

Never-Ending Story: Carmen Martín Gaité's The Back Room

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Never-Ending Story: Carmen Martín Gaité's *The Back Room*

SPANISH POLITICAL history since the civil war of 1936–39 falls into two obvious but significant periods: *then*—the almost fifty years of Spanish political life dominated by the figure of Franco—and *now*—the post-Franco period, dating from the dictator's death in 1975. Critics eager to find literary changes commensurate with the vast political and social upheavals of the last decade have theorized on the Spanish new novel and on post-Franco poetry and theater, and they have usually been forced to report, in tones wavering between defensive and disappointed, that the expected revolution has not occurred. Novelist Vicente Molina Foix speaks for the majority when he answers a survey question about the new post-Franco novel with the suggestion that the question itself is misphrased: “Sólo los profesores desesperados creen aún que las tendencias nuevas o los autores grandes surgen en relación directa a la política” ‘Only desperate professors still believe that new tendencies or great authors arise in direct relation to the political situation’ (*Diez* 11).¹

Yet, although Franco's death did not inaugurate the expected new golden age in the fine arts, changes have taken place. The death of Franco signaled a boom in marginal literary forms, indicating the desire to recuperate an alternative past now that Spain had come out from under Franco's shadow. Response to the intellectual, economic, personal, and political deprivation of almost half a century was immediate. Bookstore shelves rapidly filled with hastily written war memoirs, especially from the anti-Franco Republican point of view, with autobiographical reconsiderations attempting to recover a lost equilibrium in evaluating the recent past, with frankly pornographic tales that threatened to overwhelm the portion of the market once dominated by less overt titillation and by sentimental romantic novels.² Carmen Martín Gaité, one of Spain's most firmly established literary figures, found this period immediately following the death of Franco disillusioning: “[S]e hablaba de que, cuando muriese el dictador, iban a salir de los cajones libros maravillosos que estaban escritos y que la censura los había prohibido. Ahora se ha de-

mostrado la falacia de tales pretensiones” ‘People used to talk about how, once the dictator had died, marvelous books that had been written but prohibited by the censorship were going to come out of the drawers. The fallacy of such beliefs has now been proven. . . .’ She adds: “Lo cierto es que ha habido un descenso cualitativo y cuantitativo en la producción narrativa de los últimos años” ‘The fact is that there has been a qualitative and quantitative decline in the narrative production of the last few years’ (Fernández 171–72).

The mediocrity of works giving testimony to the just-ended Franco period provides a context and a background for Martín Gaité's 1978 novel, *The Back Room* (*El cuarto de atrás*). While continuing to exploit the author's talent for dialogue and her concern with recuperating forgotten memories, *The Back Room* “señala una nueva etapa” ‘signals a new stage’ in her literary production (Durán, “Así” 100).³ One of the most intriguing aspects of this remarkable novel is, perhaps, what it is not. It is a book on memory but definitely not a memoir; a work absolutely faithful to the details of the author's life but not an autobiography; a recuperation of a lost historical past but not a history or straightforward historical fiction.⁴ Instead, this novel projects itself into another dimension, not merely fiction but, more radically, fantasy, “relacionando el paso de la historia con el ritmo de los sueños” ‘tying together the march of history and the rhythm of dreams’ (104; 98). The plot is elegantly simple. A well-known author identified as “Carmen Martín Gaité,” whose oeuvre includes both historical investigations and fictional works, receives an unexpected phone call from a literary critic, a fan of her work, and she yields to his insistence on an immediate midnight interview. The interviewer's questions stimulate memories of her childhood under Franco, memories that can now be released because of Franco's recent death. Parallel spoken dialogue returns frequently to the theme of the author's next proposed work—a fantastic novel or a historical study—which, disconcertingly, seems to be writing itself in this novel in a mysteriously multiplying pile of folios.

The novel's central concern with the forms of writing and the function of memory has remained constant in Martín Gaité's subsequent work. Three years after the publication of *The Back Room* she unexpectedly dipped into the field of juvenile fiction with a charming fantasy about an imprisoned princess, *El castillo de las tres murallas* 'The Triple-Walled Castle.' Two years later, in 1983, she published *El cuento de nunca acabar* 'The Never-Ending Story,' which is not a story but "una especie de análisis, o . . . un injerto entre ensayo y novela o ensayo y narración" 'a type of analysis, or . . . a graft between essay and novel or essay and narration' (Medina 187). It would seem that the two strands of theory and fantasy, so expertly woven together in *The Back Room*, are unraveled and given separate expression in these works: the first a pure fantasy directed toward an audience of children, the second an account of literary theory and practice designed for a more sophisticated group of readers interested in literary reception and interpretation.

These three disparate works, *Cuarto*, *Cuento*, and *Castillo*, three books beginning with *C* (the "cosas en *C*" 'things beginning with *C*' are the metaphorical heart of *The Back Room*, and their importance cannot be overemphasized), deserve to be read together as a kind of intellectual triptych. For while *Castillo* is a children's fantasy, mature readers will appreciate the implicit reflections on the role of dreams in the constitution of reality and the suggestion that freedom is as much an interior function as an external property. The operative metaphor of the castle, moreover, is carried through in all three books, from *The Back Room*'s paper castle of the written word to the fantasy's actual castle to the chapters in *Cuento* dedicated to "Las torres de marfil quebradas" 'Smashed (or bankrupted) ivory towers' and "La entrada en el castillo" 'The entrance to the castle' (which comments explicitly on *The Back Room* and recalls the prominent role of the duke's castle in the second part of *Don Quijote*). *Cuento* also theorizes on children's tales, suggesting that children learn to tell stories from the stories they are told and telling us the story of Martín Gaité's own predilection for "Puss in Boots," the tale of a cat who defies fate by raising the firm walls of an autonomous fantasy within the fantastic confines of the tale (157–59). "Puss in Boots" is an archetypal story within a story, and Martín Gaité's lucid discussion of the collapse of the historical into the fantastic performs another version of Puss's maneuver by deploying a style that

collapses theory and storytelling. Any good story, she concludes, is irremediably fragmentary; any well-told tale is a never-ending story (22–23), and these well-told never-ending stories define humanity: "el hombre se va definiendo por las historias que urde, por cómo, cuándo, con qué propósito y para quién las urde, y sobre todo por el grado de interés que sabe despertar" 'Man defines himself by the stories, or histories, he contrives, by how, when, with what purpose, and for whom he contrives them, and, above all, by the degree of interest he is able to awaken' (161). By extension, then, the author not only questions the established limits of historical, realistically fictional, autobiographical, literary-critical, and fantastic modes by collapsing them into a single work but also demonstrates the degree to which all such structures are themselves forgotten tropes of a single unreadable metaphorical signature, an effaced nonautobiographical "I." Reading *The Back Room* through the insights of contemporary theory raises the further question of the willful radicalism a woman summons when confronted with the implacable dictates of what Derrida calls "la loi du genre" (the law of genre or of gender) that states "genres/genders are not to be mixed" ("Law" 55). What are the consequences of mixing a (lawless?) woman with the clearly defined generic limits of history, of storytelling?

The Back Room provides an excellent basis for meditation on this effacement of limits established and subverted within a single unified text. Theory of one kind is quite clearly expounded in the novel, and critics like Manuel Durán point out the significance of the narrator's many suggestive references to Todorov's structural analysis of the fantastic genre. Yet the fantastic form fails to account for the power of the novel—as Durán realizes in giving his essay the significant clarifying subtitle "Todorov y algo más." The "algo más" 'something else' is the sticking point, however, the unfathomable beyond that makes all interpretation interminable, that signals a mysterious vector into the unknown. This "something else" suggests the force that keeps the novel open-ended instead of permitting it to shut itself up between (or behind) the covers of a book, or a pile of folios, or a pillbox: the never-ending story.

We can approach the power of the text only by removing the formal constraints that mark the limits of the literary product—for such an analysis Todorov is a decoy rather than an aid—yet we must keep in mind that meaning itself derives from form.

Paradoxically, the form that must be unmasked, the form that attempts to limit the openness of the tale, can only be discovered through another form, Todorov's or one of our choosing. Let us leave aside, then, the fecund dream of Todorov's structural analysis and have recourse to other dreams, another mode for focusing the interminable (and arbitrarily terminated) analysis. Freud is, of course, one of our guides, as the never-ending story of the human urge to tell stories handily intimates the interminable analysis of the talking cure. Furthermore, Freudian psychoanalysis, which in practice takes the form of recalling autobiographical stories—real or imagined—with a peculiar binding strength in the patient's life, in theory recognizes compellingly both its own limits and the need to go beyond them. At a crucial point in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud's speculation on the origin of sexuality leads him beyond scientific analysis, and to advance his theory further he must have recourse to something more than mere verifiable fact: "In quite a different region, it is true, we *do* meet with such a hypothesis, but it is of so fantastic a kind—a myth rather than a scientific explanation—that I should not venture to produce it here, were it not that it fulfills precisely the one condition whose fulfillment we desire" (18: 57). This disclaimer, which significantly brings together the critical categories of myth, science, fantasy, and desire, introduces Freud's retelling of a story from Plato's *Symposium*, a story that is presented as the story within a story of a myth. If not for the imperatives of desire, it would not be told; but precisely because it is so seductive Freud tells it, as others have told it, for two thousand years, to account for a force unamenable to the blandishments of form, to establish a hypothetical basis for a theory that he extends beyond the limits of human memory.

This Freudian dilemma echoes in Derrida's acknowledgment of a similar frustration: "I have never known how to tell a story. And since I love nothing better than remembering . . . I have always felt this inability as a sad infirmity. Why am I denied narration? Why have I not received this gift?" (*Mémoires* 3). While Derrida insists that he cannot tell a story, he is constantly drawn to storytelling; in a sense, he cannot *not* tell a story. He tells the story of his lack of a gift for narration, and on recalling his decision to give the lectures contained in his slim book on memory, he says, "I will tell you its little story" (127). Seduced by this topic, Derrida, like Freud, goes beyond legitimate theoretical

boundaries: "It is because I cannot tell a story that I turn to myth" (86). Myth, then, in some sense represents the cure for the infirmity of a lack of storytelling ability, a compensatory gift for the lack of the gift of narration. Yet in his earlier work on memory, his well-known study "Plato's Pharmacy" in *Dissemination*, Derrida, again like Freud, has recourse to a secondhand myth told in Plato and precisely to an analysis of a story in which the "gift" is both poison and cure. Derrida reads these myths, these compelling structures, these "necessary forms of thought" (Freud, quoting Kant, 18: 28), through the field of conflicting forces conditionally signaled by such terms as *pharmakon*, *dissemination*, and *undecidability*.

Both Freud's recognition of the irrecuperability of the origin and Derrida's strategically doubled commentary on storytelling in general and on Plato in particular help provide a point of entry into the densely allusive text of Martín Gaité's novel. *The Back Room* opens with a cryptic epigraph from Bataille: "La experiencia no puede ser comunicada sin lazos de silencio, de ocultamiento, de distancia" 'Experience cannot be communicated without bonds of silence, of concealment, of distance.' The quotation establishes not only the importance of dialogue but also the perversely doubled pathways of true communication as signaled by negativity, by what is not told, by the silences and secrets of a conveniently half-deaf storyteller. Furthermore, these silences and concealments forge a bond—of communication or of communication's betrayal—intimating a double movement within the conversation (or, by extension, within the history or within the fiction) both superficial and profound, both escapist and realistic.

This issue is particularly acute given the concrete historical datum of Franco's death as a motivating factor in this fictional communication. The narrator both recalls and avoids recalling Franco, closing off the historical epoch while bringing to light the hidden counterhistory of the period, displaying the need for analysis (historical and personal) while refusing to sacrifice the distance and silence of the necessarily forgotten, the betrayed, the unknowable past. Martín Gaité's novel-writing woman is in this respect similar to Bataille's historical man, who feels a need to act but has lost a concrete function: "He understood that his need to act no longer had a job to do. But this need, no longer indefinitely duped by the traps of art, is sooner or later recognized for what it is: a negativity empty of content"

(qtd. in Stoekl 108). The ruses and refusals of an “empty negativity” at Bataille’s end of history approximately parallel Freud’s seductive myth or Derrida’s toxic gift as figures for the equally doubled, equally inaccessible projected origin. It is feasible, therefore, to ask of Martín Gaité the question that Stoekl asks about Derrida: to what extent is “the violence of nonrecuperable and ‘empty’ (Nietzschean) negativity . . . kept within textual bounds?” (118).

Says Derrida: “[Structural] analyses are possible only after a certain defeat of force and within the movement of diminished ardor. Which makes the structural consciousness consciousness in general . . . a reflection of the accomplished, the constituted, the *constructed*” (*Writing* 5). All literary criticism shares this essentially formalistic bias in its effort to grasp the energy of the never-ending narration in a chosen design. Speculation is hypothetically resolved and detained in the hypostatizations of theory. Furthermore, an impacted, overdetermined theory of storytelling vitiates the urge to represent gaps in the text, substituting the construction of wholes for the discovery of a force attentive to difference. “*In historiam*,” says Derrida, “it is the fall of thought into philosophy which gets history underway. . . . In this heliocentric metaphysics, force, ceding its place to *eidos* (i.e., the form which is visible for the metaphorical eye), has already been separated from itself in acoustics” (*Writing* 27). Derrida later clarifies that, after Socrates, who wrote nothing, all Western thinkers are subject to, and fugitives from, this fall of thought: “They *come out* of thinking, they leave it, and do so in order to fall, in order to protect themselves from it” (*Mémoires* 152). In this manner, Derrida denounces (in writing) the privileged position given to writing as the fundamental structural condition of philosophical analysis since Socrates, while recognizing the unresolvable problematic of existence after the Fall. The fall of thought into philosophy, of force into *eidos*, repeats the fall of desire into diminished ardor, of speech into writing, of dissemination into the compulsion to repeat, what Derrida elsewhere calls the “anamnesic dialectics, as the repetition of the *eidos*, [which] cannot be distinguished from self-knowledge and self-mastery” (“Plato’s” 122). If, as Freud suggests in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, the compulsion to repeat can ultimately be traced to a compulsion to complete the repetition in death, then the opening of history to the reassurances of

light, truth, knowledge, and all that is signaled by the “anamnesic dialectics” will also bind that history, that self-knowledge, and that self-mastery still closer into the feared submission to the law that is death. Derrida’s first approximation to the problem is to recall the opposition established by Hegel and discussed by Paul de Man “between remembrance as interiorization and a thinking memory which can also be linked to technical and mechanical hypomnesia” (*Mémoires* 35–36). Derrida thus establishes a sharp distinction between recollection and memorization, a distinction he later discusses schematically (70–71) as the division, according to the dictates of “implacable law,” between good, living, and creative memory (anamnesis or *mneme* implicitly related to the faculty of remembering, the ability to gather together thoughts) and bad, death-dealing, and mechanical memory (*hypomneme*, most clearly identifiable with memory’s spatial inscription, the memoirs or autobiographies that serve, dangerously, as a concrete balance sheet of a life). In Martín Gaité’s novel, a parallel fundamental bifurcation of memory obtains, opposing the sterile repetition of the dead knowledge shut up in books to the adaptable, living discourse of a creative memory. On the one hand is memory, the power of a living, creative knowledge; on the other, the finished forms, the memoirs, the monumental histories of the just-ended Franco dictatorship, the created objects, mere representations, products of a sinister “memento,” the poison pill of an artificially stimulated mind.

The issue is not so simple, however, as this first approximation may suggest. The dichotomy established for pedagogic reasons must break down if it is not to repeat naively the “fall” into a heliocentric metaphysics, and indeed Derrida is careful to clarify that “these two memories are doubtless not *opposed* to one another; they are not two”; neither are they dialectical, and the implacable law that defines boundaries gives way before “a memory already ‘older’ than *Gedächtnis* [mechanical memory] and *Erinnerung* [interiorized remembrance]” (*Mémoires* 70–71). In evoking this “older memory,” Derrida is once again telling a story, or recalling a myth, of older times and older laws, abstractly sketching out the move made by Freud’s evocation of Plato, or Plato’s evocation of a still more ancient myth, a tactic magisterially analyzed by Derrida himself in his deconstruction of Plato’s ambiguously subversive metaphor of the *pharmakon*, the poison/cure gift for the sad infirmities of memory.

Poisonously, paradoxically, the only record of living memories (Plato's of Socrates, Derrida's of the Platonic *pharmakon*, Martín Gaité's of a girlhood under Franco) is now that record transfixed in the memorial text. Furthermore, while those mechanically (re)produced simulacrum poisonously corrupt the "truth" of interiorized memory, they also provide the most efficacious stimulation for imaginative recall. In Martín Gaité's metaphor, "los verdaderos esfuerzos de imaginación son los que tiene uno que hacer para bordar en las telas usadas y con los hilos que se tengan a mano" "the true efforts of imagination are those one has to make to embroider on secondhand cloth with the threads one happens to have on hand" (*Cuento* 389).

Recent studies of *The Back Room* that focus on the historical (or "autobiographical") aspect of the novel display a profound misunderstanding of the complexities of memory and recall in the never-ending tale. Martín Gaité consciously rejects the strangling binaries of light and dark, theory and fantasy, truth and error that reveal the presence of a heliocentric metaphysics. In the opening of the novel she suggests the ambiguities that will ensue by following the epigraph from Bataille with a dream—or daydream—which immediately poses the problem of specifying the relation between observation and interpretation, one of the book's central issues. Notably, while the chaotic form of the first chapter mimics the flow of dream thoughts, the presence of readers (whose complicity with the dreamer-narrator-author is tacitly recognized in the tissue of allusion and literary reference) signals the book's representative quality. This text is a *narration* of dream, a representation of the dreamwork, with its secondary revisions and distortions, a performance already structured and formed. In this manner, the first chapter extends an invitation to transgress that almost immediately reveals its fraudulence, preserving the distance necessary to communication through the playful materialization of desire: "He dicho 'anhelo y temor' por decir algo, tanteando a ciegas . . . ; las palabras son para la luz, de noche se fugan . . ." "I have said "desire and fear" just to hear myself talk, groping along blindly. . . . Words are for the light. At night they flee . . ." (10; 2). "I have said"—the whispers in the dark, the acoustic form, cede almost immediately to the narration of an event now past, already distanced by reflection, to a record of experience that can only be written: "Words are for the light." The text, which presents itself as spoken, is

nevertheless written, a parody of the historical compulsion to repeat, shining *eidōs* compromised by an ardor diminished in the inadequacies of vocabulary. And yet, these are the materials the author has on hand, and behind the historical simulacrum of light hides the mythical (biblical) primacy given to light and, perhaps more important in a woman's text, the disguised female imperative "to give light," which in Spanish is a synonym of "to give birth." Like the narrator, the words themselves flee; they take refuge in the back rooms of the dictionary, and they play games of hide-and-seek at night. Thus, if the novel that follows this dream sequence takes the *form* of a conversation, or of a series of conversations, the growing pile of folios testifies to the significance of the *writing*, which becomes, willy-nilly, the silent influence for dissemination within and outside the text. Yet, the implicit identification of the folios with the printed (repeated and infinitely repeatable) novel poses the question of the repetition compulsion, with its attendant bewitchment by the stilled forms of death.

The plot (inadequate form) must integrate the shaping value of the force that gives it power, that creates the narrative out of desire, that subverts it through a careful designation of the lack unencompassable by mere vocabulary. The parameters of the playing field of form and force in this novel are designated by the choice of the most recognizably fictive of all fictional genres, the fantastic, radically allied with the "historical" tale of a "real" person. The plot requires the fiction of a dialogue between two characters, the form traditionally sanctioned for telling the self's story—the imperative desires, the diminished ardor—at least since Freud. A further complication: as Jean Alsina comments, "dans la 'conversation' qui fait partie du rêve (?) fantastique de *El cuarto*, le *Yo* narrateur et le *Yo* acteur sont confondus, jusqu'à la rupture dans le récit où ce *Yo* devient une troisième personne: *ella*. . . . [O]n ne peut qu'être frappé par cet immense travail, (travail au sens où pour les freudiens il y a travail du rêve) . . ." "In the "conversation" that belongs to the fantastic dream (?) of *The Back Room*, the narrative *I* and the active *I* are confused, until the break in the story where this *I* becomes a third person: *she*. . . . [O]ne cannot but be struck by this immense work (work in the sense used by Freudians in speaking of "dreamwork") . . ." (329, 330). Dreamwork, we recall, is itself a process, a form of thinking and storytelling, in which all the components are in a constant state of constitution,

distortion, dissimulation, and dissimulation of distortion. The structure of dream, “I” becoming “she,” is ambiguously intimated in the form of the dreamwork, not in its semantic content, not in the “desire and fear” emptied of all meanings except the strictly denotational, but rather in the dynamic ongoing process, of dreaming, of writing.

In this Freudian interminable analysis, this never-ending story, the mysterious man in black, Alejandro, plays the role of the sympathetic psychoanalyst or, alternatively, the ideal reader.⁵ Alejandro is the facilitator of the work—dreamwork, novel, psychoanalytic case history—but it is difficult for the reader to move without equivocation beyond identifying this general function as a motivating influence for the text. Absolute knowledge (a dangerous concept) of his character is denied, even though the man in black is central to the text. Critical consensus assures us that he needs and demands interpretation; critical disagreement reveals that a definitive interpretation is impossible. He has been variously identified as a Todorovian theorist, the ideal interlocutor, the hero of a *novela rosa* (a form of popular romantic novel), a character from the imaginary isle of Bergai, a detective, the correspondent of the author’s sewing-basket love letter, a (hermeneutic) literary critic, the reader’s ideal textual representation, a Jungian alter ego, a Lacanian Other, a figure from the engraving *Luther’s Discussion with the Devil* brought to life, a Kafkaesque creature, the narrator’s muse, her guide into the underworld of the self (a modern role-reversal Beatrice to the narrator’s Dante), a psychopomp, the devil, or simply the interviewer he announces himself to be.⁶ The problem of undecidability among these many conflicting interpretations becomes one of the most representative and most puzzling problems of the text. But apart from the intrinsic interest his figure arouses, Alejandro is clearly symptomatic of an even larger problem. We can never be sure if the meaning we assign to an event is correct. Always, the suspicion remains that any meaning we derive from the text is due to a misinterpretation, a misreading. The coherent text, as Freud recognizes in his study of dreams, can only be a fiction, but such a fiction, posited and ambiguously undone, encodes the uncomfortable reality of the text. The situation is rendered even more disturbing by the interpenetration of a fantastic text with an overtly autobiographical story line, and the entire system of meaning is jeopardized. On one level the tale demands a fantastic reading; on another it prohibits

that interpretation. An impossible proliferation of mutually contradictory meaning systems undermines any systematic effort of analysis.

The story of Alejandro and the narrator (real or fictive) is allied to the first story, the story of the narrator’s dream (or reverie). These two stories are intimately interrelated with a third story, the autobiographical tale of a young woman growing up under Franco. Alejandro, the nebulous man in black, shares the name of the Greek conqueror who cast his shadow over the known world, and this half-sinister figure appears out of the death of General Franco, whose shadowy presence defined Spain’s compulsion to repeat an ideological structure sanctioned in the official reconstructions of historical truth. “¿Qué busco ahora?” ‘What am I searching for now?’ asks the narrator rhetorically. “Ah, ya, un rastro de tiempo, como siempre, el tiempo es lo que más se pierde” ‘Ah, yes, a trace of time. As always, time is what most often gets lost’ (33; 25). On another occasion she speaks of fleeing “hacia atrás, a los orígenes” ‘backwards, to the origins’ (135; 133). Yet this flight through time from fantasy into the most profound reality of the origin of the self is as much a fantasy of flight as are the escapist flights into fantasy that typify her response to the constraints of civil war and post-civil war Spain. In addition, as Joan Lipman Brown notes, “for Martín Gaité’s generation of Spanish children, childhood memories are necessarily unreal because they deal with an era which is without parallel” (19). The narrator seeks traces of a lost time although she is aware that such traces cannot be found, perhaps never existed. “Franco había paralizado el tiempo” ‘Franco had paralyzed time,’ she meditates (133; 130); time itself has been detained by the strength of personality in a seemingly eternal game of red light, green light, confronting the narrator with the problem of a power so persistent and self-contained that it cannot be affected by life or the passage of time. Ironically, only in fantasy can the fixed time of this origin be breached. Even so, the narrator hints, until the unthinkable moment of Franco’s death, his mastery over time left no room for the narrative “once upon a time” of fantastic tales, whether closed or never-ending. Like a black hole whose effect cannot be resisted, he left no room (back room or front room) for tracing time to its origin, no room for the trace (“rastros”) from which life itself emerges. Even after his death, when “el tiempo se desbloqueaba” ‘time unfroze’ (137; 134), the driving intensity of released time forces the nar-

rator into a process of reinscription. "Ya no me acuerdo como era el libro que quería escribir" 'I no longer remember what the book I wanted to write was like,' says Martín Gaité near the end of *El cuento de nunca acabar* (277), displacing memory with the forgetfulness that allows writing to continue. Similarly, *The Back Room*, a book that could be many books, is constructed under the sign of erasure—here, of an unforgettable name. Although not written in mourning for Franco or Franco's time, the novel is certainly written, ambiguously, in memoriam, and although "the disappearance of the Face or the structure of repetition can thus no longer be dominated by the value of truth" (Derrida, "Plato's" 168), the play of the other continues to dominate the written account: narration produces time, the once upon a time; it is Franco's time.

The narrative reconstruction of these juvenile traces bifurcates into opposing representative fantasies: the "Women's Section" of Franco's Falangist party and the much-loved romantic novels, the *novelas rosas*. The first of these tracings, developed to a lesser extent, is nevertheless telling. In her reflections on the education (indoctrination) of young women in Franco's Spain, the narrator chillingly depicts a society in which the women are "situada[s] en ese espacio adjetivo al hombre" 'situated in that adjectival space with respect to man' (Matamoro 589). The propaganda touches every aspect of the daily life of the ideal Falangist wife and mother:

[C]umpliríamos nuestra misión de españolas, aprenderíamos a hacer la señal de la cruz sobre la frente de nuestros hijos, a ventilar un cuarto, a aprovechar los recortes de cartulina y de carne, a quitar manchas, tejer bufandas y lavar visillos, a sonreír al esposo cuando llega disgustado, a decirle que tanto monta monta tanto Isabel como Fernando, que la economía nacional y que el ajo es buenísimo para los bronquios. . . . (96)

We would fulfill our mission as Spanish women, we would learn to make the sign of the cross on our children's foreheads, to air out a room, to make use of every last scrap of cardboard and meat, to remove stains, to knit mufflers and wash window curtains, to smile at our husband when he came home in a bad mood, to tell him that *tanto monta monta tanto Isabel como Fernando*,⁷ that domestic economy helps to safeguard the national economy and that garlic is excellent for the bronchial tubes. (90)

Always smiling, smiling, smiling, silent and cheerful, the young women prepare for their predestined

happy ending, while criticizing "las frescas" 'bold women' and "las locas" 'the madwomen' who refuse to conform to expectations and who "andaban bordeando la frontera de la transgresión" 'were skirting the boundaries of transgression' (125; 121).

Already as a young girl, the narrator realizes that the ideal of Spanish womanhood promoted by the Women's Section can only be achieved through a ruthless and systematic negation of felt reality. As a girl, she longed for romantic escape, idolized the stylized "bold women" of popular music, and even now, as an adult, she tries to believe that her criticism insulated her from the absurdities of her education. But, as she later notes, "es difícil escapar a los esquemas literarios de la primera juventud, por mucho que más tarde se reniegue de ellos" 'it is difficult to escape from the literary schemes of one's earliest years, however hard one tries later to renounce them' (141; 138). The results of her early indoctrination are similarly durable. At one point in the novelistic present, the narrator makes tea for her unexpected guest: "[C]ojo [el termo] y lo coloco sobre una bandeja, junto al azucarero, dos vasos, dos cucharillas, y dos servilletas. Terminada la breve faena, miro al espejo, sonriendo" 'I pick up [the thermos] and put it on a tray alongside the sugar bowl, two glasses, two spoons, and two napkins. Once I've completed this brief task, I look at the mirror, smiling' (98; 91–92). The company smile for the man in black—an interloper who could be the devil—reflects the archetypal attitude of the ideal woman defined by the Women's Section. Once upon a time is still the present.

For the young woman of the Women's Section, the typical escape from this stifling pressure of social conformity is the romantic novel, a safe transgression. In the tacit opposition of fictions (the fiction of the ideal Spanish woman, the fiction of the romantic adventure) within the framework of the "real," autobiographical recollection of the past, the narrator adopts as a strategy the dichotomy of reality and fiction that the entire decorum of the novel otherwise undermines. Juan Goytisolo formulates the problem in a related manner when he says, "La realidad es nuestra única evasión" 'Reality is our only escape' (qtd. in Matamoro 595), making of realism the supreme form of rebellion against a system felt as false, artificial, fictitious. The degree of distortion and dissimulation is rendered undecidable by the effects of narrative desire working on experience. Once again the work of the novel approximates dreamwork, reminding us that

the traces of the past are recoverable only through the figurative tracings of language that repeat and replace (dislocate and displace) the grounding elements of the fantasy.

The romantic novel, pure fantasy, is one such grounding element, the inescapable literary scheme, the narrator's entry into Wonderland: "[S]aqué el espejito, me miré y me encontré en el recuadro con unos ojos ajenos y absortos que no reconocía. . . . [P]ensaba angustiosamente que no era yo. Lo mismo que aquel sitio no era aquel sitio. Y tuve como una premonición: 'Esto es la literatura. Me está habitando la literatura'" 'I took out the little pocket mirror, looked at myself, and spied in the rectangle the eyes of someone I didn't recognize, staring at me intently. . . . And I had a sort of premonition: "This is literature. I am being possessed by literature"' (49; 43). And literature, like reality in postwar Spain, is composed of a "tejido de verdades y mentiras" 'fabric of truth and lies' impossible to unravel (22; 15). Thus, the novel opens with the narrator curled up on a couch "imitando la postura de aquellas mujeres [de novela rosa]" 'imitating the posture of those women [of romantic novels]' (13; 6)—waiting (like those women) for the phone, smoking (like those women) a Turkish cigarette, awake (like those permanently wakeful women), mirroring to the minutest detail the attitudes and postures of those women of a rejected literary tradition. But she has seen herself mirrored in those women, doubled in this literary reflection of their literary poses, and as the novel progresses the mirror fractures: "mi imagen se desmenuza y se refracta en infinitos reflejos" 'my image shatters and is refracted in infinite reflections' (167; 166–67). Marcia L. Welles suggests that "the structure of *El cuarto de atrás* is itself a playful game of mirrors" (202), and the mirrors of the romantic novel complement those of the Women's Section, mirrors of the (distorted, invented) past that reflect an equally fictive present. The mirror game of *The Back Room*, however, reflects not the psychologically structured Lacanian Other that Welles hints at but a more literary double—the self inhabited by literature, a self that is nothing but words, the internalization of a printed page. Martín Gaité's critique of the romance-novel addict offers a pertinent reflection of the protagonist of this novel: "A mis paisanas no se las tachaba de noveleras porque leyeron pocas o muchas novelas, sino porque en su deseo de escapar de la realidad se adivinaban resonancias de aquellas otras heroínas de las

novelas, que se perdieron por leer novelas y soñar con vivirlas" 'I labeled my country women as "noveleras" not because they read few or many novels but because in their desire to escape from reality they discovered in themselves resonances of those other novelistic heroines, who were lost by reading novels and dreaming of living them out' (*Cuento* 89). Through their chosen literature, these women escape reality but also invent and reflect it; Madame Bovary and her like are heroines, models to be emulated and not object cases warning of the dangers their readers court. The romance, then, "only advances more deeply into the intangible density of the mirror, calls forth the double of this already doubled writing" (Foucault 56). A "mujer novelera" is not only a romance-novel addict but also a gossip, a woman interested in novelties and attentive to the latest fads. Ominously, she merges with her opposite, the archetypal Women's Section follower, as does Martín Gaité's narrator, who, in her youth, admired Elisabeth Mulder and envied the very name as well as the imaginative talent of the author of her favorite *novelas rosas*: "[M]e hubiera gustado más llamarme Esperanza o Esmeralda o Elisabeth, como Elisabeth Mulder, estaban de moda los nombres con E. largos y exóticos. . . ." 'I would rather have been named Esperanza or Esmeralda or Elisabeth, like Elisabeth Mulder. Names with long exotic E's were popular' (24; 17). As an adult waiting by the phone, *The Back Room*'s Martín Gaité is the Elisabeth Mulder of the title pages of innumerable romantic tales, whose authors' faddishly popular exotic names suggest the escapist content of their works.

For author-character "Carmen Martín Gaité" the mirror is a crucial, more than metaphorical referent. It is a curious, if unsurprising, reflection on her indebtedness to a rejected tradition that a parallel image serves Mulder, the only romance novelist cited by name. In *The Back Room*, the mirror of art reveals an unexpected self; in Mulder's *Luna de las máscaras* 'Moon of the Masks,' Marcos uses his artistic talent to reveal in his masks the inner truth of the self hidden by the social masks of polite interaction.⁸ His discovery of the true face of his actress wife, Natalia, inspires him to produce his masterpiece. The face portrayed, however, is the unacceptable mask of Natalia's betrayal with Marcos's best friend, a mask that the actress refuses to acknowledge since she has long since come to believe in her own self-imposed mask of "autenticidad" 'authenticity' in her marriage. The mask

of Natalia becomes, then, both true to the woman and fundamentally false and, revealingly, more true to the bitterness Marcos feels than to the guilt she rejects. The mask (or in Martín Gaité's terms, the mirror) is thus both unreal (as artifact) and more real (as a means of psychic discernment) than the face it reflects, but again, no simple dichotomy applies since reality and fantasy are relative terms, constantly shifting in unexpected ways. Thus, too, "Martín Gaité's" refraction of "Elisabeth Mulder" into the role of queen of the romance genre is similarly tinged with distortion. While Mulder has "un tema único, el tema por excelencia: el amor" 'a single theme, the theme par excellence: love' (Valbuena Prat 295), her romantic tales mediate between realism and sentimentalism, recognizing both the role of the interior world and the "valor en cuanto a lo testimonial" 'the value of the testimonial' (Rubio 65)—a conflict likewise crucial to the narrator of *The Back Room*. Other refractions of fiction into fiction abound. The first word of *Luna de las máscaras*, "Alejandro," comes as a distinct shock to the reader who, conditioned by other literary schemes, approaches Mulder through Martín Gaité. Significantly, in both novels Alejandro is the pivotal figure in a melodramatically developed love triangle involving an artistic personality and what Mulder calls one of those "seres que jamás conducen al desorden, el error o la miseria. Sólo, de vez en cuando, conducen al suicidio" 'beings that never cause disorder, error, or misery. They only, once in a while, lead to suicide' (28). The artist, embittered by betrayal, commits suicide in Mulder's version of the tale; in Martín Gaité's post- or anti-*novela rosa* she merely falls asleep.

It would be a mistake, however, to see in the flight from melodrama at the end of *The Back Room* a flight from fiction. The narrator continues to flee, and by her refuge in sleep (finally!) she flees from one literary scheme to another, from the formulas of the *novela rosa* back into one of the most stereotyped forms of fantasy through the overused convention that dismisses the fantastic elements as the inscription of the protagonist's dream. Alejandro, at least temporarily, seems merely the invention of a literary mind at rest. Yet the reassurances of form are almost automatically suspect in such a self-conscious work. The too easy recourse to codified memories of art sounds suspiciously like wish fulfillment and very soon reveals its fraudulence.

In this text so refracted and distorted by literary reflection, comfortable hypotheses are inevitably

doomed. Ominously, a key element of the fantastic encounter reappears in the waking "reality," and the misreading redoubles on itself to reflect another story that shows the error of the first, "correct" interpretation. It is, furthermore, entirely appropriate that Alejandro's "little gold box" of encapsulated memory serves a double function as the uncanny harbinger of fantasy as well. For it is essential to this novel that both history and fiction be revealed as fantasy; both are equally escapist, and in rejecting them the novel conflates what Derrida describes as a decisive structural opposition of Platonic thought: the subtle, almost imperceptible distinction "between knowledge as memory and nonknowledge as remembrance, between two forms and two moments of repetition: a repetition of truth (*aletheia*) which presents and exposes the *eidos*; and a repetition of death and oblivion (*lethe*) which veils and skews because it does not present the *eidos* but re-presents a presentation, repeats a repetition" ("Plato's" 135). Derrida later writes his *Mémoires*, which is pointedly not a story or a personal memoir but a memorial, written out of bereavement for the death of Paul de Man, and Martín Gaité constructs her story, which also refuses the form of the memoir, through a memory not bereaved but freed by death. But is the written word always already a dead repetition, the repetition of a death (Franco's death or the anticipated death of the self), the repetition of a truth that, like the "truths" of the Women's Section, achieves its status through constant repetition? Neither flight into the past nor flight into fiction provides an answer; neither offers a true escape from the imperative of repetition that structures the individual life.⁹

Experience, real or fantasized, repeats itself in language, and language, we recall, is also in flight in this novel, scurrying off to the back rooms of the mind like the cockroach that scurries to a refuge in the dark corners of the kitchen. It is through language, nevertheless, that the narrator sets up a series of apparent polarities that define the field of conflicting forces within the novel—memory and forgetfulness, history and literature, true and false, reality and fantasy—polarities that, in a post-Franco compensatory adjustment for a half-century of literary deprivation, are suddenly, ambiguously, flung together in a celebration of riches. X versus y seems to become x equals y, or suddenly, still more disturbingly, it becomes impossible to evaluate the terms "x," "y," "versus," "equals."

Mixed feelings accompany such blurring of categories: “[E]so era lo terrible, la ambigüedad” ‘That was the worst part: the ambiguity’ (52; 46), she comments at one point. Later she seems to concur with her visitor’s condemnation of her historical works as “una traición más grave a la ambigüedad” ‘an even more serious betrayal of ambiguity’ (55; 49). She agrees that “la literatura es un desafío a la lógica” ‘literature is a defiance of logic’ but finds in it a refuge from her feeling of drowning in her dreams (55–56; 49–50). During her adolescence, she “aborrecía la historia y además no me la creía, nada de lo que venía en los libros de historia ni en los periódicos me lo creía” ‘scorned history, and furthermore . . . didn’t believe a word of what was recounted in history books or in the newspapers’ (54; 48), but history too becomes a refuge, at least until the mountain of papers threatens to engulf her once again. Taking refuge—whether from the bombardments of the War of Succession (1700–14) or the civil war of 1936–39 (60; 53–54)—is a response deeply conditioned into body and mind.

Ambiguity, terrible ambiguity, can also become a refuge. In her conversation with Carola, that other self refracted from a *novela rosa*, Carmen suddenly recalls the unfinished novel about Alejandro (146; 141)—a novel that could be either the pile of folios growing on the table or the *novela rosa* she began in her youth, or both. When she makes a mental note to tell her visitor about the “libro sobre los usos amorosos de postguerra” ‘book on the romantic customs of the postwar era’ (97; 91), the reader suffers the same dislocation as the narrator does when Alejandro mentions the bombings: which war and which “romantic customs”? Those of the eighteenth or those of the twentieth century? Or those of her childhood dreamland of Bergai—which projects a fantasy apart from the war? Or perhaps the book she mentions is neither the completed historical study nor a projected one but instead a fictional meditation entitled *The Back Room*.

By allowing such ambiguities to persist, Martín Gaité refuses to crystallize opposing polar forces, though, like Freud’s, her “views have from the first been *dualistic*” (18; 53). Her polarities and dualisms are in constant flux, continually reasserting themselves only to break down. Her typical modes in this novel are evasion, refuge, and only occasionally resistance. Such modes do not anticipate emancipation from history or fiction—a futile endeavor in any event and also a dangerous one, as Derrida notes: “Emancipation from this language [of

phenomenology] must be attempted. But not as an *attempt*. . . . Rather as the dream of emancipation” (*Writing* 28). Derrida, Freud, Martín Gaité, and Foucault all converge on this central issue of the dream, a displaced figure of memory, which has, furthermore, effaced itself in literature. Henceforth, as Foucault writes, “dreams are no longer summoned with closed eyes, but in reading. . . . The imaginary . . . is born and takes shape in the interval between books” (90–91). For Martín Gaité the dream of emancipation is bound to the dream of writing. In *The Back Room*, the dream takes the form of a library, or refuge, of effaced recollection: “me parece ver alzarse un castillo de paredes de papel, mejor dicho de papeles pegados unos a otros, a modo de ladrillos, y plagados de palabras y tachaduras de mi puño y letra” ‘I seem to see a castle with paper walls rising in the air, or rather, a castle made of papers stuck together like bricks and full of words and deletions in my very own hand’ (56; 50). This paper castle, which can be called up in the imagination through flight to Bergai, to Cúnigan, to the *novelas rosas* of Elisabeth Mulder, to historical reconstruction, is both insubstantial and solid, protecting and imprisoning the narrative “I.” It cues remembrance while effacing memory, building itself out of the functional forgetfulness of the modern novelist-historian whose dependence on the written word threatens to overwhelm her: “¡Qué aglomeración de letreros, de fotografías, de cachivaches, de libros! . . . [L]ibros que, para enredar más la cosa, guardan dentro fichas, papelitos, telegramas, dibujos, texto sobre texto . . .” ‘What a hodgepodge of posters, photographs, odds and ends, books! . . . Books that, to confuse things even more, have dates, slips of paper, telegrams, drawings inside them, text upon text. . . .’ (16; 9).

Yet this disorder provides a protective barrier against reality, a space for dream, a source of comfort: “Los letreros nos orientan, nos ayudan a escapar de abismos y laberintos . . .” ‘[S]igns and labels orient us, help us escape from abysses and labyrinths . . .’ (18; 10–11). The paper castle saves her from the labyrinths, provides an intelligible guide to locate the magical dreamland of Cúnigan “entre el laberinto de calles y letreros que componen el mapa de Madrid” ‘somewhere in the labyrinth of streets and signs that make up the map of Madrid’ (79; 73). Text upon text: classics of Spanish literature and *novelas rosas*, history texts and the text of the history of her personal past, Martín

Gaité's literary oeuvre and this novel as a novel in progress. The refuge of the redoubled text restores a certain balance to thought, and if the bookishness of the text upon text of this work suggests the trope of a Cervantine vision, in Martín Gaité there can be no emancipation from the bookish conception of reality.¹⁰ Bound into the dream of the text, the self can only hope to orient herself by the "signs" provided for her guidance, can only situate herself within the field of relations given by the master plot of her life: neither reality nor fantasy but an oscillation between them, a knowing acceptance of the undecidability of her project. And if the dream is a night vision, the dreamwork, the novel, despite the evidence of the pile of folios, takes form by day. "Las palabras son para la luz" 'Words are for the light,' says Martín Gaité (10; 2); "force is not darkness," says Derrida (*Writing* 28).

Text upon text. In Juan Goytisolo's novel *Reivindicación del Conde don Julián* (*Count Julian*), the old scholar don Alvaro expires in the arms of the master librarian of the Tangier Spanish library. "Cu-cu-cu," he stammers, dying, and Julián, the traitor, the desecrator of books, interprets: "¿cuna, culebra, culpa, cupletista, cubil, curandero?" 'cradle, serpent, guilt, ballad singer, lair, medicine man?' or, more terribly yet, "cuclillo" 'cuckoo bird' (181). In Martín Gaité's novel there is a submerged echo of this mordant series of words beginning with C, transposed into the context of a feminine experience: "Con la C. de mi nombre, tres cosas en C., primero una casa, luego un cuarto, luego una cama" 'With the C of my name, three things beginning with C, first a house, then a room, then a bed' (*Cuarto* 11). The series is cumulative, and throughout the novel this collector of "cachivaches" 'odds and ends' adds to the studied disorder: "casa," "cuarto," "cama," "cuento" 'house,' 'room,' 'bed,' 'story' (22); "cuarto," "casa," "cama," "corazón" 'room,' 'house,' 'bed,' 'heart' (24-25); "casa," "cuarto," "cama," "copla de Conchita" 'house,' 'room,' 'bed,' 'a song by Conchita' (150-51); "Carola" (159); the omnipresent "cucaracha" 'cockroach' (28, 30, 57, 163, 208); the idyllic Cúnigan (73-98 passim); the "cartas . . . debajo del colchón" 'letters . . . under the mattress' (165) and the earlier "carta de amor" 'love letter' discovered when she is holding "la cesta de costura contra mi costado" 'the sewing basket against my side' (20). Even Alejandro, the man in black, spends his time in his "cuchitril . . . metido como una cucaracha con la famosa maleta" 'den, buried like a cockroach

with his infamous suitcase' (163), Alejandro, who gives Carmen the gift of a mysterious gold "cajita" 'pillbox.'

Of all the "cosas en C" it is the "cajita" that has attracted the most sustained critical attention. For Matamoro it is the "espacio cerrado que puede abrirse: discurso que puede interpretarse" 'closed space that can be opened: the discourse that can be interpreted' (597). Rodríguez interprets it as the means to develop an open history (79), and Sobejano emphasizes that it suggests "la solución (o remedio) de la memoria que aviva y desordena el pretérito" 'the solution (or remedy) of the memory that revives and disorders the past'—effectively an image of closure for an inconclusive history ("Enlaces" 221). Ruth El Saffar reminds us that the little pillbox is made of gold, "the symbol par excellence of transformation" (195).

For Freud, a box of any sort is a symbolic figure of femininity (12: 292), and the little jewel case Herr K. gives Dora represents for the analyst "a favorite expression for the same thing you alluded to not long ago . . . the female genitals, I mean" (7: 69). In the theme of the three caskets, as explicated by Freud, the third casket is death (12: 296). It makes little difference, I think, that the mysterious casket or pillbox in this work is gold rather than the traditional lead. The little gold box, with its ordering and disordering of memory, measures the elastic distance between life and death, the minuscule gap that separates the "cajita" and the "caja mortuoria" 'coffin' resuscitating or housing the cadaver and the buried language of memory.

The little gold box is filled with tiny, colorful memory pills, and when the mysterious visitor offers the narrator a choice of colors, she hesitates only marginally before plunging into this escape route that offers remembrance of the past without a unitary truth:

—¡Ah! . . . ¿Avivan la memoria?

—Bueno, sí, la avivan, pero también la desordenan, algo muy agradable. (107-08)

"Oh? . . . They restore one's memory?"

"Well yes, they restore it, but they also disorder it, something that's very pleasant." (102)

The narrator's willingness to sample the unknown drug is completely in character; her apartment is, after all, strewn with pharmaceuticals whose names she reviews in the opening pages of the novel as if

reciting a litany: “una pastilla para dormir—mogadón, pelson, dapaz—o para espabilarme—dexedrina, maxibamato—o para el dolor de cabeza—cafiaspirina, optalidón, fiorinal . . .” ‘perhaps a pill to put me to sleep—Mogadon, Pelson, Dapaz—or to wake me up—Dexedrine, Maxibamato—or to get rid of a headache—Cafiaspirina, Optalidón, Fiorinal’ (16–17; 9). Like those drugs, the memory pill has multiple and contradictory effects. An intoxicant that facilitates verbalization and conceptualization, it prolongs pleasure, but at the cost of a dangerous disorder: “me embriagaba de narcisismo” ‘I was drunk with narcissism’ (53; 47). The pill stimulates memories of a past not necessarily faithful to fact or even to verisimilitude, while at the same time it provokes a studied disorder, a feigned forgetfulness. This paradoxical junction provides the necessary condition for the fantastic autobiography blending invention and recall, offering the only possible aperture for speech, for writing.

The narrator’s acceptance of the tempting memory pill is, in any event, inevitable, though her rationale is circular. She takes the pill (the written word) to remember and reconstruct the past, but the pill, like other such pills, contributes to her confusion, to the disorganization of pharmaceuticals, to the unmanageable conglomeration of the texts upon texts scattered throughout the apartment. Therefore, she requires the pill as she requires the scattered notes and books, as a corrective nudge to the memory that the pill has disordered. Memory contaminated by writing seeks in writing the visible sign of the invisible memory trace, looks for the cure in the causative agent of the disease.

In “Plato’s Pharmacy,” Derrida focuses the issues of memory, writing, and speech in highly suggestive terms. He cites Socrates’s retelling of the myth of Thoth, the master of books, the trickster god of death, who offers King Thamus the gift of writing with the claim that his invention “is a recipe (*pharmakon*) for both memory and wisdom” (75). The king, unlike the narrator in *The Back Room*, rejects the memory drug of writing as a poison that would “produce forgetfulness in the souls of those who learned it” and foster the delusion of knowledge in conceited men (102). What Thoth presents as a drug to “restore one’s memory” in Martín Gaité’s terms would, as the king astutely observes, be far more likely to have the opposite effect.

Derrida adds a further complicating factor to his retelling and analysis of the myth. Thoth, he sug-

gests, does not act wholly in bad faith, nor is his gift entirely evil, and the king’s lack of insight tempers his astuteness. The two figures of memory are linked like the two effects of Martín Gaité’s pill. Derrida once again provides a clarifying insight: “Here is the *link* between these two figures of memory: the one [Mnemosyne] pretends to know how to tell stories—this is the diachronic allegory—and the other [Lethe] feigns amnesia—this is the synchronic allegory. But neither has a past anterior” (*Mémoires* 82). Two crucial issues need to be underlined in this formulation: the conscious or unwitting pretense of both remembrance and forgetting and the fundamental irrecuperability of the “past anterior.” Fiction and history, the two typical responses, leave these issues essentially unresolved, indeed, have no power to resolve them, since the terms of approach are also allegorical or mythic or use language that cannot escape mystification. “I cannot tell a story,” says Derrida. The “I,” the elided figure of autobiography, “cannot tell” but *writes* obsessively “a story” and so turns to myths, which are stories, or “family romances” (86). Neither can Martín Gaité tell a story. She writes, unendingly, many stories, not the least of which is the story of the telling of the story, the story of a drug that both stimulates memory and stimulates the narrator to “hacer memoria,” to “remember” but also to “make memory,” to invent it out of a willed or volitionless disorder.

“But what Plato *dreams* of is a memory with no sign,” says Derrida, “that is, with no supplement. A *mneme* with no *hypomnesis*, no *pharmakon*” (“Plato’s” 109). Martín Gaité’s dream, if dream it can be called, is quite different. Using Derrida’s terms, we would be correct to say that she dreams of the *pharmakon* itself, the equivocal sign that guarantees “the movement, the locus, and the play: (the production of) difference [or *différance*]” (127), the *pharmakon* that slips fact and fantasy into a provisionally constituted landscape where memory and dream merge with and echo each other. Is it possible to tell a story? Is a memory with no sign even theoretically conceivable? Such questions are precisely, if only in allegory, undecidable; that is, they are neither ambiguous (to use Martín Gaité’s term) nor paralyzed by alternation between two necessary but contradictory interpretations. Simply, undialectically, the untellable story of memory resists closure by any of memory’s figures. Such a story is of necessity never-ending. Derrida uses a poetic formulation to summarize the

dilemma of the Greek philosopher: "Plato gags his ears. . . . He listens, means to distinguish, between two repetitions. He is searching for gold" (170). Martín Gaité evokes a strikingly parallel image, and the little gold box glitters on the table at the end of her novel, undermining an entire meaning system.

The pillbox, the *cajita*, the most prominent of the things beginning with *C*, also functions as a displaced metonym for all those other *C* objects and for an astonishing array of other "coffers, boxes, cases, baskets, and so on" (Freud 12: 292), including the "cajetilla de cigarros" 'cigarette case' (69), the "cajón de un mueble con espejo" 'the drawer of a piece of furniture with a mirror' where the narrator nervously searches for a "cuaderno" 'notebook,' another *C* word, and Alejandro's false-bottomed suitcase full of secret papers (156). From her past, Carmen evokes the "aparador de castaño" 'chestnut sideboard' in the back room (188), the cadaver of her father's beloved black Pontiac identified in the "cementerio de coches" 'car cemetery' in Burgos (121), and the "baulito de hojalata" 'little tin chest' (44) that used to be her mother's treasure chest and that once held the narrator's love letters (38), her notes for stories (57; 50–51), and the journals of Bergai (195; 196).

The glittering gold pillbox tends to obscure the importance of one last "cosa en *C*" that is also a container: "la cesta de costura que fue de la abuela Rosario" 'the sewing basket that used to belong to grandma Rosario' (18; 11). This sewing basket, the object of last recourse in her search for hopelessly misplaced objects, has supplanted all the other abandoned boxes of her career, and, in the strange cacophony of the objects it encloses, Martín Gaité's narrator, like Goytisoló's don Julián, finds the keys to interpret or traduce the "cu-cu-cu" of all those things beginning with *C*. Its elements are constitutive, not of the autobiographical "I," but of the writing self, the textured self of the text upon text of the narrative dream. This box, far more closely than the pillbox, serves as the textual allegory for that other "cajón de sastre que era nuestra cabeza" 'confused mess (or tailor's box) that was our head' (*Cuento* 169). The basket contains: "carretes, enchufes, terrones de azúcar, dedales, imperdibles, facturas, un cabo de vela, clichés de fotos, botones, monedas, tubos de medicinas, allá va todo, enuelto en hilos de colores" 'spools of thread, elec-

tric plugs, sugar cubes, thimbles, safety pins, a candle end, snapshots, buttons, coins, tubes of medicine, everything imaginable, all tangled up in colored thread' (18–19; 11). It also holds, it seems, her supply of drugs (206; 206) and a love letter that might be real or might be literary apocrypha (23; 16). When the narrator trips over Todorov's indispensable book on the fantastic (19; 11) and spills the contents of the basket, all this varied cache becomes tangled together by the colored threads, the force that stitches together the disparate elements of the narrative. (Recall that one of Martín Gaité's most acclaimed works is titled *Retahílas*.)¹¹ This heterogenous collection repeats and reinforces those other disordered enumerations of books and of drugs, reinforcing as well the thread of the memory trace but without relinquishing the precious free play licensed by the *pharmakon*. Indeed, as Derrida remarks in a turn of speech characteristic of Martín Gaité, "the very oscillation of undecidability goes back and forth and weaves a text" (*Mémoires* 135). Appropriately, the critical image for this willed disorder of memory is not a flawlessly tailored garment or a smoothly woven textile or a scrap of dainty feminine embroidery. Instead, Martín Gaité's sewing basket has retained of its original function only the brightly colored, hopelessly knotted threads. Furthermore, by the very fact of being written into the novel, the ubiquitous little gold box, the "cajita dorada," has already joined the disorganized collection of things beginning with *C*, those frankly acknowledged fetish objects (12), and will soon find its place tangled in the threads of a female's narrative, lost in the writerly survivor of the back room, the sewing basket of a female heritage, the metaphor of the force that encloses and limits the interminable text. "But here, I think," as Freud says near the end of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (18: 58), "the moment has come for breaking off"—for breaking off the arbitrarily chosen knot rather than following the selected thread to its impossibly buried origin, since if we have learned anything from the never-ending story, it is to respect the crucial undecidability of a story that cannot be told but that has been allowed to disseminate in a critical "once upon a time."

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Notes

¹ The survey part of *Insula's* special issue *Diez años de la novela en España (1976–1985)* includes novelists as diverse as Luis Goytisolo, Juan Benet, José-Carlos Mainer, Darío Villanueva, Alvaro Pombo, Javier Marías, Isaac Montero, and Esther Tusquets. Translations are mine except where noted.

² The postwar period has been the subject of numerous major studies. Among the most helpful evaluations of the literary production of the Franco period are the books of Robert Spire and Gonzalo Sobejano. The post-Franco literary scene has not yet been studied systematically, but I am indebted to the valuable preliminary accounts included in essays by Manuel Durán (“Así”), David Herzberger, and Janet Pérez and to *Diez años*, the special issue of *Insula*.

³ Martín Gaité published three novels before *The Back Room*: *Entre visillos* ‘Between Shades’ (1957), a novel with a conventional plot saved from melodrama by the author’s ability to depict provincial society; *Ritmo lento* ‘Slow Rhythm’ (1962), which details the self-analysis of a man too lucid for contemporary society; and *Retahílas* ‘Series’ (1974), a dialogue, or series of interlocking monologues, between an aunt and a nephew keeping vigil as her grandmother dies. Martín Gaité has also written essays, short stories, novellas, and traditional historical studies, all of which she alludes to in *The Back Room*.

⁴ The narrator of the novel comments, “Desde la muerte de Franco habrá notado cómo proliferan los libros de memorias, ya es una peste. . . . Estoy esperando a ver si se me ocurre una forma divertida de enhebrar los recuerdos” ‘You may have noticed how many memoirs have come out since Franco’s death. They’re a real epidemic now. . . . I’m waiting to see whether I can hit on an entertaining way of stringing my memories together (128; 124. I cite page numbers for both the original Spanish and the translation by Helen Lane, which I occasionally modify). The word *divertida* is crucial here. Martín Gaité notes in her interview with Héctor Medina that etymologically *divertir* means a separation from habitual concerns, and she implies that her diversion will not only entertain but also redirect (191). To Celia Fernández she comments that her greatest achievement in this novel was precisely such a redirection away from the memoir (170).

⁵ See Freud: “Psychoanalysis was then first and foremost an art of interpreting. . . . [A] further aim quickly came into view: to oblige the patient to confirm the analyst’s construction from his own memory” (18; 18; my emphases). Alejandro’s role is in this sense very similar to that of the therapist whose professional

sympathy covers real constraint; the psychoanalyst demands a specific, coherent narration, and the patient is required to ratify the therapist’s reconstruction of a personal history.

⁶ The list is drawn from a number of critics, including Kathleen M. Glenn, Linda Gould Levine, Elizabeth Ordóñez, Julian Palley, Ruth El Saffar, Mirella d’Ambrosio Servodidio, Aleida Anselma Rodríguez, and Jean Alsina.

⁷ Helen Lane’s note: “The famous historical motto of Ferdinand and Isabella, proclaiming their rule as coequals” (90n).

⁸ Phyllis Zatlin has reminded me that the mirrors on old wardrobes are also called “lunas.” While Elisabeth Mulder does not develop this second meaning in her novel, Martín Gaité’s emphasis on both mirrors and old furniture is significant.

⁹ This inability to escape is especially poignant for Martín Gaité, who, as a trained historian, has produced impeccably researched historical accounts as well as novels, a fact recalled several times in *The Back Room*. I am grateful for the studies of Robert Spire and Ruth El Saffar for helping me think through this issue.

¹⁰ The relation of this novel to *Don Quijote* has been noted by many scholars, among them Palley (111), Durán (“*El cuarto*” 133), Glenn (151), and Levine (165).

¹¹ Martín Gaité explains her use of this word by reference to the *Diccionario de la Real academia española*—“serie de muchas cosas que están, suceden o se mencionan por su orden” ‘a series of many things that are, take place, or are mentioned in order’—and Corominas’s etymology—“Derivado de *hilo*; el primer componente es dudoso; quizás se trate de un cultismo sacado del plural *recta fila* = *hileras rectas*” ‘derived from thread; the first component is of questionable origin; perhaps it reflects a cultured term taken from the plural straight line = straight rows’ (*Retahílas* 9). The metaphor of writing as sewing is a constant in Martín Gaité’s work. In *El cuento de nunca acabar*, for example, she writes, “Ponerse a contar es como ponerse a coser. . . . Se trata de una postura correcta del cuerpo frente al desplegarse de la memoria. . . .” ‘To get ready to tell a story is like getting ready to sew. . . . It involves the correct posture of the body in front of the unfolding of memory’ (31). Later she speaks of the pleasure that “pertenece al telar donde iba bordando mi narración egocéntrica. . . . Yo era quien escogía el color de los hilos y los combinaba a mi albedrío” ‘belongs to the loom where I embroidered my egocentric narration. . . . I was the one who chose the color of the threads and combined them at will’ (237).

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