

**THREE PROUSTIAN SUBJECTS RECONFIGURED IN
EL CUARTO DE ATRÁS BY CARMEN MARTÍN GAITE:
RECOVERY OF THE PAST, SLEEP
AND THE NOVEL TO BE WRITTEN**

Herbert E. Craig
University of Nebraska at Kearney

Several critics and scholars have pointed out a literary relation between the French writer Marcel Proust and one of the outstanding novels by the Spanish author Carmen Martín Gaité, *El cuarto de atrás* (1978); but they have not examined the differences, as well as similarities, nor have they considered the possible interrelation between the Proustian facets of this work. Such will be precisely my intention here. Although Martín Gaité acknowledged in her "Bosquejo autobiográfico" that she had begun to read Proust during her summer course at the Université de Cannes in 1948 (17), and one can perceive his presence in at least one of her earlier works, *Retahílas*, I will limit my discussion here to *El cuarto de atrás*.

Already in his 1981 article "Carmen Martín Gaité, *Retahílas*, *El cuarto de atrás*, y el diálogo sin fin," Manuel Durán noted that both Proust and Martín Gaité were "novelistas autobiográficos" who sought to recover childhood through memory and used analysis to try to understand the past. Even though the professor from Yale believed that the Spanish novelist had used more fantastic elements than the French writer, he did not consider this difference to be crucial (238-39). Two years later in "*El cuarto de atrás*: Imaginación, fantasía, misterio; Todorov y algo más," Durán went on to say that the narrator of this novel seemed to be a "Proust 'de izquierdas', un crítico social, definidor de una época a la vez ñoña y cruel" (136). Such a statement implies

that Martín Gaité wished to show the perspective of a person critical of bourgeois society in Spain under Franco rather than the view of an upper middle-class gentleman in France, like Proust.

Clearly memory of the past played an essential role in the seven volumes of *A la recherche du temps perdu* (1913-27) and *El cuarto de atrás*. The protagonist-narrator in each case felt disconnected from the past and wished to recover it. For the Proustian narrator, time was lost through the normal process of forgetfulness, and the aging woman writer in the Spanish novel had become extremely forgetful. Neither character believed that one could recall at will the complete image of a previous time. In Proust's case, such conscious efforts were able to retrieve only fossilized depictions of the past, which he compared to old snapshots. Similarly Martín Gaité's character spoke with disdain of her brief notes concerning the past as "mariposas disecadas" (122).

Proust's ideas on involuntary memory have been studied in detail and exerted a major influence upon twentieth century literature and thought. As he explained in his last volume *Le temps retrouvé*, individual sensations in the present—the sound of a fork striking a plate or the rough feel of a napkin—were able to bring to mind an identical sensation from the past, as well as a myriad of other sensations associated with it through temporal or spatial contiguity. Likewise in Proust's first volume, the taste of madeleine dipped in tea called forth for the protagonist that same sensation experienced years before, along with the memory of the time and place when Tante Léonie had served him that mixture. Since through association the initial recovery of the past expanded in every direction, the narrator was indeed correct in asserting that all of Combray had come from his cup of tea. For Proust, this mechanism of involuntary memory was almost miraculous because it allowed him to recover extremely rich segments of a *temps perdu* ("lost time").

Such a mechanism based upon abstract sensory perception did not function in precisely the same way in *El cuarto de atrás* because the main character here was not affected by sensations of sound, touch, smell or taste. Nonetheless, her memory did react in an involuntary manner. On the day in which she received a mysterious male visitor in

ner apartment, went to her kitchen in search of tea and later spoke on the telephone to an unknown woman, specific words, ideas and objects in her presence allowed her also to recover in detail forgotten moments from her past.

Because of a visual stimulus she perhaps came closest to Proust when in the kitchen she happened to see herself in an old mirror, which may have come from her grandparents' apartment in Madrid. Due to her negative attitude toward cleaning, seeing a rag in her hand brought to mind two distinct stages from her past:

[M]e veo reflejada con un gesto esperanzado y animoso en el espejo de marco antiguo [. . .]. La sonrisa se tiñe de una leve burla al darse cuenta de que llevo una bayeta en la mano; a decir verdad, la que me está mirando es una niña de ocho años y luego una chica de dieciocho [. . .] resucita del fondo del espejo [. . .]. (74)

Through this spontaneous recollection of two of her former ways of being, Martín Gaité's protagonist recovered several experiences that she had undergone with her family when they visited the parents of her father in Madrid.

Although the protagonist of *El cuarto de atrás* also had another memory experience when she looked at a mirror in her bedroom and recalled being an actress at the time of her university studies in Salamanca (176), a second piece of furniture in the kitchen played an even larger role in the novel with regard to the past. This *aparador* ("sideboard"), which had belonged to her mother's father and traveled with him when he moved, had been located in the dining room of an old house in Cáceres, which that family called *el cuarto de atrás*. But more importantly it was later found in "the room in the back" of the house of the next generation in Salamanca, where the protagonist read and played as a child before the Civil War. For her this space of disorder and freedom became closely associated with the very nature of involuntary memory. Her remarks about it are notably reminiscent of Proust's ideas because they suggest the futility of conscious effort:

“los recuerdos que pueden darnos alguna sorpresa viven agazapados en el cuarto de atrás, siempre salen de allí, y sólo cuando quieren, no sirve hostigarlos” (91).

As suggested above, Proust generally treated involuntary memory in a more abstract way and focused his attention upon isolated sensations rather than upon familiar objects or specific pieces of furniture that had a sentimental value. For this reason, the bedroom furniture of Tante Léonie, which the Proustian protagonist inherited, offers an interesting parallel and point of contrast. Without thinking, he gave it to a brothel that he frequented in his youth, but he then ceased to go there when he saw the furniture imbued with his aunt's piety being martyred by the prostitutes' sinful practice (I: 567-69). By eliminating such family heirlooms from his text, Proust was not tempted to use them in his novel, like Martín Gaité and several other writers, including the Argentine Manuel Mujica Lainez (*Los ídolos*).

Nonetheless, the very title of the Spanish novel *El cuarto de atrás* and the connection that Martín Gaité made between it and involuntary memory seems to be of Proustian origin because there was also a “room in the back” in the *Recherche*. It was not a location where the protagonist of “Combray” read or played, and in fact he rarely entered the small room constructed behind Tante Léonie's house. It was reserved for the rest and relaxation of Uncle Adolphe and was later closed off when he became estranged from the family. Just the same, this back room had an intimate link with the childhood memories of the Proustian protagonist. During a time in which he felt separated from his experiences in Combray because he could no longer recall them at will and before he had any clear understanding of the process of involuntary memory, he magically recovered that forgotten space when he happened to enter one of the water closets of the Champs-Élysées and perceived the same musty smell that had characterized that room (I: 483, 485). Thus it appears that the chronologically first involuntary memory experience in the *Recherche* inspired Martín Gaité to consider her own room in the back and how this idea could be used in a novel involving spontaneous memory. However, she more fully developed what had been a simple

albeit essential incident in Proust's novel and made it the centerpiece of her own.

Not surprisingly a few other scholars have noted a similarity between the initial pages of Proust's work, which are known as "Combray I," and the first chapter of *El cuarto de atrás* "El hombre descalzo." Along with her comments on the richness of the past recovered in both *El cuarto de atrás* and the *Recherche*, as well as on certain differences between these works, Anne Paole, in her recent book *Personnages en quête de leur identité dans l'oeuvre romanesque de Carmen Martín Gaité*, recalled that Jean Alsina had considered the first sentence and even all of chapter I of *El cuarto de atrás* to be a homage to Proust's introduction. Although this idea is merely suggested and is not explained in Alsina's "Approches d'une autobiographie féminine: *El cuarto de atrás*" (333), I would observe that both narrators stated in their first sentence the sleep habits that they began in childhood. As we all know, Proust initiated his work by saying, "Longtemps, je me suis couché de bonne heure" ("For a long time I went to bed early") (1: 3), even though both he and his narrator obviously changed this habit later and slept during the day so that they could write at night. To show similarity and contrast Martín Gaité included a phrase, which, as in Proust's case, employs an adverb of time and the present perfect tense: "siempre he dormido así" (9). Also her narrator explained in detail the position and technique that she used for falling asleep. For Proust's narrator, dozing off was at times very easy, but on occasion he woke up almost immediately. In the beginning pages of "Combray I" he described falling asleep and waking up several times. Despite her elaborate procedure for entering slumber, Martín Gaité's character was unable to do so until the end of chapter I. Nonetheless, similar to Proust's narrator, she described various bedrooms in which she had slept and appeared to be of a different age in each case. Furthermore during the course of their long digressions, both narrators frequently returned to the subject of sleep.

Clearly both authors chose to use the discussion of slumber to create a context for their not entirely realist texts that follow. It is in

this atmosphere that the present and the past; the real, the dreamt and the imaginary; the conscious and the subconscious; and what is certain and uncertain easily blend. Also in the free flowing style that both writers used in their initial pages, they could easily introduce some of the principal themes of their works, which are in fact remarkably similar but would be joined by others later: childhood, love, reading, writing, memory, insomnia, rooms, travel, day and night. The only major Proustian subject that might appear to be absent from the beginning of the Spanish novel is illness. However, the abysmal memory of Martín Gaité's protagonist— who cannot even recall the name of a man who may have been more than a casual lover—suggests the beginning a mental infirmity that we used to call senility and is now associated with Alzheimer's. Even though this condition is very different from the asthma of Proust and his character, its devastating effects upon memory indirectly alludes to the French author, who is considered to be the twentieth century literary master of memory.

As for the subject of writing of a novel, which was a major one for Proust, we find it explicitly introduced in *El cuarto de atrás* even earlier than in the *Recherche*. Martín Gaité's character recalled in chapter I how she had promised Todorov to write a fantastic novel (19). In contrast, it was much later in "Combray" where the protagonist-narrator spoke of his desire to become a writer and of the difficulties that he had experienced in finding a subject (I: 170).

It is well known how Marcel Proust used the story of his protagonist's literary vocation to draw together all of the seven volumes of the *Recherche*. Despite his fervent wish to become a writer and to complete a great literary work, the Proustian protagonist was distracted by social ambitions and his love for Albertine. As he approached old age, he came to doubt his literary talent, but when he experienced the miracle of involuntary memory several times at the house of the Princesse de Guermantes, he realized that this phenomenon allowed him to recover in rich detail his own past and that his life could be subject of his entire work.

In *El cuarto de atrás* we also find the story of a novel to be written,

but Martín Gaité reconfigured with great originality the various elements of this story. In spite of her protagonist's decision to write the fantastic novel, as well as a book about love in the time of Franco, these two projects had grown cold and were abandoned. It was primarily through her conversations with her mysterious male guest that she was able to reignite her fervor for these projects. Some critics and scholars have suggested that this man may be the devil, but I believe that he can more accurately be labeled the "ideal interlocutor," whom Martín Gaité discussed in such works as *El cuento de nunca acabar* (135-40). As her woman writer spoke and the man asked questions, their words and ideas stimulated her recollections, and she underwent her own type of involuntary memory. Unlike Manuel Durán, I do not believe that this process was more magical in *El cuarto de atrás* than in the *Recherche*, even though the guest at one point gave the woman a mysterious pill to help her recall the past (106-08). As suggested above, Proust's narrator spoke of the miracle of memory and compared the marvelousness of his memory experiences to what genies were able to accomplish in *One Thousand and One Nights* (4: 447).

Instead of attributing a fantastic quality to memory, Carmen Martín Gaité shifted the magical element to Proust's other vast subject: the writing of a novel. During the conversation and spontaneous recovery of the past, the Spanish writer felt the desire to transcribe to paper what she had just said or thought, but she never did so because of the man who not only stimulated the ideas but who also impeded by his presence the recording of them. Nonetheless, the pile on the desk of written sheets of paper, which the woman did not remember even having started to write, continued to grow. Finally, a strong gust of wind from outside made the sheets fly in every direction, but the male guest later placed them in the proper order because the writer found the complete stack the next morning. As the initial words of the text indicate, this is precisely the manuscript of the novel that the readers are about to finish.

In this way, quite similar to Proust (whose narrator near the end of the text decided to tell how he came to write his work), but with the magic of a fantastic novel, Martín Gaité induces her readers first

to return mentally to the beginning of the text and then to see it as a completed whole. Because of the Spanish writer's almost unbelievably poor memory, neither she nor her readers can be certain if the guest appeared only in a dream--and she wrote the entire novel when she unconsciously got up at night--or if the man was actually with her but magically transcribed her words and thoughts to create the manuscript. Just the same, we can observe how Carmen Martín Gaité, who was very familiar with Proust's *Recherche*, took advantage of three of its principal subjects—sleep, recovery of the past and the novel to be written—reconfigured them for her own purposes and created her own original work: *El cuarto de atrás*.

WORKS CITED

- Alsina, Jean. "Approches d'une autobiographie féminine: *El cuarto de atrás*." *L'autobiographie en Espagne. Etudes hispaniques* (Université de Provence) 5 (1982): 324-33.
- Durán, Manuel. "Carmen Martín Gaité, *Retahílas*, *El cuarto de atrás*, y el diálogo sin fin." *Revista Iberoamericana* 116-17 (1981): 233-40.
- . "*El cuarto de atrás*: Imaginación, fantasía, misterio: Todorov y algo más." *From Fiction to Metafiction: Essays in Honor of Carmen Martín Gaité*. Ed. Mirella Servodidio and Maria L. Welles. Lincoln, NE: Society of Spanish and Spanish American Studies, 1983. 129-37.
- Martín Gaité, Carmen. "Bosquejo autobiográfico." *Agua pasada (artículos, prólogos y discursos)*. Barcelona: Editorial Anagrama, 1993.
- . *El cuarto de atrás*. Barcelona: Ediciones Destino, S. A., 1978.
- . *El cuento de nunca acabar*. Barcelona: Ediciones Destino, S. A., 1985. Paole, Anne. *Personnages en quête de leur identité dans l'oeuvre romanesque de Carmen Martín Gaité*. Aix-en-Provence: Université de Provence, 2000.
- Proust, Marcel. *A la recherche du temps perdu*. 4 vols. Bibliothèque de la Pléiade. Paris: Gallimard, 1987-89.