

Shaping the Chaos: Carmen Martin-Gaité and the Never-Ending Tale

RUTH EL SAFFAR, *University of Illinois, Chicago*

Carmen Martin-Gaité is among the most active writers working in Spain today. She has won numerous awards for her fiction and is well known also for her essays and scholarly works.¹ In addition to her recent writing of a novella-length fairy tale, *El castillo de las tres murallas* (1981), she has currently been involved with Spanish television, writing the script for the highly-acclaimed four-part series on the life of Saint Teresa, and preparing a prize-winning documentary on her native city of Salamanca.

In her most recently-published book, *El cuento de nunca acabar*,² Martin-Gaité collects from notebooks dating back more than fifteen years her reflections on the whole question of narrative. Those reflections, and the book of which they form a part, represent a marked departure from most studies of narrative, for they constitute an effort to restore to unity—however precarious that unity might be—the elements of storytelling that most literary studies break apart as a matter of course.

Carmen Martin-Gaité's latest book shows her always to be walking the borders, occupying that place, difficult to define and nearly impossible to call one's own, where speaker and listener, life and literature, spontaneity and order, and truth and fiction meet. Finding and abiding in no-man's-land is no easy task, as the zigzags of Martin-Gaité's essay/narrative make clear. In no-man's-land there are no rules, no authority. One must sharpen one's attention in order to live there, and learn to live by one's wits. That is what the author of *The Never-Ending Tale* seeks to do, as is shown not only in the themes upon which she reflects in the pieces that make up her work, but in the very manner in which she orders and presents those themes.

The notes that make up this volume appear to have been seeking form as desperately as Pirandello's six characters sought an author. Martin-Gaité shows herself frequently struggling with them, probing for an order that would give them coherence, looking even for her title, the beginning, the ending, as she writes herself into her scattered words.

In the first of the seven prologues that make up Part I of the work we find the author surrounded by her notes, one Sunday afternoon in the fall, "stimulated, and at the same time paralyzed by the urgency to order this so vast and yet so fragile baggage" (p. 21).³ "Baggage" is the proper metaphor, for throughout the work the

¹ For an early collection of short stories, *El balneario* (1954), she won the Premio Café Gijón. Her novel *Entre visillos* (1958) was awarded the Premio Eugenio Nadal. In 1978 she won the Premio Nacional de Literatura for *El cuarto de atrás*. In addition to those works, she has published another collection of short stories, *Las ataduras* (1960), four other novels, *Ritmo lento* (1963) *Retahilas* (1974), *Fragmentos de interior* (1976), and *El castillo de las tres murallas* (1981), a volume of essays, *La búsqueda de interlocutory otras busquedas* (1975) and two historical works, *El proceso de Macanaz* (1970), and *Usos amorosos del dieciocho en España* (1972).

² I have translated the title as "The Never-Ending Tale." The book first appeared early in 1983, and went into a second printing within two months. It is published by the Editorial Trieste, in Madrid.

³ Here, as throughout this paper, I have translated the words into English. The numbers in parentheses refer to the page on which the citations can be found in the original Spanish text.

author refers to the composition as a voyage: "All the metaphors I have been getting hold of since the beginning indicate that I don't conceive of this story as a book, but rather as a journey" (p. 63).

The book is a journey, but it also becomes a love affair, and has built into it the story of Martin-Gaite's tempestuous, troubled relationship with it: of an initially secret involvement that slowly transforms itself into an open liaison, which is finally disturbed by her efforts to dominate, manipulate, understand, fix it. Exasperated by the unending nature of her "unending tale," she ultimately decides, in a separate part, called "Ruptura de relaciones," following the 19 chapters of Part II, to end without concluding: "And suddenly this afternoon I had the electrifying revelation: Enough! A lot still needs to be done, but enough. It is not that I am finishing it, it's that I'm leaving it. I will leave it unfinished. I am not going to add to my many other infidelities that of betraying the name which I gave it in the very beginning of our relationship" (p. 283).

The point is that this book, which contains many acute observations about the creation of story is itself a work in progress, its own witness to the difficulties, joys, dangers, and satisfactions of creating something where once there was only chaos. The nature of the vision Martin-Gaite sets forth makes impossible an academic set piece, as she makes clear in the sixth of the seven prologues that make up Part I. There Martin-Gaite presents a conversation with her young professor friend, Gustavo Fabra, who died before the book was finished, and to whom it is dedicated. He has asked her, at a point when her book was just beginning to ask for form, what she is working on. She hesitates before answering: "I was afraid it would be difficult for me to define, because for me narration was everything, not only the oral and the written, but also the one that we interiorize without words and which marks and distorts all that happens to us: narration is love, it is history, it is politics. All are stories, some told better, some worse" (p. 57).

Her interlocutor suggested that she consult books already written on narration—books on Russian formalism, "new criticism," and structuralism, and for several months, under his tutelage, she went daily to the library, seeking enlightenment in all that erudition. But after experiencing increasing discomfort, not to say fatigue, in that other kind of never-ending quest, she returned to herself, much as Cervantes had to when he noted, in his Prologue to *Don Quixote* Part I, that he was unwilling to "go about looking for authors to say for me what I can say myself without them."⁴ Martin-Gaite confesses to having left Vladimir Propp halfway through his discourse on the morphology of the folktale, saying: "Those authors did not put into practice what they knew, they kept it all uncontaminated. . . . that is to say, it seemed to me that they had not invented a tone adequate to the simultaneity of narration to the experience that gives rise to it" (p. 61).

The difficulty of Martin-Gaite's work is that she asks of it that it be faithful to itself. And so her text offers itself, like the occupants of no-man's-land, as something of an outcast. It is story and essay, reflection and narration, product and process, unfinished and yet somehow complete. In Chapter 12 of the second part of her book, "A Discussion about Water Lilies," she tells of a conversation with a friend who had become mesmerized with the seductions of generative grammar. His efforts to explain his fascination with the field have a stilted quality, as if he were talking, not with a long-time friend, but with "an impersonal interlocutor recently introduced at a conference" (p. 197). When finally, through a process I will soon reveal, he breaks through to a more personal, impassioned level of discourse, Carmen says:

⁴ From Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, trans. J. M. Cohen (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1950), p. 27.

I finally managed to realize that the object of generative linguistics is not to study language as already constituted and elaborated, but rather to investigate the way it arises in the speaker, the mechanisms by means of which he produces it spontaneously. It is called “generative” for that reason, because it seeks to drink in the very fountain from which language is engendered, or rather, in the mouth and living circumstances of each speaker.

“Come on,” I told him, “for that journey you don’t need saddle bags! That’s the same thing that I’ve been working on without all those titles and special terms. That is the unending tale.” (pp. 197-98)

The observation in itself suffices to reveal the essence of Martin-Gaite’s project in her book. But since the key to it all is to enact, not just to state, the issue, it is important to see the context through which this central concept emerges. The chapter begins with the possibly apocryphal anecdote of the Spanish poet, Amado Nervo, who is walking with Miguel de Unamuno. Nervo notices some lovely flowers and asks Unamuno their name. “Water lilies,” answers Unamuno, “those flowers you are always talking about in your poems” (p. 195).

“Water lilies” then becomes the framing image for the chapter, whose inner story will concern Martin-Gaite’s conversation with her Chomsky-saturated friend. “Water lilies” moves from its place of specificity at the edge of a pond in the opening anecdote to a place of generality at the end of the chapter, standing for all those abstractions that we tend to throw around without having a concrete object to which to attach them. It is a theme central to Martin-Gaite’s whole opus, and is stated with considerable passion:

Into water lilies are converted, let’s take for example, freedom, the situation of the woman, or social justice for the one who at the same time that he elaborates more or less brilliant speeches about such matters, does not realize that he is tyrannizing everyone, is incapable of making an effort to make life pleasant for the actual woman by his side, and cannot see in the misery and need of beings with faces and eyes in his immediate vicinity anything other than an inopportune interruption that blocks his magisterial career as redeemer of the human race. (p. 199)

Within the framing image of the water lilies is contained the other story, which once again, as with Amado Nervo and Unamuno, presents two protagonists discussing words in the countryside. In the inner tale, however, the context is much more fully elaborated. The interlocutors are firmly located, and their relationship is important in the unfolding of the conversation. We learn that the fervent student of generative grammar has changed fields, that he is an old friend of the author, but one whom she has not seen for several years. She urges him to go with her to her country house outside of Madrid since he has complained of having become a slave to routine and to the clock.

It is a beautiful afternoon. In spite of the change of atmosphere, and the cordiality of the friendship, however, the exchange between the two lacks fluidity. It is only when Carmen hits on the idea of comparing generative linguistics to a mistress and his passion to that of a love affair, that her friend begins really to transmit a sense of its essence. By reminding him of past girlfriends he has brought to the house, she warms his memory, gives body to his abstractions, and soon he is deeply engaged in a vivid presentation of what has interested him in the work of Chomsky and his followers.

The story of generative linguistics has a beginning, middle, and end. It is located in time and space. But perhaps more important, since these are the ingredients of any

story, it is about the very thing it does, its point being that her book and her friend's generative grammar are both concerned with finding "the very fountains from which language is engendered ... in the mouth and living circumstances of each speaker": "I tried to make him see the contradiction that existed between the desire to understand how the human word emerges and the fact of going in search of that birth not in its true cradle, but in books and papers" (p. 198).

For Martin-Gaite the context cannot properly be severed from the content. Whatever truths are so harvested quickly lose their meaning, for the world that she offers to us in her ruminations is one that is in constant flux. Its meaning resides in the lived circumstances in which it arises. The generalization shorn of its context, like the branch from the vine, quickly withers and dies. And so the obligation to name and keep naming is threatened at every moment by a sinking back into the flux.

Martin-Gaite writes as if this task of naming were, more than a calling, a matter of life and death, a task from which there is no shrinking: "Even though of a character so different from that upon which it operates, in the end it [the word] injects life into life—another kind of life—rectifying it and saving us from its suffocation" (p. 32). The word, the act of bearing witness to the surrounding chaos, giving it shape, carries the mark of salvation, a salvation won at high cost, since it requires something akin to being in but not of the world. In an impassioned, very long paragraph, she describes the act of writing as follows:

It is to stand with eyes open, ears open, the nose taking in scents, the fingers touching, and the taste aware of the nausea, and to hold firm, quiet, despite everything; not closing any of the windows through which come the agitations of news, machines, changes, diversions, accidents, annoyances, war, injustice, and further away, weak, almost imperceptible, there in the distance, the finger drum of death approaching. And without ceasing to hear all this, to see it come, and grow, without ceasing to feel it in the throat like an amassed indisposition which bids us only throw ourselves on the ground and cry or sleep or vomit, to stand in peace and remain upright as if nothing were happening, as if we were in a quiet, padded enclosure, on a desert island, or looking at a pleasant and peaceful landscape from the battlements of our ivory tower, removed from death, change, and hurry. (pp. 29-30)

The chaos is a constant menace, as is the flight from it (which is only, after all, the illusion of flight) into abstraction. But giving it a shape which it does not, in fact, possess, is treacherous business, inevitably involving distortion. Aware of how quickly the intellect seizes on concepts and fixes them into inalterable truths, Martin-Gaite takes refuge not in pre-established patterns, but in an ongoing process in which intuition, and the needs of the moment, serve as guides. It is because of the importance of spontaneity, of creating the conditions in which the unexpected can occur, that she gives priority to the narrative created in conversation over that which is written: "In spoken narrations (which I hope this will resemble as much as possible), one does not have a pre-established program, nor are the untread paths off limits" (p. 62).

The ideal narration, then, like truth itself, emerges in context. It is born, flowers, and dies with the beauty of a pattern—one among so many—caught in the turn of the kaleidoscope, or in the shower of colored sparks against the night sky during a fireworks display. And since that ideal transformation of a bit of unformed matter into a momentary shape is generated in the presence of another, it follows that narration has a lot to do not only with the speaker, but with his or her interlocutor.

Much of Martin-Gaite's life, as she often has occasion to recount in her book, has been occupied in the search for an ideal interlocutor. That search is also the subject of some of her best works of fiction. Her beautiful novel, *Retahilas* (1974), captures the very essence of the fiction-making process as described here in *The Never-Ending Tale*: two characters, a middle-aged aunt and her nephew spend a night together in their decaying ancestral family house, whose last permanent occupant lies dying in another room. The conversation rises up like a flame of warmth and light against the surrounding dark, overcoming it.

But the miracle of the perfect interlocutor is rare, and many of Martin-Gaite's pages in *The Never-Ending Tale* are devoted to the painful discovery of the child in his essential isolation. The subject is most broadly treated in a chapter called "La confesion sacramental," where the author traces the process by which the would-be narrator turns within in search of the interlocutor otherwise denied him: "The professor and the confessor, like, years later, the psychiatrist or the journalist, pressure us to tell them stories because their profession obliges them to do so. . . . We must have gone through the disillusionment of observing their inauthenticity and lack of interest in the story they urge us to tell them before we feel within ourselves . . . the need to tell it in a free way, beyond their imposed criteria" (p. 235). The speaker of stories finally concludes: "One must seek the interlocutor by other means. Or simply dream him, which is when we begin really to write" (p. 240).

In Martin-Gaite's most celebrated novel to date, *El cuarto de atrás*,³ that is exactly what the main character, C., does. She quite literally dreams an interlocutor in a night of threatening insomnia, with whom she speaks until dawn, and through whom the chaos of her notes and dreams are put to the order necessary to break her out of her aimlessness, her nonproductivity. Because of that dreamed ideal interlocutor she was able to "begin really to write."

Not so incidentally, the storytelling, since it is necessarily a construction made by a speaker and an interlocutor, is closely related to falling in love. In *Retahilas* (p. 162), the nephew tells his aunt: "I wanted to be grown up so I could get married . . . so they would let me go to bed with a girl who would have all the time in the world . . . someone who would know how to speak, to play, to listen . . . because for me at that time one thing was terribly clear: to be able to speak was to be in love . . ." (p. 162).

There is passion in the process of bringing light out of darkness, and Martin-Gaite often uses love as a metaphor for narration: "With narration there happens the same thing that happens in bullfights and in love" (p. 46); "the attraction of love, as of story, has root in its capacity to surprise" (p. 45). Two of the finest chapters in the book, "Under the mask of the Pirate" and "Love in the Rubble," are dedicated to an analysis of the storytelling process as a basic ingredient of the state of being in love. But Martin-Gaite, so fully involved in the "turbulent river" (the title of the last section of the book) of life, has no illusion about the perdurability of passion, and sees with a clear eye the dangers of self-delusion that lurk in the shadows, as well as the tendency to destroy love by trying to hold it, fix it, lift it too high above the flux. The metaphor, then, becomes a natural vehicle for representing the process of creating the book itself, as already explained.

³ *El cuarto de atrás* has attracted considerable critical attention in the United States, and will appear, under the title *The Back Room*, in the fall of 1983, published by the Columbia University Press. For a good collection of essays on the works of Carmen Martin-Gaite, with great emphasis on *El cuarto de atrás*, see *From Fiction to Metafiction: Essays in Honor of Carmen Martin-Gaite* (Lincoln Nebraska: Society of Spanish and Spanish-American Studies, 1983).

Life in Martin-Gaité's vision of it is, like the stories we tell, a never-ending process. The task is to attend to it, to the moments and situations it offers us, illuminating them, raising them from the chaos by the power of our shaping word. And, as she explained to Gustavo Fabra, her book is about narration, which proves to be everything. Narration requires attention. It does not permit easy generalization, nor self-pity, nor abstract "programs of reform." It is heavy labor, an exercise of consciousness, a rescue operation designed not only to represent, but to give life.

In Carmen Martin-Gaité's book ideas do come to life through character and situation. Stories—about her mother, her daughter, her friends—come and go, all held within another story, a love story involving the author and her never-ending journey along the borderlands where things, however tangentially and ephemerally, meet and comingle.