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Entre visillos

Solamente uno que vive aquí puede llegar a resignarse con las cosas que pasan aquí, y hasta puede llegar a creer que vive y que respira. ¡Pero yo no! Yo me ahogo, yo no me resigno, yo me desespero.

(Only a person who lives stuck in this place can resign herself to the things that happen here, and even believe that she's alive, and breathing. But I can't! I'm suffocating, I can't resign myself, I'm in despair.)¹

Introduction

Carmen Martín Gaité completed *Entre visillos* in 1957, and submitted it for consideration for the Premio Eugenio Nadal under the pseudonym Sofia Veloso (her maternal grandmother's name). It won the prize and the following year it was published by Destino. It remains one of Martín Gaité's most popular and successful books.²

It is surprising that a novel containing such a negative portrait of post-war society experienced so little trouble with the censors. The reader's report on *Entre visillos*, dated 15 January 1958, includes the following comment:

Una historia provinciana de un grupo de chicas, sus estudios y sus amoríos. El argumento se centra en torno a la figura del nuevo profesor de alemán del instituto, desde que llega al pueblo a las vacaciones de Navidad.

¹ Carmen Martín Gaité, *Entre visillos*, 16th edn (Barcelona: Destino, 1997), 55; *Behind the Curtains*, trans Frances M. López-Morillas (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 53.

² José Jurado Morales, *La trayectoria narrativa de Carmen Martín Gaité: 1925–2000* (Madrid: Gredos, 2003), 73–4. The novel was televised by Televisión Española in 1971, and it has been translated into several languages: into English (as *Behind the Curtains*) by Frances M. López-Morillas; into Welsh (not Irish, as Martinell Gifre has it) by John Grey Davies (as *Rhwng y llenni*), published by Christopher Davies Llandybie in 1975; and into French (*À travers les persiennes*), published by Gallimard in 1961. Gifre, *Al encuentro de Carmen Martín Gaité*, 87.

Convendría suprimir dos expresiones groseras, en las galeradas número 41 y 64. Puede publicarse.³

(a provincial story about a group of girls, their studies and their loves. The plot centres on the figure of the new German teacher at the Institute from his arrival in the town to the Christmas holidays. Two crude expressions, on pages 41 and 64, should be suppressed. Publishable).

In handwriting, at the foot of the report, is the comment: 'consultado Jefe de Sección no se toman en consideración las tachaduras propuestas' (following consultation with the Head of Section, the proposed cuts are not to be considered). It is worth considering why it was so lightly censored. Aside from the arbitrary nature of the censorship process itself, other factors must be taken into account, such as the fact that *Entre visillos* was written by an unknown woman, contains elements of the established apolitical genres of autobiography, *novela rosa* and *Bildungsroman*, has no overt political message, and does not make obvious points about class and injustice.⁴

Entre visillos artfully captures the atmosphere of relentless tedium of provincial life in post-war Spain. The restrictions placed on movement, the concern for respectability and the fear of what others might say dominate the lives of the young people who are the focus of the novel. What is clear is that, in the provinces at least, little had changed since the early post-war days. In fact, Martín Gaité's comments about post-war society in *Usos amorosos de la postguerra española* closely echo her portrayal of 1950s provincial society in *Entre visillos*: 'percibía en casa, en la calle y en la escuela una atmósfera [...] que coartaba la espontaneidad' ('at home, in the street and at school, they could feel tension in the air, an atmosphere [...] that restricted spontaneity').⁵ The stagnation and immobility of Francoist Spain is evident in the petty snobberies and the concern about 'el buen tono' (good taste), epitomized by 'las chicas de beige' (the girls in beige). Lives revolve around the superficiali-

³ AGA (3)50 Sig. 21/11901 Expte 183. The copy in the AGA files is unmarked, so it is impossible to tell with certainty which were the proposed cuts. The first cut is a reference to part of the dialogue between the young men in the casino in Chapter 8, and is possibly the reference to 'servicio a domicilio'. The second is more obvious. On p. 64 (Chapter 12), there is a reference to 'irse de putas'.

⁴ Hans-Jörg Neuschäfer makes the point that the censors who viewed later editions were shocked by the leniency of the censors who read the novel in the 1950s, although we could find no evidence of this in the files. Documents referring to subsequent publications of *Entre visillos* merely refer back to earlier authorizations and contain no further comment. Neuschäfer, *Adiós a la España eterna: La dialéctica de la censura. Novela, teatro y cine bajo el franquismo*, trans Rosa Pilar Blanco (Madrid: Anthropos, 1994), 319. AGA (3)50 Sig. 73/00626 Expte 1906; (3)50 Sig. 73/05396 Expte 3520.

⁵ Carmen Martín Gaité, *Usos amorosos de la postguerra española*, 3rd edn (Barcelona: Anagrama, 1996), 22; *Courtship Customs in Postwar Spain*, trans Margaret E. W. Jones (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2004), 23.

ties of domestic chores, fashion, grooming, status, bullfights and socializing. These earnestly discussed concerns only serve to highlight the lack of real meaning in the characters' lives and the limits of their expectations. Their boastfulness about possessions also contrasts with the observations of Pablo, an outsider, about Spain's shortcomings. Moreover, through the characters' association of foreignness with progress and modernity, the feelings of inferiority of the inhabitants of the city manifest themselves.

Prevailing critical views

Despite winning the prestigious Premio Nadal in 1957, the initial reviews of *Entre visillos* were mixed. Reviews since then have tended to be positive, though their readings of the novel do not necessarily share the same focus. Many have commented on the testimonial realism of the novel. Despite concluding that it is not a great novel, Hector Medina says that 'cumple muy bien con el propósito de la escritora de captar y documentar la existencia en una capital de provincia' (it achieves the writer's goal of capturing and documenting life in a provincial capital).⁶ Ciplijauskaitė comments on the neo-realist focus on the group, rather than on inner monologue, which would be prioritized in Martín Gaité's later work.⁷ Soliño notes the realism of the portrayal of 'the internal spheres of Spanish women trapped in the daily routines of a provincial city' and María Alfaro, despite her negative reaction, acknowledged the 'realismo fotográfico' (photographic realism) in the character descriptions.⁸

Carla Olson Buck notes in *Entre visillos* the continuity of neo-realist techniques from *El balneario*, and she considers it at once a novel of social criticism and a *Bildungsroman*. She argues that 'the novel is about writing, but writing as a search for the ideal reader', therefore placing it firmly in the realm of Martín Gaité's search for an interlocutor, a theme that would dominate many of her later works.⁹ John Kronik, likewise, classes it as 'a self-conscious text', and makes much of the theme of communication in the

⁶ Hector Medina, *La novelística de Carmen Martín Gaité: Búsqueda de una voz* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1987), 62.

⁷ Biruté Ciplijauskaitė, *Carmen Martín Gaité (1925–2000)* (Madrid: Ediciones del Orto, 2000), 19.

⁸ María Elena Soliño, *Women and Children First: Spanish Women Writers and the Fairy Tale Tradition* (Maryland: Scripta Humanistica, 2002), 110; María Alfaro, 'Carmen Martín Gaité. *Entre visillos*', *Ínsula* 138–9 (1958), 13.

⁹ Carla Olson Buck, *Speaker/Reader: Dialogic Relationships in the Novels of Carmen Martín Gaité* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1990), 39.

novel.¹⁰ José Jurado Morales sees the influence of existentialism on Martín Gaité's work, as does Neuschäfer, who stresses the 'atmósfera asfixiante de *huis clos*' (asphyxiating atmosphere of *huis clos*) in the novel.¹¹

Others have centred their analyses on the theme of women. Janet Pérez termed the novel 'a feminized quest romance' and Mercedes Carbayo-Abengózar, while acknowledging its credentials as a novel of social criticism, defined it as a work of 'existencialismo feminista' (feminist existentialism).¹² For Ramos Ortega, the greatness of *Entre visillos* lies in its depiction of an age-old struggle of young women for identity and independence.¹³ Carmen Alemany Bay addresses *Entre visillos* as a parody of the *novela rosa*, as does María Elena Soliño.¹⁴ Many critics have focused on the limitations placed on women, and commented on symbols of space and confinement in the novel. Francisca López, in her discussion of *Entre visillos* as an example of 'la novela femenina', focuses on the values, restrictions and myths of provincial Spanish society, and she is one of the few critics to mention the implied lesbianism of the character Teresa.¹⁵ Lynn K. Talbot, in her feminist take on the text, reads the novel as an opportunity 'to observe, analyze and judge women's position in society'.¹⁶ For Talbot, 'the recurring images and symbols in women's fiction reflect the alienation and secondary status of women in patriarchal society', and she links her analysis to Annis Pratt's study, *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction*.¹⁷ She considers it a hopeful and positive text for its portrayal of Natalia, a young woman prepared to defy convention and challenge the patriarchal system of control. Collins too, in her study of space and female identity in the novel, deems *Entre visillos* a challenge to

¹⁰ John Kronik, 'A splice of life: Carmen Martín Gaité's *Entre visillos*', in Mirella Servodidio and Marcia L. Welles (eds), *From Fiction to Metafiction: Essays in Honour of Carmen Martín Gaité* (Nebraska: Society of Spanish and Spanish-American Studies, 1983), 49–60 (52).

¹¹ Jurado Morales, *La trayectoria narrativa*, 40. Neuschäfer, *Adiós a la España eterna*, 67–8.

¹² Pérez quoted in Catherine G. Bellver, 'Gendered spaces: boundaries and border crossings in *Entre visillos*', in Kathleen M. Glenn and Lissette Rolón Collazo (eds), *Carmen Martín Gaité: Cuento de nunca acabar/Never-ending Story* (Colorado: Society of Spanish and Spanish-American Studies, 2003), 33–49 (34); Mercedes Carbayo-Abengózar, 'Lo raro no es solo vivir, lo raro es también hablar', in Redondo Goicoechea, *Carmen Martín Gaité*, 19–32 (21).

¹³ Manuel José Ramos Ortega, 'Discurso e historia en la novela española de posguerra', *Signa: Revista de la Asociación Española de Semiótica* 5 (1996), 289–305 (298).

¹⁴ Carmen Alemany Bay, *La novelística de Carmen Martín Gaité: Aproximación crítica* (Salamanca: Ediciones de la Diputación de Salamanca, 1990); Soliño, *Women and Children First*, 109.

¹⁵ Francisca López, *Mito y discurso en la novela femenina de posguerra en España* (Madrid: Pliegos, 1995), 93–103.

¹⁶ Lynn K. Talbot, 'Female archetypes in Carmen Martín Gaité's *Entre visillos*', *Anales de la Literatura Española Contemporánea* 12 (1987), 79–94 (80).

¹⁷ Talbot, 'Female archetypes', 81.

patriarchy, and Bellver, who classes *Entre visillos* as both *Bildungsroman* and neo-realist novel, identifies a link between the theme of confinement in this novel and in other examples of literature by women.¹⁸ Adrián M. García goes as far as to classify *Entre visillos* as ‘a covertly feminist novel’.¹⁹

Multiple perspectives

Entre visillos details life in a provincial city in 1950s Spain. The multiple perspectives, often focused on the same figures, places or episodes, lend the novel a cinematic touch. More a novel of neo-realism than one of social criticism, Martín Gaité herself acknowledged the influence of Italian neo-realism on her work, and the documentary feel to the novel is in keeping with her generation’s emphasis on objectivity and testament.²⁰ It is clear that the author used elements of the *novela rosa* in *Entre visillos* and, by parodying the genre, she focused the reader’s attention on its limitations. Soliño points out that in the *novela rosa* ‘as in fairy tales, there was always a happy ending for the passive female protagonist who subjected herself to the proper patriarchal authority’.²¹ Furthermore, she suggests that the function of the *novela rosa* as modern-day fairy tale was to ‘teach optimistic conformity’.²² In contrast to this, *Entre visillos* offers a pessimistic view of conformity. As Ciplijauskaitė points out, ‘nada es pintado color rosa en ella’ (nothing in it is rose-tinted).²³

Though it is not an autobiography, the society portrayed, including its restrictions, aspirations and elements of popular culture, are those experienced by the author and her contemporaries. For Joan Lipman Brown, *Entre visillos* is, like her later novel *El cuarto de atrás*, ‘unequivocally autobiographical’, but is an autobiographical novel, rather than pure autobiography.²⁴ Carmen Martín Gaité explained that she wrote the novel ‘como una especie de rechazo de ese mundo provinciano del que huía’ (as a type of rejection of that provincial world that I was fleeing from).²⁵

¹⁸ Marsha S. Collins, ‘Inscribing the space of female identity in Carmen Martín Gaité’s *Entre visillos*’, *Symposium* 51 (1997), 66–78; Bellver, ‘Gendered spaces’, 33–49.

¹⁹ Adrián M. García, *Silence in the Novels of Carmen Martín Gaité* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000), 13.

²⁰ Carmen Martín Gaité, *Esperando el porvenir: Homenaje a Ignacio Aldecoa* (Madrid: Siruela, 1994), 54–5.

²¹ Soliño, *Women and Children First*, 113.

²² Soliño, *Women and Children First*, 114.

²³ Ciplijauskaitė, *Carmen Martín Gaité (1925–2000)*, 50.

²⁴ She further classifies it as ‘autobiografía ambiental’ (atmospheric autobiography) in contrast to the ‘autobiografía argumental’ (argumental autobiography) of *El cuarto de atrás* (Barcelona: Destino, 2004). Joan Lipman Brown, ‘One autobiography, twice told: Martín Gaité’s *Entre visillos* and *El cuarto de atrás*’, *Hispanic Journal* 7 (1986), 37–47 (37, 45).

²⁵ Quoted in Alemany Bay, *La novelística*, 77.

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