# Carlos Manuel Varela and the Role of Memory in Covert Resistance

**Ana Elena Puga**

*The Uruguayan political prisoners may not talk without permission...nor may they make or receive drawings of pregnant women, couples, butterflies, stars or birds. One Sunday, Didasko Perez, school teacher, tortured and jailed "for having ideological ideas," is visited by his daughter Milay, age five. She brings him a drawing of birds. The guards destroy it at the entrance to the jail. On the following Sunday, Milay brings him a drawing of trees. Trees are not forbidden, and the drawing gets through. Didasko praises her works and asks about the colored circles scattered in the treetops, many small circles half-hidden among the branches:*

*"Are they oranges? What fruit is it?"*

*The child puts a finger on his mouth. "Sssshhh."*

*And she whispers in his ear: "Silly! Don't you see they're eyes?*

*They're the eyes of the birds that I've smuggled in for you."*

*Eduardo Galeano*

Galeano's anecdote reassures one with the thought that even a clever five-year-old is capable of artistic resistance. All it takes to circumvent evil is a bit of wiliness and artistic imagination, the story seems to say. But is that all it takes? Just exactly *how* does one build the capacity to resist? The two Uruguayan dramas to be discussed in this article, *Alfonso y Clotilde* (1980) and *Interrogatorio en Elsinore* (1983), explore a potentially powerful weapon for the subversion of authority: memory. During the Uruguayan dictatorship of 1973 to 1984, the playwright Carlos Manuel Varela (b. 1940) decided to remain in the country rather than succumb to the temptation of exile and wrote dramas that suggest several ways in which memory may be employed in the service of resistance: 1) as a covert weapon in a struggle to create an alternative reality 2) as a spur to action 3) as a guide to ethical behavior and

4) as a performance that encodes, repeats, and reinvigorates the alternative reality. One of the things that makes Varela's theatre exciting is a constant tension between keeping memory secret – a necessity to avoid reprisals – and making it public enough to form part of a broader oppositional discourse. His work whispers to the spectator to reflect upon what happened, who is responsible, and what is to be done. As the conclusion of the Galeano anecdote reminds us, the use of memory-as-resistance demands an interpretative act on the part of the spectator. *"Don't you see?"* The little girl's rebuke to the father is the call of the artist to the audience.

Though there are many different scientific and psychological explorations of memory, Pierre Nora's philosophical work most adeptly describes the role of theatre such as Varela's in fighting dictatorship's tendency to induce social amnesia.[1] Nora defines memory as both a way of recalling and organizing the past and a way of functioning in the present, both an individual and collective endeavor, both an abstract process and a concrete embodiment of that process, linked to specific places, which he calls *lieux de memoire* (2-9). Memory, in Nora's view, is never static because it is constantly being reshaped, much as performance reshapes as it repeats. Nora includes medallions, monuments, and museums among these sites of memory, the creators and re-creators of a collective sense of self. He might also have included among these sites the marketplace, the street corner, and the theatre (Roach 28). Indeed, theatre such as Varela's is a site of memory, in which communal history may be formed by the interplay between performers and spectators. Some theatre historians, such as Joseph Roach, are skeptical that these sites, or as Roach calls them "vortices of behavior," can function as zones of transgression. Instead, Roach argues, they reinforce or even intensify everyday practices and attitudes (28). To me, the reverse seems true, at least of certain works, including Varela's, in which the performance of memory (and the performance of forgetting) invites the spectator to defy quotidian reality.

In one sense, memory is as invisible and as potentially treacherous as the most private thought. As long as one's memories remain unexpressed, they are free from persecution: they cannot be used as evidence of sedition, or confiscated, or destroyed. And as long as they remain uncensored, inner memories may contradict exterior behavior that obeys authority. Because of this, Michel de Certeau, in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, counts memory as one of the devious types of resistance to which the disenfranchised must resort, "an art of the weak" (37). "Power is bound by its very visibility. In

contrast, trickery is possible for the weak, and often it is his only possibility, as a 'last resort'" (37). De Certeau compares memory's mobility to a bird that can lay its eggs in another species' nest: relying on time rather on a space of its own, it thrives in a space dominated by an outside force. Within that dominated space, de Certeau writes, memory offers "recourse to a different world, from which can, *must*, come the blow that will change the established order." [2] One might, for example, draw on one's memory of life before a dictatorship to imagine how things might be otherwise in the future.

Despite its initially private quality, memory-as-resistance must eventually involve revelation, communication among those who would build a movement or even stage a single resistant performance. James C. Scott's notion of a "hidden transcript" in which the powerless express their disagreement, anger, frustration, and hatred privately to other members of their social group while publicly maintaining the *appearance* of compliance with authority is useful for understanding theatrical expressions of memory. While a play in performance may urge private, individual remembrance, it cannot, by its very public and collective nature, itself remain a carefully guarded, invisible memory. The performance of resistant dramas such as Varela's becomes the occasion for a partial revelation of a hidden transcript, a transcript legible to those spectators who read between the lines. The transcript then develops in complicity with the spectators who, prodded to explore their own memories, become co-creators of a collective memory and semi-public discourse that expresses disenchantment with the present and hope for a different future. The playwright, like the "conscientious historian" described by Paul Ricoeur in *Questioning Ethics*, initiates a critique of power by "opening up the archive [and] retrieving traces which the dominant ideological forces attempted to suppress" (16). In the case of memory, however, the archive is psychological rather than documentary, giving it both the protection and the fragility of the invisible – at least until total revelation becomes necessary.

Both *Alfonso y Clotilde* and *Interrogatorio en Elsinore* dramatize memory as resistance: the former work focuses on the importance of resisting the lure of amnesia; the latter centers on the interplay among memory, performance, and resistance. I will discuss each play in turn, considering first Varela's strategies for coding his message, then his dramatization of the conflict between the pressure to forget and the ethical imperative to remember, and finally his linking of memory to speech and performance. The link between memory and speech predominates in *Alfonso y Clotilde*; the link between memory and performance comes to the fore in *Elsinore*.

Open rebellion was impossible in the Uruguay of 1980, the year in which Varela wrote *Alfonso y Clotilde*. Strict censorship laws banned any work deemed "subversive" and went so far as to prohibit the printing or public mention of sensitive words such as "coup" or "dictatorship." The military's grip on the small country was so tight that it had managed to classify many of its citizens as "A," "B," or "C," depending on their supposed degree of political trustworthiness. Though disappearances were far fewer than in Argentina, imprisonment, torture, and exile was (in proportion to the smaller population) far more widespread.

After a fertile early career, Varela stopped writing for the first five years of the dictatorship, then broke the silence in 1979 with a relatively cautious domestic drama, *Las gaviotas no beben petróleo,* that hints at political dissent. In 1980 he wrote *Alfonso y Clotilde*, a much more daring call, veiled only by a thin comic façade, to resist the dictatorship's tendency to eradicate memory. Writing after the dictatorship about his work, Varela says he tried to hold up a "fractured mirror" that would oblige the spectators to piece together the meaning of the work. He resorts to this style of writing primarily to elude censorship, but the result is also a break with realism that proves to be artistically adventurous:

> En Uruguay, durante la dictadura militar, el escritor teatral no pudo seguir ejerciendo su tarea de comunicador, de acuerdo con la tradición. Fue necesario fracturar el espejo y recurrir a un lenguaje "enmascarado." Fue entonces que los críticos comenzaron a señalar elementos caraterizadores de las obras de este período, detectaron un "realismo alucinado," una creciente simbología del teatro uruguayo. (Varela 1989, 381)

The black humor, the apparent "absurdism," and the touches of "surrealism" in *Alfonso y Clotilde* all serve to mask the drama's resistance from the authorities on whom it depended for permission to be staged.[3] The drama urges a middle road between open rebellion, which it depicts as too dangerous (Paco's mutilation), and willing conformity, as epitomized by Alfonso and Clotilde's unattractive fate: the complete loss of memory and consequent disintegration of identity. That middle road, the drama suggests, involves retaining one's memory for use, as de Certeau writes, as "an art of the weak."

One of the peculiarities of the era was that the message urging cautious resistance had itself to be delivered with caution. Its "transcript," to use Scott's term, was therefore hidden in the form of a lighthearted domestic farce. The

plot begins cheerfully, as a well-heeled couple has apparently run out of gas while out for a picnic and bickers about who is to blame for their predicament. But then a dismembered hand surfaces, giving their chatter about country clubs and dinner parties a bizarre incongruity. The appearance of Alfonso's tortured and mutilated former factory employee forces the couple into grotesquely funny attempts to minimize and rationalize the situation. As the horrors accumulate – Paco dies, other bodies surface, the rescue the couple awaits proves illusory, and they suffer a total loss of memory – the comedic veneer cracks, revealing more and more ugliness behind it.

Varela's use of the grotesque, irony, and dark comedy to convey the extent to which characters are diminished by the enormity of the evil they face at first recalls the Argentine tradition of *grotesco criollo*. But upon reflection, Varela's sense of humor depends less on the *criollo* obsession with the immigrant dream of success in America and seems closer in spirit to a European predecessor, the Spanish playwright Ramón de Valle Inclán.[4] *Alfonso y Clotilde* is an *esperpento*, the theatrical genre Valle-Inclán devised to mock the hypocrisy of Spanish society in the first half of the twentieth century:

> This is the way I have wanted to create the *Esperpento*, basing myself in a lack of adaptation of tragic themes to characters who turn out to be ridiculous before them... We are lost in the great sin of the world. Men are confronted by great situations and appear then in all their smallness. (Valle-Inclán, *El Castellano*, October 23, 1925, quoted in Lyon, 123)

Varela twists the conventions of domestic farce much as Valle-Inclán twists the Calderonian drama of honor in *Los cuernos de Don Friolero*. Like Don Friolero, the hapless, reluctant avenger who cannot live up to the expectation that he will valiantly defend his reputation, Alfonso and Clotilde simply cannot live up to their comic obligation to distract the spectator from reality, or even to distract themselves from reality. In the midst of an idyllic imaginary drive to paradise an imaginary bird crashes into their imaginary windshield. No fantasy can provide a haven from the terrors that surround them on their deserted landscape. And their gruesome circumstances render their banter obscene rather than charming. The "great situation" they confront, to use Valle-Inclán's term, is the dictatorship, the pressure to forget its atrocities immediately, and the pressure to forget who they were before it invaded their lives. Indeed, much of the play's humor arises form the unseemly alacrity

with which the couple tries to forget atrocity, thus accentuating their smallness as characters in the face of disaster. For example, they first try to pretend that Paco is naked because he has simply wandered away from a nudist colony. After his death, Alfonso says of their effort to provide him with some sort of funeral rite: "Bueno, echamos unos puñaditos simbólicos, te rezás un padre nuestro y que se considere sepultado (173)." The utter lack of sentimentality, the detached irony of the playwright toward his characters combined with the exposure of their weakness is typical of the *esperpento*.

Touches of the surreal and the absurd also serve to simultaneously cloak and deliver a political message. The barren landscape in which the couple finds itself could be a dream world, or a nightmare, from a Goya or Dalí painting. It is a liminal space, neither home nor exile, which prods the characters to live in a limbo between memory and fantasy. The incongruous juxtapositions of the surreal abound: a drive in the country and a slaughtered bird, a knitting project and a dismembered hand, and an offering of toothpaste to a dying man. Dream-like images also recall the surrealists: Alfonso's wish that the car would grow wings and fly, the intrusion of a ravenous lion into his bedtime sheep-counting, Clotilde's rebuke to him that he is always, "empujando al barranco amatistas y amapolas," (154) and throughout the play, the appearance of severed body parts without explanation. Varela, however, stresses that unlike the surrealists he did not employ any techniques of automatic writing nor was he concerned with exploring the unconscious, instead he consciously strove to code his response to socio-political circumstances (e-mail of September 5, 2000).

Jorge Dubatti identifies the following elements as absurdist: the parody of the middle class, the "games" that Alfonso and Clotilde play, the lack of spatial and temporal cohesion, the occasional lack of logic to the dialogue, and the linguistic disintegration at the conclusion of the work (254). The endless wait for rescue, as Dubatti notes, recalls Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. I would add that the barren landscape also recalls Beckett, surpassing it in bleakness as not even a single forlorn tree suggests hope. The opening stage directions describe the bleak setting:

> *Las luces se encienden sobre un espacio despoblado. El suelo es una superficicie ondulante color beige. En algunos tramos las ondulaciones forman crestas que se recortan contra un fondo muy celeste que irá tiñéndose gradualmente de un azul intenso.*

What country Alfonso and Clotilde inhabit is left unspecified, which while perhaps typical of absurdist theatre, also served to help evade Uruguayan censors. And while the absurd tends to resist meaning, there could be little doubt to an Uruguayan audience of that era what South American country (or countries, since Argentina, Chile, and Brazil were experiencing similar military repression) was indicated by the picnic spot-turned-dumping ground for the tortured and killed. The bodies appearing as if out of nowhere must have reminded an Uruguayan audience in 1980 of how quickly their nation, once known as "the Switzerland of Latin America," had turned into a grim dictatorship. Besides the mutilation occurring at home, bodies sometimes washed up on their shores from Argentina, where military officers later admitted to having thrown prisoners alive from aircraft into the river between the two countries.[5]

Besides surrealist and absurdist trappings, another strategy for disguising the call to resist is decontextualization. Varela uses at least two kinds of decontextualization that might throw off the spectator or reader who is only considering the superficial meaning of the text: (1) a charged admonition appears to concern an innocuous subject and (2) such an admonition is directed away from its actual intended recipient. For instance, when Alfonso blames Clotilde for failing to check the gas tank, the stage directions mandate that her response, "No hay exactamente un culpable, sino muchos," be delivered while *"señalando hacia el foro, molesta"* (152). Why would a character in a play blame the audience for running out of gas? Upon reflection, it becomes clear that the real subject under discussion is not the gas tank but the political situation, a subject too highly charged to address directly. The same technique is repeated and layered with a second level of disguise when Alfonso and Clotilde mime having sex after discovering a hand in the sand. Clotilde says: "Hay que luchar juntos, pegar puñetazos, negar, moverse así, salpicar con nuestro sudor. Que sepan que no tenemos miedo"(159). This time the discussion edges closer to the real concern (struggle against political repression) but almost as if to compensate for that, the speech is addressed to Alfonso rather than to the audience. Though it might have been more powerful to have Clotilde urge the audience to fight and to say 'no,' it might also have been, from an aesthetic point of view, too obvious, and from a pragmatic perspective, too likely to trigger censors. The message's import is disguised by directing it to a "safer" recipient.

*Alfonso y Clotilde* clearly recognizes the allure of amnesia to a society under siege. The characters seek two different kinds of forgetfulness: a clean

slate and a false past, which might also be described as contradictory impulses toward exile and "insile." The landscape they inhabit is neither home nor exile, which seems appropriate to their tendency to oscillate between fantasies of each:

> CLOTILDE. Es necesario cambiar de ambiente.
> ALFONSO. Había que hacer las valijas, buscar otros aires.
> CLOTILDE. Qué alegria. Dejar aquello, poder dar vuelta la cabeza y decir adiós. Nunca nadie partió tan alegremente. (161)

In their imaginary exile there is no uprooting, no sense of loss or alienation because all memory of what came before has vanished. Moreover, though the characters are comically unaware of it, their fantasies of what their new life will be are identical to how they describe their old life, down to style of furniture they plan to buy and the Picasso reproductions Clotilde wants to hang on the walls once again (163). Alfonso wonders for a moment whether it might not be time for a change, but quickly succumbs to the vision of a future identical to a fantasy past they never really had. The real issue, however, is not home décor but safety. Alfonso and Clotilde enviously surmise that others somehow managed to find the magic key to safe passage into another space and time free from persecution. Though it is never explicitly stated, the nature of the persecution they fear is political, specifically torture:

> CLOTILDE. Llegaron y fueron felices. Dijeron: empezamos de nuevo. Y algunos eligieron un lugar donde morir, libremente, sin apuro, con una sonrisa. *(Al borde de la histeria.)* Se murieron con sus manos intactas, con todos los dedos, con sus dos testículos, con el cuerpo agradecido. (160)

Yet only seconds into their "escape," the imaginary bird splatters across their imaginary windshield, bringing with it the memory of blood and violence they are trying to flee (162). The irony of the play's ending is that Alfonso and Clotilde get the extreme of what they sought, like fairy tale heroes who end up tormented by the three wishes they have been granted. The only way one can truly begin again without a past, Varela shows, is to undergo a kind of self-lobotomy almost as frightening as any torture.

The second pitfall in the desire for amnesia is what has been called "insile," or the sense of exile inside one's country, characterized by alienation, frustration, and impotence. Varela considers himself a victim of insile:

> A otros compañeros les fue peor, porque escribieron en una celda, o padecieron la tortura. El exilio, en cambio, era sinónimo de destierro, también significaba ser transplantado a viva fuerza a otro lugar, con todo lo que esto suele traer aparejado. El "insilio" fue un término que se acuñó durante la dictadura y que intentó expresar la situación de los que nos quedamos. Ese sentimiento de frustración y de encierro, de "exilio," en tu propio país. (e-mail of September 5, 2000)

Uruguayan social scientist Juan Rial argues that insile bred passivity in a large sector of the middle class during the dictatorship: "El tiempo cronológico seguia transcurriendo, pero ese tiempo que se valora, estaba suspendido. Lo que se buscaba era esperar en el refugio privado, en la evocación nostalgica, en la búsqueda de la restauración"(Perelli y Rial, 31-2). Clotilde and Alfonso repeatedly attempt just such a self-protective retreat into a swirl of false memories, a nostalgic reverie that makes them spectators rather than actors in their own lives:

> CLOTILDE. ...Por lo menos podemos cerrar los ojos y pensar en lo que tuvimos.
> ALFONSO. Una especie de película adentro de uno mismo (152).

Later, they sit in an imaginary car, pretending to drive to a place where the clock of history will stop ticking (162). But every nostalgic evocation ends in disillusion. Their Saturday night sex, at first recalled as a great pleasure, turns out to have been empty and routine, at least for Clotilde (169). Within her escapist memory of home lies another escapist fantasy: the superhero world of television's Captain Joe, who can deal with any challenge, unlike her all-too-human husband. Alfonso's happy memories of country club friendships soon sour into unpleasant recollections of trying to keep up appearances despite his sexual impotence, his insomnia, and his frantic attempts to navigate between the demands of the bosses and workers at his factory (170). The deeper they delve into the memories of the old home, the more hollow its supposed pleasures ring. Long before they left (or were expelled from) home, they were already exiles of a sort.

If the seduction of exile and the retreat into insile and nostalgia are depicted as equally fruitless alternatives, what Paul Ricoeur refers to as "the duty to remember" is presented as the only ethical course of action, for the characters and for the spectators. When Alfonso yells at Clotilde, "¡Tenés que recordar!" (175), the cry could just as easily be directed from the actor to

the audience, from the playwright to the reader or spectator. There are at least two types of memories that are important to preserve, in opposition to dictatorship's tendency to erase them: memories of what life was like before the regime assumed power and memories of crimes committed during the regime. Ricouer focuses on the memory of atrocities when he speaks of the duty to remember as "an imperative directed towards the future, which is exactly the opposite side of the traumatic character of the humiliations and wounds of history. It is a duty, thus, to tell (10)." Far from wanting to remember and tell, Clotilde sees a dismembered hand almost immediately afterwards appears to have blocked it out. She counts stitches of her knitting as a kind of self-hypnosis to obliterate the disturbing image:

> CLOTILDE. Uno para abajo, uno para arriba...
> ALFONSO. (*Lento.*) Era una mano.
> CLOTILDE. Uno para abajo... Voy a tejerte un pulóver, por si refresca.(157)

Clotilde also seems to have forgotten all the ethical norms that prevailed before the military ideology gained ascendancy. Conformity has become her highest value: "Jamás refugiamos a nadie, jamás manifestamos por nada. ¿No tienen un archivo de virtudes?" she wails (176). By contrast, Alfonso recalls "palabras, pensamientos... cosas que alguna vez dijo Papá..." (172), an ethical code that precedes the dictatorship and has led him to protect the union leader Paco. Alfonso's musing might have prodded the spectator to remember a time before the dictatorship when there was nothing to shelter people from: labor organizing was not prohibited. Before the dictatorship, more than two people could gather in public without fear of attracting the police. When Varela's spectators are spurred to reflect upon some of the differences between life before and after the dictatorship or to mentally record an atrocity that occurs during the dictatorship, the theatre becomes what Nora calls a *"lieux de memoire,"* a space in which culture is collectively created.

Meaningful speech (the duty to tell) relies upon memory, even at the most basic level, as Alfonso shows at the end of the play when he can no longer recall enough of what he has just said to proceed to the next syllable. And conversely, speech can jog memory and spur resistance. The impossibility of freely voicing certain memories, the maiming of speech in Uruguayan society, is metaphorically indicated by the powerful allegorical figure of Paco, the union leader whose tongue has been cut out. Paco may represent Varela

himself, who wrote nothing during the first five years of the dictatorship, and he more generally symbolizes the attempt to silence the artist, the political leader, the opponent from any walk of life. One of the most well-known cases of such an attempt was the imprisonment of playwright Mauricio Rosencof, a leader of the Tupamaro guerrilla movement, who was kept in solitary confinement for eleven years, between September 1973 and April 1984.[6] Of the variety of competing voices in the play, Paco's voiceless "voice" signals most loudly to the audience that the author cannot speak too clearly, that the audience must carefully read between the lines. Paco is what Roach calls an "effigy," a substitute "created by the absence of an original" that keeps open a place in memory in order to perpetuate a community (Roach 36-37). Paco's silent presence substitutes for both the silenced artist and the disappeared who were not able to speak for themselves.

Because Paco, like the mythical figure of Philomela, has been robbed of speech by those who would also rob him of the ability to denounce the crime, Alfonso and Clotilde become the only witnesses to his suffering. Their reaction, however, mirrors the reaction of many Uruguayans to torture. Rather than assume the responsibility of witnessing, they distance themselves, refuse to see the torture, refuse to recognize it as their own possible fate. They try to pretend that Paco may have wandered off from a nudist colony. Alfonso even jokes about the marks of torture on Paco's back: "¡Alguien quiso hacer allí un asado!" (165). Ironically, despite their efforts to distance themselves, they eventually end up just like him, as their own memory and speech degenerates. In the meantime, Paco serves as a spur to genuine memory (as distinguished from the false memories of nostalgia), triggering Clotilde's acknowledgment of the emptiness of her life at home. "Me recuerda a alguien," she says, claiming that during one lonely moment she briefly met his eyes on a street corner (167). Clotilde's confession, in turn, triggers Alfonso's recognition that his actual experience at home was also far less than idyllic (169-70). Paco's corpse then becomes a *lieux de memoire* for the couple, a site that re-creates and embodies their community's memories. Clotilde wants Paco to help her escape memory. In a poignant reversal of roles, as if he could substitute for her own silenced voice, she pleads: "Hablá Paco. Gritá mucho mientras nos guiás y sobre todo, disimulá, tratándonos como a tus compañeros. Decí que hay otro lugar y que sólo tenemos que llegar allá y maldecir el pasado" (178). But Paco's mute presence stubbornly testifies to the persistence of the past in the present.

The play's ending warns the spectator that with loss of memory and loss of speech comes loss of self. By the time Clotilde realizes the importance of memory, it is too late:

CLOTILDE. Quiero recordar... recordar cosas....
ALFONSO. ¿Para qué?
CLOTILDE. Ayudame a recordar....
ALFONSO. Tengo muy mala memoria.
CLOTILDE. (*Angustiada.*) Se me está borrando todo, Alfonso.(178)

Though still physically alive, like victims of advanced Alzheimer's, they become shells of themselves, as basic facts such as their names and the dates of their birth escape them.

Memory, the play emphasizes, is just as important to one's identity as physical safety and material security. When Alfonso tries to tell a story – significantly, about an evil king – he cannot get beyond the first line. His loss of memory breeds loss of speech, exemplifying what William Gass has written on the consequences of political exile: "So what is sent away when we are forced out of our homeland? Words. It is to get rid of our words that we are gotten rid of, since speech is not a piece of property which can be confiscated, bought or sold, and therefore left behind on the lot like a car you have traded, but is the center of the self itself" (225).

The central irony of the drama is that though Alfonso and Clotilde are forced out of their home because of the power of words, in fact, they never meant to wield that power. The conservative Clotilde's innocent remark about Picasso was unintentionally charged with symbolism of resistance. Her husband's boss hears her admire Picasso's paintings and asks whether she also admires his "ideas." Though Varela never explicitly states what ideas Picasso might be associated with, there are at least two he might be asking the audience to recall: opposition to military rule and the ability of art to resist such rule. Varela's audience must remember (understanding any allusion requires memory) that Picasso was not only the artist who painted "La maternidad," the painting Clotilde admires, but also the artist who painted "Guernica," and who in 1937 announced his "abhorance of the military caste which has sunk Spain in an ocean of pain and death..." (Frascina 134). Embedded in the joke about Clotilde's blunder may be a second joke, between Varela and his audience, about the stupidity of censors who persecute the innocent and sometimes miss the "guilty," such as the playwright, who at the

height of the dictatorship manages to stage a condemnation of apathy to political repression and an exhortation to cultivate language and memory.

Memory, I argued above, can provide an alternative reality to a present evil, and thus can help establish an alternative ethical system. Written two years after *Alfonso y Clotilde*, another long one-act drama, *Interrogatorio en Elsinore* (1983), shows how performance can encode and repeat that alternative image: the presence of the body reproduces and re-creates collective memory in a process that Roach calls "surrogation."[7] Though each repetition creates a distance from the original event, making performance the memory of a memory *ad infinitum*, physical movements also imbue the memory with new life, keeping it from growing fainter as time passes.[8] A performed memory can depict a truth that might otherwise remain unexpressed, expose an evil, maintain a condemnation of that evil in the public mind, and threaten the established order. The threat posed by a performance, in turn, may bring on repression from authorities attempting to keep a firm hold on illegitimately obtained power. *Elsinore* then depicts performance as a double-edged sword: valuable yet dangerous.

The drama draws implicit parallels between the world of 1980s Uruguay and the putrid world of Hamlet (neither Medieval Denmark nor Elizabethan England, but some amalgam of the two). As *Elsinore*'s subtitle, *Después de la ratonera*, suggests, the play is based on the scene in *Hamlet* (3.2) in which the prince traps his uncle Claudius into publicly revealing his part in the death of Hamlet's father. By staging an image of the assassination, the pouring of poison into a king's ear, Hamlet succeeds in getting Claudius to react so as to betray his guilt. In *Elsinore*, Varela imagines a terrible punishment for the Player King after the performance: The actor is beaten, interrogated, and kept prisoner for years. But the actor's wife, along with some remnants of his disbanded troupe, continues to perform the banned work, resorting to the use of puppets when actors cannot be found, repeating the crucial moment over and over: the poison poured in the ear. Echoing *Hamlet*, *Elsinore* suggests that illegitimately obtained power requires poisoning of an individual and of a society. Theatre may not be powerful enough to serve as the antidote, but at least it can be strong enough to create and recreate a public memory of the moment, or moments, of guilt.

*Elsinore*'s complicated structure simultaneously reveals and disguises its message: it purports simply to be a play about a play that resisted illegitimate authority; yet it is also itself a play that resists illegitimate authority. By setting the drama in Hamlet's fictional past, Varela borrows an age-old dramatic

cloak as thin in contemporary Uruguay as it was in Hamlet's court. The device signals its own existence, putting Varela in the place of a contemporary Hamlet. Just as Hamlet tried on one level to maintain that his adaptation of the *Murder of Gonzago* was about Italy rather than Denmark, Varela adopts the conceit that *Elsinore* is about Denmark rather than Uruguay. Besides providing a springboard for humor based on anachronism, the distance in time and space creates a historical perspective about events and practices – interrogation, torture, disappearance – that were still raw wounds in Uruguay in 1983, the year before the end of the dictatorship.[9]

Further disguise is provided by the way in the passage of time in *Elsinore* is measured and punctuated by the plot points of *Hamlet*: the death of Polonius, the death of Ophelia, the general slaughter at the end of the fifth act, and the rise to power of Fortinbras. The audience is forced to experience these events from the perspective of the imprisoned protagonist, who in the absence of natural light or darkness depends on reports from above to mark the days. Against this background of fictional narrative, however, the activities of the protagonist and his interrogator remain painfully monotonous and true to the rhythm of (Uruguayan) prison life at the time: the Interrogator pressures for information and names; the Actor holds back until torture forces him to say something, anything.

The main characters are named for their functions: "El Actor" and "El Interrogador," which stresses their roles as performers in a play-within-the-play of their own, the sordid drama of interrogation, with its predictable script and familiar props. As they repeat their lines to the point of inducing boredom in the reader or spectator, they both seem like actors rehearsing a scene, memorizing their lines, familiarizing themselves with their characters. By the end of the play, which extends beyond Hamlet's redemptive ending to the fall of Fortinbras, both are faced with the challenge of learning new roles. The interrogator is portrayed as neither charmingly evil nor as given to 11th-hour conversions, as in many torture plays, but is simply a tenacious fellow, a hardworking, limited performer who only knows one role and sticks to it even after the lights have gone out. Though he admits that "ya no importan los papeles" (72) he cannot bring himself to learn a new part. The Actor, by contrast, breaks out and shouts his name, "Equion," as if to affirm an individuality apart from his performative function.

Because *Elsinore* is ostensibly set in *Hamlet*'s world, it allows Varela to draw from Shakespeare's rich symbolic universe without explicitly stating a moral. The moral imperative to remember, for instance, is so powerfully

depicted in *Hamlet* that *Elsinore* need only allude to it, primarily by the fact that the protagonist is a political prisoner subjected to all the techniques so familiar to political prisoners of any era: isolation, torture, pressure to implicate others in a real or imagined conspiracy. In the tradition of revenge tragedies, *Hamlet* is a play in which a physical embodiment of memory, a ghost, spurs the action. "Remember me" (1.5.91) the ghost of King Hamlet tells his son and "do not forget," the ghost chides (3.4.111) when the prince has been sidetracked by his obsession with his mother's infidelity. The play-within-the-play then highlights the nature of theatre as a space in which memory is transmitted. "The mousetrap" serves not only to expose Hamlet's uncle but also to obey his father's command: Remember me. The Player King is also a ghostly image of the dead father, yet this image is visible and speaks before all, not just to Hamlet. Who needs to be remembered in Uruguay? The obvious answer is the victims of the dictatorship: the 300 reported to have disappeared or died under torture, the 50 thousand (out of a population of three million) imprisoned for political reasons, the 400 thousand who left the country. These are the ghosts that haunted Varela and that would have haunted the Montevideo spectators who first viewed *Elsinore* in 1983. Remember them, Varela's work commands between the lines. Remembrance is the only revenge that would have been possible to an unarmed public under the conditions of military rule. One of the actor's dreams, supposedly about Denmark, is obviously about Uruguay:

> ACTOR. (Muy bajo, casi para sí) Hoy soñé que una mujer vestida de negro se acercaba a mí y extendía su mano...yo la seguía...y de pronto llegaba junto a otras mujeres que lloraban. Ellas habían perdido a sus esposos, a sus hijos, a sus amigos. Ellas dijeron que toda Dinamarka sentía su dolor...y que el mismo cielo se oscurecía para no ver tanta injusticia. Ellas lloraban...y yo sentía que volvía a tener fuerzas. (70)

Theatre, *Elsinore* suggests, can remind an amnesiac public of how power was obtained illegitimately. Claudius killed his brother; the Uruguayan junta ousted a democratically elected government. Both societies were in a sense poisoned. What hidden scene of guilt in Uruguay would correspond to the moment in Hamlet when the poison is poured in King Hamlet's ear? The play never says. Rather than offer a reductive correspondence, it leaves it to the spectators to come up with their own individual scenes in their minds' eyes. But the play does stress how much of a threat such a scene, or scenes,

of guilt would pose to the authorities. The aftermath of *La ratonera* imagined in *Elsinore* involves the imprisonment of Equion, Varela's name for the player king, and the banning of all theatre. The interrogator tells the actor: "El rey ya no ve con buenos ojos a los actores. Acaba de prohibir las representaciones en palacio...y pronto creo que lanzará censuras más severas para todos los actors de Dinamarka." The actor replies: "El rey no quiere verse en el espejo" (43). But theatre, *Elsinore* implies, is even more than a mirror: it *creates* rather than merely *reflects* memory. The interrogator searches the text in vain for a hidden subversive message: "Debe haber algo en ese texto" (65). What he misses is that the subversive power is in the performance, not in the text, and in the performance within a political context that gives particular bodily movements (in this case, the pouring of poison in an ear) a special charge. Under the right circumstances, before the right audience, a performance becomes a public accusation of guilt.

The theatrical creation of memory can be seen most vividly in the repetition of the "Mousetrap" performance that resulted in Equion's imprisonment – modified as a puppet show. Puppets substitute for actors who are too frightened to perform, highlighting how cultural memory may be perpetuated by the filling and refilling of roles with substitutes. In fact, during the Uruguayan dictatorship, secret puppet shows were performed without benefit of publicity but before large audiences, in concentration camps, private homes, housing cooperatives, and even in theatres (Barbosa 499).

Though the initial performance of *La ratonera* forms part of the background to the play, it is subsequently staged three times during the course of *Elsinore*, with the actors recounting that it has also enjoyed a long clandestine run. Each time the scene is repeated, it highlights a different element of performance's political power. The first time, it is a political awakening for the performers themselves: young actors playfully defy the ban on theatre and animate puppets to repeat the dangerous scene without fully understanding the meaning of what they do. The Actor's wife has to pass on the meaning of the performance to a younger generation that does not immediately grasp why the play threatens Claudius.

The second time the puppet play is performed, the emphasis is on a single spectator's epiphany: "¡Asesinos!" exclaims Ofelia (52), drawing the right conclusion. This performance changes her understanding of the world, underscoring the power of performance to reveal truth. The third time, the performance is repeated as farce. Luciano forgets the potion. The Queen clubs him on the head exclaiming, "¡Para tu memoria!"(62) The Young Woman

wants to make the play funnier; the wife wants to perform it so as to accuse Claudius. At least for her, the performance now carries a double denunciation: the original accusation against Claudius and his second crime, against Equion. The crime of illicit capture of power has been followed by the crime of "disappearance" necessary to maintain that power. Memory has been layered upon memory, so that the performance (like most performances) does not stand for a single thing, but begins to acquire multiple levels of meaning. The performance now serves to maintain a collective memory of crimes that might otherwise be forgotten, that the authorities are actively working to erase (through the banning of theatre, through Equion's imprisonment). Connerton writes: "All totalitarianisms behave in this way; the mental enslavement of the subjects of a totalitarian regime begins when their memories are taken away" (14).

And yet Connerton stresses that memory is not only a tool for use by resisters of repression; totalitarian regimes also reshape the past and may also be inspired by the performance of memory to perpetuate violence and repression. Connerton recounts how the Third Reich's 1938 commemorative ceremonies re-presented the failed 1923 *putsch* as a noble sacrifice necessary for the rise of National Socialism, going so far as to exhume corpses as "blood witnesses" to the struggle (42). The Uruguayan military has its own re-construction of memories, most importantly its self-portrayal as defender of the nation against guerrilla threat. This self-definition prevailed among the general population when they voted in 1989 to uphold an amnesty law granting the military immunity from prosecution for human rights abuses committed during the dictatorship. Varela's work is sophisticated enough to recognize that totalitarianism can also manipulate memory, not as resistance to authority but as its enforcer. *Elsinore* includes a warning against a naïve faith in memory for memory's sake: the performance of memory by no means *guarantees* liberation from totalitarianism. As Richard Kearney notes: "Memory...is not always on the side of the angels. It can as easily lead to false consciousness and ideological closure as to openness and tolerance" (27).

Two scenes in the play highlight this darker side of memory: an early meeting between the actor and Ofelia, and the last minutes shared by the actor and the interrogator. When the actor and Ofelia meet for a brief sexual encounter, performance is perverted into an instrument of illusion and disillusion. She asks the actor to pretend that he is Hamlet – a request for a performance intended to spur both memory (of Hamlet) and forgetfulness (of who is and is not Hamlet). Yet once their sexual union is over, she is distraught by the

sudden realization that the actor is not in fact Hamlet (16). In this example of unsuccessful "surrogation," the performer fails to live up to the role. Instead of re-creating or surpassing the enchantment of the original, the performed memory amounts to a betrayal of its origins.

The last scene between the actor and the interrogator in *Elsinore* recalls how in *Alfonso and Clotilde*, Alfonso summons up his father's teachings as a guide to ethical behavior that leads him to refrain from focusing the attention of the authorities on the union leader Paco. In *Elsinore*, however, memory motivates both the protagonist and his opponent: memories of his wife and father ultimately give Equion the courage to resume his life (72-3); memories of his own father similarly motivate Equion's torturer. The interrogator remembers the smile of his adoptive father, "cada vez que constataba mi fervor por las armas, su mano sobre mi hombro mientras me decía: 'Hijo, no podemos atacar solo con las palabras. No serviría de nada'" (69). Yet at the end, it is the interrogator who prods the actor into a recalling the letter from his wife that gives him the strength to leave his prison. Memory in-and-of-itself, the play suggests, cannot be counted on as a kind of buffer against evil: it is only a tool that must be used correctly in order to succeed in re-establishing ethical norms.

In *Alfonso y Clotilde* and in *Elsinore*, Varela walks a tightrope between saying too much and saying too little. Varela thought at first that he might have said too much. He was surprised and relieved when the only violent reactions the plays spurred were a few anonymous telephone death threats (interview July 27, 2001). The duty to remember, according to Ricoeur, implies a duty to tell, to keep traces of events, to memorialize the victims rather than the victors of history (10). *Elsinore* goes further and posits a theatrical duty to *perform* memory. By writing these works and collaborating in their productions, Varela has fulfilled all three obligations: to remember, to write, and to perform.

*Northwestern University*

## Notes

[1] Freud's theories, as elaborated in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and *Moses and Monotheism*, link memory, trauma, and history. See also Caruth's essays on Freud. Bergson (1911) was one of the earliest philosophers to distinguish various types of memory systems, an analytical task that was continued by Tulving in the 1970s and '80s. Schacter provides an excellent overview of contemporary memory theory.

[2] De Certeau's description of memory in terms of time rather than place at first seems at odds with Nora's perception that memory is also inextricably linked to physical location. But the apparent contradiction is resolved if one considers that Nora further distinguishes between "dominant" and "dominated" *lieux de memoire*. The dominated sites of memory are controlled by the government or other official organizations and correspond to de Certeau's sense of time in that they are more transient gathering spots (de Certeau gives the example of funerals and pilgrimages) defined more by the activity taking place within them rather than by official ownership of the facility.

[3] *Alfonso and Clotilde* opened on May 16, 1980 in Montevideo's Teatro del Centro, a small theatre-in-the round, and ran for about three months. On March 9, 1999 it opened in Rome, staged by the Teatro della Centena, and later toured Italy for two months.

[4] The *grotesco criollo* and the *esperpento* both evolved in the early 20th century and overlap in many areas, particularly their use of parody and black humor to expose social convention as a killer of the individual soul. The *grotesco criollo*, however, tended to employ Italian immigrant dialect and to focus on the economic struggle for survival in the new world. While the typical *grotesco* protagonist is self-aware enough to be tormented by the split between a social mask and an inner self, the more puppet-like *esperpento* protagonists are their masks. They also fail to rise to moral challenges but are so shallow that they waste little time recognizing or bemoaning their own limits. For more detail on *grotesco criollo*, see Pérez; for more detail on the *esperpento* see Lyon.

[5] For a detailed account of the Argentine military program to throw opponents alive from airplanes, see Verbitsky.

[6] Rosencof (b. 1933) is one of Uruguay's most talented and certainly its most flamboyant contemporary playwright. As the brains behind some of the Tupamaro guerrillas spectacular, though failed, assaults on Montevideo, he was imprisoned for 11 years. In "On Suffering, Song, and White Horses," in Sosnowski (1993), he recounts how, deprived of writing materials, he would commit much of his work to memory, in the hopes of one day writing it down (124). Other writers imprisoned included Hiber Conteris, Miguel Angel Olivera, and Jorge Torre. Among those forced to emigrate were essayist Eduardo Galeano and the novelists Juan Carlos Onetti and Mario Benedetti.

[7] *Interrogation at Elsinore* opened September 10, 1983 at the Teatro de la Alianza Francesa in Montevideo and ran for about two months.

[8] See Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989) for an analysis of how bodily practices incorporate memory through posture, gesture, and other movements.

[9] Though voters rejected military rule in a November 1980 plebiscite, defeating the military's proposed constitution by a margin of 57 to 43 percent, it took another four years for the regime to hold presidential elections. The result of the plebiscite surprised many voters who had assumed that they were in the minority in their dissent (Weschler 151). The voters' behavior gives credence to Scott's thesis that apparent conformity with the status quo is often born of self-preservation rather than true conviction (Scott 77-107).

## Works Cited

Barbosa, Gustavo Martínez. "Puppet Theatre." *The Encyclopedia of Latin American Theatre.* Ed. Helen Delpar. New York: Magraw Hill, 1974: 498-499.

Benedetti, Mario. *Pedro y el capitán.* Montevideo: Editorial Signos y Amauta, 1989.

Bergson, Henri. *Matter and Memory.* London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1911.

Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History.* Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins UP: 1996.

_____, ed. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory.* Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins UP: 1995.

de Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life.* Trans. Steven Rendall. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.

Connerton, Paul. *How Societies Remember.* Cambridge UP, 1989.

Dubatti, Jorge A. "Carlos Manuel Varela: Intertexto Absurdista y Sociedad Uruguaya en *Alfonso y Clotilde.*" In *Teatro latinoamericano de los '70.* Ed. Osvaldo Pellettieri. Buenos Aires: Corregidor, 1995.

Frascina, Francis. "Picasso, Surrealism and Politics in 1937." In *Surrealism: Surrealist Visuality.* Ed. Silvano Levy. New York University Press, 1996.

Galeano, Eduardo. *Memory of Fire III: Century of the Wind.* Trans. Cedric Belfrage. New York: Pantheon Books, 1988.

Gass, William H. "Exile." In *Altogether Elsewhere: Writers on Exile.* Ed. Marc Robinson. Boston: Faber and Faber, 1994.

Kearney, Richard. "Narrative and the Ethics of Remembrance ." In *Questioning Ethics: Debates in Contemporary Philosophy.* Eds. Richard Kearney and Mark Dooley. London: Routledge, 1999.

Lyon, John. *The Theatre of Valle-Inclan.* Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983.

Nora, Pierre. *Realms of Memory.* Eds. Pierre Nora and Lawrence D. Kirtzman. Trans. Arthur Goldhammer. Vol. 1. New York: Columbia UP, 1996.

Perelli, Carina y Juan Rial. *De mitos y memorias politicas: La represion, el miedo y después...* Montevideo: Ediciones de la Banda Oriental, 1986.

Pérez, Irene. *El grotesco criollo: Discépolo-Cossa.* Buenos Aires: Colihue, 1986.

Ricoeur, Paul. "Memory and Forgetting." In *Questioning Ethics: Debates in Contemporary Philosophy.* Eds. Richard Kearney and Mark Dooley. London: Routledge, 1999.

Roach, Joseph. *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance.* New York: Columbia UP, 1996.

Rosencof, Mauricio. "On Suffering, Song, and White Horses," In *Repression, Exile and Democracy: Uruguayan Culture*. Eds. Saul Sosnowski and Louise B. Popkin. Durham: Duke UP, 1993.

Schacter, Daniel L. *Searching for Memory: The Brain, the Mind, and the Past.* New York: Basic Books, 1996.

Scott, James C. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1990.

Sosnowski, Saul and Louise B. Popkin, eds. *Repression, Exile and Democracy: Uruguayan Culture*. Durham: Duke UP, 1993.

Tulving, Endel. "Episodic and Semantic Memory." In *Organization of Memory.* Ed. Endel Tulving. New York: Academic Press, 1972.

Varela, Carlos Manuel. *La esperanza no bebe petróleo*. Montevideo: Arca, 1993.

_____. *Los cuentos del final* (1981), *Teatro uruguayo contemporáneo*, Madrid: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1992.

_____. *Interrogatorio en Elsinore (Después de la ratonera)*. Montevideo: Instituto Nacional del Libro, 1991.

_____. "Teatro uruguayo: Del enmascaramiento al significado explícito," *Alba de América*, 7: 12-13 (1989) 381-88.

_____. *Alfonso y Clotilde. Antología del teatro uruguayo moderno*. Ed. Walter Rela. Montevideo: Proyección, 1988.

Verbitsky, Horacio. *The Confessions of an Argentine Dirty Warrior.* Trans. Esther Allen. New York: The New Press, 1996.

Weinstein, Martin. *Uruguay: Democracy at the Crossroads*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1988.

Weschler, Lawrence. *A Miracle, a Universe: Settling Accounts with Torturers*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990.