

RE-INHABITING PRIVATE SPACE: CARMEN MARTÍN GAITÉ'S *EL CUARTO DE ATRÁS*

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1. INTRODUCTION

In an article last year in the *New York Review of Books* Daniel Mendelsohn argued that Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* can be read as an «authentic women's literature»¹, for the novel attempts to record «that which men's literature dismissed as trivia.»² Whether or not this is the case (because after all we have novels of the obscure such as Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, Fontane's *Effie Briest*, *Fortunata y Jacinta* etc.) Woolf herself believed that her novels were in fact recuperating: «these infinitely obscure lives that remain to be recorded»³ –lives which transpired within the domestic sphere and which did not directly participate in public life and therefore in the production of History (with a capital H –that is, produced by great men). This is a useful way of understanding Carmen Martín Gaite's *El cuarto de atrás*. Against the monumental, heroic history of the Francoist regime, Martín Gaite's 1978 novel brings to the forefront those stories which have been ignored and marginalized by the Francoist regime: namely, the stories recounting the experiences of women during the almost forty years of dictatorship. Her novel, in very much the same vein as *Mrs. Dalloway*, «intricately records the obscure and hidden worlds and movements in women's lives,»⁴ during the Franco years and in so doing forges these stories into a new kind of literature. But Gaite's text does not simply invert a hierarchy of value which had labeled the private as trivial and the public as significant, but suggests a complex relation between the two. For *El cuarto de atrás* suggests that the revitalization of public life is itself dependent on imagination, ideas and memories which are themselves drawn from private life – particularly when, as in the

1. MENDELSON, Daniel: «Not Afraid of Virginia Woolf», *The New York Review of Books*, 50 (2004), pp. 1-10.

2. Ibid., p. 2.

3. LEE, Hermione: *Virginia Woolf*, New York, Vintage Books, 1999, p.13.

4. MENDELSON, Daniel: Op.cit., p.2.

time of the dictatorship, public life has itself been debased and emptied of all true political significance. Gaite's novel is therefore a kind of «authentic women's literature» (in Woolf's and Mendelssohn's senses) which, in portraying a woman's emergence as an agent of history, is also a kind of political literature.

The process represented by the novel must begin with the protagonist's memories – memories associated with the historically female spaces of the kitchen, the bedroom, and the backroom. But Gaite's novel shows that for these memories to become available for the protagonist's political self-renewal, they have to be put into a narrative. And the narrative itself requires that one remember through a process of exchange and interaction with an *interlocutor*. In *El cuarto de atrás*, the novel itself turns out to be the record of this exchange. And the novel's many readers then become part of a collective «working through of the past» initiated by literature – a process which has begun with the apparently insignificant memories and associations of one woman in her back room.

2. PSYCHOANALYSIS AND STORYTELLING

Carmen Martín Gaite's *El cuarto de atrás* can be read as a meditation upon Spain's most recent past (the civil war, post war and Francoism) which has only become possible after the death of Franco. In the first pages of the novel we find a woman protagonist who from the depths of her refuge seeks to narrate her past through an art of memory. But we find that this attempt to articulate her past is frustrated due to the fact that, perhaps, she has nobody to whom the story can be told. The protagonist is in need of an *interlocutor* – someone who would help her to recover «todas las cosas que he estado recordando y sabe Dios cuántas más...»⁵ But this *interlocutor* is not simply a listener, but someone whose role can be more closely associated with that of an analyst – someone who not only listens to the patient's stories, but who also seeks to organize these stories into a coherent narrative. According to Peter Brooks, the analyst «must help the analysand construct a more coherent, connected, and forceful narrative discourse, one whose syntax and rhetoric are more convincing, more adequate to give an interpretative account of the story of the past than those that are originally presented, in symptomatic form, by the analysand.»⁶ It becomes clear throughout the novel that the protagonist's attempt to remember and articulate her past happens only when she is encouraged by her *interlocutor* to put her memories into a form of narrative.⁷ What emerges is the narrative of the primarily private experiences of a woman who has lived through the

5. MARTÍN GAITÉ, Carmen: *El cuarto de atrás*, Barcelona, Destino, 1981, p. 22.

6. BROOKS, Peter: *Psychoanalysis and Storytelling*, Cambridge, Blackwell, 1994, p. 53.

7. There are many articles and books that have been written on the mysterious appearance of the man dressed in black. To many critics this sudden appearance justifies identifying the novel partly as a fantastic novel. See Linda Gould Levine: «Carmen Martín Gaite's *El cuarto de atrás*. A Portrait of the Artist as Woman»; Joan Brown Lipman: «A Fantastic Memoir: Technique and History in *El cuarto de atrás*»; Julian Paley: «El interlocutor soñado de *El cuarto de atrás*, de Carmen Martín Gaite»; Manuel Durán: «*El cuarto de atrás*, Imaginación, fantasía y misterio; Todorov y algo más.»

Francoist regime – a record of experiences which, like those of many other women, has been obliterated from the official written history of the Francoist regime. The protagonist can be seen as the transmitter of an oral discourse, a discourse that had been confined to the private space of the household up until the death of Franco.⁸

In this sense the private space of the home has served as a refuge for people who had had to withdraw from a public life and public space which had been entirely appropriated by the totalitarian regime. According to the protagonist, Franco had indeed projected himself upon all spaces belonging to the public: «(Franco) había conseguido infiltrarse en todas las escuelas, cines y cafés, allanar la sorpresa, y la variedad, despertar un temor religioso y uniforme, amortiguar las conversaciones y las risas para que ninguna se oyera más alta que otra»⁹. The protagonist suggests that, in addition to infiltrating all public life, Franco had also been capable of controlling History and Time itself: «(Franco) había sido el motor tránsito y secreto de ese bloqueo del tiempo. Y el jefe de las máquinas, y el revisor, y el fabricante de las cadenas del engrane, y el tiempo mismo, cuyo fluir amortiguaba, embalsaba y dirigía, con el fin de que apenas se sintiera rebullir ni al tiempo ni a él...»¹⁰. Faced with a control of space, History and time, Spanish citizens were compelled to withdraw into the private spaces of the home in order to survive: «Y aprendimos a esperar, sin pensar que la espera pudiera ser tan larga. Esperábamos dentro de las casas, al calor del brasero, en nuestros cuartos de atrás, entre juguetes baratos y libros de texto...»¹¹. But *El Cuarto* suggests these private spaces not only provided the citizens with a physical refuge from the terror of the dictatorship, but also functioned as refuges for memories, imagination and dreaming. According to Hannah Arendt in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*: « Political contacts between men are severed in tyrannical governments and the human capacities for action and power are frustrated. But not all contacts between men are broken and not all human capacities destroyed. The whole sphere of private life with the capacities for experience, fabrication and thought are left intact.»¹² But living exclusively within this refuge and not publicly «working through» a traumatic past cannot, the novel tells us, be sustained for a lifetime. The protagonist's initial attempt to remember, and narrate, her past from the isolation of her back room is shown to fail. This is evidenced by the protagonist's initial efforts, documented in the first chapter – an effort which results in an incoherent narrative riddled with gaps, contradictions in chronology, faulty narrative syntax and unconvincing rhetoric. In the *Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt argued that an exclusively pri-

8. Interesting comparisons can be made to other women writers use of private space as a *refuge* during dictatorial regimes. I am particularly interested in Marta Traba's *Conversación al sur*, Tununa Mercado's *En estado de memoria* and Diamela Eltit's *Vaca Sagrada*.

9. MARTÍN GAITÉ, Carmen: Op. cit., p. 132.

10. Ibid., p. 137.

11. Ibid., p. 153.

12. ARENDT, Hannah: *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, New York, Harcourt Brace, 1968, p. 172.

vatized life was the absolute triumph of tyrannical forms of governments over the individual, because in isolating these individuals in their back rooms and interior patios, and thereby eliminating contact between them, these governments were able to gradually eliminate their ability to distinguish between fiction and reality, thereby compromising these people's abilities to identify the political fictions of the regime:

«...the experience of the materially and sensually given world depends upon my being in contact with other men, upon our common sense which regulates and controls all other senses and without which each of us would be enclosed in his own particularity of sense data which in themselves are unreliable and treacherous. Only because we have common sense, that is only because not one man, but men in the plural inhabit the earth can we trust our immediate sensual experience»¹³.

At the beginning of *El cuarto de atrás*, Gaite's protagonist, confined to her back room and interior patio, seems to exhibit exactly this incapacity. But the interaction and dialogue produced by the protagonist and the *interlocutor* within the novel directly unsettles such totalitarian attempts as Franco's to completely disenfranchise its citizens from politics and each other. According to Theodor Adorno, an anamnestic «working through the past» entails a:

«seriously working upon the past, that is, through a lucid consciousness breaking its power to fascinate rather than closing the books on the past and, if possible, even removing it from memory. The attitude that everything should be forgotten and forgiven, which would be proper to those who suffered the injustice, is practiced by those party supporters who committed the injustice»¹⁴.

It is no surprise then that as the protagonist speaks to the *interlocutor* she starts to notice pages emerging from her desk: «Por la parte superior de la máquina asoma un folio empezado, leo de refilón: '...al hombre descalzo ya no se le ve.' ¿Cuándo he escrito esto?, tenía idea de haber dejado la máquina cerrada y con la funda puesta...»¹⁵. These pages, of course, are the story she begins to unravel as she speaks to the *interlocutor* – a story which, by the end of the novel will be revealed as the novel itself. This novel becomes a public record of one character's emblematic effort to then publicly work through a traumatic and difficult past during a time (the Spanish Transition) when people seem to have opted to forget rather than remember.

3. INTERIORS

In the course of the novel, the protagonist is able to piece together her past and organize it into a coherent narrative – a process which allows her to constitute her own identity. But the recovery of the past not only happens through her interaction with the *interlocutor* but also through the objects (the mirrors,

13. Ibid., p. 174.

14. ADORNO, Theodor: *Critical Models, Interventions and Catchwords*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1998, p. 6.

15. MARTÍN GAITÉ, Carmen: Op. cit., p. 31.

couches, chairs, armoires) which have migrated with her and have occupied certain spaces (the kitchen, the backroom, the attic) within the many houses she has inhabited as a child and as an adult. For the protagonist these intimate objects function as repositories of memory: «objetos cuya historia, inherente a su silueta resuena apagadamente en el recuerdo y araña estratos insospechados del alma, arrancando fechas...»¹⁶. Her «working through of the past» which constantly evokes recent moments of Spanish history (the Spanish Civil War as well as Franco's dictatorship) are not alluded to through the use of archives or history books but rather through particular objects within her house. In this case her recuperation of Spain's history is based on «lived experience» rather than on monumental history: «...no somos un solo ser, sino muchos, de la misma manera que tampoco la historia es esa que se escribe poniendo en orden las fechas y se nos presenta como inamovible, cada persona que nos ha visto o hablado alguna vez guarda una pieza del rompecabezas que nunca podremos contemplar entero»¹⁷. The protagonist's mistrust of history – in particular Francoist historiography – causes her to find alternative ways of narrating the past as a child and later as an adult: «pero yo entonces aborrecía la historia y además no me la creía, nada de lo que veía en los libros de historia ni de los periódicos me lo creía, la culpa la tenían los que se lo creían...»¹⁸.

In this case the domestic, historically associated with an inferior compartment of existence, becomes in Gaite's novel a tactile, sensuous space for remembering and ultimately for writing:

«Pienso en los interiores de Vermeer de Delft: el encanto del cuadro emana de la simbiosis que el pintor acertó a captar entre la mujer que lee una carta o mira por la ventana y los enseres cotidianos que le sirven de muda compañía, la relación de la figura humana con esos muebles usados que la rodean como un recordatorio de su edad infantil»¹⁹.

The Protagonist's narration will take us into her intimate spaces – real or imagined – (her childhood house, her grandmother's house, the backroom, her imaginary island of Bergai, her own apartment), while at the same time pointing to the fact that these particular spaces are not only to be read as sites of everyday life but more importantly as spaces of renewal and recovery. In Martín Gaite's novel, even domestic spaces such as the kitchen – usually understood either as trivial or unimportant, or, alternatively, as the sites of an enslaving domestic ideology –, are also represented as possible spaces of freedom and creativity for women. The separation within the private sphere between – on the one hand – the domestic, the banal and the routine (traditionally thought to belong to the realm of the «feminine») and – on the other hand – the drawing room or salon as the privileged realm for the emergence of the aesthetic – a

16. Ibid., p. 16.

17. Ibid., p. 167.

18. Ibid., p. 54.

19. Ibid., p. 74.

domain traditionally thought to belong to men – is unsettled in Gaite's novel. For in *El cuarto de atrás*, the protagonist makes supposedly unpolitical and unimportant spaces and experiences into the aesthetic material for her novel.

While in the kitchen the protagonist is able to conjure up a whole array of childhood memories just by looking at pieces of furniture which once belonged in her childhood home: «Cuántas habitaciones desembocan en ésta, cuántos locales! Querría hablarle al hombre de negro del vehículo narrativo que suponen los muebles, regalarle todas las imágenes que, en este rato, se me han aparecido entre el aparador y el espejo. Y muchas más surgirían si se asomara él aquí y empezara a darme pie con sus preguntas ligeras y quebradas que nada indagan, que son como dibujos de humo en el aire.»²⁰. It is important to point out that this process of recollection does not only recover private experiences and memories but also a people's experience with history and popular culture during Francoism. Throughout the narration we find detailed descriptions of the movies, clothes, children's games, hairstyles, and songs which influenced women's attitudes towards each other and towards culture in general: «...hemos sido víctimas de las mismas modas y costumbres, hemos leído las mismas revistas y visto el mismo cine, nuestros hijos puede que sean distintos, pero nuestros sueños seguro que han sido semejantes...»²¹. What the protagonist of the novel seems to achieve throughout her narration is to write the history of every mark and scratch of the particular interiors she has inhabited and at the same time capture specific historical moments through a sort of collective memory. In this case, the bedrooms, kitchens and living rooms that are evoked and used as vehicles for her imagination and for writing are places where women have lived in the past (rooms with no privacy) whose walls can be said to be permeated by their creative force.

4. PRIVATE SPACE AS PUBLICNESS

Gaite's representation of the elements of popular memory in *El cuarto de atrás* does not only serve to underline the actual points of contact between everyday life and history, but also shows how these apparently private experiences and memories associated with the intimate sphere become the basis for a political alternative to the totalitarian regime. In his *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* Jürgen Habermas pointed to the emergence in eighteenth century Europe of what he called «a public sphere of private persons.»²² In Habermas's account the public sphere arose out of civil society in the eighteenth century in opposition to the political domination of the absolutist state. This public sphere of private persons was the medium by which the new middle class articulated its resistance to feudal political domination. This public sphere, in principle, was to be accessible to everyone. Within it a process of critical debate would

20. Ibid., p. 97.

21. Ibid., p. 137.

22. HABERMAS, Jürgen: *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Cambridge, MIT University Press, 1992, p. 27.

take place where ideas were exchanged and where new ideas emerged during a process of interaction. These open spaces of discussion would then allow the public to come to consensus about what was practically necessary and in the general interest – allowing this public not only to eventually assert control over political authority, but also, perhaps, to transform the nature of political authority itself. Feminist criticisms of Habermas's model have pointed to the fact that in the historically existing bourgeois public sphere, needs and positions of other groups, namely women, were in general excluded from consideration as merely «private» matters.²³ According to this criticism, Habermas' model of the public sphere assumes that all participants should be able to bracket off their life in the intimate sphere and become disembodied minds in the public arena, leaving women, for example, to take care of the private sphere. This both raises issues of women's exclusion from the public in this model, and also of woman's relationship to the private, either as a space that she is 'confined' to, or which, perhaps, she might choose to occupy.

However, while it may be true that Habermas overestimates the ideal character of a bourgeois public sphere which was composed mostly of property-owning fathers and husbands, these criticisms tend to overlook the usefulness of Habermas' model for describing how a new politically effective public can emerge from what we think of as the private sphere. For a crucial part of Habermas' argument is that private experiences associated with new forms of socialization in the later eighteenth century (the family, new practices of child-rearing, and so on), become a source of resistance to the dominant absolutist order. Moreover, while the bourgeois public spheres of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries largely overlooked gender issues, it is also true, as Seyla Benhabib, and Habermas himself, have argued, that the public sphere is a self-transcending institution – that, in the twentieth century, the very gender arrangements which the early bourgeois public sphere presumed as a matter of course become the *object* of political debate.

What makes Habermas's conception of the public sphere particularly useful in analyzing *El cuarto de atrás*, is that his model of how private, bourgeois publics emerged under absolutism can easily be applied to the emergence of counterpublics under various totalitarianisms – including Franco's. While Hannah Arendt's model centers on what she terms «the space of appearances»²⁴ – the face-to-face interactions of human beings who share an ethos – Habermas allows one to understand how it is that resistance is able to form amidst diverse, private, individuals in the intimate space – and eventually resurface and become politically effective. This is exactly what *El cuarto* depicts. One can argue therefore that Martín Gaite points to the important function of the dialogue between the protagonist and the interlocutor as an «alternative public sphere»

23. FRASER, Nancy: «Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,» in Craig Calhoun (comp): *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, Cambridge, The MIT Press, 1996, pp. 109-142.

24. ARENDT, Hannah: *On Revolution*, New York, Penguin Books, 1965, p. 240.

– In other words, that the private space of the home is being used as a space in which, as in Habermas' model, ideas are exchanged and new ideas emerge through a process of discursive interaction. But most importantly, resistance to the dominant regime happens precisely through subjects constituting themselves as private subjects, whose identities are not dependent on the dominant regime. The protagonist of *El cuarto* herself suggests this when she writes:

«Estoy lejos, en una isla, aislamiento viene de isla, era una sensación peligrosa, prohibida por las mujeres de la Sección Femenina, cuando se fomenta conduce al victimismo: hay un morbo irracional en ese vago deleite de sentirse incomprendido, que no se apoya en argumento alguno ni se dirige contra nadie, que encenaga al individuo en la mera autocompasión placentera»²⁵.

During a stormy night, the protagonist/writer and the interlocutor exchange ideas about history, memory and writing. What is important here is that new ideas about writing, memory and history are produced not only by the individual writer but out of a process of exchange between the writer and interlocutor. The protagonist chooses to occupy her own private space. This space in turn is used in order to bring private-intimate experiences/memories into the public sphere – and thereby subject them to critical questioning. It is also important to note that the exchange of ideas which takes place in the protagonist's home challenges the official discourse of the state in the same way as bourgeois public spheres challenged the absolutist states in the eighteenth century. The back-room becomes a kind of public sphere, in which an oral discourse is broadcast far beyond the walls of the home. Interestingly enough, the character's meditation on Spain's recent traumatic past occurs from a detached and leisurely position of a private citizen and this position is ultimately not questioned by the author but rather celebrated as the necessary model for critical reflection and perhaps even visionary transformation.²⁶ As I will argue later in the paper, the discovery of the manuscript of *El cuarto de atrás* at the end of the novel points to the emancipatory power of the book as an artifact which will reach out to what Benedict Anderson would call an «imagined community.»²⁷

5. ALLEGORIES OF THE POLITICAL

The discussion between the protagonist and her interlocutor can be understood as a nascent public sphere. Among the topics discussed in this public sphere are dominant modes of inhabiting private space which the narrator wants to contest: the *Angel of the Home*'s characteristically spotless house, and the Francoist regime's relegation of women to the private sphere after the civil war. What the protagonist's discussions of these two forms of domestic order makes clear is that Franco's effort to impose total control not only on the

25. MARTÍN GAITÉ, Carmen: Op. cit., p. 120.

26. In contrast, other novels such as Rodoreda's *La Plaza del Diamante* exposes the particular hardships experienced by working class women who do not have (cannot afford) to have a room of one's own and must learn to survive in the streets during and after the Spanish civil war.

27. ANDERSON, Benedict: *Imagined Communities*, New York, Verso, 1991.

streets, but also in the home has an unintended consequence: the very domestic sphere which is supposed to safely isolate women (in particular) from the political itself becomes politicized. For, as Gaite shows, the protagonist's criticisms of domestic order themselves take on a proto-political character.

The protagonist of *El cuarto de atrás* is confronted with the use of private space by a domestic *Angel of the Home* upon her many visits to her grandmother's house in Madrid: «Mucho más que en mi casa de Salamanca, ni en la de verano de Galicia, fue en esa de Madrid, cuando veníamos en vacaciones de Semana Santa o Navidad, donde se fraguó mi desobediencia a las leyes del hogar y se incubaron mis primeras rebeldías frente al orden y la limpieza»²⁸. As the child enters this private space she immediately feels enclosed and repressed by the atmosphere of the house. It is a place where order is venerated, where we see examples of a private space that is being carefully arranged by an *Angel of the Home*:

«...y me sentía tragada por una ballena; se me propagaba todo el bostezo de la casa con su insopportable tic tac de relojes y su relucir inerte de plata y porcelana, templo del orden, sostenido por invisibles columnas de ropa limpia, planchada, guardada dentro de las cómodas, ajuar de cama y mesa, pañitos bordados, camisas almidonadas, colchas, entredoses, encajes, vainicas...»²⁹.

The use of private space by her grandmother evokes the mid-Victorian age where the house was necessarily a battlefield – a place where daily, summer and winter, mistress and maid fought against the dirt and cold for cleanliness. This is the scene of labor, effort and perpetual struggle: «...mientras llegaba de la cocina o de las alcobas el amortiguado trajín de las dos criadas que conocieron a mi padre de niño y que continuaban desde entonces limpiando, impertérritas, cazuellas, azulejos, picaportes y molduras, siempre limpiando»³⁰.

El cuarto shows that the idea of the *Angel of the Home* is not simply a general gender ideology, but one put to specific use by Franco. For the regime is interested in relegating women to the private space of the home for political, as well as gender, ideological reasons. The novel shows that Francoism involves an effort to colonize private space, and thereby erode possible sources of resistance. According to the protagonist, women were the ones who felt most acutely the repressive apparatus of the regime: for Francoism represented the end of the emancipatory efforts undertaken during the years of the Republic. The young protagonist of the novel is educated by the Church and forced to attend classes given by the Women's Section of the Falangist Party³¹ that educated young women into being good mothers and wives:

28. MARTÍN GAITÉ, Carmen: Op. cit., p. 75.

29. Ibid., p. 78.

30. Ibid.

31. Pilar Primo de Rivera was in charge of the *Sección Femenina*. In a speech on behalf of the Falangista women of Spain, Pilar Primo de Rivera was quoted saying the following: «We are here solely to celebrate the victory and to honor your soldiers. Because the only mission women

«Las dos virtudes más importantes era la laboriosidad y la alegría, y ambas iban indisolublemente mezcladas en aquellos consejos prácticos, que tenían mucho de infalible receta casera... Cumpliríamos 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...»³².

But to the extent that Francoism penetrates into the domestic sphere, it also unintentionally politicizes it: for the character's *resistance* to this domestic order becomes a symbolic struggle against Franco as well:

«El polvo se descolgaba en espirales por los rayos de sol, se posaba silenciosamente sobre los objetos, era algo tan natural y tan pacífico, yo lo miraba aterrizar con maligno deleite, me sentía cómplice del enemigo descarado, que con mayor terquedad reduplicaba sus minúsculos batallones cuanto más asediado se veía por las batidas implacables. Desde muy temprano, con el primer rayo de luz que traía hasta mi cama una lluvia menuda de motas de polvo, coincidían las diligencias para su captura, las órdenes fanáticas a toque de diana, el despliegue de aparejos escondidos en un cuartito oscuro del pasillo, y en seguida aquel arrastrar, frotar y sacudir de escobas, escobillas, plumero, zorros, cogedor, paño de gamuza, bayeta, cepillo para el lustre. Yo había hecho frente común con el perseguido, le daba secretas consignas y secreto albergue, le abría el embozo de mi cama. 'Que vienen, escóndete aquí. Tu venganza es burlarte y renacer en otro sitio, no podrán contigo.'»³³.

In this passage, the grandmother's temple of domestic order becomes an allegory of the regime itself, and of its struggles against anti-Francoist insurgencies. The child's camaraderie with the hunted dust and fugitive objects takes on the character of a political sympathy for the insurgents, who must be sheltered from the fanatical housekeeping measures of the regime. The child's dream of escape from this order itself becomes a political allegory: «Yo soñaba con vivir en una buhardilla donde siempre estuvieran los trajes sin colgar y los libros por el suelo, donde nadie persiguiera a los copos de polvo que viajaban en los rayos de luz, donde sólo se comiera cuando apretara el hambre sin más ceremonias»³⁴. If the grandmother's temple is the regime, the dreamt-of garret becomes an anarchic utopia, where order is not venerated and where things can exist in free disorder. In Gaite's novel then, the protagonist's desire for an alternative to the pacified space of the clean home is not simply a rebellion against a gendered ideology, but takes on a specifically political coloring under the Franco dictatorship. Her desire for a garret can be read as a desire for a dif-

have as their patriotic task is the home. That is why, with the arrival of peace, we will increase the labor initiated in our formatory schools, to make life for men so pleasant that within their homes they will find all that they lacked before, and therefore in their spare time they will not have to look for satisfaction in the taverns or casinos» (MANGINI, Shirley: *Memories of Resistance: Women's Voices from the Spanish Civil War*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1995, p. 94).

32. MARTÍN GAITÉ, Carmen: Op. Cit., pp. 94, 96.

33. Ibid., pp. 87-88.

34. Ibid., 89.

ferent polity: one not strictly organized from above, but in which objects and people can find their own places.

It is important to point out that the source of the protagonist's alternative political vision – an anarchic utopia of freely associating, rather than hierarchically organized, objects – comes from a specific intimate, domestic memory: her experience of the backroom. This is a space which the children inhabited freely and which stood in stark contrast to the uses of backrooms during the Franco years as waiting rooms devoid of any sense of publicness. In this back room, creativity and happiness predominated:

«Las habitaciones del primer pasillo daban a la Plaza de los Bandos, las del otro, a un patio abierto donde estaban los lavaderos de la casa, y eran la cocina, la carbonera, el cuarto de las criadas, el baño y el cuarto de atrás... Era muy grande y en él reinaban el desorden y la libertad, se permitía cantar a voz en cuello, cambiar de sitio los muebles, saltar encima de un sofá desvencijado y con los muelles rotos al que llamábamos el pobre sofá, tumbarse en la alfombra, mancharla de tinta, era una reino donde nada estaba prohibido»³⁵.

This room provided the children with an interior/private space which they could use however they wanted to use it. In this space, the rules of order did not apply – that is, they were free to use the space in an alternative way. The children did not feel the need to venture outside of the home because they could find freedom in the back room of the house. With the beginning of the war, this changes. As the narrator tells us, the back room begins to be appropriated by the world of adults because it needs to be used in order to store «articles of prime necessity.» It is interesting to note that the space of the kitchen, that is the space that has historically belonged to women, begins to take over the backroom. Order slowly takes over the chaos of the room and this change is represented through the changes in the use of a large *aparador*:

«Antes de nada hay que decir que en el cuarto de atrás había un aparador grande de castaño; guardábamos allí objetos heterogéneos, entre los que podía aparecer, a veces, un enchufe o una cuchara, que venían a buscar desde las otras dependencias de la casa, pero esa excepción no contradecía nuestra posesión del mueble, disponíamos enteramente de él, era armario de trastos y juguetes, porque la función de los objetos viene marcada por el uso, ¿no cree?... Y, sin embargo, su esencia de aparador constituyó el primer pretexto invocado para la invasión. Cuando empezaron los acaparamientos de artículos de primera necesidad, mi madre desalojó dos estantes y empezó a meter en ellos paquetes de arroz, jabón y chocolate, que no le cabían en la cocina. Y empezaron los conflictos, primero de ordenación para las cosas diversas que habían quedado sin guarida, y luego de coacción de libertad...»³⁶.

This change in the use of the space of the back room happens gradually until the children are displaced from the room and their childhood is taken over by the world of the adults, that is, by the conditions that emerge from the war:

35. Ibid., 187.

36. Ibid., p. 188.

«hasta que dejamos de tener cuarto para jugar, porque los artículos de primera necesidad desplazaron y arrinconaron nuestra infancia, el juego y la subsistencia coexistieron en una convivencia agria, de olores incompatibles»³⁷. With the disappearance of the back room the child is then forced out of pure necessity to look for alternative spaces in which she can exercise her need for freedom.

Initially, the child is seduced by the world of consumerism; she desires to fill the emptiness created by the disappearance of the back room by acquiring a set of porcelain dishes: «...pero cuando llegaba el invierno, me olvidaba y sucumbía a las exigencias de una industria que fomentaba el descontento y el afán de consumo»³⁸. The child visits the storefront continuously and stares at the set of porcelain dishes through the window with longing. One day she decides to take her friend to see it, but the friend is not impressed and in turn initiates her into the world of invention and imagination: «Fue cuando me empezó a hablar de Robinson Crusoe, me dijo que a ella los juguetes comprados le aburrían, que prefería jugar de otra manera, 'De que manera?' 'Inventando; cuando todo se pone en contra de uno, lo mejor es inventar, como lo hizo Robinson.'» (194). From this moment on, the protagonist and her friend begin to create an imaginary island called Bergai – an alternative private space to where they can flee in order to escape the confinement of the world that surrounds them: « 'Si te riñen, te vas a Bergai -dijo ella-, ya existe. Es para eso, para refugiarse'»³⁹.

In colonizing the back room, the kitchen has also extended the logic of *necessity* into the deepest recesses of the house. Even the backroom has been made unsuitable as a refuge for creativity and imagination. Faced with the loss of even this last fugitive physical space, the children invent a fictive one, and the process of invention itself involves a process of interaction and collaboration between the two girls – that is, a kind of public sphere. Most importantly, the space of *Bergai* takes shape as *literature*: «Al día siguiente, inauguramos las anotaciones de Bergai, cada una en nuestro diario, con dibujos y planos; esos cuadernos los teníamos muy escondidos, sólo nos los enseñábamos una a otra. Y la isla de Bergai se fue perfilando como una tierra marginal, existía mucho más que las cosas que veíamos de verdad, tenía la fuerza y la consistencia de sueños... incluso soportaba sin molestia el olor a vinagre que iba tomando el cuarto de atrás...»⁴⁰.

6. CONCLUSION

The image of the back room and the island of Bergai as alternative private spaces that save her from the realities of the post-war period, her distaste for order, domesticity, and the ideology of the Women's Section of the Falangist party, and her distrust of history are all conjured up by the protagonist for the man in black in her own back room during a stormy night. The differences are

37. Ibid., p. 189.

38. Ibid., 190.

39. Ibid., p. 179.

40. Ibid.

clear; the protagonist of the novel refuses to be relegated or confined to the domestic sphere as an angel of the home or a good mother and wife, yet she does not reject private space altogether, choosing rather to re-inhabit and consequently find strength and inspiration in it. Discussing her memories of private experiences with the interlocutor frees them from what figures like Arendt would grasp as «the shadowy realm of the private,» bringing them instead into the broad light of publicness. In remembering and recounting her life during the Franco regime, the protagonist of *El cuarto de atrás* introduces an analysis of the everyday life of women during Francoism, including the popular culture, the films, games and songs (chifles, modistas, escondite inglés, Conchita Piquer and songs) which are all but absent from Monumental histories. Her narration, then becomes a «working through of the past» because as Mircea Eliade argues: «aquel que se acuerda de su pasado lo domina y se adueña de su destino...»⁴¹. For the protagonist of M. Gaite's novel, remembering then, becomes an important tool against collective forgetting.

By the end of the novel, the protagonist's remembrances, brought into the open through her discussions in the back room of her apartment, become the novel itself. As Bachelard suggests in his *Poetics of Space*:

«And all the spaces of our past moments of solitude, the spaces in which we have suffered from solitude, enjoyed, desired and compromised solitude, remain indelible within us, and precisely because the human being wants them to remain so. He knows instinctively that this space identified with his solitude is creative; that even when it is forever expunged from the present, when, henceforth, it is alien to all the promises of the future, even when we no longer have a garret, when the attic room is lost and gone, there remains the fact that we once loved a garret, once lived in an attic. We return to them in our night dreams»⁴².

The writer does not only hide out in her *refugio* – this *refugio* also helps her achieve a critical theoretical distance which enables her to read her past and the past of Spain. Domestic utopias such as the backroom, the attic and the island of *Bergaí* become the models for alternative conceptions of the political, at a point when Franco has crushed all the other available public models. Written in the private space of the protagonist's home, the novel breaks out into the public realm through the printed page, offering the private experiences of a woman in Francoist Spain to a community of readers, writers and interpreters. In short, her private experiences, transformed into a novel form, achieve publicness and perhaps even encourage a public «working through of the past.» In a society which has been collectively traumatized, the memory-work performed by one particular individual can set a precedent for collective remembering or storytelling. Addressed to an imagined community of differing individuals, one individual's private experiences become potentially parabolic. When the tyrant

41. ELIADE, Mircea: *Mito y Realidad*, Barcelona, Colección Labor, 1994, p. 35.

42. BACHELARD, Gaston: *Poetics of Space: The Classical Look at How We Experience Intimate Spaces*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1994, p. 10.

had taken over the streets, political energies were funneled into private space; private experiences then become allegories of the public and political. Re-telling the stories of these private experiences, of the imagination and creativity which continued to flourish within these real and imagined private spaces, becomes a resource for a new publicness. The means for this renewal is literature.

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