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# Teaching *Entre visillos* and *Retahílas* as Representative of Martín Gaité's Oeuvre

María Luisa Guardiola

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## *Teaching the Works of Carmen Martín Gaité in Advanced Literature Courses*

I teach several courses on the literature of Spain of the second half of the twentieth century. The contents of these courses are organized around a major theme, such as the Spanish Civil War, the city, or memory and identity. No matter what the theme, a work by Carmen Martín Gaité is always well received by students. Her writing connects directly with the reader in an intimate way. Her style is spoken, colloquial, personal. My students enjoy being the interlocutor, the one who listens to and interacts with the narrator. Martín Gaité's writing offers new connections and new perspectives: she challenges the feelings of isolation so prevalent in our postmodern world and helps with self-understanding and knowledge. Her writings are ideal vehicles for nudging undergraduates out of their comfort zone. Her stance on human existence as a never-ending creative process in a world full of representations and simulacra challenges readers to be creative, to communicate with others, and to look within themselves for answers. The author tells us the importance of taking the risk to invent oneself, free from prior interpretations, a risk that sometimes occurs when we speak with a stranger.<sup>1</sup>

*El cuarto de atrás* (1978; *The Back Room* [1983]), probably her best-known novel, is the work I have used most frequently in advanced literature courses on Civil War and postwar literature and film and on memory and identity. Taught in Spanish, these courses are geared to majors, minors, and other students who are linguistically advanced. *El cuarto de atrás* is an individual and collective memoir of the postconflict years as seen by a woman who did not fit the mold imposed by the Francoist code under the auspices of the Sección Femenina.<sup>2</sup> The fantastic narrative element fascinates my students, who come to class wondering who the man dressed in black is. As in many works by Martín Gaité, beginning with *Retahílas* ("Yarns"), the conversation between the man dressed in black and the narrator is the catalyst for telling the story.

Given the excellent reception of Martín Gaité's works by my students and in response to the author's death in 2000, I decided to teach a course in her honor in 2002. I teach at Swarthmore College, and most of the students have solid literary and linguistic backgrounds. The course was offered to seniors who had already taken Spanish literature courses. There were a few Spanish majors, and other students took the course to become more familiar with Spanish culture before studying abroad or in order to improve their Spanish. The course covered a broad spectrum of Martín Gaité's works in chronological order, six

novels and one play: *Entre visillos* (1958; *Behind the Curtains* [1990]), *Retahílas* (1974), *El cuarto de atrás*, *Nubosidad variable* (1992; *Variable Cloud* [1995]), *Capercucita en Manhattan* (1990; "Little Red Riding Hood in Manhattan"), *Lo raro es vivir* (1996; *Living's the Strange Thing* [2004]), *La hermana pequeña* (1999; "The Little Sister"). A few of the author's essays were assigned to help students understand the reading: selections from *Desde la ventana* ("From the Window"), *La búsqueda de interlocutor* ("The Search for a Conversational Partner"), *Agua pasada* ("Water under the Bridge"), *Usos amorosos de la postguerra española* (*Courtship Customs in Postwar Spain*), and other texts were distributed to students to complement the fiction.

Other works by Martín Gaité are included in an advanced-level Spanish women writers course. We usually read *Nubosidad variable* to examine the subversive theme of friendship among women. Sometimes I offer students a selection of short stories, in order to concentrate on the importance of personal relationships, the spoken word, and memory's legacy. I assign several nonfiction works as theoretical background for this course also, such as selections from *Desde la ventana* and *La búsqueda*. Students read seven or eight novels, and one to three weeks are allotted to each, depending on length.

### **Entre visillos and Retahílas as Representative Works**

The theme of communication links most of the works by Martín Gaité, with specific concerns associated with the time at which they were written. Related ideas are writing and literature as a refuge, the interlocutor as a vital resource for eliciting conversation, the distinct voice of women, communication as the basis for understanding, and writing as a means to break silence and isolation. Notwithstanding the common themes that unite Martín Gaité's works, there are idiosyncratic elements in her earlier works that help us study the development of her writing technique. When we focus on the earlier novels, especially *Entre visillos* and *Retahílas*, this theme and its variations according to changes in the author's circumstances become apparent.

*Entre visillos* and *Retahílas* both show the development of Martín Gaité's spoken style and her immersion in the narrow, seemingly insignificant world of a small provincial Spanish city in the 1950s. In *Entre visillos*, she describes the repressed and tedious life of Spanish postwar youth. The consequences of the fifties generation's shortcomings are revealed in *Retahílas*, when the hopes and values of a new generation confront those of the previous one. No matter what the temporal setting, dialogue is offered as a medicine against the silence imposed by the repression and taboos of the long postwar period.

### **Entre visillos**

I give the historical facts of the Spanish Civil War (1936–39) and the early postwar period (1939–53),<sup>3</sup> then Martín Gaité's biography using the author's

“Bosquejo autobiográfico” (“Autobiographical Sketch”). Students are asked to read the introduction to *Entre visillos* by Marina Mayoral from the 1997 Destino edition of the Clásicos Contemporáneos Comentados collection (reprinted in the 2007 Espasa Calpe edition). The novel is studied according to the categories of narrative technique, time and space, and characters and social divisions.

### **Narrative Technique**

Martín Gaité breaks with traditional literary modes to create her own voice, a feminine language that appears spontaneous in that it includes many colloquial expressions, refrains, and other devices associated with the spoken word. Her chapters alternate between the first person and third, as follows:

*Natalia's diary* The diary is a written form women have traditionally used for self-expression and self-knowledge. In the early postwar years in Spain, it served as a refuge. Natalia's diary entries refer to recent events. Her colloquial expressions reproduce the rhythm of the spoken word and chronicle what other characters have said. In her diary, readers can therefore witness the creation and performance of different speech patterns.

*Pablo Klein's narrative* This narrative is written in the third person and relates to the past. His position as a main narrator is ambiguous, since he can be a direct witness or an incidental one. He tells what he sees and sometimes shares Natalia's perspective.

*Julia's letter (ch. 9)* Julia, Natalia's older sister, speaks naturally to her absent boyfriend, expressing her frustration with her surroundings in the provincial town. She wants to get married soon to escape to the capital, to gain at least some freedom.

The author replicates the dialogues, setting, and people of an unnamed town (Salamanca) in Spain in the 1950s. Characters develop through their speech and actions as they play their roles. The realism is enhanced by the multiple perspectives of the characters. This technique acquires an existential level because, although grounded in reality, it transcends the narrow settings of the provincial town.

### **Time and Space**

The novel's unity depends on a few selected locations that convey the repressed atmosphere of the provincial town. The title itself refers to the viewing of the world from an essentially feminine, domestic, private space. *Mujeres ventaneras* (“women who look out the window”) are a constant in Martín Gaité's work. The female characters of *Entre visillos* can only watch the outside world. The

*mirador* (“enclosed balcony”) is the best spot in the house because it allows the female characters to gather there and observe what is happening outside. A few will rebel, ineffectively, against their imposed passivity, but most will submit.

The time is provincial Spain of the 1950s. The prevailing patriarchal family model of that era enforces social rules and mores. Natalia feels and tries to defy the repression of this model. Her diary is the form that her defiance takes. She supports Julia’s decision to leave town for the capital city.

### ***Characters and Social Divisions***

Natalia, Pablo, Julia, and Elvira are the main characters, and their defiance unites them. Natalia and Pablo are at the center of the plot; the other two characters orbit them and express a collectivity that responds in various ways to the restrictions endured by all. The minor characters are types, examples of the roles available that fall within the norm imposed by a tedious world that offers scant opportunity outside marriage. Class divisions are forgotten only at the nonexclusive Instituto Femenino (“high school for girls”). Natalia befriends her classmate Alicia Sampedro, who comes from the working class. Both Natalia’s and Alicia’s families resent this friendship, and the young women know that their relationship will not last after high school.

*Entre visillos* belongs to the bildungsroman genre. Natalia feels the isolation of a free-spirited woman in her teens who is shunned by the older women. Her sense of loss and loneliness is put into words in her diary, which is her refuge. The contradictions of postwar life are expressed in the form of oppositions: rebellion/conformity, alienation/communication.

Students watch the film *Calle Mayor* after reading and discussing *Entre visillos*. The visual representation of provincial life in Spain of the 1950s helps them better understand the authoritarian rule that oppressed women during the postwar years. The film and *Entre visillos* share a focus on women longing to find a man to marry. The idea of the modern Penelope waiting for her man appears in many literary works of the time. The film’s thirty-five-year-old protagonist, Isabel Castro, is too old to have any hope of marrying. This bitter realization is something that she has in common with Mercedes, Natalia’s sister in *Entre visillos*. It is useful to compare Martín Gaité’s female characters, who have a small measure of independence, with the more constricted roles of women in *Calle Mayor*.

### **Retahílas**

While *Entre visillos* presents a collage of society in order to explore the idea of written literature as a haven from provincial postwar Spain, the main device of *Retahílas* is dialogue. In the prologue and epilogue, the novel realistically introduces the rest of society. The eleven chapters are a series of interconnected

*retahílas*, threads that tie together the intimate conversation between forty-five-year-old Eulalia and her twenty-four-year-old nephew Germán. The role of the interlocutor is central to their conversation.

Before we read the novel, I give students a historical outline from the 1950s until Franco's death in 1975. I explain the transition from social realism to the new literary forms of the 1960s and the experimental style in narratives of the 1970s. *Retahílas* (the novel the author declared her best, in a televised interview with Joaquín Soler Serrano in 1981) delves into the relationship of two characters who seek to know themselves and overcome their isolation. Isolation is a recurring theme in the author's work, so I give the students a list of relevant essays and quotations. The list includes *La búsqueda de interlocutor* ("The Search for a Conversational Partner"), which articulates the theory of communication that underlies *Retahílas*, and *El cuento de nunca acabar* ("The Never-Ending Story"), which explains the idea of a sought-after imaginary listener.

In *Retahílas*, the main character, Eulalia, confronts her past by talking with Germán, who acts as a mirror that reveals her problems to her—among them her failed marriage, loneliness, and the forfeited chance to be a mother. Germán, meanwhile, is eager to hear stories about his mother, who died when he was very young. Aunt and nephew open up to each other in a mutually sincere acknowledgment of their past. By naming the old taboos and family secrets, each unravels his or her own identity, which has been concealed by society's gender and age expectations. Confession becomes a healing act: *Retahílas* is a love story with words. (In *Cuadernos de todo*, the author reminds us that listening to a story is a loving deed: "sólo a alguien que te escuche con pasión le puedes hablar bien" ("A good conversation can only happen with somebody who listens passionately" [170]).

Eulalia and German's dialogue evokes the past, a recurrent motif in this author's works. Martín Gaité mentions that writing requires going back to origins. The power of the word is summarized in this statement: "Cuando vivimos, las cosas nos pasan; pero cuando contamos, las hacemos pasar" (*Búsqueda* [1973] 18; "When we live, things happen to us; but when we tell a story, we make them happen"). The importance of naming things to narrate memory is emphasized: "[L]as cosas sólo toman cuerpo al nombrarlas, y nadie, por ignorante que sea, deja de intuir el poder de las palabras para dar a la luz lo que, antes de ser designado o mentado, yacía sin rostro en el vientre del caos" (*Cuento* 257–58; "Things take shape only when they are named, and nobody, no matter how ignorant, stops believing in the power of words to give birth to whatever lay faceless in the womb of chaos, before it was ever designated or mentioned"). As I explain to my students, the title of the novel introduces the idea of "unraveling" words that will be sewn together by the written text. The double theme of ruin and the search for an interlocutor is woven within and throughout. The three things needed for there to be an intimate, transformative conversation are: a suitable location (Eulalia talks in the old living room of the family's Pazo de Louredo, a space that holds both personal and communal memories for nephew



and aunt), unlimited time (the conversation takes place at night, when all is still and there is no rush), and a willingness to listen. The dialogue between Eulalia and Germán is not possible without a listener who draws out the thoughts and feelings of the speaker, and the conversation that results has the power to heal wounds from conflicts of the past.

Martín Gaité refers in several of her essays in *La búsqueda de interlocutor* and *El cuento de nunca acabar*, and in an epigraph to *Retahílas*, to a quotation from Padre Sarmiento emphasizing that eloquence resides in the listener: “La elocuencia no está en el que habla sino en el que oye” ([2009] 17; “eloquence does not reside in the speaker but in the listener”).

### Narrative Technique

When I taught the Martín Gaité course in 2002, the excellent 2003 edition of *Retahílas* by Montserrat Escartín Gual was not yet available. This is a meticulously edited critical edition with much about the works of Martín Gaité in general and *Retahílas* in particular. Escartín Gual presents the structure of the novel on three levels: the situational (here and now), the framed story where the past is revised, and the articulation of a theory of dialogue and the spoken word.

The novel's eleven chapters are linked: an idea that ends one chapter begins the next, and the motif of memory shapes the narrative with recurring sewing metaphors. The prologue presents information about the characters and their family in a nineteenth-century *costumbrista* style, emphasizing local customs. The epilogue returns to reality with the metaphor of the closing trunk. The impersonal narrator is used to frame and balance the different points of view. The characters do not act uniformly and have sometimes contradictory opinions. The point is made that a person, being not one entity but many, has more than one perspective. By narrating his or her own story, each character takes a hand in shaping his or her own life.

### Time and Space

The nightlong conversation in *Retahílas* lasts about six hours. Psychological time is as important as real time. Because things are quiet and unhurried, it is possible to go back to certain memories. The almost-in-ruins Galician family house is a perfect setting to elicit the conversation between Eulalia and Germán because it brings them back to their childhood years, a necessary factor in any self-identifying narrative.

### Characters and Social Divisions

Social commentary in *Retahílas* centers on gender roles rather than on class divisions. Martín Gaité criticizes the feminism of the 1970s for pursuing equality

without taking into account gender differences and for being too rigid. Liberation is not possible for women who are caught up in the neurosis of an internal double discourse about familial and societal expectations. These expectations also affect Germán, who was banished from his sister's room (and from his only conversational companion) for playing with dolls. *Retahílas* offers Eulalia, a woman of Martín Gaité's age at the time Martín Gaité wrote the novel, the opportunity to invent her own voice. Communication, and therefore language, becomes the only salvation for each character. Eulalia, especially, will realize her potential as an individual after the long conversation with Germán. Language and identity are inextricably intertwined.

### **Teaching Resources and Methodologies**

In my courses, a historical and sociological background session introduces each book. I use an insight approach when teaching the works of Carmen Martín Gaité. I give the students a "Guía de lectura" ("reading guide") and ask them to share their thoughts and feelings about the day's material before providing them with my own critical approach. A sample question from the guide for *Entre visillos* is, ¿Por qué es tan importante el diario de Natalia dentro del ambiente que rodea a este personaje femenino en una ciudad de provincias de la España de la época? ("Why is Natalia's diary so important within the context that surrounds this female character in a provincial town of postwar Spain?"). For *Retahílas* a typical question is, La lengua y la identidad están interconectadas en las obras de Carmen Martín Gaité. Explica la función del interlocutor para iluminar los espacios más recónditos de la mente de Eulalia. ¿Cómo se utiliza el diálogo como procedimiento de autoconocimiento en *Retahílas*? ("Language and identity are intertwined in Carmen Martín Gaité's works. Explain the role of the interlocutor to enlighten the most hidden spaces of Eulalia's mind. How is dialogue used as a self-knowledge technique in *Retahílas*?")

I also assign at least one essay on the material for each day. Essays that I have found particularly valuable to teach *Entre visillos* are Marsha Collins's "Inscribing the Space of Female Identity" and John Kronik's "A Splice of Life"; to teach *Retahílas*, Cecilia Burke Lawless's "*Retahílas* and the Loose Threads of Home, Sweet Home" and Gonzalo Navajas's "El diálogo y el yo en *Retahílas* de Carmen Martín Gaité" ("Dialogue and the Self in Carmen Martín Gaité's *Retahílas*"). I provide a bibliography on both novels along with a general bibliography and make available several additional essays on the e-platform *Blackboard*, such as Joan Brown's "One Autobiography, Twice Told: Martín Gaité's *Entre visillos* and *El cuarto de atrás*," Roxanne Marcus's "Ritual and Repression in Carmen Martín Gaité's *Entre visillos*," and Lynn Talbot's "Female Archetypes in Carmen Martín Gaité's *Entre visillos*." Films are used as resources to convey sociocultural information about Spain. In addition to *Calle Mayor*, the feature films *Tristana* and *La prima Angélica* are valuable. Print and video



interviews with the author, particularly the interview by Soler Serrano after she returned from a five-month stay in the United States, are both informative and fascinating.

Specific activities for teaching *Entre visillos* and *Retahílas* are designed to enhance student engagement and comprehension. Students have two weeks to read each novel. Assignments include twenty-minute oral presentations on a theme related to the author's world or an aspect of a novel, character representation in class, and the writing of original dialogues based on a novel. Students may also create a collage suggested by a text. The collage assignment came from students in my Martín Gaité homage course after they read *El cuarto de atrás*, and I have since continued it and shared it with colleagues. Students write a twelve-to-fifteen-page term paper either on one novel or on a thematic approach to both; this paper may be and often is an extension of the oral presentation. For *Entre visillos*, students are often interested in the difficulty encountered by women seeking access to higher education and in the lack of freedom for men and women in a strictly traditional society; for *Retahílas*, they are often interested in gender and gender relations. Submission of an outline for the paper well in advance of the due date motivates students to do research as the course progresses, which adds to their understanding of the works and the period.

*Entre visillos* and *Retahílas* have many of the motifs and themes that characterize Martín Gaité's work. At the same time, their contrasting structural elements and time frames point to the breadth of her range. Studying these two novels in tandem shows her development and leads to a better understanding of her earlier works and a better perspective on the progression of her writing over time.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>"Y solamente aquellos ojos que se aventuraran a mirarnos partiendo de cero, sin leernos por el resumen de nuestro anecdotario personal, nos podrían inventar y recompensar a cada instante, nos librarían de la cadena de la representación habitual, nos otorgarían esa posibilidad de ser por la que suspiramos" (*Búsqueda* [1973] 20; "And only those eyes that venture a fresh look at us, not reading us through the sum of our personal anecdotes, can invent us and reward us at every turn. They can free us from the chains of habitual performance, they can offer the possibility of being that we long for").

<sup>2</sup>The Sección Femenina was the female branch of the Falange, the fascist organization founded by José Antonio Primo de Rivera, in which all young women had to enroll and participate.

<sup>3</sup>In 1953, Spain's relations with her European allies and the United States improved. The United States supported Franco's anti-Communist position during the Cold War, and a military assistance agreement in 1953 established United States military bases in Spain (Cantarino 402).