Identification and Empathy in Perpetrator Fiction on the Spanish Civil War

Abstract

This article analyses the ethically suspect processes of identification and empathy mobilized by Miguel Dalmau's 2009 work of perpetrator fiction, *La noche del Diablo*. It draws on narratological perspectives on character identification and narrative empathy and on philosophical discussions on the necessity of attempting to comprehend the motivations of those who commit evil acts. Informed by these narratological and philosophical insights, the article argues that perpetrator fiction about the Spanish civil war is a psychologically useful tool for expanding our understanding of how individuals commit atrocities and for enhancing our awareness of ourselves as potential agents of perpetration.

Keywords: **narrative empathy**; **character identification**; **Spanish civil war**; **perpetrator fiction**

Historical fiction is more comfortable with the perspective of victims of violence than with that of perpetrators. In the genre of Holocaust fiction, landmark perpetrator narratives, such as Jonathan Littell's *Les Bienveillantes* (2006), have attracted commercial success as well as critical scrutiny and have increased the visibility of perpetrator stories. However, other cultural memory paradigms, for example works of fiction about the Spanish civil war, have shown more resistance to the trend of perpetrator fiction. The relative lack of interest in the perpetrator's perspective in the Spanish context can be explained by the fact that Franco's Nationalists enjoyed four decades during which to propagate their version of history. Recent Spanish fiction on the civil war has been concerned with the recovery of long-silenced Republican memories of the conflict. But the Nationalist perspective on the war and

particularly the viewpoint of perpetrators of violence can be as thought-provoking as they are disturbing. This article offers an analysis of a work of perpetrator fiction on the Spanish civil war and explores the ethically suspect processes of identification and empathy mobilized by perpetrator narratives.

The study begins by outlining the ethical stakes of perpetrator fiction with regard to the problem of readers' identifying and empathizing with evil characters. It gives an overview of narratological perspectives on character identification and narrative empathy elicited by immoral protagonists and outlines a philosophical perspective on the necessity of attempting to comprehend the motivations of those who commit evil acts. After situating the discussion of perpetrator fiction as a psychologically useful tool for expanding our understanding of how individuals commit atrocities and for enhancing our awareness of ourselves as potential agents of perpetration, the article offers an analysis of the processes of identification and empathy set in motion by Miguel Dalmau's 2009 novel *La noche del Diablo*, a work of historical fiction on the Spanish civil war narrated in the first person from the perspective of a Nationalist perpetrator of war crimes. This study elucidates the narrative conditions that make empathy with Dalmau's violent and morally corrupt narrator possible. Furthermore, it evaluates how the novel contributes an innovative perspective to recent historical fiction on the Spanish civil war, which has been concerned above all with the experience of Republican victims. Offering an anatomy of the psychology of perpetration, *La noche del Diablo* examines the motivations of an ideological sympathizer turned agent of Nationalist terror and at the same time poses uncomfortable questions about historical atrocities and the identity of their perpetrators.

Perpetrator fiction provokes a degree of moral anxiety that is qualitatively different from the concerns sometimes expressed about historical fiction focused on the perspective of victims of atrocities. Misgivings about readers' identification with victims can be found in

discussions of Holocaust literature. Scholars such as Robert Eaglestone and Marianne Hirsch argue that a distance must be maintained between consumers of Holocaust culture and victims of the Holocaust in order to prevent appropriative modes of identification that diminish otherness and make victims' experiences too accessible.[1] This perceived need for a detached stance and for some modulation of identificatory urges is even more pressing with perpetrator fiction. Scholars' unease with the identificatory processes prompted by victims' and survivors' stories stems from an ethical concern with preserving the inherent incomprehensibility and solemnity of events involving extraordinary human suffering. But the psychological and ethical stakes of identifying with perpetrators are of a different nature and order of magnitude.

Suzanne Keen illustrates how processes of narrative empathy activated for especially unsavoury characters can be unsettling for readers. In an analysis of Keri Hulme's *The Bone People*, Keen describes the upsetting feeling of being encouraged to see a child abuser in a sympathetic light. The sense of empathy for such a character is overlaid with the impression of having been manipulated by the author. Keen characterizes this reading experience as a kind of empathic distress, which arises when a reader feels compassion for and complicit with a character whose acts are at variance with the reader's moral principles.[2] Fiction narrated from the perspective of unpleasant characters calls for cognitive suppleness in addition to emotional resilience. Erin McGlothlin observes how Holocaust perpetrator fiction

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[1] Robert Eaglestone, *The Holocaust and the Postmodern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 6. Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), p. 161.

[2] Suzanne Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 134.

instantiates a challenge to the comforting view of Nazi victimizers as monsters.[3] The availability of the perpetrator's perspective humanizes the victimizers and defies our urge simply to regard such individuals as beyond the pale and hence undeserving of psychological investigation. Perpetrator fiction deploys strategies to regulate readers' affective relationship with autodiegetic narrator-perpetrators. These strategies enable readers to negotiate the moral anxieties generated by the narrative focalization and by the character identification invited by the narrative perspective.[4] Readers' identification with immoral characters entails certain risks. According to McGlothlin, narratives that make evil protagonists too relatable are in danger of diminishing readers' capacity for moral judgment. There is a possibility that narratives that stimulate an empathic response for evil characters might cause readers to misconstrue the ethical implications of a text.[5]

The value of perpetrator narratives derives precisely from the psychological and ethical challenges invited by such texts. Keen argues that fiction expands the opportunities for identification beyond the trustworthy and unintimidating individuals with whom we interact in our daily lives. Narratives provide what Keen terms 'safe spaces' for identifying with villains and occupying the perspective of morally repugnant characters. On a superficial level, exploring the psychological intimacy of contemptible characters allows readers to experiment with taboos. Such acts of narrative identification also serve a deeper moralizing and didactic function: 'Feeling with villains has been recuperated as an aspect of ethical reading practices through its opportunity to warn, caution, instruct, and safely defuse social

[3] Erin McGlothlin, 'Empathetic Identification and the Mind of the Holocaust Perpetrator in Fiction: A Proposed Taxonomy of Response', *Narrative*, 24:3 (2016), 251–76 (p. 252).

[4] Ibid., p. 253.

[5] Ibid., pp. 255–56.

tensions through carnivalesque inversions of norms.'[6] Eric Leake makes a persuasive case for difficult empathy, based not on the facile, nonthreatening process of identifying with victims of oppression and abuse who are most deserving of our understanding but rather on a more unsettling attempt to grasp the emotions of individuals with whom we might not wish to associate.[7] He argues that the exercise of difficult empathy makes available an understanding of a broader variety of human actions, some of which are in greater need of attention than the objects of compassion that typically excite our empathic tendencies.[8] Difficult empathy, Leake argues, could even offer the means for addressing our most pressing social problems.[9]

Empathy with perpetrators might then serve a psychological and social utility, even if such an exercise goes against the grain of everyday cognitive operations. Adam Morton argues that our potential to empathize with those who perpetrate wicked acts is limited by moral decency; in adhering to a behavioural code we exclude certain hypothetical undertakings from our range of possible action and thus restrict our capacity to imagine those acts that fall outside of the scope of virtuous conduct.[10] Morton observes that we are generally unwilling to imagine the motivations behind wicked acts. The task of

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[6] Keen, *Empathy and the Novel*, p. 131.

[7] Eric Leake, 'Humanizing the Inhumane: The Value of Difficult Empathy', in *Rethinking Empathy Through Literature*, ed. by Meghan Marie Hammond and Sue J. Kim (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 175–85 (p. 176).

[8] Ibid., p. 184.

[9] Ibid., p. 184.

[10] Adam Morton, 'Empathy for the Devil', in *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*, ed. by Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 318–30 (p. 318).

conceptualizing a murderer's indifference to the sanctity of life is inhibited by emotional barriers. We feel revulsion at the prospect of empathizing with murderers owing to the uncomfortable sense of identification entailed by the processes of affective and cognitive matching that are integral to empathy.[11] An intuitive understanding of wicked acts usually depends on our imagining perpetrating those acts, which uncovers a resemblance between us and evildoers that can threaten our self-conception. There is a fear that understanding the motivations behind wicked acts might diminish our aversion for the perpetrators and our condemnation of them. Furthermore, as Morton points out, the explanation of others' acts usually serves a more readily apparent purpose of social utility as we endeavour to master others' ways of thinking for our own ends. In the case of wicked acts, the rehearsing of motivations and actions seems to serve no useful goal and might even strike us as potentially dangerous.[12] When we try to empathize with the perpetrators of atrocities, Morton contends, we come up against a barrier: we may be able to picture their motivations and their acts, but we cannot bring ourselves to believe that we would have acted in a similar way in their situation, and we thus refuse to identify with and feel sympathy for them.[13] An additional reason for why we find it difficult to empathize with perpetrators of atrocities is our inadequate capacity to build up a full appreciation of the context in which such acts are committed. We devote the finite capacity of our imagination to fathoming a perpetrator's thought processes and motivations, but we struggle to imagine acts performed in circumstances that are materially different from our own.[14]

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[11] Morton, *On Evil* (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 19–20.

[12] Ibid., pp. 20–21.

[13] Morton, 'Empathy for the Devil', p. 321.

[14] Ibid., p. 325.

Empathizing with perpetrators sheds light on the problem of evil. It expands our cognitive and affective tools and in the process reveals something deeply troubling about ourselves. The exercise of difficult empathy disables complacency and obliges us to reckon with our own propensity for evil.[15] Most evildoers are at root not very different from us. Heinous acts do not originate in a peculiar psychology operating beyond typical human motivation. Morton sustains that, contrary to popular intuition, 'most evil acts are performed by people disturbingly like you and me, that we can have some imaginative grasp on what it is like to perform many evil acts, and that in doing so we have to understand some very basic and important facts about human motivation'.[16] Perpetrator fiction furnishes the imaginative resources to conceptualize the motivations for wrongdoing and to simulate the execution of evil acts. In furnishing these resources, such fiction competes with our instinctual aversion to identifying with perpetrators, but it does so generally within an ethical framework that counteracts our empathic reaching out and obliges us not to lose sight of the morally contemptible nature of the acts represented. McGlothlin is clear that perpetrator fiction does not entail an appeal for absolution or forgiveness for crimes against humanity.[17] The aim of such literary works is rather to unsettle readers by prompting a shift to the perpetrator's perspective and by eliciting empathy for figures we typically condemn without a second thought. Perpetrator fiction works in the space between condemnation and compassion: it simultaneously activates our empathic tendencies while it refuses an endorsement of the protagonist's acts. The emphasis in such fiction is on understanding how perpetrators came to act and how they overcame the barriers to hurting other human beings. The value of such

[15] Leake, 'Humanizing the Inhumane', p. 177.

[16] Morton, *On Evil*, pp. 2–3.

[17] McGlothlin, 'Empathetic Identification', p. 256.

fiction lies in its exploration of the psychology of perpetration. It allows readers to grapple with ethics and with the vexed question of how individuals like us can act inhumanely. It thus compels us to ask difficult questions about ourselves and about our own capabilities, as we are obliged to confront the problem of evil, which we tend otherwise to keep at arm's length.

Miguel Dalmau's *La noche del Diablo* is a work of historical fiction inspired by the real-life events of the battle of Mallorca in the early months of the Spanish civil war and the brutal repression and extrajudicial killings that took place in the aftermath of the battle. The events are narrated from the perspective of a fictional character, Julián Alcover, a priest who acts as interpreter and confidant of an actual historical figure, Arconovaldo Bonaccorsi—also known by his nom de guerre Conte Rossi—the Italian fascist soldier who led the campaign against the Republicans and the subsequent drive to purge Mallorca of the Nationalists' political opponents and their sympathizers. In his command of the Falangist counterstrike in Mallorca, Bonaccorsi expanded the number of recruits from 500 to 22,000 in a matter of weeks. Bonaccorsi's rapid mobilization of adherents illustrates the leader's standing with the local Falangists and his influence on the young volunteers.[18] Dalmau's novel seeks to explain Bonaccorsi's allure and to account for the malevolent influence the fascist leader exerted on the fighters under his command. Hans Lauge Hansen locates the value of Dalmau's novel in its reconstruction of the National-Catholic belief system, as embodied in the protagonist of the text. *La noche del Diablo* dissects the historical connections between National-Catholicism and Italian fascism. The novel fleshes out the ideological entanglements between the two movements through its recreation of the motivations and psychology of a Spanish

[18] Denis Vigneron, 'Sous la lune, le diable: Deux textes en echo: *Les grands cimetières sous la lune* de Georges Bernanos et *La noche del diablo* de Miguel Dalmau', *Études romanes de Brno*, 33: 2 (2012), 73–82 (p. 78).

collaborator with the Italian fascist Bonaccorsi.[19] The portrayal of the protagonist Julián's fascination with Bonaccorsi constitutes part of a wider inquiry into evil and its corrupting effects. Dalmau explores how dominant personalities can infect others with their malign worldview and investigates how complicity results from ideological seduction.

While perpetrators' confessions in Spain have been few in number and have attracted scant interest in wider society, fictional accounts of perpetration published in the last twenty years give some indication of an increasingly receptive public.[20] *La noche del Diablo* followed in the wake of Alberto Méndez's 2004 bestseller *Los girasoles ciegos*, also published by Anagrama and whose commercial success was later replicated at the box office in 2008 by José Luis Cuerda's film adaptation. Like Dalmau's novel, the final story of Méndez's collection explores the perspective of a Catholic clergyman in the context of civil war violence.[21] Méndez's character Salvador employs a similar ecclesiastical style and confessional tone in his first-person narrative, which constitutes an admission of guilt delivered to his spiritual advisor. Akin to Dalmau, who as we will see uses certain techniques to smooth the way for readers' encounter with an unsympathetic character, Méndez deploys attenuating strategies to facilitate readers' engagement with Salvador, a deacon who

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[19] Hans Lauge Hansen, 'La memoria del diablo: La memoria colectiva en la novela *La noche del Diablo* (2009), de Miguel Dalmau', *Sociocriticism*, 25: 1–2 (2010), 271–84 (p. 277).

[20] On perpetrators' lack of motivation to speak out and the lack of public interest in their stories, see Paloma Aguilar and Leigh A. Payne, *Revealing New Truths about Spain's Violent Past: Perpetrators' Confessions and Victim Exhumations* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

[21] Alberto Méndez, 'Cuarta derrota: 1942 o Los girasoles ciegos', in *Los girasoles ciegos* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 2004), pp. 103–55.

expresses himself with comparable alienating theological verbiage. Despite its stifling and obsessive quality, the perpetrator's story does not become over-powering because it is interspersed with contrasting narrative perspectives—that of a child, whose Republican father is in hiding and is exposed by Salvador in the course of the latter's unwanted amorous advances on the mother, and that of a third-person omniscient narrator who contributes to this reconstruction of Salvador's pursuit of the boy's mother and its tragic denouement. It is noteworthy that the director and screenwriter chose to focus on the final story of Méndez's collection in their adaptation and thus to give precedence to the perspective of the wayward priest-perpetrator. While Spanish writers and filmmakers have been hesitant to attend to the perspective of violent perpetrators in the civil war, the recent surge of true-crime adaptations on streaming platforms suggests the enduring popularity of a subject-matter that is likely to attract growing interest among creative practitioners in Spain.[22]

The fact that both Méndez and Dalmau decide on the morally ambivalent figure of the civil war–era priest to focalize their exploration of the topic of perpetration is a result of the idiosyncrasies of a genre that requires readers to occupy a space of empathic discomfort. Using narrators who are invested with moral authority by virtue of their vocation, these stories invite readers to place our trust in the storyteller, but this trust is rendered all the more uncomfortable when we become aware of the narrator's acts. The context of the Spanish Church during the years of the civil war provides a scenario well suited to the purposes of

[22] For an overview of the recent phenomenon of true-crime adaptations and the ethical and cultural stakes of these filmic representations, see Sarah E. Fanning and Claire O'Callaghan, 'Introduction: Screening Serial Murder—Adaptation, True Crime, and Popular Culture', in *Serial Killing on Screen: Adaptation, True Crime and Popular Culture,* ed. by Sarah E. Fanning and Claire O'Callaghan (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), pp. 1–31.

writers who aspire to generate this uneasy complicity between readers and immoral narrators, which is the hallmark of perpetrator fiction. Alfonso Álvarez Bolado summarizes the extent of the Spanish Church's implication with the Francoist cause as one characterized by progressive alignment. The Church moved from an initial posture of caution and reserve to an enthusiastic sacralization of the Nationalist campaign as a crusade.[23] Its blessing of the Nationalists came in the wake of the opening months of bloody religious persecution in Republican zones, which culminated in the deaths of 12 bishops, 4184 priests, 2635 monks, and 283 nuns before the authorities were able to regain control.[24] While it is clear the Church was not part of the initial Nationalist coup d'état of July 1936, nor was it the cause of the ensuing civil war, it soon applied the full force of its moral leverage in favour of the Nationalist side in a conflict it regarded as a holy war. The Church's identification with the Nationalist cause was such that it went on to determine the very nature of the political and social system that emerged at the end of the conflict.[25]

La noche del Diablo is a fictional memoir in which Julián Alcover looks back at the events of the summer of 1936 while on his deathbed in a sanatorium some ten years later. In his memoir, Julián seeks to make sense of his past acts and to alleviate the torments of his memory by bearing testimony to the atrocities perpetrated by Bonaccorsi and his men. In the process, the narrator and protagonist of Dalmau's novel seeks to explain the acts of violence

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[23] Alfonso Álvarez Bolado, *Para ganar la guerra, para ganar la paz: Iglesia y Guerra Civil: 1936–1939* (Madrid: Universidad Pontificia de Comillas, 1995), p. 22.

[24] Hilari Raguer, 'La iglesia', in *En el combate por la historia: La República, la Guerra Civil, el Franquismo*, ed. by Ángel Viñas Martín (Barcelona: Pasado y Presente, 2012), pp. 447–460 (p. 447).

[25] Álvarez Bolado, *Para ganar la guerra*, p. 22.

he has witnessed and to recognize his complicity in them. By adopting the perspective of a Nationalist perpetrator of war crimes, Dalmau invites readers to share the intimacy of violent individuals and to probe their psychology. *La noche del Diablo* traces the aetiology of violence in an ostensibly virtuous individual: using a Catholic priest as the narrator-protagonist, the novel creates the necessary conditions for identification and empathy with the perpetrator as he descends into moral corruption. The character's transformation from a posture of ideological sympathy with the Nationalist cause to a position of active involvement in war crimes is all the more disturbing because of his status as an erstwhile figure of moral authority. Julián joins a murderous rampage in the summer of 1936 and is implicated in acts of rape, murder, and torture of Republican sympathizers and civilians. But the extent of the protagonist's complicity in these crimes is revealed only gradually and partially. The piecemeal nature of our glimpses into Julián's transformation ensures that the tension between our identification with the protagonist and our repudiation of his acts remains intact throughout our reading of his testimony. With each revelation, Julián becomes more monstrous, and yet the character's rhetorical strategies and withholding of information sustain the reader's empathy for him.

Fernando Huidobro Polanco is a possible historical source of inspiration for Dalmau's character Julián. Huidobro, a Jesuit priest from Santander, was among the members of the clergy that accompanied the Nationalist forces in Navarra. Huidobro wrote of impromptu masses celebrated on the front line of battle and of his activities as army chaplain as he attended to the spiritual needs of the Castejón battalion of the Spanish Legion. His sacralization of the Nationalist troops has resonances of the kind of language used by Julián: 'Entramos ayer en esta Navarra bendita. Hemos hablado con los requetés que lo llenan todo de religión, idealismo, Patria y hasta elegancia, con sus uniformes color caqui limpísimos y

correaje nuevo'.[26] Accompanying the Castejón battalion on its advance to Madrid, Huidobro witnessed the pre-planned and coolly executed rear-guard killings carried out by the Nationalist forces in the course of their onslaught. The brutality of the Nationalist advance from the landing in the south along the corridor from Seville to Badajoz, which enabled the subsequent launch of the siege of Madrid, earned it the moniker 'la columna de la muerte'.[27] Acting with the expressed intention of curbing excessive use of the death penalty, Huidobro proposed a set of rules for the military authorities that dictated the types of crimes that could be legitimately punished with execution. Huidobro asserted that murderers of women, priests, and other harmless individuals should be punished with death, as should exponents and promoters of ideologies such as communism, but that the misguided masses who had been incited to violence should be spared. Hilari Raguer notes that Huidobro's endeavour to legislate the grounds for death sentences a posteriori and retroactively was not simply a violation of basic legal principles that if enacted would amount to state crime; it was a profoundly immoral attempt to usurp an almost Godlike role in determining who would live and who would die.[28]

In Dalmau's novel Julián is careful to register his shock at the displays of progressive brutality meted out by Bonaccorsi's death squad, the Dragones de la muerte. Initially he is persuaded that the violent treatment of political enemies is a necessary continuation of a religious war aimed at purging Mallorca of the enemy. Julián accepts violence as the price

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[26] Quoted in Hilari Raguer, *La pólvora y el incienso: La Iglesia y la Guerra Civil Española, 1936-1939* (Barcelona: Península, 2001), p. 88.

[27] Raguer, 'La iglesia', p. 448.

[28] Raguer, *La pólvora y el incienso*, pp. 192–93.

exacted for eliminating an ideological pathogen from the body politic.[29] But in their escalating savagery, the dragons' barbarous sorties begin to repulse Julián. Using the third person to relate the acts of violence he witnesses, Julián insists on his separation from the soldiers. He presents himself as Bonaccorsi's reluctant factotum, compelled by duty to remain at his master's side, a mere bystander, disgusted by the events he beholds in pursuance of his responsibilities (43). However, there is a gradual slippage in verb forms from the third person to the first-person plural as Julián becomes increasingly comfortable with violence. Convinced of the necessity of Rossi's work, he is reconciled to his own obligations in the enterprise: 'A lo largo de aquel día Rossi y los dragones batieron hasta el último rincón de la tierra. En primer lugar nos dirigimos a la escuela y luego al domicilio del maestro' (189). The hunt for crypto-Republicans and other suspected enemies of fascism is presented at the outset as the work of Rossi and his men. But Julián is unable to conceal his approval of the ensuing ransacking of the schoolmaster's home and the public burning and desecration of his copies of decadent literature, including works by Zola, Maupassant, Flaubert, Dostoyevsky, and Tolstoy. When the schoolmaster attempts to rescue a copy of one of his books from the flames and is detained, Julián displays his contempt for the man and gives his blessing to the punishment:

[29] Miguel Dalmau, *La noche del Diablo* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 2009), p. 156. Subsequent references are given in parentheses in the main text. Paul Preston's *The Spanish Holocaust: Inquisition and Extermination in Twentieth-Century Spain* (London: Harper, 2012) provides historical examples of the genocidal ideology espoused by the Nationalists. Julián's exterminatory rhetoric is characteristic of the language used by the rebel faction, which advocated targeted violence against a predefined political enemy.

> El maestro irrumpió en la plaza por obra del Diablo. En un alarde de osadía, sorteó el círculo de dragones e introdujo sus zarpas en el corazón del fuego. Luego rescató un volumen chamuscado –*Ana Karenine*– y trató de salir huyendo ante el asombro general. Por fortuna, fue interceptado por cien brazos de hierro y luego conducido a la Casa de Falange. El propio Rossi se encargó de dirigir el interrogatorio, empleándose a fondo como dictaba su sentido del deber. Cumplido éste, me dejó a solas con el prisionero para que intentara poner paz en su alma. […] Traté de convencerle. Pero se negó a recibir la confesión. (190)

Julián assumes his role in the execution as a provider of moral support to the condemned man. He officiates the ceremony of death by administering the last rites, and from this moment on plays an indispensable part in the executions as he imbues them with a ritualistic aura and semblance of moral justice. Rossi describes Julián's role in the executions as the 'matrimonio perfecto' (192). While the priest does not deliver the coup de grâce personally, his presence legitimizes the proceedings by lending the moral authority of the Church to the act of murder. In their final moments, the kneeling prisoners cling desperately to their faith and look to Julián for salvation: 'Un minuto antes del pistoletazo, me miraban a mí, el padre Alcover, como se busca un faro en mitad de la noche. Pero yo les cerraba la puerta para evitar que mancharan mi alma' (192). Julián refuses compassion for the victims: 'Como es natural, yo jamás traté de ponerme en el lugar de nuestros enemigos' (180). During the Spanish civil war, the practice of having priests take the confession of captured Republicans before their summary execution was widespread.[30] Giving the condemned a final opportunity to receive absolution was regarded as a noble act of mercy and also undoubtedly served as a form of humiliation inflicted on vocal atheists. The bishop of Mallorca, Josep Miralles, was proud to

[30] Raguer, *La pólvora y el incienso*, p. 185.

report that only one in ten sentenced to death in his diocese refused to receive the last rites before being shot.[31] While Dalmau's character is ill at ease with physical acts of violence, he theoretically approves of murder in furtherance of the fascist cause. Julián describes the system of denunciations and the resulting lists of victims as a 'maquinaria perfecta' (177). Lack of proof in no way troubles him. On the basis of rumours, he is prepared to condemn men to death: 'no exigíamos pruebas: bastaba con los rumores, porque los rumores son la escarcha de la verdad. Es cierto que los motivos de la denuncia no siempre eran honestos – viejas rencillas, celos, envidias, odios larvados en el tiempo…–, pero la Humanidad es así y sólo nos importaba el fruto diario de la cosecha' (177). Infected by the 'euforia contagiosa' (179) of the fascist cause, Julián joins the convoys of death squads without hesitation. His claim to feel troubled by his metamorphosis into a soldier-priest strikes a hollow note: 'Así oficiamos nuestro bautismo: con balas, con alcohol, con palabras gruesas. Yo estaba consternado, pero traté de fingir aplomo' (183). On the contrary, Julián seems to adapt to his new role with consummate ease. He acknowledges his moral depravity and admits he was intoxicated by the orgy of blood spilling: 'yo no me percaté de ello, inmerso en la ceremonia de sangre' (183). He embraces his new duty with few scruples: 'Yo cumplía con la tarea de llevar consuelo al reo, armado con la pistola y mi crucifijo de madera. […] Mi trabajo concluía tan rápido como el del pelotón, y abandonaba el lugar convencido de haber hecho una buena obra' (186). Julián's former identity becomes subsumed under that of the Dragones:

> Nos llamábamos los Dragones de la Muerte, circulábamos en el Auto de la Muerte, posábamos junto al Parapeto de la Muerte. Ella era nuestra dueña y señora, la Madonna del Infierno. Aunque Cristo había dicho "Yo soy el Camino, la Verdad y la

[31] Ibid., pp. 186–87.

> Vida", nosotros sólo pensábamos en la parca. […] [Fue] un derroche constante de sangre y de esperma, una orgía inaudita de polvo, sudor y lágrimas que se representaba por toda la isla como una función ambulante del Diablo. […] Si en aquellos días yo hubiera tenido el valor de asomarme a mi alma, habría oído el lejano cañonazo de la condenación. Pero yo estaba poseído. (208–09)

Abandoning God, Julián becomes an agent of death and destruction. In the closing pages of the novel, he measures the depth of his fall in a tortured soliloquy in which he is interrogated by his revived conscience:

> Julián, me decía, ¿qué has hecho? ¿No te diste cuenta de que aquellos desdichados empezaban a asemejarse a nuestros mártires? No lo vi. Ni tampoco supe reconocer el rostro de Cristo en aquellos condenados. ¿De qué me había servido entregar mi juventud rezando a unas imágenes que hablaban de dolor, si cuando esas imágenes tomaron vida perdí la luz y contribuí a su muerte? (321)

We never witness Julián's active participation in violence, but the omission is more likely a result of the narrator's design rather than an accurate characterization of the nature of his acts. Julián carries a gun and makes mention of learning to pull the trigger (183). He writes of the feeling of guilt inspired by the act of killing with an intuitive understanding that is suggestive of an oblique confession of culpability. We also witness Julián's feigned murder of the victim of a mass rape in order to protect the woman. He suspects Rossi will shoot the woman if he does not do so himself, and so Julián discharges his firearm against the wall of the barn in a mock execution aimed at sparing the woman's life. The muted reaction from Rossi and the Dragones when Julián emerges from the barn suggests that his use of the gun does not surprise them, which raises the question of his direct involvement in the acts of murder depicted in the narrative. Julián uses the first-person plural when reporting these crimes, but

he rarely expounds his own deeds in any detail. The protagonist's own sense of agency is dissolved in the collective of which he is part.

The sense that Julián elides the more damning examples of his guilt is reinforced by an understanding of his unstated aims in writing this narrative. In the opening pages, Julián promises to tell all in order to bring peace to his conscience, and yet he informs us that the doctor has advised he conserve his energy: 'Para ser fiel a los hechos debería confesarlo todo; pero el médico me ha aconsejado que administre mis fuerzas con prudencia' (11). In this way, Dalmau subtly raises the possibility that Julián will gloss over the more disturbing aspects of his past so as not to upset his fragile equanimity and state of health. Furthermore, Julián often resorts to theological abstractions at times when his narrative comes perilously close to a consideration of his culpability: '¿Qué he de contar? La vida es un misterio en manos de Dios y sólo Dios conoce la respuesta a los enigmas humanos' (11). Julián advances the possibility that his memoir will break the silence in which he has entombed his ignominious past and thereby help him to recognize and make peace with the self: 'Ya no reconozco el paisaje […] de mi alma. Todo es demasiado confuso' (11–12). In its promise of self-understanding through the act of writing, *La noche del Diablo* toys with the generic conventions of illness narratives that aim at repairing a sense of self that has been disrupted by pathology. However, although he writes from a sanatorium, Julián's loss of self has been caused not by his current illness, to which he dedicates only the briefest of mentions, but by his heinous past acts. From its opening pages, *La noche del Diablo* gestures at the unreliability of its narrator. Julián frames his narrative in such a way as to elicit the reader's sympathy: depicting himself as prostrated by tuberculosis and on the cusp of dying, he cloaks his story in the guise of an illness narrative. But in its failure to address his experience as a patient, the story reveals that its true impulse lies in the pangs of a guilty conscience. It is an appeal for redemption through self-justification and a self-serving plea for the reader's

absolution. While the narrator presents his testimony of the battle of Mallorca as an accurate account of the atrocities witnessed by a bystander, there are clearly grounds to question his forthrightness about his involvement in the events recalled. At the basic level of characterization, Julián's reservations when it comes to admitting his part in acts of violence are motivated by his desire to attenuate his guilt. Julián's unreliability as a narrator is symptomatic of his guilty conscience and is illustrative of how the processes of self-deception and assignation of blame operate in the mind of a violent individual. At a deeper structural level, Julián's elusiveness plays a significant role in facilitating readers' empathic engagement with the narrator of the text. Julián's incomplete account sustains readers' ambivalent view of the character: we are able to empathize with him more easily if his own role in acts of violence is obscured by his insistence on collective agency. The omissions are therefore a necessary condition for the effectiveness of Dalmau's perpetrator narrative: the text relies on readers' empathy with Julián, which in turn depends on the narrator's ability to hide his guilt.

Even with the actual people we encounter in our lives whom we consider deserving of our understanding and compassion, empathy is mediated by distancing mechanisms that ensure we are shielded from the distress of direct exposure to the source of the target's negative emotions. In her conceptualization of empathy informed by recent advances in psychology and neuroscience, Amy Coplan emphasizes the importance of self-other differentiation in the process of imagining and simulating others' situated psychological states. The other-oriented perspective-taking that is central to empathy is reliant on empathizers' sustained awareness of their identity as being distinct from that of the target. Empathizers' failure to preserve an awareness of their identity as separate agents can lead to their becoming enmeshed in the target's experience, which can cause emotional over-arousal and personal distress. It can also lead to erroneous assumptions about what the target is

feeling based on a projection of the empathizer's own perspective. Losing sight of the boundaries between the self and other inevitably leads to an inaccurate representation of the other's experience and to emotional contagion in the absence of true understanding of that experience.[32] The ability to simulate others' emotions as theirs rather than our own plays an important role in the aesthetic satisfaction derived from tragic representations. Canonical discussions of our engagement with others' suffering, such as those by Aristotle, Lucretius, David Hume, and Edmund Burke, allude to this need for detachment on the part of observers of others' pain. Aristotle's concept of catharsis, Lucretius's metaphor of the shipwreck viewed from the shore, and Hume's and Burke's systematic treatment of the topic all share a concern with the protective distance that shields spectators when they witness potentially disabling and overwhelming emotions.[33] Empathy is predicated on this underlying tension of distance and proximity: to simulate others' affective states we must adopt their perspective, but at the same time our alignment with their perspective cannot be so complete that we lose our sense of distance from them and our self-awareness as separate entities.

This tension between distance and proximity is particularly fraught in readers' engagement with perpetrator fiction. Readers must negotiate the hazy boundary between understanding perpetrator motivation and endorsing perpetrators' acts. In making available the perpetrator's perspective, these narratives appeal to readers' empathy and yet refuse too complete an assimilation of that perspective by illustrating the horrors committed by these

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[32] Amy Coplan, 'Understanding Empathy: Its Features and Effects', in *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*, ed. by Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 3–18 (pp. 15–17).

[33] Stefano Ercolino, 'Negative Empathy: History, Theory, Criticism', *Orbis Litterarum*, 73 (2018), 243–62 (p. 249).

figures. The ethical action of perpetrator narratives happens in this space of discomfort, in which readers are suspended as they waver between sympathy and condemnation. Morton observes that empathy with fictional perpetrators does not lead readers to approve of violent acts. When we use the details of another's situation to feel our way into that situation, we are selective in the details we apply to recreate the other person's perspective. We might lay stress on some desires, beliefs, and emotions at the expense of others. In our partial recreation of the other's experience, we might feel an emotion similar to that which is attributed to the other person but which may in fact be different from the emotion we would experience ourselves were we in that situation.[34] Our empathy for fictional characters such as Macbeth or Raskolnikov depends on a partial imagination of the motivation behind acts we would never endorse. As Morton puts it, 'we can empathize with the motives of repugnant characters in part because empathy can be selective in its choice of an imaginative basis'.[35] The selective nature of empathy enables readers to seize on certain aspects of characterization at the expense of others and to cultivate an emotional connection with fictional protagonists on the basis of chosen affinities. In his analysis of readers' difficult empathy with the psychotic and murderous protagonist of *American Psycho*, Leake argues that readers' engagement with such protagonists is based on a peripheral identification with aspects of the characters' personality and interests that are unrelated to their violent acts. Leake argues that the humorous disquisitions on pop music, fashion, and business cards in *American Psycho* facilitate these processes of peripheral identification with the protagonist, which enable an inchoate sense of shared identity based on readers' recognition of the protagonist's preoccupations and

[34] Morton, 'Empathy for the Devil', p. 324.

[35] Ibid., p. 325.

interests.[36] In *La noche del Diablo*, peripheral identification occurs in Julián's moments of introspection, which tend to be set apart from the occasions on which the protagonist explicitly engages in, witnesses, or justifies acts of violence.

Just as readers' empathy for evil characters is selective, it can also fluctuate during the course of reading and can take on different gradations depending on the strength and basis of our connection with the characters. Keen systematizes the narrative features thought to be instrumental in evoking readers' empathy under two main categories: character identification and narrative situation. With regard to the first category, readers' identification with fictional characters can be ascribed to aspects of characterization, such as: whether they are named; how they are described; the traits attributed to them; whether they conform to certain social types; the extent to which they display a complex and multifaceted personality; the nature of the actions they undertake and their role in the plot; the quality of their speech; our mode of access to their consciousness. The second category relates to the narrative point of view and perspective, which comprise factors such as the grammatical person used for the narration, the relationship between the narrator and characters, whether characters' thought processes are depicted or whether, conversely, our perspective is limited to surface appearances.[37] In her analysis of readers' engagement with perpetrator fiction, McGlothlin uses the term identification to capture the ethical dimension of readers' active and conscious relationship with characters that transgress the representational prohibitions of Holocaust studies.[38] For this critic, identification with perpetrator-protagonists is not a fixed state but rather can be used as an umbrella term for various kinds and degrees of reader response that fluctuate over

[36] Leake, 'Humanizing the Inhumane', p. 181.

[37] Keen, *Empathy and the Novel*, p. 93.

[38] McGlothlin, 'Empathetic Identification', p. 258.

the course of reading. Identification thus encompasses cognitive, emotional, and ethical engagements that can vary in intensity for different readers and over the duration of the narrative; it can be blocked and reversed, is almost always partial, and is dependent on readers' predisposition as well as facilitated by certain narrative strategies.[39] McGlothlin's taxonomy of identificatory responses to perpetrator fiction encompasses a scale ranging from basic existential identification to ideological identification via a number of intermediate and determining processes, such as perspectival identification, reliability-dependent identification, and affective identification. Existential identification is the baseline of reader engagement with unethical narrators. Narrative focalization on the perpetrator's perspective and the representation of such a character's consciousness entail a rudimentary sense of identification, in which the reader acknowledges the perpetrator's human identity.[40] Perspectival identification encompasses a scaling up of empathic engagement, in which the reader sees events partially through the eyes of the perpetrator and neglects temporarily other points of view but nevertheless remains cognizant of historical and cultural tradition and is able to juxtapose the perpetrator's tendentious point of view with the stories of victims.[41] Perspectival identification can be enhanced by reliability-dependent identification: the reader's readiness to assume the perpetrator's perspective increases in consonance with the character's reliability. The propositional truth of the narrator's statements, the credibility of the narrator's representation of atrocities, and the sincerity of acknowledgement of responsibility for those events all contribute to enhancing the perpetrator-protagonist's

[39] Ibid., p. 259.

[40] Ibid., p. 260.

[41] Ibid., pp. 260–61.

reliability and the reader's empathic investment in the character.[42] The narrator's reliability can come under scrutiny owing both to the historical knowledge that the reader brings to a text and to tensions within the text, where an implied author casts doubt on the narrator's account.[43] Affective identification entails readers' bringing their own emotional resources to bear on understanding perpetrators' thoughts and feelings about their acts.[44] McGlothlin observes that in Holocaust perpetrator fiction, the reader's emotional connection with the protagonist tends to occur in those instances of the protagonist's story that are separate from actual acts of victimization and that thus offer a more accessible route to emotional engagement.[45] Ideological identification describes the extent to which the reader relates to the perpetrator's belief system and ethical code. Such identification with the perpetrator's worldview can facilitate the other forms of identification—perspectival and affective—and implies the reader's endorsement of the narrator's acts. McGlothlin argues that ideological identification, although rightly feared given the high ethical stakes of fiction narrated from the perspective of victimizers, is only a remote possibility because of the discernible pedagogical and ethical aims of the implied authors of these texts.[46]

Readers' emotional attachment to immoral characters is thus facilitated by certain narrative conditions and assumes different forms and degrees of intensity. *La noche del Diablo* invites readers' identification with the protagonist through its use of the first person, which promotes a sense of intimacy and an expectation of the revelation of confidences.

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[42] Ibid., p. 261.

[43] Ibid., p. 262.

[44] Ibid., p. 263.

[45] Ibid., p. 263.

[46] Ibid., p. 264.

Julián insists on his mediocrity and paints an unflattering portrait of his unexceptional qualities and appearance (13). His self-effacing manner wins the reader's sympathies from the first; his unthreatening demeanour, coupled with the trust typically inspired by his religious vocation, disarms the reader. Our existential identification with Julián as a humble and kindly everyman is amplified by our perspectival alignment with his version of events. Readers are unlikely to entertain an ideological identification with Julián's fascist fervour, but we can perceive how a modest cleric living through the ideological turmoil of the 1930s might be attracted to the Falangist cause and might begin to demonize the Republican other. We have little reason to question Julián's reliability in the early stages of the narrative; rather we most likely regard him as a flawed product of his time, someone who is seduced by ideology and who commits himself unwillingly to a cause he later regrets. Our affective identification with Julián is thus peripheral to his acts of victimization: it precedes the violence we witness later in the narrative and is fortified by the occasions on which he expresses estrangement from his actions and presents himself as a victim of circumstance.

In its intimation that Julián is as much a victim as a victimizer and in its use of narrative strategies designed to lubricate the reader's empathic entanglement with the protagonist, *La noche del Diablo* approximates certain rhetorical transgressions that can undermine the ethical aims of perpetrator fiction. Leake observes how novels that mobilize difficult empathy for an immoral character are in danger of facilitating an easier empathy when they explain perpetrators' acts as the result of social conditions and environment. Mitigating explanations can blur the distinction between victimizer and victim.[47] Eaglestone sees the sanitization of perpetrators as part of a deeper problem with perpetrator fiction, which purports to give an insight into the evil of victimization but displays a number of

[47] Leake, 'Humanizing the Inhumane', p. 180.

strategies by which it deviates from the brutal realities of perpetration: first, in its depiction of violence, perpetrator fiction uses attenuated lexical choices that blur agency; second, in its use of clichéd plot developments, such fiction treats the topics of guilt and redemption far too frivolously; third, in its representation of the aetiology of evil, perpetrator fiction presents murderous acts as the result of psychopathology and thus fails to address the problem of how sane people engaged in acts of genocide.[48] Eaglestone argues that such fiction is built on an unfulfilled promise: 'Perpetrator fictions seem, at their core, to offer the idea that there might be an answer as to "why" the protagonists (real, fictional) might have committed such atrocities. Yet […] this "why" is a question that is never and perhaps can never be answered.'[49] In its vague treatment of the agency of violence and oversimplified handling of Julián's remorse, *La noche del Diablo* is guilty of some of the faux pas Eaglestone identifies in Holocaust perpetrator fiction. But the novel does not shy away from the problem of the aetiology of evil. In its focalization on an apparently balanced character who displays prosocial tendencies and yet commits abominable acts, Dalmau's novel directs our attention to the question of how ordinary people might come to perpetrate such misdeeds. By illuminating Julián's progressive moral degradation and the motivations behind his escalating wrongdoing, *La noche del Diablo* shifts readers' attention from the why to the how of perpetration. The result of this shift is a more relatable psychological profile, which captures the flaws in the process of making decisions that can lead otherwise sane individuals to inflict harm on others. Eaglestone's view that we cannot decipher the why behind acts of evil is persuasive. The impenetrable layers of inheritance, beliefs, and situation that compose any

[48] Robert Eaglestone, 'Avoiding Evil in Perpetrator Fiction', *Holocaust Studies,* 17:2–3 (2011), 13–26 (p. 18, 23).

[49] Ibid., pp. 15–16.

individual identity make the empathetic perspective-shifting required to answer such a question an improbable feat. Understanding why also seems to entail an endorsement of those acts and hence poses an impossible ethical conundrum. But something that perpetrator fiction can help to elucidate is how. In his discussion of the difficulties of comprehending the psychology behind evil acts, Morton argues that how a person came to commit such acts is a more manageable question and is immeasurably more useful for understanding our own dangerous capabilities. An emphasis on the how of perpetration also helps to guard against the swerves away from evil that Eaglestone detects in perpetrator fiction: attention to how individuals decided to commit murderous acts puts agency at the centre of the frame and keeps readers alert to efforts to downplay or obfuscate culpability. An explanation of how entails no appeal for moral justification and thus obviates the need for facile expressions of guilt and redemption. Furthermore, it levels the distinction between our own psychology and that of the perpetrator other and in this way enables an appreciation of how ordinary individuals like us can act in reprehensible ways.

The value of *La noche del Diablo* is that the novel represents evil not as an unfamiliar other, comforting in its monstrosity and remoteness, but rather as something familiar and recognizable. The archetypal villains of fictional stories bear little resemblance to our closest family members, at whose hands we are most likely in statistical terms to fall victim to violence.[50] By adopting the perspective of a violent antihero who happens to be a figure of moral authority, Dalmau's novel obliges readers to reconcile their preconceived ideas of evil as an alien other with an appreciation of how regular individuals—even those of great moral standing—can behave wickedly. Dalmau dissects the role of ideology in suppressing his antihero's recognition of the enemy's humanity. In this way, the novel provides a disturbing

[50] Morton, *On Evil*, p. 93.

insight into how perpetrators justify acts of violence using thought processes that readers can track and understand. Readers can follow the operation by which Julián overcomes the emotional barrier of distress produced by the torture and execution of his political opponents. In consequence, we can gain an understanding of how perpetrators view their motivations for reprehensible acts and how they are able to prevail over the obstacles to such acts.

Morton's barrier theory of evil defines evil acts as those that result from a strategy or learned practice in which an individual's adopted course of action is not constrained by barriers against choices resulting in the suffering, death, or humiliation of others.[51] Evil, according to Morton, stems from a breakdown in the process of choosing our actions, such that we bypass the barriers against harming others.[52] There are many ways in which this breakdown can occur, and Dalmau's novel represents the process by which someone learns to perpetrate violent acts because of acquired ideological beliefs that render political enemies subhuman and because of self-deception that makes harmful acts seem admissible and indeed desirable.

The first intimation that Julián can overcome an innate aversion to violence is a scene of voyeurism in which he happens upon the victim of an aerial bombardment. His encounter with the corpse brings to life the harsh reality of war for the first time, and yet as he administers the last rites to the victim, Julián's initial horror at the loss of life gives way to his eroticization of the victim's body:

> Nunca he sido un hombre valiente. Con esfuerzo logré acercarme al cadáver, pero comprendí que debía arrodillarme en señal de respeto. En ese instante el corazón me dio un vuelco. Palma era un pueblo, quizá la conocía […] Pero en mi empeño por

[51] Ibid., p. 57.

[52] Ibid., p. 62.

> evitar su rostro, mis ojos se refugiaron en la parte inferior du su cuerpo. En realidad era la primera vez en mi vida que podía observar detenidamente a una mujer. Sí. La primera vez en casi treinta años que la carne prohibida se me revelaba, siquiera en parte, y a causa de ello me invadió un profundo sentimiento de turbación. Veía sus piernas, cubiertas por unas medias amarillas: la piel blanquecina, las pantorrillas blandas, los tobillos gruesos… Todo era nuevo y pecaminoso. (26)

An understanding of Julián's educational and cultural background as a priest in the early decades of the twentieth century helps to explain the confused mixture of repulsion, fascination, and arousal he feels upon encountering the woman's corpse. Frances Lannon captures the stultifying intellectual environment of Spanish Catholicism from the late-nineteenth-century revival until the 1960s, when the liberalizing impetus of the Second Vatican Council began to temper the intolerance and insularity of traditional Spanish integrism. Amid this culture of Catholic exclusivism, in which religious belief equated to patriotism and other ideologies represented anti-Spain, the fever pitch of hatred for European liberalism and pluralism was matched only by aversion to sex. Lannon observes the oppressively puritanical nature of Spanish Catholicism and the potency of the taboos surrounding sex and the body that pervaded the Church's teaching.[53] The female body in particular was regarded as impure. Immodest female fashions, such as short skirts, were excoriated by clergymen in the 1920s; regarded as a dangerous import from abroad, such fashions constituted a tangible manifestation of the covert yet no less pernicious threat posed by foreign ideas. In school textbooks images of human anatomy were censored. Sexual activity was tolerated in the laity within the institution of marriage and with the express

[53] Frances Lannon, *Privilege, Persecution, and Prophecy: The Catholic Church in Spain 1875–1975* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), pp. 49–51.

intention of bearing children, but celibacy was an altogether sacred state and a mark of the superiority of the priestly life.[54] Julián's glimpse of an unclothed body must be seen in the context of a repressive psychosexual worldview in which nudity was indissociable from the concepts of guilt and sin. His claim that this is the first time he is able to observe a woman at close quarters reflects the sheltered existence imposed on those destined for the priesthood in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Spain. Lannon observes that from the age of eleven or twelve until their ordination in their early to mid-twenties, young seminarians spent the majority of their time in an exclusively male and clerical educational setting.[55] They were segregated from lay society, received visits from family at set times and from others only with special dispensation; their correspondence was inspected and their behaviour policed even during breaks away from the seminary, when they were advised against pastimes such as the cinema, the evening *paseo*, political meetings, and reading novels and secular newspapers. As Lannon puts it, 'Physically, intellectually, and culturally the world of the priest was self-contained and self-sustaining through the long years of formation'.[56] The scene of Julián's encounter with the corpse not only reflects his unworldly upbringing; it also registers a change in his attitude from an entirely relatable sense of distress to a pathological outlook that is increasingly remote from the reader's own. The perceptible shift in Julián's attention from the horror of death to a perverse recreation in the spectacle of the woman's flesh lays the foundations for the protagonist's later habituation to violence. By prefacing his depiction of the scene with the confession of his cowardice, Julián implicitly portrays the act of overcoming the horror inspired by the corpse as an act of bravery. He approaches the

[54] Ibid., p. 52.

[55] Ibid., p. 93.

[56] Ibid., p. 93.

corpse because he is compelled by the duty of his office, and the reader can thus envisage the learned process by which Julián will overcome his revulsion in order to commit acts he reproves. Violence and death are progressively associated with sensual desire in *La noche del Diablo*. At first, Julián makes a pretence of finding the soldiers' ribaldry and nudity revolting, but his displays of disgust are suspiciously emphatic (196–98). He is evidently in awe of Rossi and the Dragones and even expresses admiration for their virility, although he does so in a characteristically coy fashion (104). Eventually, Julián consummates his infatuation with martial culture when he masturbates in Rossi's quarters (259).

Morton's barrier theory of evil gives insight into the mechanism by which Julián grows accustomed to choices that result in others' suffering. Julián associates violence with masculine vigour. He sees brutality as a virtue for the realization of his ideological goals. Therefore, he strives to suppress his revulsion in the presence of violence with petty acts of courage aimed at emulating Rossi and his men. As well as revealing the impediments that potential perpetrators must vanquish, Morton's barrier theory illustrates how we can empathize with the perpetrators of evil acts by drawing analogies with situations in which we have overcome barriers to certain actions. Our own past action with which we draw the analogy need not be immoral; in fact, Morton argues that analogies involving a paler shade of immorality are more akin to metaphorical descriptions of another's psychology, which lead to pseudo-empathy but not to true understanding of the barriers that one overcomes in the perpetration of evil acts. Morton argues that situations in which we overcame a feeling of repugnance in order to act in a certain way provide a surer route to understanding the psychology of someone who engages in wrongdoing.[57] Julián's initiation into Rossi's violent world in *La noche del Diablo* is punctuated by a series of forks in the road where the

[57] Morton, 'Empathy for the Devil', p. 327.

protagonist must make up his mind about how to act. Julián is never coerced; he opts voluntarily for a morally hazardous course of action in these situations, but the decision is never made with an easy conscience. At each stage of his transformation from humble priest to Rossi's henchman, Julián must conquer his aversion to immoral acts. Dalmau's portrayal of perpetrator psychology thus illustrates the functioning of cognitive and affective barriers to evil and captures the operation by which such barriers are overcome.

Julián describes his impressions of Rossi during their first meeting. Rossi is armed to the teeth in his fascist uniform, with an intimidating aura and menacing eyes unlike anything Julián has ever seen: 'El principal foco de atención estaba en los ojos: ardientes, azules, mortales […] Ese brillo era la prueba de que Bonacorsi se había enfrentado cara a cara con la muerte. Y la había vencido […] En la isla nadie tenía una mirada así, nadie, ni los cirujanos, ni los sepultureros, ni los veteranos de guerra, ni los asesinos' (43). Julián shudders in Rossi's presence; his better instincts warn him away from the Italian soldier. He professes his religious occupation in a bid to excuse himself from Rossi's service: 'Ante aquel diluvio de peticiones, me limité a decirle que yo sólo era un siervo de Dios. Pues bien, el conde respondió: "De acuerdo, padre. Pero ha de ser algo más. Dios no lo necesita todo el día. Y yo sí"' (43–44). Rossi's irreverence stuns Julián, but the priest commits to becoming the shadow of this menacing figure—his secretary, translator, and interpreter, 'tanto en la retaguardia como en el frente' (43). Julián is perfectly aware that these duties imply his abandoning the monastery to accompany Rossi; he knows his service will be required even on the field of battle and senses that his abandonment of his duties in the monastery will be spiritual inasmuch as physical. He claims not to notice the sound of the metaphorical trap door opening beneath his feet, but the statement could equally imply active disregard. The verb *ignorar* does not clarify whether the omission is deliberate: 'Ignoro el chasquido de la trampa abriéndose bajo mis pies, y veo mi propia claudicación' (44). He submits meekly to Rossi's

will. Soon Julián will substitute a fascist uniform for his habit. Rossi's disconcerting warning of the performative role of the uniform brings the significance of Julián's changed appearance to the fore: 'El hábito hace al monje, Julián. No lo olvide. Ya no es tiempo de sotanas. El enemigo ha de saber que no habrá perdón' (51). To remove any final ambiguity regarding Julián's new role, Rossi hands the priest a gun. As with the previous incremental stages in Julián's conversion, the priest overcomes his initial trepidation and prevails over the psychological barriers against moral corruption:

> Aún vibraba su voz cuando se dirigió al escritorio, abrió el cajón y sacó una pistola. Me sobresalté. 'Es suya –me dijo con firmeza–, la necesitará.' Y del mismo modo que había renunciado a la sotana, abracé resignado aquella prueba. ¿Cómo lo permití? ¿Por qué no la rechacé? Ahora lo comprendo. Conozco a muchos religiosos que habrían abandonado a Rossi en el momento terrible en que éste les hubiera entregado una pistola. Pero yo no. Si he de ser sincero, me invadió una excitación poderosa y desconocida. (52)

Julián detects in himself the perverse allure of violence, which he learns to embrace by going against the socialization of his upbringing and the teaching of his profession. These initial hurdles in his transformation smooth the way for Julián's engagement in battle, in which he claims to feel more alive than ever before (75), and for his eventual reconciliation with Rossi's warped justification for the commission of atrocities against unarmed civilians (171–73). Julián eventually learns of the ease with which one can become proficient in taking a life. He uses the metaphor of making a donation in a church to capture the effortlessness of pulling the trigger:

> Descubrí que todo se limitaba a apretar el gatillo. Era algo tan simple como encender el interruptor o depositar una limosna en la iglesia. Un instante. Nada más. En el fondo el conde tenía razón al decir que el primer muerto es el único que importa,

> porque es el único que nos hace sentirnos verdaderamente culpables. Un solo pecado basta para condenarnos. El resto es baladí. (183)

The lexes of religion and war coalesce in Julián's testimony as he invests the battles in which he takes part with the sanctity of a religious crusade against a diabolical enemy. He distorts the language of religion to support his chosen course of action, but Julián is not beguiled by his own sophistry. Dalmau's protagonist displays awareness of the gravity of each of his acts. His descent into evil is marked by turning points in which he decides consciously to overcome the barriers against indecency.

In addition to dramatizing the considered choices that lead to the perpetration of evil, *La noche del Diablo* explores the motivations for wrongdoing in its thick description of perpetrator psychology. Dalmau opts to narrate from Julián's perspective rather than from that of the more grotesque incarnation of evil in this novel, Arconovaldo Bonaccorsi. By seeking to decipher the mindset of the devil's assistant rather than the devil himself, Dalmau inscribes his work in a philosophical tradition pioneered by Hannah Arendt in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.[58] Compared with his charismatic boss, Julián is unremarkable, dull even. He describes himself as a reserved and unexceptional figure. He sees his mediocrity reflected in his mundane appearance, of which he paints an unflattering self-portrait in the opening pages of his narrative, where he describes himself as a bespectacled and buck-toothed 'hombre sin importancia' (13). The insistence on Julián's insipid character and lacklustre physiognomy recalls Arendt's celebrated discussion of bureaucratic criminality in her report on Adolf Eichmann's trial. Eichmann casts a feeble shadow in Arendt's descriptions. She singles out

[58] Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin, 2006).

Eichmann's 'ill-fitting teeth, and near-sighted eyes'.[59] Dalmau gives emphasis to the very same disarming and comical features in his description of Julián. For Arendt, Eichmann's testimony suggests that perpetrators of atrocities are not necessarily psychopaths or fanatics but instead are frighteningly indistinguishable from the most ordinary and mundane individuals. *La noche del Diablo* illustrates how cowardice and complacency—the most banal of vices—coupled with blind professional ambition can lead ostensibly ordinary people, who are otherwise repulsed by violence, to commit abhorrent acts. In his study of the novel, Denis Vigneron underscores the everyday human frailties that seem to be at the root of the protagonist's evil: 'Julián Alcover est un homme faible qui s'est laissé porter par les événements. Une certaine pusillanimité, la peur que lui inspirait son supérieur ont fait qu'il soit devenu un criminel'.[60] With both Eichmann and Julián, there is a contrast between their superficial banality and the monstrosity of their acts. Dalmau shares Arendt's interest in a specific type of evil, not the kind perpetrated by the murderous monsters on the ground but by the faceless bureaucrats that operate the machinery of death from the sidelines. Dalmau chooses to focalize his narrative on the perspective of the latter. Just as readers have only oblique access to the warped worldview of the irredeemable Rossi, neither do we see events through the eyes of one of Rossi's psychotic Dragones. Instead Dalmau studies the motivations of a figure who is not naturally inclined to violence nor who finds it attractive. Like the bureaucratic organizers of evil on whom Arendt bases her theory of banality, Julián accepts the necessity of violence in furtherance of an ideological cause. He does not enjoy the bloodlust, but Julián plays an equally important role in the brutality.

[59] Ibid., p. 5.

[60] Vigneron, 'Sous la lune, le diable', p. 80.

In his discussion of state-sponsored atrocities, Morton makes a careful distinction between, on one hand, the violent actors who torture and murder—and do so to satisfy impulses and fantasies, much as serial killers and violent individuals do in civilian life—and, on the other, the organizers who orchestrate such activities as part of an overall plan and who need not be violent and indeed might even be repulsed by these acts.[61] Morton analyses the ways in which ideology can insulate the organizers of violence, who might otherwise be disgusted by it, so that they are able to tolerate the acts in the name of a greater cause. What we see in totalitarian regimes, according to Morton, is the 'subservience of the individual conscience to the ideology of the state'.[62] Acts of collective violence are the result of ideas that permit individuals to subdue the distress caused by the pain of others.[63] In his study of how *La noche del Diablo* contributes to the formation of collective memories of the Spanish civil war in contemporary Spain, Hansen meticulously teases out the features of the cultural belief system and ideological prejudices that prime Julián for violence.[64] Hansen looks at how the narrator constructs his belonging to a cultural collective defined by Catholic traditionalism and by its opposition to the alien Republicans.[65] The ideological construction of a collective self that is threatened by a corrupting hostile force serves to dehumanize the political enemy and thus lays the moral groundwork for the acts of violence that will appear later in the narrative. This ideological priming plays an important role in enabling Julián to master his aversion to the suffering of his political enemies. Equally important is Julián's

[61] Morton, *On Evil*, p. 79.

[62] Ibid., p. 79, 82.

[63] Ibid., p. 84.

[64] Hansen, 'La memoria del diablo', pp. 273–74.

[65] Ibid., p. 275.

sense of duty. Dalmau's protagonist is ambitious: he longs to visit Rome and he sees Rossi as the key to fulfilment of that aspiration and to the advancement of his career (322). In his rationalization of acts of violence and in the rhetorical strategies with which he defends his complicity, Julián displays similar thought processes to those described by Arendt in her discussion of the means by which SS officers would persuade themselves to execute atrocities:

> [T]he problem was how to overcome not so much their conscience as the animal pity by which all normal men are affected in the presence of physical suffering. The trick used by Himmler […] consisted in turning these instincts around, as it were, in directing them toward the self. So that instead of saying: What horrible things I did to people!, the murderers would be able to say: What horrible things I had to watch in the pursuance of my duties, how heavily the task weighed upon my shoulders![66]

Julián has a clear sense of his role in what he sees as the divine restoration of social order. He shares a sense of the historic and grandiose with which the Nazis invested their genocidal enterprise and sees bloodshed as the price exacted for the implementation of his vision of social harmony:

> ¿Cómo llegamos a este punto? Ahora ya lo sé. El orden es imprescindible en la sociedad. Para el buen cristiano, el orden es sinónimo de moral, y en las horas de peligro el orden reemplaza siempre a la moral. Desde antiguo, el orden es el bien más sagrado. Cada vez que el orden se restablece, el Diablo fracasa y regresa la armonía a los corazones. Tras aquellas semanas de guerra, Mallorca volvía a ser el paraíso de antaño. Claro que aquello tenía un precio. Todo en la vida lo tiene. La sangre. (186)

[66] Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, p. 106.

Just as, according to Arendt, the Nazis found their momentous task difficult to bear and resorted to psychological strategies to cope with the burden of inflicting human misery, Julián directs his gaze away from the pain he causes toward an anguished contemplation of the mental strain that results from the fulfilment of his duties as Conde Rossi's factotum: 'le participé mi inquietud [a Rossi]. "Es difícil vivir esta época, Excelencia", le dije' (187).

In the end, Julián's foremost concern lies not with the victims of the Dragones' murderous rampage but with himself. At every turn of his testimony, he seeks to justify his acts, extenuate his guilty conduct, obscure the extent of his participation, and legitimize the atrocities he witnesses. Paradoxically, it is these very mechanisms of attenuation at play in Julián's self-serving testimony that facilitate readers' empathic modes of engagement with the protagonist of the story. Because Julián is no monster, we can empathize with him and begin to see the paths by which we too might be able to overcome the barriers to hurting other human beings. Dalmau's novel poses important questions about the role of ordinary individuals in the perpetration of atrocities. The novel distinguishes between agents that carry out murder and those that commission and justify it away from the scene of the crime. *La noche del Diablo* is a significant character study of the latter. By making available the perspective of such figures through its narrative focalization and its facilitation of identification and empathic modes of reading, the novel obliges readers to contemplate their own potentialities as agents of evil. By presenting him as all too relatable, all too human, the novel refuses a reification of the figure of the perpetrator. Julián's perspective yields a startling insight into the events of the Spanish civil war, while it disables the more comfortable and readily available position of empathizing with the victims of atrocities. Equally, an understanding of the acts of narrative manipulation and dissimulation at work in *La noche del Diablo* illuminates the preconditions for reader identification and empathy in perpetrator fiction. Julián lies to garner our sympathies and to alleviate his own moral

turmoil, but it is this very mendacity that enables us to enter into a closer affective relationship with the character and to grapple thus with the problem of how perpetrators are able to act as they do.

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