

HOMOEROTICISM AND SPECULAR TRANSGRESSION IN PENINSULAR FEMININE NARRATIVE

JAUME MARTI OLIVELLA
Reed College

We are familiar with the object-relations theory that the mother must reflect the child in order to give it first security, then a rightful emancipation from her; in Lacan, she is likewise one mirror before which the infant can practise the fiction of a self (Segal, 171)

What if the mother-writer wants to use that mirror to recreate her own fiction? Then we are faced with a mirror reversal, a specular transgression through which the mother-writer asserts her right to use the mirror for her own search, in order to discover/uncover the hidden self and/or the homoerotic impulse vis à vis a non-confrontational other. This, I will argue, is the underlying structure of Carmen Martín Gaité's *El cuarto de atrás* (*The Back Room*), Esther Tusquets's *El mismo mar de todos los veranos* (*The Same Sea of Every Summer*) and Carme Riera's «Te deix, amor, la mar com a penyora» («I Leave You, My Love, The Sea as a Token»). Published in the last years of the seventies (Riera, 1975; Martín Gaité and Tusquets, 1978), these books may be seen as a clear indication of a new female textuality in Peninsular narrative. A textuality that anticipates some of the basic characteristics attached to an American tendency which has just recently been labeled «New Experimental Feminist Fiction». According to Cris Mazza's formulation, the most salient traits of this new feminist fiction would be the use of «dualism» in the dialogical search for the unconscious self, the use of a «circular structure» to por-

tray an «agonizing» character and the importance of the «voice»¹. In fact, what Cris Mazza points out, it seems to me, is the culmination of a long process that goes back to the sex changes and/or disguises of a George Eliot or a Willa Cather in order to cover their hidden desires and/or ideologies to today's most unrepressed representation of female sexuality. Such a process might be clearly exemplified inside one of the Peninsular traditions that I know best, the Catalan, if only one recalls two of its major narrative voices, those of Victor Català and of Mercè Rodoreda. Victor Català, whose real name was Catarina Albert, found it necessary to masquerade as a male in order to articulate her inner ghosts and desires whereas Mercè Rodoreda was the first female novelist who managed to provide both a narrative that satisfied patriarchal needs for self-reflection — thus her *La plaça del Diamant* (*The Time of the Doves*) came to be regarded as a historical metaphor for Catalonia's struggle for survival — while, at the same time, being able to shatter patriarchy's «traditional mirror». If, as Virginia Woolf had it, «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, [but] if she begins to tell the truth, the figure in the looking-glass shrinks» (Woolf, 35), then, Rodoreda's *Camelias Street* and her *Mirall Trencat* (*Broken Mirror*), appear as the other side of the looking-glass, that in which no male could fail to see his most unpleasant, shrinking image. Rodoreda's work, on the other hand, clearly anticipates the three characteristics mentioned above in her use of a distinct female narrative voice and the circular structures of her agonizing characters' stories, always rendered in her peculiar confessional mode.

In her introductory remarks to Carme Riera's stories, Kathleen McNerney states that «Carme Riera does not like mirrors... At the same time she professes a fascination for the Narcissus theme» (McNerney, 27). Such a statement aptly summarizes the woman writer's position of rejecting the mirroring role imposed on her by patriarchal descriptions of subject formation (Freud, Lacan), while, at the same time, vindicating the (playful) use of the mirror-

¹ I have summarized these characteristics from the information provided by Cris Mazza in her lecture «Experimental Realism and New Feminist Fiction» (Reed College, February, 12, 1990).

text in order to (re)create her own image. As Marcia Welles has it: «In fact, the structure of *El cuarto de atrás* is itself a playful game of mirrors» (Welles, 202). Playful or not, once the female narrative is liberated from the passive role of projecting back the other's image, it becomes the locus of her own imaginary. It is my contention, therefore, that the three texts considered here constitute a significant narrative sequence that posits a productive narcissism the goal of which is to (re)encounter oneself in the lost image of one's own desire. Gonzalo Navajas has clearly summarized this characteristic narrative gesture when he writes:

Numerosos personajes se conciben a partir de su búsqueda de un yo legítimo frente a deformaciones externas. La novela actualiza el conflicto lacaniano del yo contra las categorías del Imaginario y lo Simbólico. ... Por medio del orden simbólico, el yo es sometido a las imposiciones de un sistema cultural procedente de un orden patriarcal autoritario. Tanto en la psicología lacaniana como en el postmodernismo se asume la existencia de un yo original puro al que los elementos externos han corrompido. ... Un número considerable de personajes de la ficción postmodernista española en los que se materializa el binarismo conflictivo entre yo y otro son mujeres. No es éste un fenómeno sorprendente. Con mayor intensidad que en el modelo cultural occidental en general, el español ha conferido a la mujer una posición de manifiesta subordinación al sistema del otro (Navajas, 21).

In order to study how Martín Gaité, Tusquets and Riera subvert that traditional subordination, I suggest to look at two critical discourses that provide both a thematic and a theoretical framework for the three texts under scrutiny. I am referring to Luce Irigaray's *Amante Marine*² and to a series of current anti-Oedipal feminist strategies of reading, specifically those concerned with a re-reading of the myth of Echo and Narcissus. Naomi Segal, for

² In *Amante Marine de Friedrich Nietzsche* (Paris: Minuit, 1980), Luce Irigaray positions herself as a transhistorical respondent to Nietzsche's Zarathustran, Olympian attitude. Her response, as the title suggests, retakes the depths of the sea-goddesses in order to challenge the reductive view of women as silent ideals of patriarchal spiritual dreams. By rejecting woman's echoing quality — their «résonance» — of man's discourse(s), Irigaray's text provides a perfect literary framework wherefrom the feminist reversals of the Echo myth may be effected.

instance, in her reading of the male French confessional «récit», writes:

An archetypal structure for all these themes is the myth of Narcissus and Echo. I want to suggest that this myth is the «unthought» of the Oedipus complex, just as the mystery of female sexuality both lies behind and is excluded from the Oedipus complex. Not only the desire of women but women's knowledge is written out of it: yet for the latter to exist this desire and this knowledge must first have been there. Mother and daughter alike must be unsaid in order for men to speak (Segal, 170).

This radical suppression of woman's voice and desire in the Oedipal structure is further elaborated by Caren Greenberg as follows:

The mother, as the object of desire, is the point of intersection between father and son; ... The mother's body, as a point of intersection and contention becomes symbolic: a sexual battleground important not because of her own intrinsic power, but rather as a mark of the father's power. In this sense, the wife/mother's body fulfills the first requirement of a language system: it marks something other than itself. ... Woman is the text in the Oedipus myth, and if we pursue the analogy, the fate of the text (and therefore of language) in the Oedipal reading process parallels the fate of women in patriarchy: both are without intrinsic value and gain importance only to the extent that they signify something other than themselves (Greenberg, 302-3).

Thus, under patriarchy, woman in language and as language is reduced to the inscription of otherness at the expense of the self. Martin-Gaité, Tusquets and Riera, nevertheless, manage to reverse that situation by placing woman's desire at the very center of their respective love stories. Their narratives do not signify anything other than their feminine, maternal desire. And it is indeed the maternal metaphor that provides the thematic link between their stories of a common loss, that of the loved one. In the three stories, albeit on different levels, the sea appears as the site both of love and of loss, the textual marker of the mother's body that had been totally obliterated in the Oedipal narratives. In this sense,

Martín Gaité's initial evocation of the lost lover is particularly significant:

Me escribe alguien que está sentado en una playa y a quien la inmensidad que tiene enfrente y la libertad de elegir cualquier itinerario le agobian porque le sugieren mi ausencia, al parecer irreversible, ... mira el horizonte y se pone a llamarme durante mucho rato, hay varios renglones sin más contenido que el de mi nombre, escrito entre guiones y en minúscula, con una ondulación que imita las olas del mar, me dejo *acunar* por las líneas rizadas que me llaman, mientras el rumor de las olas verdaderas se iba llevando el *eco* de su llamada desde la orilla (Martín-Gaité, 21. Emphasis mine).

The love letter from the sea-side is «rocking» the newly born desire of Martín-Gaité's protagonist. The sound of the waves, on the other hand, contains the echoing voice of the male's fainting desire. But Martín-Gaité's text has ceased to be an echo chamber³ of male sameness in order to become a real sea lover in search of all the Bergai islands of her (re)discovered imaginary. This liberating gesture resonates in Irigaray's formulation:

Et il fallait que tous vous m'ayez perdue des yeux pour que, vers vous, je revienne avec un autre regard. Et, certes, le plus pesant a-t-il été de clore, par amour, mes lèvres, de refermer cette bouche qui toujours voulait couler. Mais, sans ce retrait, jamais vous ne vous seriez souvenus que quelque chose existe qui a autre langue que la votre. Que, de sa prison, quelqu'une appelait à retourner à l'air. Que vos mots raisonnaient d'autant mieux qu'en eux une voix était captive. Amplifiant vos dires d'une résonance sans fin. J'étais votre résonance (Irigaray, 9).

³ In *Amante Marine*, Irigaray writes:

Le charme le plus puissant des femmes: redoubler, âmes sublimes, les hommes. Donner corps — et sans différence — à leurs idéaux. Et comme ceux-ci sont les dieux de la langue: leur rendre voix, matière-support pour productions transcendantes. ... Une chambre d'écho exemplaire. Une enceinte, fermée bien sur, pour résonance admirablement appropriée (117).

In the text, I have used the same image to express its specular transgression when I have compared Martín Gaité's back room to the echo chamber of a female imagery newly recovered.

The captive voice may be seen as that of Echo, the nymph condemned to repeat Narcissus's words beyond all hope of being corresponded. This is how Ovid introduces her in his *Metamorphoses*:

A strange-voiced nymph observed him, who must speak
 If any other speak and cannot speak
 Unless another speak, resounding Echo.
 Echo was still a body, not a voice,
 But talkative as now, and with the same
 Power of speaking only to repeat,
 As best she could, the last of many words (Ovid, 62).

Echo's «alterity» is her essential quality, her voice is «strange», or rather, estranged, that is, appropriated and forced to repeat the other's voice. In the three texts considered here, the feminine voice is «strange» inasmuch as it articulates an estranged desire. These texts, like Echo, also repeat the other's voice, although without reflecting its desire. Riera's high school teacher, Tusquets's Colombian student and Martín Gaité's mysterious man in black become echoing devices, perfect interlocutors that allow the mirror transgression to take place. All these narrators, unlike Echo in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, have the freedom to speak first, to utter their unconventional desires. Let us recall again Echo's predicament: «She might not speak the first but — what she might — waited for words her voice could say again» (Ovid, 62). Thus, what Echo has to do equals the role traditionally assigned to women who had to «wait» for the men to say the words, to speak their desires. Echo, on the other hand, has to reverse Narcissus's self-same mirroring. she has to mirror her desire so that he can utter the words, whereas women's traditional role, as described by Virginia Woolf and Luce Irigaray, was to mirror/repeat the male's desire by projecting back the image they wanted to see of themselves. The homoerotic impulse allows — demands — the mirror reversal, the specular transgression. «Echoing», thus, like in Irigaray's «When Our Lips Speak Together»⁴, becomes the best means of communication. Caren Greenberg's subtle argument, moreover, contributes a new dimension with her re-reading of Echo's myth as, precisely, a new strategy of reading:

⁴ See Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Trans. Catherine Porter. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 205-219.

When Narcissus rejects Echo's love, she repeats his words in such a way as to express her own love for him. Echo's repetition is, therefore, a reading. Echo has abducted the first person pronoun, and the negation of passion simultaneously becomes expression of passion. In short, repetition by a different-sex speaker is a creative act of reading involving a new locus of desire and a non-Oedipal act of identification. ... When the object of desire is language, when the object of desire is the first person pronoun, identification, even repetition, is something else: it is the transformation of the meaning of language. The necessary ambiguity of language makes repetition an act of radical change: where once there was no desire, the words come to express desire. Where once the first person was male, it is now female (Greenberg, 307-8).

The «radical change» of this new female textuality is the specular transgression that threatens to break patriarchy's mirror language. The reversed Echo-like quality of this language lies in its insistence on articulating its own desire beyond any repetition of the male desire for Oedipal sameness. That is why, ultimately, Martín Gaité, Tusquets and Riera construct their texts not only as «mirrors» but as «echo chambers», now posited as the metaphorical back rooms of their imaginary, wherein their original selves, their innermost desires can be found/heard anew. Like Martín Gaité's initial (re)discovery, Tusquets's protagonist is given the chance of a sexual/textual rebirth amidst the wavery movement of her sea-like, maternal desire:

Y la siento palpar, viviente y cálida, contra mi oído, como si me hubiera acercado a la oreja una caracola marina, doblemente mecida mi cabeza por el levísimo ondularse del mar bajo la barca y por el acompasado respirar del cuerpo de la muchacha y me siento navegar —flotar— en uno de estos raros instantes en que todo se apacigua y en que la vida fluye mansamente, y con una sorpresa incrédula constato que soy de nuevo ahora, por primera vez después de tantísimos años, absolutamente feliz, ... porque únicamente ella, a lo largo y a lo ancho de mil años de soledad, ha querido y ha podido romper el aislamiento, adentrarse en mis laberintos oscuros, y merece que yo le entregue —temblosamente, miserable y enfermo— este yo más profundo, y por más profundo más herido, esta realidad última, que yace soterrada y letal por debajo de todas mis apariencias y mis

medias verdades, por debajo de todos mis disfraces (Tusquets, 187-8).

It is only in the pure mirror of Clara's total desire that the protagonist of *El mismo mar de todos los veranos* can reencounter her inner self, or, to repeat Segal's initial formulation, can recreate the fiction of her own self. In Carme Riera's «Te deix, amor, la mar com a penyora», this sexual/textual fusion, portrayed in a strikingly similar context, achieves a sort of transcendental quality:

Every passing second — the clock of our veins was the fullness of noon — my trembling body caressed by your hands, brought us nearer to some mysterious, ineffable place that imperiously summoned us. A place out of time, out of space (noon, a boat), made to fit our measure, into which we would inescapably fall. Without salvation, for that was the only way for us to be saved, because down there, in the realm of the absolute, the inexpressible, beauty was waiting for us, beauty dissolving in your-my image when I looked at myself in the mirror of your flesh. And in the safe shelter, in the most intimate cleft of your body, there the adventure began; an adventure not of the senses, but rather of the spirit (Riera, 36).

This perfect moment of fusion, of love in the «depth» of the sea-mirror, the flesh of the desired, non-confrontational other is, like in Tusquets, a beginning and an end in itself. As if responding to the inherent threat of that «act of non-Oedipal identification», the symbolic order of the self-same intervenes to impose the «law of the father»:

But nobody, except my father, dared to talk straight to me, facing reality. I still remember the grimace that contorted his face; the bitter tone in his voice, but I forget his words, I only remember two sentences, which have often *echoed* in my mind like the insistent slogan of a commercial that gets into your head and you unintentionally repeat over and over in your mind (Riera, 35. Emphasis mine).

Here, the agent of repetition is reversed once again. It is the patriarchal law that echoes through/against difference. Even the

most sublimatory moment in the narrative is permeated by the echoing quality of the symbolic order:

I was weak enough to get involved in that affair you no doubt regret now. Now your life has taken on a different course. ... I feel happy for you. Jaume is a great boy too. ...»
 «You talk as if you were my mother.»
 «I assure you I would have liked to be» (Riera, 41).

It is ultimately, essentially, the mother's desire and/or the desire for the mother that is always at stake under patriarchy. Unending, like Echo's lament, like the sea waves, these mother-writers' echoing voices retake the sea metaphor (Martín Gaité's broken dolls by the sea, Tusquets's return to the sea-sameness and Riera's sea-token) in order to insist on the different and distinct voices of their common desire.

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