[Essentially . . . , to live is to feel waited for. And to wait. And to fill up hours, places, memories] (24). The young girl waits for love. The housewife waits for her husband to come home, for the baby to be born, for the children to animate the house with their games. The beloved waits (twelve years!) for her lover to return; the condemned woman waits patiently for death to overtake her. Accordingly, monotony, emptiness, boredom—the essence of waiting—make Ida's time seem to pass more quickly rather than more slowly: "No es verdad que el tiempo tarda en transcurrir cuando la vida no nos interesa. La propia monotonía y la falta de relieve lo despedaza; es decir, lo unifica, lo convierte en una dimensión sin metas ni puntos de partida" [It is not true that time passes more slowly when life does not interest us. The selfsame monotony and lack of highlights breaks it up; which is to say, unifies it, converts time into a dimension lacking either goals or points of departure] (39). The time of waiting becomes the uniform and undifferentiated memory of waiting, becomes the substantial volume of ordinary life—and in the superimposed text of Ida's long walk through the city, recollected fragments of memory from this time of waiting provide a grid to structure a time-out for reflection, a privileged time that will initiate the new volume of the short/long wait for death.

In Salisachs's novel, the connotations of "volume" pertain as well to the more common forms of mass communication. This is a novel stuffed to overflowing with references to popular culture and particularly to the inescapable visual effects of modern life in a big city. The protagonist's husband works for Estela Publicidad, one of the advertising companies responsible for huge signs that deface the cityscape. In her wanderings through the city, Ida stops to ponder a street sign, concluding: "No deja de ser curioso el empeño humano de asentar ideologías a fuerza de modificar los letreros callejeros. Es como si también ellos fueran parte esencial de los anuncios puramente destinados a la promoción de los productos de consumo" [It is a curious feature of human efforts that they establish ideologies by changing street signs. It is as if these too were an essential part of the advertisements purely destined for the promotion of consumer goods] (193). These consumer items become ever more distanced from any potential use: "Ver la tienda de artesanía toledana ofreciendo navajitas, pisapapeles y un sinfín de cosas inservibles que los turistas compran porque la filigrana es un arte que España heredó de los moros" [Look at the Toledo handicraft store, full of knives, paperweights, and an infinite number of useless objects that tourists buy because filigree work is an art that Spain inherited from the Moors] (271). Nevertheless, a superfluity of useless commodities embellishes this novel, in which they paradoxically carry a double charge. The

artifacts remind the reader of a Spanish culture produced for the tourist trade, for foreign consumption, while on another level such items also serve as a crucial defining element of the romantic fictions that Salisachs plays against, fictions where meticulously designated knickknacks such as these function as stock elements in a class-marked drama.

In the wake of such studied estrangements of objects from their uses, people are disarticulated—"Daniel había conseguido ser únicamente un periódico sostenido por dos manos, un par de ojos mirando el televisor y un silencio sorbiendo sopa" [Daniel had managed to become only a newspaper held up by two hands, a pair of eyes watching the television, and a silence slurping soup] (218)—or are obscenely multiplied, as when Ida passes by rank upon rank of televisions on display, each tuned to the same station, each projecting the same image. The implications of this increasingly displaced commercial reproduction of bodies and stereotypical cultural markers are political as well as social: "'Queremos jugar la baza de la democracia, pero no sabemos utilizarla', piensa Ida. ['']Basta contemplar ese desfile de monotelevisores para comprenderlo['']" ["We want to learn the trick of democracy, but we don't know how to use it," Ida thinks. (")It is enough to contemplate that parade of monotelevisions to understand that(")] (167). The silent banks of television images blink at passersby; Ida's running commentaries provide the sound track for this moving documentary of contemporary mores. Michael Walsh writes of postmodern imagery that "there is no question of a reality which is coded or constructed or mediated or even textually contained; reality has instead disappeared, has abdicated, has been swallowed up by simulacra, by images" (Walsh 1991, 305–6).[4] All these popular/commercial representations banish "literary" or high-cultural concerns, filling that absence with a ceaseless renarrativization of banal and empty forms—something Salisachs clearly expects her readers to deplore.[5]

It is important that Salisachs articulates her most stringent critique of banal commercialism from the point of view of a middle-class woman, whereas her example of the uncritical consumer is the fragmented character/caricature of the man of the house. In this reversal of the traditional gendering of consumers, Salisachs encodes a moderate feminist impulse. Meaghan Morris has written persuasively about the pitfalls of the common identification of mass culture with women, or with a particularly stimagized sort of feminine sensibility: "There are many versions of a 'distraction' model[6] available in cultural studies today: there are housewives phasing in and out of TV or flipping through magazines in laundromats as well as pop intellectuals playing with quotes. . . . The rush of associations runs irresistibly toward a figure of mass culture not as woman but, more specifically, as bimbo" (Morris 1990, 23–24). Linda

Christian-Smith specifies the implications of this model for romance fiction's construction of ideal womanhood: "Shopping is a major form of consumption for white women and girls; it is also a mechanism for reinforcing these girls' positions within traditional femininity. Shopping . . . is the activity through which women pass on their accumulated domestic knowledge" (Christian-Smith 1990, 68). This knowledge, which defines the modality of becoming a romance heroine, also, by extension, defines the romance novel's version of successful womanhood for the society at large.

If consumerism, or flitting restlessly from one banal representation to another, is associated with the bimbo, Morris argues, the contemplative mode and, in mass culture studies, the contemplation of distraction are "assumed to be the prerogative of male intellectual audiences" (Morris 1990, 24). Thus, tradition requires a masculinist institutional practice of knowledge to deal with the banal and to set it into an aesthetic or ideological framework. Morris and Salisachs, from their very different perspectives, uncover the workings of that particular myth. Morris does so in her deconstruction of misogynistic traces in such thinkers as Baudrillard. Salisachs achieves a similar end in presenting her critique of banal consumerism from a woman's perspective, in reasserting the value of the written object over the transient semifictions of television, billboards, and tourist displays, all of which Salisachs ambivalently codes for both masculine (high fiction) and feminine (low fiction) readings in her middlebrow text.

If (the) volume—"el objeto permanente"—is one of Salisachs's abiding concerns, another is the status of absence, which she figures not only as the absence of specific people whose lack is felt as an open wound (the lover Juan, the son Jacobo) but also as the absence of soul in the places that define a life and in the cultural markers that define a spirituality. For Ida, who prides herself on her housekeeping talents, the estrangement from what should be her personally defined space, her apartment in the Calle de Aribau, is a singular anguish. As a young, newly married woman, Ida is not permitted to participate in such important decisions as where she and her husband will live or how her new home is to be decorated. Her opinions are shunted aside as the unformed tastes of a seventeen-year-old child, while her husband, with the assistance of his mother, chooses their apartment and furnishes it.

Ida accepts her husband's orders at first but in later years comes to realize that without the imprint of her personality the apartment can never be truly hers. Daniel refuses her request for change, with the result that Ida retreats ever further from the abusively indifferent, united front of husband and mother-in-law until "poco a poco fui perdiendo aquellos

impetuosos deseos de renovación" [little by little I began to lose those impetuous desires to renovate] (Salisachs 1983, 21). The first definitive subordination of her desires at the hands of her mother-in-law, abetted by her new husband, sets the tone for Ida's marriage. She cannot feel "at home" in her home, and her need to imprint her own soul on her apartment gradually gives way to a defeated acceptance of her insignificance. She lives at odds with her apartment and its contents during all the years of her marriage, absently present, inattentive to family disturbances, unaccounted for in family councils, gone or "ida" in the most basic sense of the word.

Salisachs recounts that one of the most disturbing characteristics of her childhood was a systematic effort to avoid eating. Her mother resorts to ineffective threats of leaving, but when the menace of her absence becomes a frightening reality, it precipitates a trauma of mingled loss and guilt:

> —Si no comes me iré— decía mi madre.
> Y se cubría la cara fingiendo sollozos.
> Ni siquiera ante aquella perspectiva claudicaba. Por eso, cuando contra toda previsión un día se fue de verdad, tuve la impresión de que la culpa era mía.
> Empecé a notar su ausencia cuando el piano del salón dejó de sonar:
> —Mamá ya no toca el piano. . . .
> ¿Dónde está mamá?
> Nadie contestaba. Nadie parecía escuchar la pregunta.
> Alguna vez me dijeron:
> —No tardará en regresar.
> Pero el regreso jamás se producía. (Salisachs 1981, 49)
>
> ["If you don't eat, I will leave," my mother said, and she covered her face, pretending to sob.
> I would not give in even to that pressure. Thus, when one day, contrary to all expectations, she really left, I had the impression that it was my fault.
> I began to notice her absence when the piano in the living room stopped playing.
> "Mother doesn't play the piano anymore. . . . Where is mother?"
> No one answered. No one seemed to hear the question.
> Once they told me, "She'll be back soon."
> But she never did come back.]

The child's mourning for the lost mother takes the perverse form of eating even less: obscurely, so as to compel the mother's return, even if only in the form of a reiterated threat to leave. The child, starving herself for attention, almost gone from the mother, already gone. The reader of *El volumen de la ausencia* sees the other side of this family drama, the mother's side. Ida, who feels the barrier of the ugly apartment between herself and her family, is always already absent from her children. They tend to treat her alternatively as an innocent who must be protected from the real world or as a willfully blind and irresponsible woman who refuses to abandon comfortable illusions for an ugly reality. Ida intermittently tries to understand and to mend the differences between herself and her older children, only to discover/uncover ugly facets of their lives that compel her to retreat once again from these emotional starvelings, these products of an unloving relationship between an unanchored woman and a self-indulgent man.

Just as Ida floats and wavers, so does contemporary society experience a conceptual shift as the enduring Falangist image of woman comes into conflict with the realities of a modernized, post-Franco Spain. The stereotypical hypertraditionality of Ida's family hints at the first level of Salisachs's critique of the "Sección Femenina." The Salisachs of 1957 has already sketched the characterizations she will later deploy in 1983: the domineering mother-in-law, the saintly mother, the abusive husband. In *Adán-helicóptero*, Salisachs offers the parodic outline of the evil mother-in-law; with *El volumen de la ausencia*'s Soledad Pérez de la Sierra, she fills in the details. Soledad is proud, unyielding, incapable of admitting to any mistakes. Her illustrious genealogy presents a recurrent point of reference, though the war has erased the family fortune. Ida comments interlinearly: "Todo en la vida de esa mujer ha ido apoyándose en pedestales de cartón" [Everything in that woman's life has been propped up on cardboard pedestals] (Salisachs 1983, 55). According to the mother-in-law's own tales, Soledad was a rich orphan of good family, heartlessly disinherited by evil lawyers, later rescued by a good man, also of good family. Then came the war, the martyrdom of her beloved husband (vilely assassinated by the Communists), the loss of the family fortune, the subsequent necessity for her son to enter into the job market early. His efforts were promptly rewarded with the recognition that such energy and talent deserved. Soledad, although often "sola (solita)" [all alone] in the world, has one great accomplishment: never, not even in the most difficult times for her family, has she lowered herself to work. "No le importaba que la considerasen una inútil," comments Ida. "La inutilidad femenina era, para mi suegra, una suerte de afirmación jerárquica" [She did not concern herself about being considered useless. Female uselessness was, for my mother-in-law, a kind of hierarchical affirmation] (57).

Ida's own mother, again in good stereotypical form, could not be more

different. In contrast with Soledad, she never talks about the past, never brags. Neither does she feel rancor: "jamás se quejaba. Era como un recipiente sin fondo donde lo que entraba para herirla, se perdía en olvidos" [she never complained. She was like the bottomless bucket into which whatever hurtful thing fell was lost in forgetfulness] (58–59). She devotes herself wholly to her daughter's family; she is the silent, self-sacrificing angel of the house who makes all in her passage comfortable and disappears to her sewing machine so as not to disturb anyone by her presence. "Su máxima ambición," says Ida, "consistía en no ser ambiciosa" [Her main ambition consisted in not being ambitious]; her particular heroic enterprise was, in her mother's own words, to ignore unpleasantness: "No hay como fingir que no se perciben. Todo se arregla haciéndose el ciego" [There is nothing like pretending that one does not see. Everything works out when one acts blind] (200–201)—that is, the best way to deal with an uncomfortable fact is to ignore its existence. For Ida, this model of self-annihilation is the inaccessible epitome of the perfect woman, the unstated reproach to Ida's own selfish moments.

The juxtaposition of these two women of the older generation, so perfectly counterbalanced—complete selfishness and perfect selflessness; the one disruptive, the other self-effacing; one parasitic, the other all-nourishing—suggests a straightforward critique of the roles women are traditionally taught to play. Between them the two older women represent the opposing poles of a single prototype, the ideal woman of the Falangist women's section. Ida clearly condemns the manipulative mother-in-law, the woman who has turned uselessness into an art and an opportunity for mischief. Implicit in this configuration of opposites is Salisachs's awareness of a pervasive value change in which society at large tolerates the working wife and actively supports any condemnation of the upper-class, bourgeois woman as an unproductive charge on society. What is surprising is that her heroine also feels some discomfort with the practiced pieties of her hardworking (though equally homebound) mother. Although Ida states again and again that her mother's saintliness is the model of what womanhood should be, she uneasily suspects at times that her mother's blindness, so like her own, partakes less of Christian charity than of something more mundane, such as a wish to insulate herself from the bother of learning uncomfortable truths. Likewise, the mother's insistent self-effacement (her absence) subtly forces recognition of her omnipresence. At one point Ida comments: "Una vez más, mi madre se replegaba en aquellos segundos planos que lograban hacer de ella la persona insignificante más importante del mundo" [Once again, my mother slipped back into that secondary role that made of her the most important insignificant person in the world] (260). Ida's mother is as manipulative as Daniel's, and to greater effect. This half-articulated recognition of masked egotism represents a crucial reevaluation of the effect of enforced repression on human interactions.

Daniel is the proto-arche-stereotypical husband. As the teacher in "la escuela internacional masculina" reminds his students, "El egoísmo . . . es una de las características que más debe destacar el hombre. . . . Sin él se corre el riesgo de afeminarse" [Selfishness . . . is one of the most outstanding qualities for a man. . . . Without it, he runs the risk of effeminacy] (Salisachs 1957, 127–28). Daniel is at no such risk. He is variously characterized as a hypocrite, a pretentious, if impotent, failure at any intellectual enterprise, a boot-licking minor functionary, a temperamental dictator who requires constant ego-stroking, an insecure and abusive spouse who elevates himself in his own estimation by denigrating his wife's abilities. He is always marvelously contained in an impermeable shell of egotism. Ida's feminist friend, Marta, calls him a "[f]ósil franquista pasado por las teorías de Carlos Marx. Ceños crónicos porque eso de sonreír es cosa de fachas. Marido de 'ida' sin vuelta" [Falangist fossil overlaid with Karl Marx's theories. A chronic scowl because smiling is for wimps. Husband of "ida" without a return ticket] (Salisachs 1983, 45).

This character's major delusion is that he imagines himself to be a great but misunderstood novelist. His first, mercifully ignored, novel was published only as a favor to a friend (this helpful friend of the publisher, ironically, is Ida's lover). Daniel naturally feels that his novel failed to win any important literary prizes because of his refusal to compromise his art, to prostitute himself for the literary mafia. Despite his supposed disdain, however, in his second book, also published through the good offices of Juan Arenal, Daniel decides to conform to the current literary fads, with even more nefarious results: "Nada era realmente genuino en el libro de Daniel. Todo quedó en un texto paranoico donde la magia de García Márquez se unía a la salvaje mítica de Caballero Bonald, a las rebeldías sistemáticas de Scorza y a las audacias literarias de Rulfo" [Nothing was really genuine in Daniel's book. It all came down to a paranoid text in which García Márquez's magic was tied to Caballero Bonald's mythic savage, to Scorza's systematic rebellions and Rulfo's literary audacities] (199). This time he does get reviewed, but the few pages devoted to the novel are scorchingly negative. As Tania Modleski reminds us, in literature as in life, "women have always had to 'read' men." In popular romances, the heroine typically "probes for the secret underlying the masculine enigma, while the reader outwits the heroine in coming up with the 'correct' interpretation of the puzzling actions and attitudes of the man" (Modleski 1982, 34). In contrast with Modleski's

observation about the romantic hero who must be read by a clever, loving woman, Salisachs draws in *El volumen de la ausencia* a portrait of a dark and brooding man who is unworthy of reading, whose enigma, like his novels, derives only from a chaotic compilation of regurgitated—and wholly incomprehensible—commonplaces. He is at every level the personification of modern banality. At last Ida's much-tried patience runs out, and she refuses to buttress her husband's fragile masculinity any longer, refuses to waste her intellectual energies on puzzling him out, refuses to give his mediocre fictions the sympathetic reading he demands as his natural right and her obligation.

This declaration of independence is timely, for by this point in the novel Ida is on the verge of learning about her husband's long-standing affair with her only female friend, the outspoken feminist Marta Echave. Marta's role in the novel is also stereotypically delineated: she is the portrait of the feminist as fraud, the perfect counterpart for Ida's fraudulent, pseudointellectual husband, a woman who manipulates rehearsed novelty for seductive effect, "captando la atención de [los] invitados a fuerza de repetir sus consabidos lugares comunes sobre 'el feminismo inteligente', 'las realizaciones personales' y la 'imperiosa necesidad de la juventud de espíritu'" [capturing the attention of the guests by repeating well-known clichés about "intelligent feminism," "personal fulfillment," and the "imperative need for the youthful spirit"] (Salisachs 1983, 131). The bitter critic of contemporary mores, feminist or not, would already have suspected that such a woman's only use for friendship is the betrayal of a friend. This lack of close and supportive relationships between women holds not only in the satirical world of *Adán-helicóptero*, in the parodic aspects of *El volumen de la ausencia*, nor even in the more darkly shaded moments of the interactions between Ena and Andrea in *Nada*, but also more generally for popular fiction written for women. Jean Franco has noted that "significantly missing from mass literature is any form of female solidarity," and she suggests that this absence fulfills a specific function in service of the status quo: "it reinforces the serialization of women, which is the very factor that makes their exploitation as reproducers of the labor force and as cheap labor so viable even in corporate society" (Franco 1986, 266). Ida, like the heroines of the romances and soap operas she emulates and rejects, is a woman alone and hence vulnerable in both the social and the sexual marketplaces. She has a saintly mother, a repulsive mother-in-law, an alienated daughter, and a so-called "friend" who not only betrays her friendship through an affair with her husband but also kills her son. In Marta and in Daniel, Salisachs refines her critique of the contemporary social structures that license such hypocrisy.

Marta, in any case, has gone far beyond permissible boundaries. The social changes that allow women to enter the marketplace also set implicit limits on the degree of access. Marta is beautiful, charming, and exceptionally talented; as one coworker admits, "se ha convertido en la dueña absoluta de la empresa. Allí ya nada se hace y se dice sin saber cuál es la opinión de Marta Echave" [she has become the absolute owner of the business. Nothing can be said or done there without finding out Marta Echave's opinion] (Salisachs 1983, 44). She is too successful for comfort in the business world; everything in the novel points to a tacit agreement between Ida and her middlebrow reader on this point. Marta drinks too much, smokes too much, associates with other women's husbands too much. Despite her dazzling success, norms of the serial romance dictate that somehow she must be made to conform to the sedulously cultivated judgment of the essential wrongness, the pitifulness, of the unmarried career woman. Her fatal flaw is common to all soap opera villainesses who dare too greatly, who blur too completely the boundaries on which traditional notions of gender distinctions are propped. She is morally bankrupt, a fraud, a traitor, and (lightly hinted at) a nymphomaniac as well.

Ida, the would-be typical housewife, is far more circumspect both in her love affair and in her entry into the labor market. Her expanded role as critic of the old forms and model of the new requires considerable discretion. As Franco notes in her study of Latin American and U.S. romance, new plots are needed when considerations of salaried labor are involved in the story line (Franco 1986, 251). In her modern demiromance, Salisachs must steer a delicate course between depicting a job that is too subservient and hence unworthy of her heroine (waitressing or clerking come to mind) and a job that would show her as too ambitious or domineering (Marta Echave's CEO role is the counterexample). Work is necessary for this modern heroine. That work must be meaningful enough so that she can develop independence and a sense of self-worth, but it must not be too compelling. To this extent, Salisachs would implicitly concur with those critics who have made the association between the "distraction model" and women's lives.

Despite her alienation from the domestic sphere, Ida realizes that housewifery is her true career and her gallery work only a hobby. Her failure to make her mark in the first realm is a crucial character flaw, while the very indefinition of her salaried labor suggests its primary function as a plot device. The "Silhouette Books" offer apposite guidelines for depicting the modern unmarried heroine: "In spite of her fragile appearance, [she] is independent, high-spirited and not too subservient. ... Often she is starting a career, leaving college, unhappy with her

present job. . . . Though she wants to work, and plans to after marriage (in some business with her husband), her home and children will always come first" (qtd. in Cohn 1988, 93). Ida Sierra's part-time job in the art gallery offers an elegant solution to this difficult problem of the working mother. Like the model for women's paid work offered in the Silhouette guidelines and normally followed in formula romances, Ida's job emphasizes the helping and caring dimensions of the service-sector roles most typical of romance heroines. The job is not overly demanding, involves an extension of traditional domestic tasks, represents a professional dead end, allows Ida to demonstrate her artistic sensibilities (in contrast to her husband's lack of aesthetic sense and Marta's overdeveloped urge for mastery), and also provides the occasion for getting to know her future lover, Juan Arenal, a painter whose exhibition in the gallery receives mixed, if generally favorable, reviews from art critics (no overreaching liaison with genius). It is impossible to measure the exact degree of delicate parody here; but other factors indicate that Ida's floating inefficiency implies some complicity with her own subjugation. At the same time, the author is careful to maintain a balance between the counterposing images of the self-sacrificing and distracted housewife and the egoistic and driven professional woman.

Ida habitually floats between the two shores of spicy melodrama and rejected reality. Eventually, however, she must come to some hard realizations about herself, even against her mother's training and her own impulses. A pretense of blindness has worked for her in the past. Just as Salisachs recalls of her younger self in *Derribos*, "Hay que fingirse crédula, nenita[,] porque de lo contrario los Reyes Magos jamás te dejarán sus juguetes. . . . o se admite sin chistar todo lo que 'no es' para obtener el premio de tu ficción, o se acepta la verdad con la derrota" [You have to pretend to believe, little girl, because otherwise the Wise Men will never leave you toys. . . . You either go along, without saying a word, with everything that "is not" in order to win the prize for your fiction, or you accept truth with defeat] (Salisachs 1981, 126). So too Ida: "Pensé que debía fingir. Aparentar que yo 'no sabía'" [I thought that I ought to pretend. To make believe that I "didn't know"] (Salisachs 1983, 265). But the pretense is no longer forgiving; the Three Wise Men no longer bring the desired toys even to the resolutely infantile.

Ida is forced to confront reality precisely through the melodramatic actions of her children. Rodolfo, the elder son, and his friend, Carlos, both have highly developed artistic sensibilities and speak authoritatively on matters ranging from human relationships to political issues to abstract philosophical concepts. They are endowed with an old-fashioned courtesy and gentlemanliness that make them always attentive to their

companions. There is, however, a dissonance in this portrait of the perfect gentleman, a disharmony already signalled by their sensitivity—traditionally a feminizing trait, as Salisachs reminds the reader—and Ida is the one person who seems not to have guessed their secret. She learns the truth only after it has become public knowledge in the scandal sheets. While Ida is as circumspect and self-censuring in her revelations to her absent lover as the press is to its reading public, her coworker, Mónica, is more straightforward in her assessment. According to Mónica's version of the story, a depraved group of sexually obsessed, drug-addicted perverts, Luis Robledo and "sus chicos," have been thrown into jail. Among the group of jailed youths are Ida's son, Rodolfo, and his friend, Carlos, who feel for each other, it seems, "una de esas imposiciones afectivas que a veces duran toda la vida" [one of those affective commitments that sometimes last a lifetime] (252).

The safe world of Ida's ideal nuclear family crumbles even further when, in a strange turn of events, the whole family appeals for salvation to Ernesto Carihuela, the daughter's lover. The oddity of Ernesto Carihuela's adoption by the family goes beyond their urgent need for his advice and his influence in ameliorating the potential scandal that could result from an open revelation of Rodolfo's sexual preferences. Andrea, the beautiful, willful daughter, has (like her namesake in Laforet's novel) cultivated the friendship of the richest girl in school with the entirely pragmatic objective of finding and seducing the richest possible man to support her intended lifestyle (a rather cynical rewriting of *Nada*). That the most available candidate is her friend's father does not deter her in the least. Through his seduction she finds the means to negotiate a place in society for herself, and—in an enormous blow to conventionalism—Andrea's father, Daniel, opportunistically supports his daughter in this endeavor. Ida, like her mother, perhaps prefers to know nothing of the matter, and when she does discover her daughter's affair she must distinguish her own illicit affair from Andrea's: "'Son dos casos distintos.' . . . Probablemente Andrea se había unido a un hombre sólo por su dinero. En cambio, yo me estaba uniendo a ti sólo por amor. Era necesario desglosar los dos casos; llegar a la conclusión de que únicamente mi hija estaba pisando terreno falso" [They are two different cases. . . . Probably Andrea had gotten together with a man just for his money. In contrast, I attached myself to you only for love. It was essential to separate the two cases, to reach the conclusion that only my daughter was on shaky ground] (162). At question, then, for Ida are not Andrea's actions but Andrea's motivations.

Such distinctions are consonant with the tradition of the popular romance, which would comprehend a woman who gives herself for love

and would even reward her with the upwardly mobile marriage of her dreams—the "payoff" for virtue. No one is so universally execrated, however, as the woman who forthrightly uses her body to achieve monetary goals; romance heroines must *seek nothing*. By contrast, Carihuela's wife soon demonstrates that contemporary society is less forgiving than popular fiction when she evenhandedly condemns both women. As far as respectable society is concerned, it is like mother, like daughter. Carihuela's wife arrives at the apartment door and with a gesture of repugnance informs Ida that she is "tan puta como su hija" [as whorish as your daughter] (179).

Ida has to come to terms with the knowledge that her own reading of her family is not an innocent one and reflects neither naïveté nor Christian forgiveness but rather a complicitous exploitation and radical reshaping of the family text. In order to reread the banal sensationalism of her life, she has to accept certain facts. Some realizations, such as her son's homosexuality, her daughter's financially motivated affair with a rich man, and her husband's use of the family apartment to conduct an affair with her exfriend Marta, impinge less immediately upon her writing of the text of her own life and motivations. Considerably more significant are the rereading and rewriting of her life in terms of a shifting sense of her woman's role in a changing society. She learns that she is not guiltless of her own subordinate status, that she has been vegetating her entire life, finding refuge in a prolonged childhood. If she has not known how to escape from her unhappy marriage, it is because *she* has made no real attempt to resolve her complaints. Her lifelong enslavement to others is a form of egotism. Her affair with a married artist is tainted. Her motive of "love" is as fraudulent as her daughter's excuse of economic gain or as Marta's feminist pronouncements, and she has used her young son Jacobo as a lover-substitute, investing the child with too much psychological weight in her determination to maintain her pedestrian life. After Jacobo's death, her perpetual rehearsal of the never-achieved reunion with her lover defers the resolution of pressing complications at home, allowing her to maintain the illusion that she is floating blamelessly above the surface of events.

The cumulative effect of these revelations is, at first, devastating: "Me sentía igual que una reclusa a la que se le despoja de todo. Olvidada. Desprendida de sus derechos de mujer. Expulsada de aquel nuevo sistema de vida que lentamente iba derrotando al antiguo, e incapacitada para formar parte de él, aun cuando todo en mí estaba reclamando ser admitido de nuevo" [I felt like a recluse who had been dispossessed of everything. Forgotten. Deprived of her rights as a woman. Expelled from the new system of life that had slowly been defeating the old system and incapacitated to become part of it, even as everything in me was demanding readmittance] (189). Finally, however, she feels a sense of liberation, of freedom to be herself: "Nada más que ella misma" [Nothing more than herself] (182). In the wandering through the city, in the review of the long series of errors that has marked her progress towards some significant closure, the real, the true, the profound uncover themselves at last. In reconstructing the story of herself, Ida Sierra effectively achieves her own liberation and an unexpected moral empowerment.

Perhaps this conclusion seems a little too pat, a little too contrived, a little too faithful to the new myth of the modern woman's coming to consciousness. Salisachs envisions the story of the self, after all, as a long monologue directed towards the absent lover, and this very other-directedness affects the nature of the final revelation. Then again, the implicit equation of naming with knowing and liberation seems too programmatically facile, at least in terms of a typical literary-critical reading. Certainly, it is difficult to imagine how Ida's hard-won truth about herself will survive her return to the miserable Aribau apartment or her husband's compulsive television watching, much less what form Ida's new acceptance of her own agency might take. If the novel's social and political agenda remain unclear, however, what is useful and important is its investigation of society's control mechanisms and of the nuances of male/female relationships. Salisachs reminds her middlebrow readers that such banalities as a bank of television screens or a wall plastered with advertisements for beauty products are regulatory mechanisms and that these mechanisms are capable of generating a perplexing degree of satisfaction with their traditional roles in a large proportion of the population.

Morse, in her theorizing about the ontology of everyday distraction, finds that "older concepts of liberation in everyday life based on 'escape attempts' and figurative practices are no longer viable. . . . Indeed older notions of the public realm and of paramount reality have been largely undermined, and a return to a pretelevisual world of politics, the street, and the marketplace is unlikely." She further notes that "recognizing the extent and scope of an attenuated fiction effect in everyday life—an effect now largely unappreciated or considered trivial and hence subject to little vigilance—might already be a step toward bringing distraction within a controlled psychic economy of disavowal" (Morse 1990, 213). Salisachs's middlebrow novel, more clearly and straightforwardly than many works of high culture, recognizes the power of fiction effects such as those described by Morse and suggests how difficult and how necessary it has become for her readers to understand their functioning. In *El volumen de la ausencia*, the melodramatic events that motor the plot will

pull the reader into the fiction. At the same time, its obvious soap opera qualities, along with the emphatic repetition of images signalling the banalization of culture, offer a permanent dissonance—not an escape from fiction, or even from semifictional effects, but rather a controlled disavowal of distraction from within.

Notes

1. The main question Alborg asks himself is why this woman, who has a talent for theoretical abstraction, wastes her time on so many badly written "realist" novels. He suspects that "Mercedes Salisachs quizá ha sentido la preocupación de que ella no transitaba por estos predios que constituyen la 'gloria' de otros muchos, y ha querido satisfacerles o emularles" [Mercedes Salisachas has perhaps felt concerned that she was not traveling on the path that leads many others to "glory" and so has wanted to satisfy or emulate them] (Alborg 1962, 400), that is, she wastes what talent she does have trying to imitate current fads. Curiously, this type of faddist-influenced writer is one of the objects of Salisachs's satire in *El volumen de la ausencia*.

2. See the introduction to my *Talking Back* (Castillo 1992) for a discussion of this issue in relation to modern Latin American fiction by women.

3. Woman readers are traditionally taught to insert themselves into literary discourse as pseudo-men, a process Fetterley identified several years ago and called "immasculation" in her book on American fiction, *The Resisting Reader* (1978).

4. In this passage, Walsh is commenting on Baudrillard's recent work. I have taken the citation out of context, since it seems so appropriate to Salisachs's critique of consumer culture.

5. Salisachs's warning about the impact of commercialism and modern media representations is especially powerful given her status as an insider. She is a graduate of the Escuela de Comercio with a degree as a "perito mercantil," and she has worked for almost forty years with Spanish radio and television companies.

6. Margaret Morse provides a concise definition of the "distraction" model: "freeways, malls, and television are the locus of an attenuated *fiction effect*, that is, a partial loss of touch with the here and now, dubbed here as *distraction*" (Morse 1990, 193).

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