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Elizabeth Cornick

MA Essay

3 May 2021

**Woolf as Window: A View into Martín Gaité's Treatment of Alienation in
*El cuarto de atrás***

lo que importa es tener en cuenta los modelos literarios que influyen en las conductas, ¿no?

Martín Gaité, *El cuarto de atrás* (1978)

what matters is taking into account the literary models that influence behaviors, don't you think?¹

The Spanish writer Carmen Martín Gaité translated Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) into Spanish in 1982, just a few years after publishing *El cuarto de atrás* (The Back Room) in 1978.² Curiously, another translation of *To the Lighthouse* by Spanish writer Antonio Marichalar was reprinted in 1978, and the Biblioteca Nacional de España (National Library of Spain) to this day mistakenly records that Martín Gaité's translation was published in 1978 also.³ Since another Spanish translation of *To the Lighthouse* had been reprinted recently, why would Martín Gaité translate the same novel four years later? I interpret Martín Gaité's translation as evidence that she wanted to put Woolf's novel into Spanish herself because Martín Gaité understood Woolf's modernist themes and innovative narrative strategies at work in *To the Lighthouse* after refiguring them in her own novel.⁴ In a 1980 journal entry from Martín Gaité's posthumously

¹ There is an English translation of *El cuarto de atrás* by Helen Lane, but all English translations in this essay are my own for the purpose of providing literal translations closer to the original Spanish.

² See Elide Pittarello's "'Homenaje a Virginia Woolf,'" Marcella Uberti-Bona's *Geografías del dialogo: La traducción en la obra de Carmen Martín Gaité* (52), and Mónica Fuentes del Río's "La traducción en la obra de Carmen Martín Gaité" proving that Martín Gaité's translation of *To the Lighthouse* was published in 1982. Their collective research contradicts the Biblioteca Nacional de España's record that the translation was published in 1978. Also, please note that I will translate the first reference to Martín Gaité's titles but will refer to her texts by their original titles throughout this article.

³ See Biblioteca Nacional de España's [online catalog](#).

⁴ See Fuentes del Río's article regarding Martín Gaité's self-observation that she mainly translated women's work (172).

published *Visión de Nueva York* (2005) (Vision of New York), she writes alongside a drawing of the cover of Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) that her translation of *To the Lighthouse* only took her a month and a half, describing "las resonancias" (the resonances) she felt while translating the novel (*Visión de Nueva York* 144).⁵

I take these literary-historical facts indicating Martín Gaité's clear interest in Woolf as a point of departure for comparing *El cuarto de atrás* and *To the Lighthouse*. Multiple scholars have discussed Martín Gaité's obvious admiration for Woolf's work in, but not limited to, *Desde la ventana: Enfoque femenino de la literatura española* (1987) (Through the window: Spanish literature with a feminine focus) and *Visión de Nueva York*.⁶ In the introduction of *Desde la ventana*, Martín Gaité explains that *A Room of One's Own* inspired her to write about women's writing: "[el] ensayo de Virginia Woolf... me llevó por primera vez a preguntarme por las posibles peculiaridades del discurso femenino. Lo que más me había llamado la atención era el uso del tono narrativo aplicado al tratamiento de un tema teórico" (*Desde la ventana* 12) (Woolf's essay got me to ask myself for the first time about the particular possibilities of a women's writing. What grabbed my attention most was the use of the narrative tone applied to the treatment of a theoretical topic). Clearly, Martín Gaité indicates her fascination with the narrative aesthetics and themes of Woolf's essay, particularly its tone. Although she wrote *Desde la ventana* after *El cuarto de atrás*, I read her introduction to the essay as an excellent clue affirming my claim here that Martín Gaité was deeply interested in Woolf's narrative methods before she explicitly said so, or possibly before she herself was even aware.

⁵ See Pittarello's "'Homenaje a Virginia Woolf'" for an in-depth analysis of Martín Gaité's collages regarding direct and indirect allusions to Woolf.

⁶ On *Desde la ventana*, see Lojo Rodríguez's "'England's Most Precious Gift': Virginia Woolf's Transformations into Spanish" and Marisol Morales-Ladrón's "Desde el espacio interior". On *Visión de Nueva York*, see Pittarello's article.

This essay will illuminate Martín Gaité's affinity to Woolf's modernism on a subtler plane through her engagement in *El cuarto de atrás* with the modernist issue of alienation so prominent in *To the Lighthouse*. Woolf foregrounds the classic modernist theme of alienation as an approach to articulating the crisis of modernization in *To the Lighthouse*—that is, the onslaught of a constantly changing present that disrupts social roles at the beginning of the twentieth century. Understanding Woolf's approach will provide a window into seeing the different ways in which Martín Gaité plays with alienation in *El cuarto de atrás* to address the crisis of modernization in her temporal and geopolitical context. While the two texts exhibit thematic and formal parallels, this essay does not assume modernism as a universal literary movement. To do so would flatten the importance of the two novels' historical and social contexts. Rather, following the lead of José Luis Venegas's book *Decolonizing Modernism* that adopts a more inclusive vision of modernism than the traditional one, I see the thematic and formal parallels and connections as “a network of related yet localized aesthetic responses to specific historical and cultural conjuncture” (3).

I begin with the historical context of *To the Lighthouse* in order to demonstrate the dynamics of modernization to which Woolf's modernism responded. Against the backdrop of major cultural shifts brought on by the end of the Victorian era and the First World War, Woolf's canonical high modernist novel traces the lives of the Ramsays and their friends vacationing off the coast of Scotland (Kavaloski 123).⁷ Michael Whitworth writes about the now widely accepted antagonistic relationship between modernism and modernity, providing a useful view into Woolf's modernism as a response to her experience of modernization: “though modernist

⁷ On the extensively studied socio-historical context of *To the Lighthouse*, consider Ana Parejo Vadillo's “Generational Difference in *To the Lighthouse*” regarding the end of the Victorian era, Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* regarding the destruction of the First World War as the backdrop of the novel, and Andrew Ramsay's death in the war conveyed in brackets in Part II “Time Passes”: “[A shell exploded. Twenty or thirty young men were blown up in France, among them Andrew Ramsay, whose death, mercifully, was instantaneous.]” (133).

writing is dominated by the experience of the metropolis, of technological innovation and the accelerated pace of modern life, it satirises and rejects the phenomena of ‘bourgeois’ modernity” (147). Furthermore, Whitworth states that the rejection of the “Victorian and Edwardian heritage is a defining feature of modernism” for Woolf’s period (150). Although he notes that Woolf maintains an ambivalent relationship to Victorian society and does not necessarily reject it completely, I will show that she remarks on its deterioration that sparked the crisis of the bourgeois subject in *To the Lighthouse*.

I turn now to *El cuarto de atrás*, a novel that Martín Gaité wrote during a major transitional period (1975-1982) in Spain from an authoritarian dictatorship to a democracy. At the end of the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), Francisco Franco seized control of Spain, dashing the progressive policies and culture of the defeated Second Spanish Republic (1931-1936) (*Usos amorosos* 12-13).⁸ Reflecting on the cultural outcomes of the cataclysmic civil war through which she lived, Martín Gaité wrote the historical essay *Usos amorosos de la postguerra española* (1987) (Courtship Customs in Postwar Spain), a companion essay to *El cuarto de atrás*. There, she analyzes the Franco regime’s propaganda of the 1940s that celebrated Spain’s “bendito atraso” (blessed backwardness), since the regime privileged Spanish tradition over integrating new models of modernity espoused by countries such as the United States, for example (17-34). Following this decade, Martín Gaité then explains the crucial change in the early 1950s: Spain was about to start her “luna de miel con los Estados Unidos” (honeymoon with the United States) (28). The renewed economic relationship with the United States spurred a

⁸ Although this essay primarily explores Woolf’s influence on Martín Gaité, I would be remiss if I did not mention the Spanish Civil War’s influence on Woolf. Her beloved nephew Julian Bell died in the war fighting for the Second Spanish Republic. In *Modernism and the New Spain*, Gayle Rogers explains that Woolf’s *Three Guineas* (1938), “an epistolary polemic against the fascist tendencies of her native culture,” uses photos from the Spanish Civil War to represent the dangers of tyranny (126).

period of accelerated modernization of Martín Gaité's Spain to which her modernism responds.⁹ The ensuing radical economic and industrial transformation of Spain during 1965-1980, to include (but not limited to) rapid urbanization, consumerism, and shifts in gender and sex relations, meant that modernization was intensely condensed (Subirats 27). Therefore, the experience of cultural upheaval was registered at an extreme level similar to the cultural changes Woolf witnessed.

Given the uneven and ambiguous modernization of Spain (Subirats 39), it follows that literary modernism occurred unevenly and ambiguously in Spain too (Sieburth 231). Although Stephanie Sieburth does not see *El cuarto de atrás* as a novel decrying the “modernization and nascent consumerism,” which I argue Martín Gaité's novel does, Sieburth acknowledges that the “contradictory, uneven, and discontinuous modernization of Spain” occurred during the period in which Martín Gaité wrote *El cuarto de atrás* (21). She also notes the “dilemmas which [Martín Gaité] faced as [she] tried to find a role for [herself] in a society *where old and new existed in tension*, and where modernization was not accompanied by political freedom” (22) (my emphasis). That the “old and new existed in tension” is critical for understanding how Woolf's and Martín Gaité's modernisms treat alienation in their novels. Being aware of this contradictory coexistence produces the sense of alienation the characters experience as a result of the way modernization disrupts the old to create the new, hence displacing rather than replacing the old.

Sieburth's observation that Spanish modernism occurred unevenly is correct (Sieburth 231), and Spain is not an exception in this regard. New modernist studies have questioned the periodization of modernism in general, opening up the term “modernism” to be re-conceptualized aesthetically and thematically as well as in terms of its geopolitical and historical

⁹ Sieburth writes that the Spanish “economic boom did not occur until the 1960s,” an observation consistent with Spain's reopening up of international relations (243).

evolutions beyond its traditional period associations.¹⁰ In a similar vein, I apply a thematic and historical approach to my analysis of *To the Lighthouse* and *El cuarto de atrás* as modernist texts in this essay while taking the novels' modern times into consideration. Doing so illustrates that their modernisms demonstrate, in the eloquent words of Marshall Berman, an "attempt by modern men and women to become subjects as well as objects of modernization, to get a grip on the modern world and make themselves at home in it," because modernity is "a unity of disunity: it pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish" (15). *To the Lighthouse* and *El cuarto de atrás* illuminate the classic modern struggle to make oneself feel at home in a modern world that is constantly evolving, meaning that social roles in those worlds are in crisis due to the radical and incessant nature of change. Due to the process of modernization, Woolf treats alienation as a site for consciously recognizing the performativity of female roles, providing a window into viewing Martín Gaité's treatment of alienation produced by a similar type of crisis in *El cuarto de atrás*.

Performativity's Role in Alienation

The word "alien" can be a noun, adjective, or verb (more commonly appearing as "alienate" in verb form) to designate something as a stranger/foreigner, strange/foreign, and an act of estrangement (OED and Reed 11). As such, figures like Marx and Brecht found alienation as a productive platform for articulating the condition of modernity (Reed 11-12). Unfortunately, the scope of this essay prevents an extensive examination of the long history of alienation. Here, I

¹⁰ Although modernism is traditionally understood to span 1890s-1940s, Susan Stanford Friedman points out "[e]ven within the European context, this dating privileges...modernism in English produced in Britain and the United States and by expatriates living abroad," indicating that modernism's end date and Anglophone bias means that this definition of modernism, which excludes non-Western modernisms, does not fully work for Western modernism either (427). For additional sources discussing the periodization of modernism, see Marshall Berman's *All That is Solid Melts into Air* and Eric Hayot's introduction to *A New Vocabulary for Global Modernisms*.

use the term “alienation” to describe a sense of detachment within the characters created by the act of performing a social role while *recognizing* that they are performing that role. Recognition of performance makes one feel estranged from oneself because it signals that one has adopted a dual position of being both a performer and a spectator of oneself. In other words, a social act that once felt natural, and hence unnoticeable, suddenly feels artificial and noticeable. To put it otherwise, recognizing the reenactment of an older role and seeing oneself perform it in the present creates feelings of alienation.

Performativity—the repetition of actions constructed by society that constitute the subject—factors into the sense of alienation in the novels’ female characters when they realize that they are repeating a role that modernization has rendered outdated. As Judith Butler illustrates in *Gender Trouble* through the case study of drag, “we see sex and gender denaturalized by means of performance which avows their distinctness and dramatizes the cultural mechanism of their fabricated unity” as opposed to the heteronormative insistence that gender is a natural and inner essence (175). Following Butler’s logic, the denaturalization of the female characters’ social roles leads them to see those roles as constituted by repetitive performance. I add a historical component to her theory, however, by suggesting that a moment of particularly acute modernization allows subjects to realize the denaturalization of the roles since its constant process of disruption and creation causes the formed and forming roles to coexist in the present. The modern subject begins to experience her social roles as unnatural (even though they were always unnatural since they are collective constructions) because the act of repeating them starts to require a conscious effort. The awareness of playing parts indicates that those parts are visible, thus meaning that they are outdated and no longer fit the present time successfully (i.e., what used to feel “natural”). Further, Martin Hägglund’s notion that the “condition of temporality is,

strictly speaking, ‘undecideable,’ since it consists in a relentless displacement that unsettles any definitive assurance or given meaning” supports my claim that Martín Gaité and Woolf articulate this experience of the modern subject through their female characters. These characters experience alienation due to the “relentless displacement” of modernization’s constant dynamism that dislocates their roles, thus forcing them to embrace new ones (62).

This essay demonstrates that using performativity as a tool to decode alienation in modernist texts is productive. Joshua Kavaloski’s book *High Modernism: Aestheticism and Performativity* that examines the link between performativity and high modernism inspired my own investigation into their relationship. My definition of performativity, however, diverges from his. Rather than Kavaloski’s formulation of performativity as achieving social efficacy (causing a change) in the extratextual worlds of high modernist texts (19, 23), I define “performativity” as the repetitive performance of actions that maintain a social order articulated by society within the texts. In doing so, I align my definition more closely with Butler’s theory in terms of viewing performativity as a process that sustains the status quo. I locate performativity in *To the Lighthouse* through the social actions of Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe. These actions induce feelings of estrangement because the simultaneous cultural disintegration and renovation driven by modernization reveals the outlines of their roles, hence denaturalizing them. Then, I apply my analysis of Woolf’s treatment of alienation to illuminate that Martín Gaité continues Woolf’s tradition in her novel, revealing the estrangement of the female character through theatrical metaphor and parody of the romance novel.

Alienation as Uninvited Dinner Guest

In this section, I will first examine how the dynamics of modernization transfigure social roles that once felt natural into alienating structures in *To the Lighthouse* to establish the model with which (as I mentioned above) Martín Gaité engages in *El cuarto de atrás*. In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf illustrates that modernization—the process of cultural progress that disrupts the old and ushers in the new—causes formed and newly forming roles for women to coexist, rendering them noticeable and therefore strange. In particular, Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe stand out as acute examples of the alienating effects of modernization. Against the fading away of the Victorian era in the background of Part I “The Window,” Mrs. Ramsay and Lily are aware of playing their social parts. Their awareness of acting signals that those roles are in crisis because of the fact that they are aware of them, hence situating Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe in the alienating position of being both inside and outside themselves.

As many critics have noticed, Mrs. Ramsay, the classic Victorian matriarch of the Ramsay family, acts the older, traditional female role produced by Victorian society (e.g., Vadillo 123-24). At the beginning of the novel, Woolf almost literally frames Mrs. Ramsay as Queen Victoria: “she... stood quite motionless for a moment against a picture of Queen Victoria wearing the blue ribbon of the Garter” (14). Woolf superimposes Mrs. Ramsay upon a picture of the queen wearing the “ribbon of the Garter” because the Order of the Garter is the “the oldest and most senior Order of Chivalry in Britain,” representing the deeply rooted tradition of chivalrous values held by Victorian society that are associated with Mrs. Ramsay (Goodey). In contrast, the younger Lily Briscoe, a family friend who is unmarried and likes to paint, represents the “New Woman,” the newer part for women that emerged during the early twentieth century at the end of the Victorian era (Vadillo 124). In addition to the generational difference that

separates them, Woolf homes in on the issue of social roles becoming visible, and therefore alien, to Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe in the climactic dinner party scene at the end of Part 1.¹¹

At the dinner, Woolf puts on display Mrs. Ramsay's and Lily Briscoe's affect. Because they are alienated from watching themselves carry out their respective parts, Woolf depicts them as both performers and spectators. After everyone is seated, Mrs. Ramsay observes that "[n]othing seemed to have merged. They all sat separate. And the whole of the effort of merging and flowing and creating rested on her" as the Victorian matriarch, so,

giving herself the little shake that one gives a watch that has stopped, the old familiar pulse began beating, as the watch begins ticking—one, two, three, one, two, three. And so on and so on, she repeated, listening to it, sheltering and fostering the still feeble pulse as one might guard a weak flame with a newspaper (83).

Like clockwork in her own estimation, Mrs. Ramsay reluctantly performs her function as the dinner party hostess to "merge" her guests—that is, to reduce the distance she perceives between everyone by imposing the social norms that govern the relations among them. That same act, however, ironically perpetuates her own sense of estrangement because she sees herself performing it. Woolf's objectification of Mrs. Ramsay as a watch underscores the visibly engineered nature of the whole event, also indicating the repetitiveness of her social duty as she notes the "old familiar pulse" beginning to beat. Furthermore, the mix of organic and mechanical metaphors describing her—"pulse began beating" vs. "watch begins ticking"—suggests that Mrs. Ramsay registers that she conforms her body and behaviors to an externally designed position

¹¹ Many scholars have commented on the generational difference of Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe. For a couple examples, see Minow-Pinkey's chapter "*To the Lighthouse*" pp. 84-116 and Thais Rutledge's "Woolf's Feminine Spaces and the New Woman in *To the Lighthouse*". For Martín Gaité's part, she also explores the generational gap between her narrator, "C", and her daughter in *El cuarto de atrás*. In *Usos amorosos*, the epigraph proclaims that she wrote this essay "[p]ara todas las mujeres españolas, entre cincuenta y sesenta años, que no entienden a sus hijos. Y para sus hijos, que no las entienden a ellas" (for all the Spanish women, between 50 and 60, who do not understand their children. And for all the children who do not understand their mothers), indicating that generational difference expressed the transformation of social roles as an alienating experience, too (*Usos amorosos*). Lack of understanding due to inter-generational issues is a common modernist trope.

and goal that she has internalized but now sees and feels as something almost external.¹² At the same time, however, the simile likening her “feeble pulse” to a “weak flame” also illustrates that Mrs. Ramsay knows that the role she is playing is coming to an end; the act is quasi-outdated. By exposing Mrs. Ramsay’s recognition of her own social acting and of the outmoded nature of that part, Woolf illustrates why just before dinner Mrs. Ramsay had a “sense of being past everything, through everything, out of everything...as if there was an eddy...and one could be in it, or one could be out of it, and she was out of it” (83). Mrs. Ramsay feels outside the flow of life because she realizes that her way of being in the world does not fit the present as seamlessly as it once did. Woolf depicts the dynamics of modernization (characterized here as the “eddy”), layering Mrs. Ramsay’s older Victorian role beneath the newer roles flowing in from the relentless march of modern progress.

Although Lily Briscoe is the “New Woman,” the clash of Victorian culture and the incoming modern culture renders her role visible too, creating a sense of alienation in her like Mrs. Ramsay. Later on in the dinner party, Lily notices that Charles Tansley, another guest of the Ramsays, desperately wants to contribute to the conversation but that he does not know how. Lily does not want to help him because she remembers that Mr. Tansley had rudely told her earlier in the day that women “can’t paint, can’t write” (91). Yet she reminds herself:

There is a code of behaviour, she knew, whose seventh article (it may be) says that on occasions of this sort it behoves the woman, whatever her own occupation may be, to go to the help of the young man opposite...as indeed it is their duty, she reflected, in her old maidenly fairness, to help us, suppose the Tube were to burst into flames. Then, she thought, I should certainly expect Mr. Tansley to get me out. But how would it be, she thought, if neither of us did either of these things? (91)

The “code of behaviour” Lily recalls is probably Mrs. Beeton’s *Book of Household Management*, a well-known manners guide for women in the Victorian era, which served as a script for female

¹² Professor Antonio Gómez’s idea about the mix of mechanical and organic metaphors in this passage.

interaction with men.¹³ After imagining the consequences of what might happen if no one followed their prescribed actions, Lily decides to stall her socially required rescue of Mr. Tansley and experiment. That she tests out the idea of deviating from the dinner party etiquette speaks to her self-awareness of her culturally assigned role and of her attempt to play a new one. Lily's impulse to experiment demonstrates that she sees the Victorian model for women as too constraining to suit her, supporting Berman's notion that the modern subject negotiating modernization must be open to the new and innovative (13-14). But Mrs. Ramsay interferes by silently reproaching Lily's silence (her experiment) and thus coerces Lily to follow her part, so "Lily Briscoe had to renounce the experiment—what happens if one is not nice to that young man there—and be nice" (92). Because Mrs. Ramsay makes Lily act the prototypical Victorian, Woolf illustrates that the old attitudes still operate within the new ones, situating Lily in a position of being outside and inside a role. Lily reflects, however, on the cost of being nice: "She would never know him. He would never know her. Human relations were all like that, she thought, and the worst...were between men and women. Inevitably these were extremely insincere she thought" (92). Lily, who is cognizant of the insincerity of her rescue of Mr. Tansley—that is, of her acting—also realizes that carrying out their duties prevents them from knowing each other. In other words, the female and male genders are always alienated from one another because of the types of roles that they perform are also deteriorating.

Woolf registers the already dysfunctional Victorian conventions in the dinner scene by portraying the characters as estranged from each other and themselves, despite their presence at what should be a moment of communion. In doing so, Woolf treats alienation as an expression of the dislocation of changing female roles caused by the accelerated pace of modernization in her

¹³See the "Dinners and Dining" section and the multitude of conversation rules dispersed throughout Mrs. Beeton's manners manual.

society.¹⁴ Vadillo writes that Woolf found herself in the same conflicting position of the old and the modern coexisting: “For if Woolf presents the Victorian ideal of femininity as passé, as belonging to a period before the war, she also looks back to it as the imprint of the modern: the modern artist, the modern artwork, the modern woman” (140). Returning to Woolf’s characters, Mrs. Ramsay’s “imprint” on Lily Briscoe certainly contributes to the dissatisfaction she experiences, because it forces her to consciously contend with the older and newer roles within herself. Due to the cultural disintegration and renovation at the end of the Victorian era and the First World War, women experience their social parts as strange because they feel the contradictions between different sets of cultural demands, some newer and more effervescent than others.

With the paradigm of Woolf’s treatment of alienation in mind, I turn now to analyzing Martín Gaité’s approach to the same in *El cuarto de atrás*. In her novel, Martín Gaité also foregrounds the female narrator’s recognition of performing a social role that produces a sense of alienation in her, but she does so through theatrical metaphor and parody. *El cuarto de atrás* is about a narrator-protagonist, 50-year-old female author introduced as “C,” who shares the same first initial as the author Carmen Martín Gaité. The nonlinear narrative weaves in and out of dialogue between C and a mysterious male stranger (*el hombre de negro*) who arrives unexpectedly at her apartment to interview her. Their conversation summons C’s memories of growing up in the post-Spanish Civil War era and current book project on that period. To represent the multivalent facets of memory, culture, and historiography, this experimental novel contains a hybrid of genres: the fantastic, memoir, history, and the *novela rosa* (romance novel) (19-20). *El cuarto de atrás* emerged from Martín Gaité’s historical project on capturing the

¹⁴ David Bradshaw argues in “The socio-political vision of the novels” that the “fundamental question” of what the relationship is between civilization and society “lies at the heart of *To the Lighthouse*” (199).

postwar romantic rituals previously discussed in the essay, *Usos amorosos*, which the narrator of *El cuarto de atrás* frequently references in the novel (*Usos amorosos* 12). Although C's daughter appears at the end of *El cuarto de atrás* to gesture toward the generational difference between the female characters as Woolf does with Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe, Martín Gaité primarily explores the alienation created by the multilayered female roles stored within the narrator.

In *Usos amorosos* and *El cuarto de atrás*, Martín Gaité and her narrator discuss the Sección Femenina (Women's Section), one of the cultural institutions that inculcated the Franco regime's definition of the ideal Francoist wife in young women. C recounts to the stranger that according to the rhetoric of the Sección Femenina and the history books she read for school, "Isabel la Católica" (Isabel the Catholic Queen) symbolized the standards for the ideal Spanish woman: "la laboriosidad y la alegría" (industriousness and happiness) (172-73). The lauding of Isabel la Católica, a traditional symbol of Spanish imperial grandeur, echoes the privileging of Queen Victoria, also a symbol of English imperialism, as an exemplary model for women in England to which Woolf nods in *To the Lighthouse*. If C expressed these virtues (productivity and joy), then she would properly assume her female role of being the "complemento y espejo del varón" (complement and mirror of the man) (172).¹⁵

Martín Gaité illustrates the estranging position of C being inside and outside her role by juxtaposing her present life with her past life before the swift period of modernization initiated near the end of Franco's regime. The models from C's past operate within her present life since the present is (at least to a certain extent) a product of the past, as demonstrated by Lily Briscoe. But the intermixing of the past in her present induces tension that results in her dissatisfaction with inhabiting an impasse between a *fully formed* role and a *forming* role. With more critical

¹⁵ Note the similarity between Martín Gaité's observation that women were supposed to be mirrors for men and Woolf's analysis of the same in *A Room of One's Own*: "Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size" (35).

distance from her youth in her middle age, C grows more aware of the persona she repetitively performed and still attempts to perform, albeit ambivalently and reluctantly, at her current age. In Martín Gaité's late modernist text, the demonstration of the performativity of the female role does more than expose the sociopolitical reality instigating the crisis of the bourgeois subject, as Woolf's novel does. *El cuarto de atrás* calls attention to the performativity of the female role in the plot and goes further by reenacting the crisis of the female subject in its narrative structure.

Theater and Alienation

In the plot of *El cuarto de atrás*, Martín Gaité illustrates the multiplicity of social acts now noticeable to C, and thus strange, because of the cultural upheaval created by Spain's period of modernization in the 1960s and 70s. As is the case in *To the Lighthouse*, the contradiction of modernization registers in moments of alienation, since the dislocation of the old roles as new ones form renders the performativity of the female role visible. By overtly casting her characters in many parts, Martín Gaité communicates to readers that C experiences her position as both the performer and the spectator of herself through theatrical performance. Although the man in black claims his purpose is to interview C, he also acts as a psychoanalyst, literary critic, confessor, and male love interest from a romance novel, to name several of the functions he plays in their relationship (Castillo 819). In response to these various roles, C attempts to act the corresponding parts: analysand, author, sinner, and female protagonist from a romance novel. Moreover, even their namelessness contributes to the ease with which they switch roles. The switching of positions further emphasizes the instability of Martín Gaité's characters' social functions and also their desire to reinvent themselves to navigate the constantly changing present of their modern world resonating with Berman's theory of modernism (13-14).

Beyond the role-play of the characters throughout *El cuarto de atrás*, Martín Gaité stages C in an imaginary theatrical play to illustrate C's consciousness of reenacting her former female role and the affect of detachment that accompanies her awareness.¹⁶ The scene I analyze below exemplifies how C's imagination of herself and the man in black play-acting demonstrates her realization of performing a drama that she now sees since she is partially outside of that deteriorating show. The telephone rings at one point during their conversation, so C leaves the living room to take the call in her bedroom. After the call between C and a woman named Carola who is allegedly connected to the man in black romantically, the theatrical metaphor is launched by: "Me acerco a la puerta, sin hacer ruido, y asomo un poquito la cabeza, amparándome en la cortina, como si observara, entre bastidores, el escenario donde me va a tocar actuar enseguida" (244) (I inch closer to the door, without making a sound, and I peek my head out a little, shielding myself behind the curtain, as if I were observing, from the wings, the stage where I'm going to act in just a moment). C tiptoes over to the doorway of her bedroom and then peers down the hallway to the living room where she left the man in black. As she prepares to transition from her previous act as the potential "other" woman she played in the scene with Carola, C lingers behind the curtain that separates her from the man in black and the old part she must resume with him when she returns to the living room. The very act of her lingering reflects the liminal nature of her old role that still functions in her present one. Furthermore, the blending of C's positions as both performer and audience member captures the multiplicity of her social roles that exist in tension to each another, emphasizing her feelings of detachment. C's choice of theatrical vocabulary to describe her apartment in the first sentence, such as "cortina" (curtain), "bastidores" (stage wings), and "escenario" (stage), also demonstrates her sense of alienation

¹⁶ See footnote 74 of the edition of *El cuarto de atrás* analyzed in this essay noting the theatrical metaphor. Also see Kathleen Glenn's essay noting the same (156-58).

from her own home; she is estranged from it, seeing her apartment as a theater. Her silent tiptoeing to the bedroom door, or the stage “wings” as she describes them, mimics how an actress would approach the stage wings prior to going on stage. Here, she views herself as a performer in between scenes and roles in the theatrical sense and the modernist sense.

As she stands in the threshold and continues to stare down the hall, C’s thoughts unfold:

Ya lo conozco, es el de antes, veo la mesa con el montón de folios debajo del sombrero—evidentemente el tramoyista ha añadido algunos más—y al fondo, a través del hueco del lateral derecha (suponiendo que el patio de butacas estuviera emplazado en la terraza), vislumbro las baldosas blancas y negras del pasillo que conduce al interior de la casa; el hueco está cubierto a medias por una cortina roja del mismo terciopelo que la que me esconde, pero ni se mueve ni se adivina detrás de ella bulto ninguno, no da la impresión de que por ese lateral vaya a aparecer ningún actor nuevo (244-45)

(I already know it, it is the same one as before, I see the table with the pile of sheets of paper underneath the hat—evidently the stagehand has added some more—and in the background, through the opening at stage right (presuming that the seats were located on the terrace), I glimpse the black and white tiles of the hallway that leads to the rest of the apartment; the doorway is half covered by a red curtain of the same velvet as the one that hides me, but it neither moves nor shows any lump behind it, it does not give the impression that any new actor will appear on that side of the stage)

The “stage” curtain is halfway drawn, so she can see the table with the growing pile of pages but not the man in black. Another experimental dimension of the novel is its self-generating façade: the growing number of pages beneath the stranger’s hat apparently represents the growing number of pages of the very novel that we, the readers, are reading. In an attempt to make sense of the pages, C rationalizes that a stagehand must have put them there. She continues to keep up the charade of the theatrical play, spotlighting the contradiction of watching herself act a part that she recognizes and now perceives as a script. Her apparent estrangement from her own text further exposes the tension she experiences as a result of negotiating the push and pull of her social roles, being both inside and outside them at the same time, in the cultural turbulence of Spanish modernization during the 1970s. A closer look at the dashes and parentheses of the long

sentence above reveals that they interrupt her train of thought visually and functionally, adding to its convoluted syntax. In addition, they appear like asides delivered by an actress on stage: “—evidentemente el tramoyista ha añadido algunos más—” (244) (—evidently the stagehand has added some more —) and “(suponiendo que el patio de butacas estuviera emplazado en la terraza)” (Ibid.) (presuming that the seats are located on the terrace). This punctuation further portrays C’s uncertainty about her future role, since the dashes and parentheses demarcate the temporal impasse between the social part she knows and the future one she does not know.

Caught between the stage wings or social roles, C articulates a self-reflective space where she highlights the disconnection between her formed and forming roles that she struggles to anticipate in the narrative. In the transitional moment, she questions who she is as a narrator and how she should behave in this scene, underscoring her feeling of self-alienation. C continues to imagine *el hombre de negro* and herself as performers:

El personaje vestido de negro ya está preparado, espera mi salida tranquilamente sentado en el sofá, todo hace sospechar que vamos a continuar la representación mano a mano. Finge estar embebido en la lectura de unos recortes de prensa, pero lo que hace es repasar su papel, mientras que yo el mío lo he olvidado completamente; (245)

(The character dressed in black is all ready to begin, he waits for my exit sitting calmly on the sofa, everything suggests that we are going to go on with our show together. He pretends to be absorbed in reading some newspaper clippings, but what he really does is go over his part, whereas I have forgotten mine completely;)

Again, she describes her relationship with the man in black in theatrical terms, such as “personaje” (character), “representación” (show), and “repasar su papel” (to go over his part). At this point, however, her anxiety about reentering this stage manifests. She claims that she has forgotten her lines “completamente” (completely), but she imagines that the man in black has rehearsed his part well during her absence. Here, C recognizes the contour of her former part that she used to act in relation to her male guest, echoing Lily Briscoe’s recognition of the old social

role for women articulated by Mrs. Beeton's *Book of Household Management* that she was supposed to carry out. But now C feels as if she has forgotten her part because she knows that it no longer fits, so she is left holding a partially defunct manuscript now. In recognizing that the former model is collapsing, C feels that part of herself is also collapsing since she has been formed and is still constituted by that model. She is stuck in limbo between the role she knew and the new role she does not know in the midst of the transforming gender dynamics during the cultural maelstrom of 1970s Spain, alienated from herself and from the man in black.

Novela Rosa as Parody

As it is for Woolf, examining the coexistence of formed and forming social roles with a critical edge is paramount to Martín Gaité, especially in the context of understanding the dissolution and reconstitution of those parts. Martín Gaité, then, finds structuring the narrative of *El cuarto de atrás* as a *novela rosa* (romance novel) “parody...a fertile area” for exposing the alienating effects of seeing an old social part collapse while performing it in her novel (Jameson 16).¹⁷ Frederic Jameson notes parody's place in modernism because parody “deviate[s] from a norm which then reasserts itself,” as opposed to pastiche, which he defines as a “neutral practice” of imitation, “without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse” (16-17). Thus, through its satiric edge, parody maintains the “order and coherence of the cultural fabric while registering historical and social change in aesthetic terms” (Venegas 53). Along the same lines as Jameson, Linda Hutcheon also affirms that “[p]arody is...repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity. In this it goes beyond mere allusive variation” (6). Her observation of parody as “repetition with critical distance” dovetails well into

¹⁷ See also Venegas who states that “[p]arody has been frequently considered a constitutive element of literary modernism” (53).

Berman's emphasis on the importance of the "critical bite" in modernism (32). In order to present parody comprehensively as a repetition with a difference to express the dynamism of modernization in *El cuarto de atrás*, I reproduce Berman's exact formulation of Nietzsche's notion of parody here, describing that

... one type of modern throws himself into parodies of the past: he "needs history because it is the storage closet where all the costumes are kept. He notices that none really fits him...so he keeps trying on more and more,"unable to accept the fact that a modern man "can never really look well-dressed," because *no social role in modern times can ever be a perfect fit*. (22-23, quoting Nietzsche; my emphasis)

Here Nietzsche, and Berman following him, brilliantly portray how parody captures the dilemma of the modern subject. To negotiate the constantly changing present, the modern woman resorts to her old social roles. But in doing so, she realizes that they do not fit her contemporaneity because modernization as a constant process always dislocates the old and creates the new, therefore prohibiting a complete fit. Furthermore, Nietzsche's metaphorical choice of "costumes" emphasizes the theatrical nature but also the dual position of the modern individual being the performer wearing the costume and the spectator seeing the performer (herself) in costume simultaneously. In this way, C wavers inside and outside her former social position, only partially fitting any role, just as Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe at the dinner party and C's imagination of herself in a dramatic production demonstrate.

For Martín Gaité, structuring *El cuarto de atrás* as a parody of the *novela rosa* captures the contradiction of critiquing a role transmitted by the very literary model that still functions within C. *El cuarto de atrás* opens like a *novela rosa* with the C awakening in the middle of the night in a dazed state of mind.¹⁸ She recalls that when she was alone as a young girl, she would

¹⁸ My demonstration of *El cuarto de atrás* as a parody of a *novela rosa* is indebted to Sieburth's idea of the novel mimicking the *novela rosa* form, which she labels *mise-en-abîme* instead of parody (208). In the critical introduction, however, Teruel notes that C looks "con los ojos—ahora paródicos—de la novela rosa" (40; with

imitate the attitudes of the women she saw on the cover of Elisabeth Mulder's romance novels, which portrayed women "que hablaban por teléfono" (89; who were talking on the phone), "aparecían en pijama" (90; appeared in pajamas), and "siempre estaban despiertas, esperando algo, probablemente una llamada telefónica" (90; always awake, waiting for something, probably a phone call). The narrator's confession that she would try to imitate these women as a child suggests the profound influence these fictional women had on her conception of what it meant to be a modern woman in the postwar years. As the novel progresses, C exhibits all of these characteristics of the female protagonists from *novelas rosa* she recalls in the quotes above, yet by doing so she also criticizes them, distancing herself from those popular archetypes. After listing their defining features, she narrates: "Me despierta el sonido del teléfono, lo cojo a tientas, sobresaltada, sin saber desde donde, y una voz masculina desconocida pronuncia mi nombre y mis apellidos" (103; The ringing of the phone awakens me, I pick it up, startled, not knowing from where, and an unknown male voice pronounces my name and surnames). Immediately after picking up the phone, C accidentally knocks over a glass of water on a book that she dries with her "manga del pijama" (103; pajama sleeve). Here, Martín Gaité casts her narrator as a female character from a *novela rosa* by describing her as awake in the middle of the night, answering a call from a mysterious man, and lounging in bed in her pajamas. Ironically, C appears to repeat semi-consciously her image of the ideal, female love-interest from her childhood in adulthood.

Martín Gaité raises the stakes of this parody, however, by moving beyond comical irony as C gradually grows more aware of acting out the female attitudes she learned from romance novels. By the end of the novel, she does not and seemingly cannot hide her feeling that she is performing; she *intentionally* pictures herself acting out a *novela rosa*, indicating her awareness

eyes—now parodic—at the romance novel). Glenn's essay also describes Martín Gaité's treatment of the romance novel as parody (154).

of recapitulating the ingrained role from her youth in the present. Therefore, C experiences the contradiction of deviating from the social part modeled by the *novela rosa* yet she reasserts it in an illuminating and alienating way through parody.¹⁹ For example, when C reads one of her articles to the man in black, he interrupts her to compliment her glasses, prompting C to recall: “En las novelas rosa, cuando se llegaba a una escena de clima parecido a esta, se podía apostar doble contra sencillo a que el desconocido iba a revelar su identidad” (213; In romance novels, when you came to a scene with an atmosphere similar to this, you could bet double or nothing that the stranger was going to reveal his identity). C openly acknowledges that the scene happening in the narrative is like a scene out of the sentimental novels she used to devour as a girl. In order to make sense of her current female role with regard to the man in black here, C returns to the old female behaviors that she learned from the *novelas rosa*. Her immediate reaction to act out the former female role demonstrates the adhesiveness of the old role, which is reminiscent of the difficulty Lily Briscoe experiences when she attempts to break from the Victorian social standards for women during the dinner party. Furthermore, the position of being inside and outside that former role, for both characters, captures the condition of estrangement produced by modernization, which displaces the older models while making the newer ones. In this exchange with the man in black, C self-consciously reverts to theatrical terminology again by calling it an “escena” (scene). The repeated dramatic image projects the estrangement she experiences (once again) due to observing her former and present female roles coexisting just as she did in the extended theatrical metaphor. Still, without the definitive script for the future female act in hand, C anxiously stands there unsure of how to respond to him and continues the parody of the *novela rosa*: “el corazón se me echa a latir como un caballo debocado” (213; my heart starts to gallop like a bolting horse). C has not moved beyond the literary model of her

¹⁹ For Berman, contradiction is also a classic condition of the modern subject (22).

childhood; she recognizes that it is ingrained in her. Because she now sees herself acting out those sentimental behaviors while registering her awareness of it, the role becomes denaturalized and so made visible through the critical lens afforded by parody.

On one level, *El cuarto de atrás* is a parody of the *novela rosa* to demonstrate how scripted romantic relationships were for the female narrator growing up in the 1940s in a military regime and how the assigned roles that are breaking down in the 1970s prevented women and men from interacting with one another in a satisfactory way. This gender alienation due to social roles falling apart in modernization resonates with the gender alienation Lily Briscoe notices between herself and Mr. Tansley at the dinner party and the gender alienation Martín Gaité writes about in *Usos amorosos*. On another level, because *El cuarto de atrás* borrows the form of the *novela rosa*, it reenacts that genre with a difference structurally. That distance articulates the alienation C experiences from recognizing the traces of the former part she learned from the *novela rosa* remaining active in her maturity. In other words, the part she currently plays is built on the scaffolding of the old one just like the novel itself is built on the scaffolding of the *novela rosa*. In C's words, she says that it is "difícil escapar a los esquemas literarios de la primera juventud, por mucho que más tarde se reniegue de ellos" (213; difficult to escape the literary schemas from one's youth, no matter how much later one renounces them). Therefore, although C has enough distance to critique the form of the *novela rosa* through parody (since she is the alleged author of *El cuarto de atrás* too), she realizes that she is paradoxically satirizing the romance novel while being re-actualized by it. The structural doubling of the novel reflects the same "in-betweenness" C experiences as estranging due to partially acting coexisting roles, thus repeating the contradicting effects of modernization in 1970s Spain with a critical distance.

Final Thoughts

After Martín Gaité finished reading of *A Room of One's Own*, she wrote: “me congracia con la Woolf ya definitivamente” (*Visión* 145; I’m ingratiating myself with Woolf definitively now). Martín Gaité holds herself to this statement when she declares that Woolf’s *A Room of One's Own* galvanized her to write about women’s writing in *Desde la ventana* toward the end of her career. As I have shown in this essay, however, she is clearly concerned with the experience of the female subject (like Woolf) in her novel *El cuarto de atrás* years earlier. But why focus on alienation only in the female characters?

While suggesting that the female characters are alienated from others necessarily implies that the male characters are also alienated, I see that Woolf and Martín Gaité probably focus on feelings of alienation within the female characters for this main reason: women experience the cultural upheaval caused by modernization more acutely than men do. Although, “[b]oth men and women participate in the social and cultural systems of gender,” Bonnie Scott writes, “women write about it more, perhaps because gender is more imposed upon them, more disqualifying, or more intriguing and stimulating to their creativity” (3). Therefore, by using Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* as a window into viewing how Martín Gaité explores the modernist issue of alienation in *El cuarto de atrás*, we gain a deeper understanding of the subtle synergy between these two iconic women writers and how they register the dynamics of modernization in their modernist novels. In sum, I agree with Matai Calinescu that “one should not speak of *one* modernity, *one* way or pattern of modernization, *one unified* concept of modernity which would be inherently *universalist* and would presuppose *universal* and *uniform* standards, independent of temporal and geographic coordinates” (17). As I hope this essay has done, the reexamination of

modernism through a feminine lens and with a broader scope illuminates the multitude of modernities, modernizations, and modernisms waiting to be uncovered.

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