EL CUARTO DE ATRÁS BY CARMEN MARTÍN GAITE: SPACE, TEXT, AND INSCRIPTION

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In the novel *El cuarto de atrás*, the narrator suffers from insomnia and writer's block. Through the guidance of a mysterious midnight visitor, the man in black, she recalls her childhood and youth of Spain's Civil War and post-Civil War period and revisits uncompleted writing attempts. As the narrator speaks, the text we read is produced, and speech gives birth to writing.

Although there has been broad speculation on the identity of the midnight visitor,[1] critics have concentrated on his supportive role in liberating the narrator's speech. Linda Gould Levine interprets this character as the narrator's creative muse and guide (162). Kathleen Glenn observes that the conversation between narrator and visitor represents "the dialogue which, ideally, will take place between author and reader" (153-54). Robert C. Spires claims the novel's narrative process "centers on an attempt to free past, present, and future female subjects from their subjection to the various ideological apparatuses fashioned by the modern post-totalitarian state" (64). Estrella Cibreiro indicates that the presence of the mysterious caller allows for the development of a subversive narrative which condemns the "discurso mítico, unívoco de la posguerra" (38). Finally, Elizabeth Ordoñez notes that the character of the man in black becomes gradually "feminized" throughout the narrative, ultimately demonstrating supportive and maternal characteristics (95).

While not denying the liberating and maternal function of the midnight visitor, this paper will examine his restrictive and patriarchal characteristics. If the conversation between the narrator and her caller is viewed as a metaphor for the human subject's relationship with the Lacanian symbolic system, a negotiation takes place in which the protagonist temporarily adopts a submissive role in order to return to writing.[2] The following analysis of pre-textual space (mental facsimiles of the writing process which the narrator produces before the midnight visitor's arrival) and textual space (simultaneous inscriptions which occur as the dialogue between the two characters develops) demonstrates that the narrator's process of returning to writing necessitates a compromise to patriarchal constraints at specific moments in her process of telling.

In the first chapter of *El cuarto de atrás*, the novel's pre-textual space, the narrator reveals her problematic relationship with words. Blurred letters and images and memories from her youth float before her, yet she cannot access them: "las palabras son para la luz, de noche se fugan" (10). The narrator's

association of the "day" with words and the "night" with inaccessibility to words is reminiscent of Hélène Cixous' observation that binary pairs in Western Culture (such as activity/passivity and *logos/pathos*) refer back to the division between the masculine and the feminine (91). Identifying with the night and images, the narrator Carmen resigns herself to 'signing' her name to the beach scene by sketching images in the sand that begin with the letter *C*: *casa*, *cuarto*, *cama* (11). She subsequently identifies herself with the negative, feminine value of the masculine/feminine dichotomy.

This pre-textual space reflects the narator's intersubjective state in which she fluctuates between a preference for images (indicative of the Lacanian category of the Imaginary) and a longing for words (suggestive of the Lacanian Symbolic). On the one hand, the images of *casa*, *cuarto* and *cama* refer to the back room of her childhood, which she mentally confuses with her current environment: "Ha empezado el vaivén, ya no sé si estoy acostada en esta cama o en aquélla . . ." (12). The *cuarto* stands out in her mind not only as a focus of maternal attentions (her mother had meticulously selected the curtains, bedspreads, and pillow covers (13), but as a "metaphor for freedom" (Gould Levine 169); a part of the *casa* where as a child, the narrator could study, rest, and play (13). These images represent Lacan's *objet a*--external objects to which the human subject clings, even as it exists in the symbolic order.[3] Once lost, this space of freedom gives way to words of symbolic significance in the cultural context around her: "war", "poverty" and "survival." Interpreting the narrator's preference for images as a longing for lost objects, we are reminded of the Lacanian notion of the human subjects' dual relationship with the categories of the Imaginary and the Symbolic, which, according to Lacan's scheme, co-exist after the subject has entered into the symbolic order.[4]

On the other hand, the narrator's pre-text is also symbolically inscribed with words. If, as Lacan tells us, the ability to formulate sentences necessitates a compliance to social and psychic demands,[5] the fact that the narrator "signs" her name with images that harken back to specific words--instead of signing with a word itself--articulates her resistance to the cultural significance of these particular words. The symbolic function of the images *casa*, *cuarto*, *cama* is indicated in Josefina González' observstion that this series is "una secuencia de palabras que denotan objetos que han sido tradicionalmente relacionados con la realidad opresivamente cotidiana y enclaustrada de la mujer" (86),[6] and in Ruth El Saffar's observation that these images refer to "everyday, domesticated, containing objects . . ." (193).

The narrator's discovery of a mysterious, glowing letter in her sewing basket (20) further reveals the subjective ambiguity which characterizes all pre-textual inscription, whether linguistic or pictorial, in the space of the

narrator's apartment. Like the dancing letters in her mental pre-text, the handwriting in this document is virtually illegible. The narrator's name, written several times, reminds her of the image of sea waves in a way reminiscent of the beach scene: " . . . hay varios renglones sin más contenido que el de mi nombre, escrito entre guiones y en minúscula, con una ondulación que imita las olas del mar . . ." (21). The narrator imagines an unknown man--presumably the author of the letter--walking on this beach, which becomes littered with doll parts. As the man disappears from sight, she tells the reader: "Al hombre dezcalzo ya no se le ve" (23). The chapter ends as the narrator tumbles into bed, wishing for this imagined lover to come forth (25). The emergence of the man in black in the next chapter marks the beginning of the dissolution of subjective ambivalence in the pre-textual environment. From the first verbal exchange, the mysterious visitor establishes his authority through his privileged position to language. Awakened by the intimidating voice of the caller, "una voz masculina desconocida pronuncia mi nombre y mis apellidos con un tono seguro en el que se trasluce cierto enojo," the flustered narrator allows the caller to enter without questioning his claim that they had scheduled an interview for this time (27).

The visitor's entrance transforms the pre-textual space of the apartment into textual space. He takes the narrator through events related to her initiation into reading, writing, and romance, in a way reminiscent of Peter's Brook's analysis of Freud's essay "Beyond the Pleasure Principle." Brooks defines as "a going over again of a ground already covered. . . ." (97) If, as Brooks states, a "binding" of textual energy must take place in narrative so that the plot may end in the correct way without "short circuits" or false endings (101-3), the visitor allows the narrator to recount her experiences so that her story ends with the writing of a novel, and not, for example, with the loss of her childhood playroom, or with a sexual encounter between characters--an outcome typical of the *novelas rosa* that influenced her reading tastes as an adolescent.[7] As the visitor involves the narrator in the process of telling, she recalls failed writing attempts: unfinished research projects, undelivered love letters, the unended *novela rosa* which she and a friend attempted to write. In fact, immediately after she has exchanged her first words with the man in black, she notices a piece of paper peeking out of the typewriter: " . . . al hombre descalzo ya no se le ve" (31), the very sentence she has used to describe the barefoot stranger disappearing into the beach scene. She also notices that the visitor has placed his hat on a pile of about fifteen pages--the same amount that the reader of *El cuarto de atrás* has read (32). The brief exchanges between visitor and narrator have in effect validated the mental text constructed in the previous

chapter. Because of the presence of the man in black, the Word, *logos*, has already become flesh.

When the narrator discovers that writing has indeed taken place, she initially responds with fear and passivity. Spying a verse emerging from the typewriter, she depends upon her interlocutor to maintain her sanity: "Su presencia es mi único asidero real en estos momentos, no podría resistir que una nube de humo lo arrebatara de mi campo visual" (102). His words mezmerize her, and she would rather listen to his voice rather than find her own: ". . . que no deje de hablar, sus palabras hipnotizan como un cuento" (103). Furthermore, the narrator adopts the role of lover as another caller, Carola, accuses the narrator of writing love-letters to Alejandro (presumably the midnight visitor), and of signing them with a large *C*. Dumbfounded, the narrator recalls the *C* she had previously inscribed upon her mental beach scene. Shortly thereafter, when the visitor thanks the narrator for sharing her stories with him, she is overwhelmed with emotion. *Pathos* takes over as she loses access to *logos*: "La emoción me traba la garganta," she tells us, "parece una despedida. Nos estamos mirando como antes de que sonara el teléfono, Carola no existe, sólo él y yo" (198). Although no romance actually takes place, for a moment she *is* the lover of Alejandro, and Alejandro *is* the man in black before her. Lastly, when the raging storm outside frightens her, she clings to the visitor's neck. He reproaches her, and she admits, "Si, estoy temblando, soy tonta" (200), revealing her dependence upon him with this expression of self-negation.

Even as the visitor acknowledges the narrator's act of inscription, he exerts his authority over her words. The chapter ends as the interlocutor reads a pile of pages which her dialogue has generated (200). Ironically, she has no knowledge of the pages which she has inscribed until he identifies them as hers. When she asks who has written them, the visitor responds, "Supongo que usted. Se las puedo ordenar?" (200). This gesture of chronological ordering reminds us of Julia Kristeva's statement,"Father's time mother's species,' as Joyce put it

. . ." (190), when Kristeva links linear time with male subjectivity (190-91).[8] Although Ordoñez notes that the visitor asks permission first (95), *he* orders the text; after all, his presence has made it appear, his provoking has caused the narrator to speak, and his own hands lay implicit claim over the text as he puts the papers in chronological order.

In conclusion, textual inscription in *El cuarto de atrás* is dependent upon dichotomies: the presence of the midnight caller as interlocutor is necessary to overcome absence of text. Likewise, the narrator's submission to his authority allows him to guide her over ground already covered, so that this time the tale

may end in the novel we read. Although the man in black liberates her voice, he subverts the elements of action associated with the speaker and the characteristics of passivity associated with the listener, communicating the message that without him, the narrator cannot write. The resulting text comes through a compromise: the narrator must follow the interlocutor's lead, temporarily adopting a submissive role which at the same time avoids a short circuit that would end in sexual coupling. The compromise marks the narrator's partial yet inevitable submission to her cultural system, and illustrates the patriarchal aspects of the man in black.

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NOTES

[1] See Castillo 819 and Palley 112 for a listing of critical speculation on the identity of the man in black.

[2] Another Lacanian-based analysis of *El cuarto de atrás* includes Mirella d'Ambrosio Servodidio's article, which draws its observations from concepts such as *méconnaissance*, the Empty Word and the Full Word, and the Lacanian distinction between the *je* and the *moi*. Again, the visitor's role in liberating the narrator's speech underlies Servodidio's focus as she aims to demonstrate: "It is only with the publication of *El cuarto de atrás* that the *miscognition* of *El balneario* is substantially reversed by a gradual process of *recognition* and disclosure of truth (121)."

[3] For Lacan's notion of the *objet petit a* as representative of the original mother/child unity that the individual gives up at birth, see *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 198. For Kaja Silverman's critique "Birth, Territorization and Lack," see 151-57.

[4] Silverman 157 summarizes Lacan's idea that the Symbolic and the Imaginary coexist, the Imaginary existing before the human subject enters into the Symbolic.

[5] Here we infer knowledge of Lacan's discussion of the human subject's need to experience the different psychic crises in order to be integrated into society, the symbolic system, synonymous with language and patriarchal society. An integral part of this concept is the notion that language acquisition is marked by the internalization of gendered codes of behavior as dictated by

the social system. Lacan's discussion of the Symbolic and related themes is found in Lacan's "Function and Field of Speech and Language," *Écrits*, 65-68.

Also, Kaja Silverman's chapter, "The Subject" (126-92) in *The Subject of Semiotics*, gives an overview of essential Lacanian views and their Freudian correlations.

[6] On the topic of sketching a *casa*, *cuarto*, and *cama*, Josefina González offers a fascinating analysis from the perspective of ecofeminism. She presents the case that the act of sketching these images on the beach comprises part of a complex diagram of images beginning with C which challenges the traditional representation of oppression associated with these objects.

[7] On the topic of plot in *El cuarto de atrás* deviating from the love stories of the *novela rosa*, Gould Levine observes how Martín Gaite recreates "the external setting and details of her uncompleted *novela rosa*" (165), but emphasizes that the characters in this version transcend the "one-dimensional roles" of the original (165). On a similar note, Ordoñez remarks: "Though a degree of subtle and subdued sensuality from '*la novela rosa*' may pervade this encounter, there are limits to the degree of borrowing. . . . [I]t is no longer a thinly veiled ploy for the sexual pairing of two individuals" (91). Lastly, El Saffar sums up the role of the man in black as ". . . the lover who *could* involve C. in stories of passion, jealousy and violence. Yet he is also the listener, the interlocutor through whom creativity is awakened . . . ." (194)

[8] In "About Chinese Women," Kristeva clearly links the symbolic order--speech and language Western culture--with linear time and male subjectivity. See 152-53.

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