

THE SPIRITUAL CONSCIOUSNESS
OF CARMEN MARTÍN GAITE
THE WHOLE OF LIFE HAS MEANING

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MONOGRAFÍAS
TAMESIS

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In Spirit and Truth

Meaning

‘Meaning makes a great many thing endurable – perhaps everything’.¹ When we think about the impact of seeing the meaning in something, perhaps after not understanding the experience for some time, we may agree that the sense of calm, of a world opening up, of seeing a way forward in a new direction, rooted now in understanding, really does make difficult, challenging, even devastating experiences bearable. In 1989 Carmen Martín Gaité told the Italian Hispanist Maria Vittoria Calvi that eventually she was able to understand the meaning in everything, that she experienced everything in a very meaningful way.² The understanding she arrives at represents an objective appreciation of situations and experiences that may not have been apparent at the time. Four years earlier her twenty-eight-year-old daughter, Marta, had died as the result of a heroin addiction, yet Martín Gaité sets no limits to her understanding. In a recent book exploring Martín Gaité’s six final novels with reference to the writer’s own testimony, shared during their many years of friendship, Joan Lipman Brown relates that Martín Gaité told her ‘she saw Marta as “una pionera” [a pioneer], since she was one of the first to confront the twin plagues of heroin and AIDS that would claim the lives of so many young Spaniards’.³ Martín Gaité’s perspective endows the experience of Marta’s life and death with meaning, opening up a new way of seeing and understanding.⁴ It may also provide a sense of a new dimension, which is not surprising when we consider the source of Martín Gaité’s view that everything is meaningful.

In the same interview, Martín Gaité described herself to Maria Vittoria Calvi as religious, as having a lot of religious feeling. The qualification she placed on her definition of ‘religious’ brings it closer to what might be described as

¹ C.G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (London, 1983), p. 373.

² Maria Vittoria Calvi, ‘Appendice: Un’Intervista a Carmen Martín Gaité’, in *Dialogo e conversazione nella narrativa di Carmen Martín Gaité* (Milan, 1990), pp. 165–72 (p. 171).

³ *Calila: The Later Novels of Carmen Martín Gaité* (Lewisburg, 2021), p. 106.

⁴ Joan Lipman Brown’s assessment is that ‘through whatever means, including rationalization and literary wish fulfilment, she had made peace with Marta’s passing’: *Calila*, pp. 106–7.

'spirituality'.⁵ Martín Gaité is not describing adherence to a creed or following prescribed practices, but a perspective that recognises the presence of a supernatural world in addition to the day-to-day world, and seeks to reunite the two.⁶ It involves living in full recognition of the interaction of the day-to-day and spiritual worlds. For Martín Gaité defines her understanding of 'religion' as 'volver a atar' (from *religare*), meaning to bind back or bind again, with the idea of reconnecting: 'Yo tengo mucho ese sentimiento religioso, en el sentido de "*religare*", volver a atar: dentro de mí, todo me va ocurriendo siempre de una manera muy significativa' [I have a lot of religious feeling, in the sense of '*religare*', binding back: inside me everything always happens in a very meaningful way].⁷ In this context it is the day-to-day and the supernatural worlds that are being reconnected.

Martín Gaité also tells Calvi that she believes that nothing happens by chance: 'no me parece que nada ocurra por casualidad, sino todas las cosas se van entendiendo con el tiempo' [I don't think anything happens by chance,

⁵ A contemporary example of this use of 'religioso' to describe a spiritual attitude can be seen in an interview with Blanca Andreu in which the poet asserts 'soy muy religiosa' [I am very religious], going on to explain that 'no practico ninguna religión, pero tengo mucha fe' [I don't practise any religion, but I have a great deal of faith] (*El País*, 25 July 2022).

⁶ There are scant references in her fiction to the traditional Catholic practices of her childhood: a reference to the practice of Confession in *El balneario* [The Spa] (in *Cuentos completos y un monólogo* (Barcelona, 1994), pp. 178–234 (p. 218)), or an elderly character saying the Rosary (*Nubosidad variable* [Variable Cloud] (Barcelona, 1992), pp. 102–03). Regarding Martín Gaité's own practices, she wrote in 1983 that she had gone into St Patrick's Roman Catholic Cathedral in New York in order to pray (*Cuadernos de todo* (Barcelona, 2002), p. 575), something also mentioned by José Luis Borau ('Al día siguiente', *Turia: Revista Cultural*, 83 (2007), 249–60 (p. 259)). Prayer, of course, can take place anywhere, but the particular atmosphere of many churches and cathedrals, where – often for many years – people have entered in order to make contact with the supernatural, may provide the kind of environment that makes such practice easier, as Martín Gaité seems to have found. She also mentions praying to St Joseph, and the Catholic liturgical year figures in her notebooks and occasionally in her record of the period of writing a book where the start or end date coincides with a particular feast day. Borau also describes the writer's adaptation of a practice familiar to Christians, commemorating as it does the key symbol of Christianity, the cross. On a New York Street she bent down, dipped two of her fingers in a puddle and made the sign of the cross, first on her own forehead and then on Borau's, much to his surprise ('Al día siguiente', p. 259). The ritual, retained from childhood, is here transferred to the street and represents a kind of blessing on them both. These practices – praying in a church, praying to a saint and blessing with the sign of the cross – reflect her belief in the supernatural, in God and her personal connection with this aspect.

⁷ Calvi, *Dialogo*, p. 171.

rather that eventually everything makes sense].⁸ This suggests that the writer believes there is another force at play in life and in the world. She seems to consider that a greater intelligence is at work, pervading all things, in the way that believers conceive of God or the supernatural. Marie-Louise von Franz, a close colleague of Jung, describes a similar perspective: ‘If we look back over life, we can see that there is a pattern.’⁹ Jung and von Franz would describe the architect of this pattern as the Self, the archetype of wholeness in which consciousness and the unconscious as described by Jung are already united.¹⁰ As an explanation of the way in which Martín Gaité sees meaning in all the events of her life, von Franz would say that it is ‘as if the Self, with a capital, has a plan for us, a kind of destiny’.¹¹

Martín Gaité’s belief in an ever-present, supernatural Being who interacts meaningfully with the created world is evident in her record in her notebooks of a crime committed in Madrid in the early 1960s, by a man, a tailor, who murdered his five children.¹² In a manner reminiscent of the ogre in Perrault’s version of the fairy tale *Tom Thumb*, he slit the throats of his children and held them up one by one on the small balcony onto the street to show passers-by what he had done.¹³ Rejecting the widespread interpretation that the poor man

⁸ Calvi, *Dialogo*, p. 171.

⁹ In Fraser Boa, *The Way of the Dream: Conversations on Jungian Dream Interpretation with Marie-Louise von Franz* (Boston & London, 1994), pp. 27–28.

¹⁰ ‘[The Self] embraces not only the conscious but also the unconscious psyche’: C.G. Jung, *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology* (London, 1953), § 274. It is advisable when analysing or dissecting anything – whether a text or some material in a laboratory – that one uses tools which are appropriate. In *Loving’s the Strange Thing*, I set out a number of reasons why Jungian psychology is an appropriate tool for understanding the work of Carmen Martín Gaité (Oxford, 2018), pp. 5–9. These included the view that the aim of psychiatry should not be to cure the patient, and a shared dislike of labelling people. Martín Gaité has criticised psychiatrists for their determination to cure their patients and for the unequal power relationship and lack of real interest in their patients: *Cuadernos*, p. 391 & p. 397. Jung dismissed the idea that the aim was to cure as ‘a layman’s error left over from the early days of psychoanalysis’: *The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche* (London, 1969), § 142. He also revealed interest in what his patients had to say and rejected the tendency to label them with a diagnosis, emphasising the uniqueness of each one and thus sharing with Martín Gaité a dislike of labelling. The definition of religion is also something they both share. Jung wrote: ‘I want to make clear that by the term “religion” I do not mean a creed’: C.G. Jung, *Psychology and Religion: West and East* (London, 1969), § 9.

¹¹ Von Franz in Boa, *Way*, p. 28.

¹² I also discussed this story in *Loving’s the Strange Thing* in the Introduction and in relation to *Capercita en Manhattan* (Madrid, 1992), pp. 4, 21 & 130.

¹³ Charles Perrault, ‘Hop-o’-my-Thumb’, in *The Fairy Tales of Charles Perrault* (London, 1998), pp. 109–27 (p. 121). The ogre meant to murder Hop o’ my Thumb and his brothers but was deceived into killing his own daughters.