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The Absence of Tragedy in *Ifigenia* by Gonzalo Torrente Ballester.

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Torrente Ballester's *Ifigenia* was published in 1950 and written in 1948-49 out of profound feelings of 'disgusto' and 'decepción' with politics (Becerra 1990: 74, Blackwell 1985: 51, De Paco 2011: 44). The author was in Paris in 1936, just about to commence his doctoral studies, when news broke of Franco's uprising; he returned immediately to Galicia to find that friends had been imprisoned, associates killed. Torrente had identified with Galician nationalism in the 1930s, was appointed Secretario Local del Partido Galleguista in 1935, and on those grounds considered worthy of suspicion by the new regime. Following the advice of a cleric who was a family friend, he joined the Falange in 1937 to work with Dionisio Ridruejo and other members of the 'Burgos Group' in various cultural collaborations (Becerra 1990: 100-101). After the war, however, it rapidly became apparent that Franco's vision of Spain offered no place for the intellectual. In 1942, Ridruejo wrote a long and deeply critical letter to the General, resigning from his position; months later he would be detained by the police. This was the year Torrente later described as representing 'la victoria sobre los restos, actuantes o no, del liberalismo, del respeto al pensamiento ajeno, de la libertad de expresión' (Torrente 1976: 67). Spain had entered a period of 'operaciones purificadoras' with Government-approved campaigns against Ortega and Unamuno, the discrediting of Baroja, banning of works by Valle-Inclán and the systematic denigration of those artists and intellectuals living in exile. Torrente reflected in the 1970s that it was the beginning of a period in Spanish history that was so profoundly anti-intellectual, a Minister could declare with utmost conviction that

Spain 'pondría en la frontera dos millones de soldados contra el comunismo y el existencialismo', essentially declaring war on intellectual freedom and the free movement of ideas (Torrente 1976: 67-68). Censorship rapidly became the scourge of writers and journalists and in 1943, Torrente's first novel, *Javier Mariño*, was seized from bookshops twenty days after its publication due to the 'immorality' of a relationship described in it.¹ In a decision he subsequently regretted, the author changed the novel's ending so it could be re-released (Becerra 1990: 93, 101).

Torrente's artistic response in the 1940s to the growing disjuncture between the Spanish State's self-mythologising propaganda and the realities of political and intellectual suppression, marks the commencement of what has become known as his technique of 'desmitificación' (Blackwell 1985, Pérez 1986, 1989).² Its first manifestation was the short story *Gerineldo*, published in the newspaper *Arriba* in 1944, followed in 1946 by his play, *El retorno de Ulises*, acknowledged by the author as his response to the conscious mythification of the deceased José Antonio Primo de Rivera (Becerra, Pérez).³ *Ifigenia* was first published in Madrid by Afrodísio Aguado in 1950 to a barely audible critical response, and with some notable exceptions such as Janet Pérez, Diana de Paco Serrano, Lens Tuero and Camacho Rojo, the book has continued to attract significantly less critical attention than *El retorno de Ulises* has featured regularly in academic curricula and publications. One possible reason for this is

¹ The practice of censorship began with the Ley de Prensa in 1938, and in 1941 the Vicesecretaría de Educación Popular was established, a bureaucratic apparatus charged with the 'oversight, prevention and orientation of penalties' (Abellón 1980 16).

² 'Su propósito al 'destripar' así el mito debe entenderse en el context del período y la sociedad española durante los llamados años triunfales, una época de nacionalismo exacerbado cuando los falangistas victoriosos se entregaron a una orgía de automitificación' (Pérez 1986: 443).

³ In his interviews with Carmen Becerra, Torrente describes how he witnessed the creation of mythologies around the figures of both José Antonio and Franco, and how, in the wake of the Civil War, Franco's mythologised persona 'pudo más'. (Becerra 1990: 52-53).

the fact that in Spain, Greek myth had traditionally been transmitted and revisited through theatre and that an interested readership was limited in the field of fiction (Lens and Camacho: 2003, 93). The author's choice of this myth in the late 1940s as a vehicle for expressing his own political disenchantment, therefore merits more investigation and consideration.

A Post-Conflict Myth?

The story of Iphigenia has attracted many writers in post-conflict situations, and this is no less true of Hispanic iterations of the tragic events of Aulis. Perhaps surprisingly, many versions of Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis* are closely related to post-conflict contexts, despite the fact that its temporal setting is before the Trojan Wars have commenced.⁴ Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis* was written out of war-weariness after observing the effects on democracy of the protracted Peloponnesian Wars (431-404 BCE). Hispanic versions of the myth written in the wake of civil wars include Alfonso Reyes' *Ifigenia cruel*, written after the Mexican Revolution and the many years of civil conflict it ignited; also Nicaraguan poet Michele Najlis' *Cantos de Ifigenia*, written after the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas in 1990 following their prolonged insurgence against Somoza's dictatorship in the 1970s and the Contra War in the 1980s. Apart from the obvious reading of Iphigenia as a symbol of slaughtered innocence and the 'collateral damage' of war, its selection in post-war contexts may also be motivated by the authors' desire to make sense of the origins of conflict, to look back to where it all started. Her sacrifice

⁴In her book, *Adventures with Iphigenia in Tauris*, Edith Hall comments on post-war contexts in relation to Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris*. She notes that the importance of the Crimean War to the appearance of images of Iphigenia in nineteenth century Western Europe is primarily geographic, as the mythical Tauris of Euripides' play was associated by archaeologists with the Crimea (2013: 6). She also highlights the post-conflict context of Reyes' *Ifigenia cruel* (2013: 276). This is further elaborated in Shaughnessy (2016:11-17).

is, after all, the action that launches the Greek fleet and marks the beginning of The Trojan Wars. Moreover, the story's focus on the betrayal and sacrifice of one family member by another, make it a particularly apt vehicle for examining the origins of civil conflict and expressing its painful legacies.

Torrente had always been interested in the creation of imagined worlds. What classical mythology offered the author in the 1940s was a means of exploring the contemporary situation of political consolidation and internal factionalism in the Spanish right at this time, in a setting that was temporally and spatially remote. While its cultural remoteness may have given the author the added advantage of evading close attention by the censors (De Paco 2011: 52), Torrente's choice of the myth of *Ifigenia* was motivated precisely for the possibilities it offered of analogies between Greek myth and Spanish *realpolitik*.

Torrente escogió el mito de Ifigenia precisamente por encerrar un núcleo casi idéntico de valores: nacionalismo, la patria, el concepto de la guerra como gloriosa, el sacrificio del individuo a los intereses del estado, y una situación en que la religión o sus representantes adoptaron actitudes partidarias. (Pérez 1986: 443)

To date, the focus of scholarly work on Torrente's *Ifigenia* has been on the author's use of the classical myth to critique post-Civil War Spanish politics. Notwithstanding the author's immediate concern with the Spanish situation, it is important to acknowledge the capacity of a text to generate commentary in broader contexts which can transcend authorial intentions. Torrente's novella merits a reading that extends beyond the national situation and considers how it relates to the post-war European context. Despite Franco's efforts to isolate Spain

culturally from the rest of Europe, scholars and artists like Torrente, who read French literature as well as translations from across the continent into French and Spanish, were not immune to trends in European thinking. His 'Nota autobiográfica' acknowledges the fact that his pessimism at the time of writing the novella was not only due to the repressive nature of his local environment, but also the Europe-wide political and intellectual context: 'A mi modo, *Ifigenia y La princesa durmiente va a la escuela* son mis respuestas a la situación posterior a la segunda Guerra mundial. De ahí su pesimismo [...] Por entonces, yo no tenía esperanza' (Torrente Ballester 1986: 20). Arguably, there are significant degrees of confluence as well as some important differences between Torrentes' demythifying project of this period and the post-war pan-European experience of politics. Disillusionment with politics is a trans-historical phenomenon, though it is rarely experienced as such. Writing in the 1950s about Post World War II Europe, Karl Reinhardt argued that 'there is not even a remotely comparable analogy to the decline of meaning, the loss of the centre etc (*sic*) in which so many of our artists and analysts of culture wallow' (Reinhardt 2003: 17).⁵ Reinhardt traced what he saw as a modern manifestation of European nihilism back to the fin de siècle pessimism of Schopenhauer which 'Nietzsche imagined he had to take to extremes and overcome'. He saw Nietzsche's nihilism as 'historically orientated' (Reinhardt 2003: 18-20), a definition that is helpful in coming to terms with the level of pessimism underlying Torrente's novella. This is a point we will return to when comparing Euripides' and Torrente's exposure of the dangerous mendacity of political rhetoric. Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* was first published in 1951, a year after Torrente's *Ifigenia*, and analyses some of the means by which the mechanics of power exercised across Europe in the 1930s and

⁵ Reinhardt's lecture was first published in German in 1957 as 'Die Sinneskreise bei Euripides', in *Eranos*, 26: 79-317.

1940s. Torrente's fictional text allows him to expose how these same oppressive practices evolved in Spain during and after the Civil War, while his use of classical myth as a metaphor for these serves to widen the relevance of his critique beyond national borders.

The Choice of Myth

Post-war contexts alone do not explain the attraction for Torrente of the rather obscure version of the story he chose to work with. The plot of all the Iphigenia variants begins in the same way: Helen has flown to Troy with Paris and her husband, Menelaus, calls on the Greek Lords to honour their pledge to defend her. Their ships have united with those of his brother, King Agamemnon, in Aulis, where they prepare to sail for Troy. The lack of favourable winds prevents their departure, and Agamemnon instructs Calchas, the seer, to consult the Oracle. It is revealed that Agamemnon has offended the goddess, Artemis, who now demands the sacrifice of his eldest daughter, Iphigenia, in return for fair winds for the fleet.⁶ In the version dramatized by Aeschylus in the *Oresteia*, the girl is sacrificed in compliance with divine will. In another, as enacted in Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis*, she is not killed on the altar but miraculously replaced with a doe, and thus delivered by the goddess. In other versions of this variant she is transported to Tauris where she serves the goddess as her priestess, and is eventually reunited with her brother, Orestes, as told in the dramatizations by Euripides, *Iphigenia in Taurus* and Goethe in his *Iphigenie*. Torrente opts for a much less known version where, unbeknown to Agamemnon, Iphigenia is actually the love-child of Helen and Theseus whom his wife, Clytemnestra, has raised as their own. This deviation from the more

⁶ Torrente uses a mixture of Greek and the Latin names for his characters throughout, possibly reflecting diverse sources. He cites Pausanias and Stesichorus (Blackwell 1985: 45) as well as Ovid and Grimal (Becerra 1990:234-35). For a fuller account of the classical variants and other sources Torrente draws on, see de Paco (2011: 45-47) and Lens and Camacho (2003: 101-102).

mainstream, received versions of the myth introduces an important and subversive element that attracted the author, as it undermines any assumptions that relationships or actions in the story are constructed upon truth or legitimacy. Through his choice of narrative variant, then, Torrente further undercuts the heroic nature of the launch of the Greek fleet by foregrounding something already present in more familiar versions: that the epic events of the Trojan wars are constructed on foundations of deceit and the sexual peccadillos of members of a ruling elite. This technique of revealing the petty and ignoble nature of the motives behind apparently glorious events pervades the text, with the clear authorial intention that the reader extrapolate from myth and fiction and apply the same principle to history and politics.

In his interviews with Carmen Becerra, Torrente has described his mythical sources as ‘puntos de partida’ for his own work, and when asked whether their retellings by other authors have influenced his work, the author declares he is less interested in previous versions than in the core ‘significación permanente’ of the myths themselves (Becerra 1990: 234, de Paco 2011: 46). While he goes on to acknowledge that *Ifigenia* is (not surprisingly) full of references to the Iliad, it is surprising that at this point in the interview he does not mention Euripides’ *Iphigenia in Aulis*, without question the most seminal, influential dramatization of the sacrifice of Iphigenia, and the fact that the Narrator of his own *Ifigenia* alludes pointedly to Euripides within the text (Torrente 1987: 62). Torrente’s world-weary narrator comments on how Euripides would have written such the scene of the Agora de Reyes, where Agamemnon appeals for Iphigenia’s life to be spared, suggesting that he would have dedicated more space to the noble sentiments of sacrificing personal interests to the public, and contrasts this to the unheroic silence of the gathered ‘heroes’ who cannot look Agamemnon in the eye but

instead stare at the ground (Torrente 1987: 62). This allusion to Euripides is complicated, as the butt of the narrator's irony is unclear. Are we to read the lack of sincerity implied by the narrator to be Euripides' or solely that of his characters? Should we read it as an accusation that Euripides masked ignoble motives by placing fine words in his characters' mouths, or as a more general dismissal of canonical versions of the myth, an inevitable by-product of Torrente's technique of 'desmitificación'? The allusion remains ambiguous, perhaps meant to be read as another demonstration of the narrator's already established unreliability, or perhaps indicating that the author has overstated his own lack of interest in other writers' versions of the myth. Torrente was widely read and a playwright himself; he was clearly familiar with Euripides' seminal text and it is difficult to imagine it did not, at some level, influence his selection of the myth. The author's declared lack of interest in this and other versions, however, is not born out by critical analyses which identify concrete intertextualities between Torrente's novella and Euripides' play, and examine some of their many fascinating similarities and differences (de Paco, 2011, Lens and Camacho 2003 and Pérez, 1986). It is arguable that a clear line of literary legacy extends from Euripides to Torrente. This is most apparent in the fact that both place the capacity of language for deceit at the centre of their works, and in the scepticism they share in their depiction of public rhetoric and its manipulation by their protagonists. Edith Hall has described *Iphigenia in Aulis* as containing 'considerable explicit epistemological commentary on the nature of truth and fiction, appearance and illusion' (Hall 2005: 13). Writing about the re-emergence of Euripides' play during the 1990s and early 2000s in the context of the Iraq War, she says:

Of all the Greek tragedies, it is the one most clearly about 'Big Lie' theory, [...] politicians' ability to spin into existence the justification for a war, almost from

nothing, but also about humans' tragic inability to use their own vast intellectual potential in order to protect themselves from doing inexcusable things to each other (Hall 2005: 25).

The 'Big Lie', is that the sacrifice of an innocent girl is not only militarily necessary but morally acceptable. Torrente's re-working of the myth takes this Euripidean thread of self-deception to an extreme, where Calchas, the priest who interprets the oracle, does not himself believe in the gods and possesses an utterly anachronistic knowledge of meteorology that discredits any notion that his actions are based on religious belief. Such is the level of deceit here, that even the gods acknowledge it is not sacrifice that controls the weather systems, and happily manipulate the gullibility of their human followers to their own best advantage. For in Torrente's unheroic, mythical world, the gods' powers have greatly diminished along with the numbers of their devotees; remaining practicers are shallow and pragmatic in their approach to sacrifice. If Euripides' Aulis is 'astoundingly irreligious, as well as remarkable for its lack of consensual ethical standards' (Hall 2005: 27) these too are central characteristics of Torrente's work, mercilessly exposed through his ironic humour.

Deception and Rhetoric

Self-deception and the deception of others are central to the core myth: Iphigenia is brought to Aulis under the false pretence of a betrothal to Achilles, who is also deceived by Agamemnon who strategically elects not to inform him of his role as bait. This aspect of the narrative is highlighted by Euripides in the prevarications of his characters – Menelaus, Agamemnon, Achilles and Iphigenia all talk themselves into radical changes of position. However, this aspect of deception is brought to a new level by Torrente's characterisation

and plot development in his *Ifigenia*. This is particularly true of his characterisation of Calchas, who fabricates the oracle out of his irrational hatred of Iphigenia because he cannot sexually possess her, and his resentment of the 'heroic' Achilles who does. When Agamemnon resists the oracle's demand for sacrifice, Calchas fakes an omen to apply more pressure on the king, killing sentries with silver arrows from Diana's temple (Torrente 1987: 66). Deception in the novella is always strategic, and at times gratuitously cruel; Menelaus is aware that Iphigenia is not Agamemnon's daughter, but decides not to reveal her true parentage so as not to reduce his brother's anguish at the prospect of her sacrifice. He justifies this on the grounds that it may provoke a change of heart too sudden to be convincing, and that Agamemnon should be allowed, instead, to construct a noble version of his acquiescence for posterity, a version where he puts public office before family. This is precisely what happens, and in this way, Torrente reveals not only Agamemnon's emotional shallowness, but how deception by one individual can feed directly into self-deception by another (1987: 72-73).

The author's stated intention is to expose what he sees as the fundamentally deceptive nature of politics: 'en *Ifigenia* [...] se trata de expresar mi decepción de la política: no hay una conducta política pura; la conducta política es siempre una apariencia que encubre una ambición innoble' (Becerra 1990:74). While Torrente claims that this critique is directed at politics in general, there can be little doubt that the centrality of deception and self-deception in *Ifigenia* is also directed at the Spanish political context of the late 1940s, and the rhetoric used by the Francoist state in its attempts to control of discourse through censorship and coercion. With the notable exception of Iphigenia, none of the characters speak with the intention of communicating felt experience, but rather with the intention of projecting a particular image of themselves and/or persuading the listener of a hidden agenda. Poseidon's

comments on Zeus reflect the culture of doublespeak prevalent in Spain at this time, as Franco consolidated power: 'No hubo asamblea en que no prevaleciera su tesis, porque así tenía que ser; pero siempre tras una discusión verdaderamente académica y correcta' (Torrente 1987: 34). Zeus's response could be that of any dictator: 'la razón coincide totalmente con mi voluntad'. Torrente even describes state-appointed propagandists, 'agitadores' hired by Menelaus to spread anti-Trojan propaganda throughout the Greek kingdoms and whip up pro-war feeling among the grassroots, reminiscent of the rather paranoid state propaganda during the Spanish dictatorship and its depiction of outside influences as a threat to Spanishness. Like Euripides before him, Torrente is fascinated by the science of persuasion, and his relentless parody of the abuse of rhetoric in *Ifigenia* greatly facilitates the process of 'demythification' of the victors of the Civil War at the time of writing. In comic mode, he draws our attention to Achilles' poetic prowess in his address to the Agora de Reyes, when Apollo, observing from Olympus, comments: 'Verás cómo se expresa en hexámetro heroico' (Torrente 1987: 61). He then proceeds to send up the hero's vanity, mocking a use of rhetorical gesture that extends beyond the verbal to a meticulously costumed performance: 'aquella capa, colgada solo de un hombro; ¡jaquel innecesario desliz! – era de un impecable clasicismo' (Torrente 1987: 61). However, there is a more serious point beneath the parody of Achilles' vain posturing, which is the dishonesty of his words to Agamemnon, as he feigns support for the king's opposition to the sacrifice. What Agamemnon does not know is that Achilles has already seduced Iphigenia and is now angling for a betrothal before the fleet departs for Troy; the betrothal will get him out of his current impasse with the King, further his career, and will, he is confident, be forgotten by the time the war is over and therefore not tie him down. The performative and deceptive functions of language are again emphasised by the narrator when he describes Calchas' speech to the troops as 'un perfecto

discurso de agitación: urgente, preciso, de frases redondas' (Torrente 1987: 89). In a more damning and less comedic scene, Agamemnon visits Iphigenia just before she goes to the sacrificial altar, and gives her a fulsome account of Calchas' unexpected eloquence, as though the priest's rhetorical prowess somehow justified his acquiescence to her death. Adding insult to injury, he goes on to explain in inflated rhetorical terms how her 'heroism' will impact on future generations of scholars and thinkers, but, the narrator notes, 'sus últimas palabras no llevaban, verdaderamente, el acento de una convicción profunda' (Torrente 1987: 93-94). In one of the very few moments of genuine pathos in the book, the unfortunate girl, painfully aware of the hollowness of his words, can only respond '¡Por favor, papá, no me recuerdes el patriotismo!'⁷

Characterisation and *Peripeteia*

Many key similarities and differences between Euripides' version and Torrentes' have been identified, most of which relate to plot and to character motivation insofar as this impacts on plot development (de Paco 2011: 49, Pérez 1986: 442). However, there is more to be said on the similarities and differences between the two authors' characterisation. Ulterior motives abound in Torrente's *Ifigenia*; they shift and change along with the characters' evolving agendas leading to radical changes of mind. Again, this could be read as the author taking his cue from Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis*, where Menelaus, Agamemnon, Achilles and Iphigenia all undergo dramatic changes of position and opinion. In Torrente, however, *peripeteia* or reversals in a character's thinking are invariably motivated by vanity, sexual urges, self-

⁷ This is a particularly interesting example of the complexity of Torrente's relationship with Euripides' text: on the one hand we hear echoes of Euripides' awareness of the gaping void between rhetoric and truth, on the other, the removal of patriotism as a source of guidance and solace for Iphigenia's character represents a rupture with the Euripidian legacy (Lens and Camacho, 2003: pp104-5).

centred ambition and philotimia, and Achilles, more than any other character, exemplifies the see-saw effects of moral instability in the text. As we have seen, motivated by the desire further his military career, he initially supports Agamemnon's refusal to acquiesce to the oracle's demand for Iphigenia's sacrifice. Unexpectedly, he then finds himself utterly enchanted by Iphigenia to the point where he seems genuinely determined to defend her. However, the depth of his feelings proves short-lived: all it takes to change his mind is a false report by a complete stranger (Diana in disguise) that Iphigenia has taken barbarian King Thoas as her lover. Suddenly, the baser instincts of racism, pride and sexual jealousy override all other considerations and feelings. In a scene which contrasts starkly with Achilles' rhetorical flair in the *Agora de Reyes*, he informs Agamemnon and that he is no longer prepared to defend Iphigenia, with the brief and churlish statement: 'Simplemente he cambiado de opinión' (Torrente 1986: 77). Torrente adds another couple of stabs of puncturing irony to the scene: the narrator notes that Achilles could have told Agamemnon of his sexual trysts with Iphigenia, but refrains from doing so because 'pudo más su cortesía. Aun burlado era todo un caballero', thus mocking a 'heroic' code that will preserve Iphigenia's reputed virginity while simultaneously delivering her to her death. There is no question of Achilles seeking verification of the report; the suspicion that he has been cuckolded is enough to banish any motive other than the recovery of his reputation. Torrente cannot resist a final stab, as the narrator notes: 'De esta respuesta nació la enemistad invencible de Aquiles y Amgamenón, que tanto hizo cantar a los poetas' demonstrating again that the origins of great and glorious tales – whether in history or myth – are more often than not to be found in petty, self-interested motives.

Torrente's low opinion of politics and official histories at this time is scarcely surprising, given that he had just witnessed the conscious creation of myths surrounding the victors of the Civil War and the propaganda engines of the Francoist state throughout the 1940s (Becerra 1990: 52-53). Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis* also casts a cold eye on the questionable morality of 'war heroes' and their actions. It is the first known version of the myth that questions whether Agamemnon's motives in sacrificing his daughter are purely for the greater good of Greece or rooted in his concern for his own reputation. There are, however, significant differences in characterisation and tone in Euripides' text; it is not universally dismissive of its characters' changes of mind, which in some cases he presents as responding to shifts in inner, emotional balance; this is arguably the case with Achilles. Like Torrente's character, Euripides' Achilles undergoes two reversals of position: his initial feelings are of outrage on discovering that Agamemnon has brought Iphigenia to Aulis with the promise he will marry her, however, following Clytemnestra's appeal and his discovery of the true purpose of her arrival, this turns to a determination to defend her. This position also changes when he acquiesces to the sacrifice, and this final reversal in Euripides' version is sufficiently ambiguous to have been read and performed as either an example of ineffective and unheroic dithering on Achilles' part, or a genuine response to Iphigenia's inner emotional shift, and her decision to go willingly to the altar to save Greece from invasion by Troy, thus delivering Greek women and children from a future of slavery (Stahl 2003: 135-36). While Torrente and Euripides' Achilles act out of differing motives, the pattern of *peripeteia* in both works is so similar as to underline the case for influence by *Iphigenia in Aulis*, the first account of the sacrifice to introduce such indecision into the narrative. Indeed, it does so to the point of introducing an element of suspense, appearing to threaten the expected outcome of the plot (Stahl 2003: 136).

The differences between each author's approach to characterisation in their re-telling of the events in Aulis are significant: unlike Euripides', Torrente's characters have little or no capacity for emotional depth or reflection, and their changes of mind do not involve painful doubts or deliberations. This, of course, is a conscious strategy on his part to emphasise what he saw as the absence of sincerity in political life. Given the seriousness of its subject matter, the absence of emotional depth in Torrente's *Ifigenia* is striking. The choices made by the author in terms of characterisation and the ironic, detached tone of the omniscient narrator that is struck from the opening lines, combine to create an emotional vacuum at the centre of the novella. By way of contrast, while there are many ironic readings of Euripides' work, a key aspect that still fascinates modern audiences is what Judith Mossman has described as 'the portrayal of emotion for which he was famous in antiquity' and his 'emotional seriousness' (Mossman 2003: 9). Mossman highlights the ability of Euripides' characters 'to build emotional bridges, however temporary, between one another, with a powerful effect on the audience' and 'in stark contrast' [...] 'with the harsh world of the play outside these scenes' (Mossman 2003: 9). It is interesting that where the tragic poet of the 5th century BCE was able to communicate human relationality during the prolonged conflict of the Peloponnesian Wars and their aftermath, the twentieth century writer is unable or unwilling to do so. There are no such bridges in Torrente's *Ifigenia*, and in the absence of any sincere emotional rapport between characters – however momentary – there is little sense of humanity or of tragedy. We have seen already how even in his final moments with her, still believing her to be his daughter, Agamemnon is unable to transcend his concerns with self-justification and reputation in order to relate to Iphigenia at any meaningful level.⁸ In this

⁸ De Paco gives a more charitable appraisal of Agamemnon's behaviour in this scene (2011: 59).

respect, while it is important to read the novella against the backdrop of the Spanish Civil War and the consolidation of the Franco regime, there is also much to be gained from reading it against a broader political backdrop of post-war Europe in the 1940s. It is arguable that the absence of emotional content also relates to the existential crisis that was creeping over intellectual life in Europe at the time of its composition.

Post-War Contexts

In this respect, the post-war context of both Euripides' and Torrente's versions of the story of Iphigenia's sacrifice is significant, as both authors transmit their profound disillusionment with militarism and how it has debased political life. Nowhere is this more apparent in *Ifigenia* than in Calchas' speech, which justifies the sacrifice of the innocent in order to achieve military, economic and cultural expansionism. He persuades the gathered kings and military leaders that the Trojan campaign will bring not only military victory and the spoils of war, but promises the Greeks cultural domination, echoing the rhetoric of expansionist nationalisms not only in Spain but throughout Europe in the 1930s and 1940s. There are many similarities between Torrente's and Euripides' versions, not least the centrality of rhetoric and the ability of characters to persuade themselves and others of the acceptability of actions which are morally abhorrent. It is interesting to note that many of the most gripping moments of Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis* are not those where heroic militarism dominates, as might be expected of a tragedy of its time, but rather where its characters resort to 'transparently hollow justification, "spinning" an argument' (Hall 2005: 22). Indeed, as already stated, Hannah Arendt's critical reflections on the role and mechanics of ideology in *The Origins of Authoritarianism* outlines key features of the mechanics of political suppression in Germany and Russia in the 1930s and 40s that are also visible in Torrente's *Ifigenia*. In his various

interviews and commentaries on the work, ideology is not a term Torrente uses, but rather the more generic and inclusive term, 'política'. This is undoubtedly because in Spain in the 1930s and 1940s the term ideology was closely associated with left wing, Marxist-inspired politics, whereas the right saw themselves as the proponents of a 'natural' order of nationhood sanctified by the Church, rather than by ideology. As already noted, Torrente saw *Ifigenia* as a damning critique of all politics, which he regarded as universally corrupt and deceitful. Nonetheless, and notwithstanding Arendt's important distinction between totalitarian states and dictatorships, his *Ifigenia* exposes and parodies characteristics of Franco's dictatorship in the 1940s that are clearly analogous with the certain political dynamics of Nazi Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union (Arendt 2017: 404). Such features include the use of 'totalising explanations' such as the faux-economic justifications for the Trojan campaign disseminated by Menelaus (Torrente 1987: 16-17); also 'totalising narratives' such as Calchas' seductive argument that with Iphigenia's sacrifice, Greece will not only defeat Troy militarily, but will become 'la inventora de la cultura' (Torrente 1987: 69-70). We also observe what Arendt describes as 'the temporary alliance between the mob and the elite' so evident in Hitler's rise to power and which contributed immensely to the success of Franco's 1936 military insurgency, supported on the ground by vigilante violence (Arendt 2017: 427-445). Interestingly, it is in the military ranks of *Ifigenia* that Torrente locates just such an unholy alliance, as foot soldiers clamour for Iphigenia's death, thereby giving Agamemnon further justification for his acquiescence to her sacrifice. For all interested parties (and everyone has an interest in her death), the girl has become the only obstacle between them and glory or wealth. For those previously infatuated by her, Calchas and the lower ranking troops, her death also facilitates their bitter need to avenge the fact that they can never have her, ensuring no-one else can.

There is one significant area, however, where Arendt's description of a society governed by totalising ideology diverges from Torrente's mythical Greece, and that is her analysis of how the Nazi regime purported that the sacrifice of scapegoats (Jews or political prisoners) should cause pain in the executioner. In order to give meaning to the sacrifice, in order to help it 'make sense', it should hurt the perpetrator too; otherwise it would be a meaningless action with no collectively acknowledged value (Arendt 2017: 593-596). In contrast, in Torrente's text, the notion that Iphigenia's executioners could suffer in the process of her sacrifice is remarkable for its absence. Moreover, the suppression of suffering and the absence of grief are hallmarks of this rendition of the myth, to the point that it is difficult to regard *Ifigenia* as a tragedy at all.⁹

The Absence of Tragedy

In his consideration of the challenges of defining tragedy, Terry Eagleton interrogates the widely-held view that it 'may be poignant, but it is supposed to have something fearful about it too, some horrific quality which shocks and stuns. It is traumatic as well as sorrowful' (Eagleton 2003: 1). The emotional ingredients Eagleton names are interesting to apply to

⁹ It is significant that De Paco highlights the dominance of the Homeric legacy of the epic, heroic tradition in Torrente's *Ifigenia*: 'Pese a que el núcleo argumental, el sacrificio de la joven inocente, resulte herencia eminentemente trágica, sin embargo, la narración está construida sobre un escenario que recrea la literatura épica homérica y posterior, fuentes de inspiración de toda la obra (De Paco, 2011: 46). Where De Paco's analysis tends to merge two literary legacies – the heroic and tragic – treating them as though they were one, 'la tradición épica y trágica' (2011: 56), her use of language in the first citation (p46), belies an underlying tension between the heroic and tragic in the book: *despite* the tragic nature of the story's central narrative, Torrente's novel is firmly grounded in the heroic tradition. Arguably, even if his intention is to parody mercilessly the values that underlie the heroic tradition, he does this so intently that the underlying tragic dimensions of the story are constantly in danger of being overshadowed.

Torrente's work: it contains a few fleeting moments of poignancy surrounding Iphigenia's sacrifice; its greatly diminished gods inspire less fear than contempt for their pettiness and ineffectuality; and whether the book shocks, stuns, traumatises or is even sorrowful is open to debate, a point to which we will return in relation to the novella's ending. Torrente is a declared believer in the 'death of tragedy' and its impossibility in the modern world, and states in relation to Valle-Inclán's work, that 'toda pretensión de restaurar la tragedia es una pretensión vana, lo que queda es la tragicomedia' (Becerra 1990: 150). It is certainly the case that *Ifigenia* is permeated by a barbed, ironic humour. However, the extent to which Torrente suppresses the expression of human suffering and grief is so extreme that it is difficult to categorise the book as even tragicomic. This absence of pathos is achieved in various ways that are worthy of comment. One important outcome of Torrente's choice of mythical variant is that it completely side-lines Clytemnestra from the plot, effectively removing the pathos of a mother's pain as she observes her husband send their child to the sacrificial altar. (This is in marked contrast with the precedent set by Euripides' Clytemnestra who makes a heartrending appeal to Agamemnon with veiled threats of consequences if their daughter is killed.) In *Ifigenia*, however, Clytemnestra is already too 'absorbed' by Aegisthus to pay attention to the fate of Iphigenia who, after all, is not her daughter. In the absence of a mother's anguish, therefore, the first hint of suffering in the book appears in relation to Agamemnon at the Agora de Reyes. Most of the Kings are prepared to go along with the sacrifice but 'hallaban natural que el dolor de su padre se expresase públicamente con trágica dignidad, con amplitud de frase – si no en verso, por lo menos en prosa rítmica'. Characteristically, the acknowledgement of another's pain is immediately undercut by the vanity of a value system that gives more importance to rhetorical prowess than to grief (Torrente 1987: 59). It is at this potential, emotional high-point in the novella that we witness

how one of the few expressions of apparently genuine feeling in *Ifigenia*, Agamemnon's appeal to spare Iphigenia's life, is systematically undermined by the narrator's use of the subjunctive 'como si el dolor le hubiese dulcificado' (Torrente 1987: 71-72). Just pages later, we are informed that after only two days, the Kings's suffering at the prospect of her sacrifice has diminished to a 'llevadero dolor' (Torrente 1987: 82), suggesting an incapacity for any depth of feeling. The most deeply felt emotions in the book are Calchas' and Diana's 'absolute' hatred of Iphigenia, alongside Achilles' and Agamemnon's pride and vanity. Base feelings invariably prevail in Torrente's *Ifigenia*: a web of ambition, lust and deceit weaves around the victim she until is utterly isolated, without emotional support or practical defence, and like so many political scapegoats of totalitarianism in Europe, she reacts with the 'complete passivity' characteristic of the voiceless victim (Arendt 2017 xxxix). In the tent before her sacrifice she is 'inmóvil y resignada', and when Agamemnon enters he finds her 'mudo, inmóvil y espantado', her face betraying no feeling, 'como petrificado' (Torrente 1987: 92). This is the only scene in the book where the effects of terror and trauma are evoked; she feels alienated from herself, already detached from bodily experience 'siento mis manos como si no fueran mías', 'no siento el dolor' (Torrente 1987: 100).

The absence of expressions of emotion is not without purpose, as it reinforces the brittleness of its protagonists' egos, so dependent on outward manifestations of power and incapable of manifesting or reflecting on their own failings and vulnerabilities. It also reflects the political dependency of Franco's Spain, Hitler's Germany or Stalin's Russia on outward displays of victory and invulnerability; their self-presentation as omnipotent; and the determination to obliterate any opposition - human or ideological - to their political consolidation. In Franco's Spain, an important part of this process was the suppression of accounts of individual and

collective suffering by opponents and victims during and after the Civil War, a practice whose legacies continue to haunt both public and private domains to this day. The consistent lack of acknowledgement of suffering throughout the book is a key factor in the overall impression it creates of an absence of tragedy. The fact that all the characters but one exercise extreme degrees of self-interest and cynicism makes empathy impossible between them, and inspires none in the reader. Our sympathies extend only to Iphigenia, whose character inspires a sense of poignancy, but who is drawn with insufficient self-awareness to inspire what Theodor Adorno called ‘the absolute of suffering’, the ontological sense that the human condition involves a tragic struggle to come to terms with the inevitability of pain (Adorno 1972: 320). Despite the fact that the original title of the novella was *La muerte de Ifigenia*, the aim of Torrente’s version is not to inspire reflection on the tragic inevitability of human suffering, but to expose the more despicable aspects of human nature in political life, and the resulting inevitability of victimisation.¹⁰

The novella’s final section narrates the dramatic high-point of the myth, Iphigenia’s sacrifice. Military leaders process to her tent in full regalia as the troops gather at the newly constructed altar to Diana under the moonlight, all with a newfound unity of purpose and all absorbed by the pomp and trappings of the ritual – ‘todos vivían hacia fuera, preocupados del llanto, de la ceremonia, divertidos (Torrente, 1987 111-112). As ever, Torrente’s narrator exposes his characters’ failings: ‘Pero si fueran capaces de mirarse hacia dentro...’ (the implication is clearly that they were not capable of such a thing), and he goes on to give us hypothetical versions of their internal musings. The Kings reflect on how ritual ennobles

¹⁰ The title of the book was changed at the last minute for reasons related to typesetting rather than a change of emphasis on the author’s part.

Iphigenia's death, which otherwise 'no pasaría de la crueldad' (112). Nevertheless, they conclude that the girl's death was a 'penoso espectáculo', emphasising the performative aspect of the ritual rather than the reality of the death inflicted. Ritual allows them to suppress any real empathy with the victim; they respond to the killing in an almost Brechtian fashion, as though they were observing themselves observing a piece of theatre: 'Estoy seguro de llorar cuando su padre la entregue al victimario' (112). At the moment of her death, Diana replaces Iphigenia's body with a doe, not, as in Euripides' version, to preserve her life and whisk her off to Tauris, but because the goddess has discovered the girl is no longer a virgin and bears Achilles' child. The switch is motivated by Diana's desire not to sully her reputation by contaminating her altar with a non-virgin sacrifice; there is no desire to save Iphigenia's life. In this telling of the tale there is no possibility of deliverance for the victim, and the book ends immediately after the 'miraculous' switch with four one-sentence paragraphs. In the first, the troops and their leaders are united by a sense of relief that divine intervention has absolved them from any residual sense of guilt: 'Gritaron como quien descarga de un peso la conciencia, como quien, apesadumbrado, agradece a los dioses que vengan a sacarlo del apuro'. In the second, we learn that Calchas, the atheist priest, is so baffled by Diana's intervention he succumbs from that moment on to 'tribulaciones que habían de llevarle a la tumba'. The third describes how peace is restored to the camp at Aulis, a collective purpose is recovered and preparations for the fleet's departure resume; everything returns to normal with no outpouring of grief for Iphigenia's death. The book's final sentence, understated, almost throwaway, describes how the victim's body is disposed of: 'Diana huía entre las sombras, llevando a rastras el cuerpo de Ifigenia hacia la huesa que en un bosque de cipreses le había preparado' (Torrente 1987: 117). The contrast with the preceding passages and their description of the ritual nature of the sacrifice could not be

more stark. Customary endings to Classical Tragedy would involve either an 'exodus', where the bodies of the dead are displayed and carried out in a procession followed by a lamenting Chorus, or *deus ex machina*, divine intervention that would include instruction for the surviving protagonists. Given that Torrente's novella draws consistently on the metaphor of theatre and performance, the fundamental absence of theatricality and ritual in its ending is all the more striking. There are no burial rites here, no-one is interested in mourning Iphigenia, no-one will speak with rhetorical flourish - however insincere - of the death of a mere girl.

Anti-climactic endings do not tend to be a feature of tragedy; the casual cruelty of the novella's ending makes no attempt to invoke the pity and fear we associate with the genre. It is in many ways an inevitable culmination of the systematic suppression of empathy throughout the book. Eagleton reminds us that 'suffering is a mightily powerful language to share in common' (Eagleton 2003: xvi), but Torrente's objective in *Ifigenia* is not to demonstrate shared suffering, but rather what he saw as the universal inevitability of victimisation, motivated by self-interest and the pursuit of power. What does take the reader by surprise, however, is the sheer mundanity of the novella's final sentence. For a book with a narrator who has had so much to say, the narration of the final moments of the book is economical to the point of feeling truncated, even perfunctory. It is interesting to consider why the author should opt for such a sudden and unexpected shift in tone. It would appear that Torrente, in this final sentence, finally removes the filter of his narrator's voice, thus allowing the reader to interpret the stark nature of the events unimpeded by its ironic detachment. The deed is done; there is no further need for spin, and no amount of pomp,

ritual or rhetoric can disguise the cruelty with which the defeated are treated in post-war Franco's Spain.

The message transmitted by the sordid circumstances of *Ifigenia's* ending seems to be that all will continue as before in the realms of gods and men, whose most base motives will always triumph through the use of force. In the post-war contexts of Spain and throughout Western Europe, this reflects a rather fatalistic view held by many artists and intellectuals in the 1940s, that history seemed not to progress but to be locked in destructive cycles made inevitable by the human capacity for violence rather than a tragic fate. The hurried and hidden nature of Iphigenia's burial is also undeniably resonant of the graves dug by death squads during and after the Civil War. The lack of dignity and ceremony afforded her body, the absence of mourning, the chillingly off-hand tone of the prose, all combine to create a dehumanising effect that diminishes any sense of tragedy surrounding her death. It is unlikely that Torrente intended to dehumanise the novella's victim in order to expose the despicable nature of her killers; their failings have already been laid bare in the text. It is more likely that the ending reflects the depth of his own feelings of disgust at the levels of violence he had perceived in Spain during and after the war. The closing sentence, rather than leaving the reader shocked or stunned, induces a sickening effect, as though we had moved beyond shockability to a more jaded response of revulsion. This effect can largely be attributed to the repetitive nature of Torrente's demythologising technique; the immediate, automatic reflex by the narrator to expose mendacity in all expressions of emotion eventually becomes monotonous and oppressive. Scepticism is habit-forming and contagious, and there are so few expressions of sincere feeling in the book that when the reader encounters them in the mouth of its victim, Iphigenia, we are at first unsure whether or not to take them at face value. Given the historical

context of the piece, the relentlessness of Torrente's parody arguably runs the risk of downplaying the real personal and collective suffering of those victims of fascism whose bodies, like Iphigenia's, were disposed of in unmarked graves.

Ifigenia's ending, then, does not excite the emotional responses expected of tragedy. There are other expectations of the genre that it is equally futile to apply to Torrente's text, for example the expectation that suffering will impart some form of wisdom or that it will be instrumental in some positive way (Eagleton 2003: 31, 37). This, of course, is not always borne out by tragic plots, but it is the hope and expectation of the audience/reader that such an outcome is possible, that sustains our empathy towards suffering protagonists throughout. Any such hopes are systematically thwarted by Torrente, for whom human suffering has no positive outcomes. *Ifigenia* is a text designed to instruct, but the message it seeks to impart is unremittingly pessimistic. Its manipulation of classical mythology is designed to explode myths of military heroism, political salvation and victory. Like many of his generation in Spain and Europe, Torrente had observed the dangerous mythologisation of military and political leaders and by the 1940s was profoundly suspicious of the relationship between myth and ideology. *Ifigenia* is a book that vents, in his own words, his disgust and disillusionment with politics (Becerra 1990: 74, Blackwell 1985: 51) and with what he has described as 'la baja categoría de la realidad' (Becerra 1990: 52-53). The cynicism of his characters and the dehumanisation of its victim in the novella's ending, convey a crushing sense of moral vacuum and a lack of hope that can only be translated into political fatalism. In this sense, perhaps, the book is open to the criticism that it participates in the very social order it seeks to critique, by suppressing the expression of suffering and disavowing any possibility for change.

Conclusions

According to Torrente and subsequent critical consensus, *Ifigenia* was too 'subtle' to be understood by its readers in 1950 as a metaphor for Franco's Spain (Pérez, 1986: 443). But there is nothing subtle about either the plot or tone of the book, not to any reader familiar with classical myth or with Spanish politics in the 1940s. While these criteria may have excluded some lower ranking civil servants working in censorship at the time, Spain still had a population of both right and left-wing intellectuals who were more than qualified to read and recognise the analogies between Torrente's demythologisation of the heroes of the Trojan War and his debunking of the heroic pretensions and myth-making by Franco and the Falange during and after the war. It is arguable that – far from being subtle – the cynicism expressed by the omniscient narrator and all the characters bar Iphigenia, is so overwhelming that it eclipses the moral judgement that the author wished the text to communicate. In Torrente's case, it is also necessary to consider the relationship between myth and ideology in the political context of the 1940s, and some of his interviews with Carmen Becerra are particularly revealing in this respect. For example, when Becerra asks in the 1980s why Torrente feels impelled to repeatedly destroy myths, and whether he believes that the destruction of myths is potentially liberating, his answer is not straightforward. He commences by acknowledging that no society can live without myths, adding that in general, we expect 'los procesos de desmitificación' to 'preparar el terreno para una nueva mitificación', adding 'Lo importante es suministrar mitos porque parece que los necesita el hombre de estructura mental actual' (Becerra 1990: 63). However, Torrente's work does not exemplify this stated belief in the intrinsic or modern necessity for myth; it has consistently undermined and destroyed myths but has never undertaken the creation of new ones. The

key as to why comes later in the conversation when Becerra makes a distinction between Torrente and Camus, suggesting that for the former, 'los mitos están allí, aguardando ser desmitificados', whereas for the latter, 'está allí, aguardando hacerse realidad'. Torrente agrees, and clarifies his understanding of the relationship between ideology (particularly utopian, Marxist ideology) and myth, explaining that where Camus believes in the transformation of reality through revolutionary ideology and in the realization of the 'mito de la revolución en una realidad' [...] Mi propuesta es completamente distinta porque yo no creo en esas teorías' (Becerra 1990: 65). It is Torrente's profound distrust of ideology and its potential for myth-making that prevented him from engaging in the creation of alternative political myths to those that held power in Spain in the 1940s. Again, in conversation with Becerra, the author stresses the view that myth is inseparable from historical agency, that it has 'efectividad histórica [...] el mito mueve, impulsa al los demás a hacer algo'. It would appear to that this, in fact, is why he distrusted it so profoundly, and why he felt compelled to undermine it in his work.

It was Torrente's acute awareness of the dangers of monolithic and utopian ideologies in the late 1940s that inspired him to undermine political 'mythologies' and to resist the promotion of new political 'myths'. His awareness of the power of ideology to mislead and corrupt mass opinion was shared by many in Europe at this time, and evidence of its disastrous outcomes in Germany and Russia in the 1930s and 1940s was recorded by Hannah Arendt in the first edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951). Unlike Arendt, however, who went on to develop a Theory of Action and a clear vision of active citizenship,¹¹ Torrente's rejection of

¹¹ These are very efficiently summarised in <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/arendt/>

politics *per se*, leaves the author stranded in a kind of nihilistic stasis that is reflected in *Ifigenia*; he can debunk the old myths, but cannot point a way to alternative forms of political agency or 'efectividad histórica'. In the Preface to the first edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt explains that the book was written 'out of the conviction that it should be possible to discover the hidden mechanics by which all traditional elements of our political and spiritual world were dissolved into a conglomeration where everything seems to have lost specific value' (Arendt 2017: 10), motives that are equally applicable to Torrente's authorship of *Ifigenia*. Arendt's 1951 Preface, however, goes on to warn of the dangers of political disengagement: 'To yield to the mere process of disintegration has become an irresistible temptation, not only because it has assumed the spurious grandeur of 'historical necessity', but also because everything outside it has begun to appear lifeless, bloodless, meaningless, and unreal' (Arendt 2017: 10). To be fair to Torrente, in a Spain that had not been 'liberated' by the Civil War but rather plunged into a dark period of censorship and the suppression of both political and intellectual opposition, the prospects of political agency were very remote. Against this backdrop, and the broader backdrop of post-war Europe, it is scarcely surprising if his *Ifigenia* appears, at times, to succumb to the 'meaningless and unreal', to have disengaged from the flesh and blood realities of human suffering during and after the Civil War, and indulge instead in a blend of nihilism and debunking irony that may have left a sympathetic readership feeling even more defeated and disempowered.

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