

Greek Tragedy or Theatre of the Absurd?: Montes Huidobro's *Oscuro total*

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A bitterly jealous man murders his niece and nephew, and then serves their hearts to his brother in a gruesome banquet. A daughter convinces her brother to kill their mother because their mother and uncle had killed their father. Distraught that her husband is abandoning her, a woman slays their children. A father orders his newborn son killed to avoid dire prophesies. Unwittingly, a son murders his father and marries his mother; the mother commits suicide.

Greek tragedy does tend toward the extreme of dysfunctional families. In my innocent youth, when I first began teaching twentieth-century Spanish theatre – and the term “dysfunctional family” had not yet been popularized – I would tell my students not to worry too much about the apparent lack of psychological realism in Jacinto Benavente's *La malquerida* or Federico García Lorca's *La casa de Bernarda Alba*. After all, they were works inspired by Greek tragedy, and the characters would therefore not be the folks next door.

That was before I began reading the local newspapers with attention. Distraught that her husband may leave her, a woman seat belts their two small children and sets the car on fire, thus burning the children to death while their horrified grandparents watch helplessly. A grandfather, assault weapon in hand, kills his beloved granddaughter, along with three neighbors. A son takes an ornamental sword and stabs his sleeping father seven times, through the heart, lungs, and other vital organs. These are examples from central New Jersey, but newspapers and television across the country provide equally disturbing stories on a regular basis. At times the whole nation focuses on a particular event. Such was the case of the grim discovery of the bodies of José and Mary Louise (“Kitty”) Menéndez in Beverly Hills, in 1989, and during the trial of their confessed killers, sons Lyle and Erik. Like everyone else, Matías Montes Huidobro was riveted by the story; from that horrifying, real episode, he created his powerful,

absurdist play *Oscuro total* (written 1993, published 1998). In his program note for the premiere production in 2000 during the Festival Internacional de Teatro Hispano in Miami, Montes Huidobro alerts us that the specific anecdote is unimportant: “Otros actos de violencia han ocurrido desde el veinte de agosto de 1989, y tanto el parricidio como el matricidio, y en particular el infanticidio, se han repetido una y otra vez en miles de variantes, unificados todos por la violencia en sí misma.” According to the author, the Menéndez anecdote is merely the basis for a metaphoric image of violence and the abuse of power. These are indeed the underlying themes of many twentieth-century plays, for example such works as Fernando Arrabal’s *El laberinto* and *Los verdugos* (1956): antirealist tragicomedies that nevertheless reflect all too well the tragedy of the Spanish Civil War and its aftermath.

These metaphorical themes are readily associated not only with Greek tragedy but also, precipitated by the horrors of recent wars, with contemporary theatre from many nations. In his ground breaking study on the theatre of the absurd (1961), Martin Esslin suggests in general terms that there is a connection between Greek tragedy and the twentieth-century movement:

Concerned as it is with the ultimate realities of the human condition . . . the Theatre of the Absurd, however grotesque, frivolous, and irreverent it may appear, represents a return to the original, religious function of the theatre – the confrontation of man with the spheres of myth and religious reality. Like ancient Greek tragedy . . . the Theatre of the Absurd is intent on making its audience aware of man’s precarious and mysterious position in the universe. (293)

Esslin includes the cruel metafictional games of Jean Genet within his broad definition of absurdist theatre, and it is with that Artaudian current that the theatre of Matías Montes Huidobro is linked. Indeed, the Cuban playwright has identified Francisco Morín’s 1954 production of Genet’s *Las criadas* (original title, *Les Bonnes*) in Havana as having left an indelible mark on his own theatre and that of other Cuban authors. In his 1993 interview with Aristides Falcón, the playwright emphasizes the significance of that staging: “Asociado el hecho teatral con la realidad histórica, absurdo y crueldad llevan a un capítulo esencial en nuestra escena que dura todavía...” (135). Not surprisingly, the comment points to Falcón’s subsequent doctoral thesis: *El teatro cruel de Matías Montes Huidobro* (1999). Perhaps also not surprisingly, like *Oscuro total*, Genet’s *Las criadas* was inspired by a sensational real-life drama (Lewis 459). Montes Huidobro’s interest in specific, historical events, however, always transcends them: “Pero no me interesa

un *suspense* policíaco, sino uno que, pasando por lo político, vaya de lo psicológico a lo ontológico” (Interview with Febles and González-Pérez 231). With specific reference to *Oscuro total*, Jorge Febles astutely defines this tendency: “Este trasfondo clásico de la obra está en función de acentuar su carácter ritualista, religioso, pues elucida la inmanencia mítico-histórica de la situación representada” (Transmigración 197; Re-textualización 111).

Nevertheless, the reader or spectator may not readily see a connection between Genet’s *Les Bonnes* (first staged 1947; revised version 1954) or a related play such as José Triana’s *La noche de los asesinos* (1966) and Greek tragedy. Nowhere in his illuminating discussion of Genet’s landmark play does Esslin himself relate it to classic theatre or mythology (146-52). Discussions of Triana’s *La noche de los asesinos* have tended to focus on his approach to the absurd, suggesting that for him it is a Latin American instrument of social criticism as distinct from the European current, which is supposedly limited to an apolitical metaphysical investigation (Taylor 234).

Diana Taylor, however, in *Theatre of Crisis*, carefully relates Triana’s Lalo of *La noche de los asesinos* to Oedipus. Moreover, Triana revealed his interest in Greek tragedy when he wrote *Medea en el espejo* (1960). In more general terms, William García has established the widespread impact of Greek tragedy on Latin American theatre. In his 1996 doctoral dissertation, *Subversión y reelaboración de mitos trágicos en el teatro latinoamericano contemporáneo*, García identifies numerous plays that self-consciously rework Greek myths while juxtaposing classic conventions with contemporary genres:

Además de la inserción del mito en la cultura a la que pertenece el dramaturgo, en numerosas versiones latinoamericanas se introducen nuevas ramificaciones ideológicas en la fábula, se experimenta con otros géneros teatrales (como la farsa, la comedia bien hecha o el melodrama) y con discursos teatrales latinoamericanos (el teatro bufo, la farsátira), y se cuestionan o se parodian las convenciones canónicas de la tragedia. (2-3)

Oscuro total, although not included in García’s study, is an excellent example of the melding of Greek tragedy with the contemporary genre of absurdist theatre. García concentrates his analysis on plays that overtly relate to specific figures – Electra, Antigone, Medea – and that usually so indicate in their titles. The intertextuality of Montes Huidobro’s *Oscuro total*, unlike *La noche de los asesinos*, is explicit and yet differs from the works cited by García in that it refers to multiple Greek tragedies rather than a specific myth.

Oscuro total is a rich text that invites varying interpretations. Jorge Febles has read the play as a commentary on the Cuban family: “En su empeño retextualizador, el teatrasta hiperboliza la naturaleza ya en sí grotesca del acontecimiento para complementar de manera novedosa ese retrato crítico de la familia cubana que ha dado pie a buena parte de su producción” (Transmigración 185). Certainly Montes Huidobro has recognized the Cuban family as a central motif of his writing: “Mi interpretación *sui generis* de la familia cubana, de sus luchas, de sus historias responde a mi modo de verla tanto en la crítica como en la creación literaria” (Interview Escarpanter 101). He has identified the motif as a recurring aspect in Cuban theatre in general: “a cannibalistic desire within the family nucleus full of hatreds and Freudian complexes, that is directed toward its own destruction” (qtd. Lessing ix). Febles is thus on solid ground when he concludes that *Oscuro total* may be read as a metaphor of Cuba and the Cuban family:

En última instancia, deviene metáfora que apunta a una perspectiva apocalíptica: la innoble posibilidad de la violencia permanente que se desarrolla en forma centrífuga como signo doloroso del núcleo familiar cubano y, por extensión, del propio acontecer histórico nacional. (Re-textualización 113)

I would contend, however, that *Oscuro total* is universal in theme and therefore in no way limited to Febles’s interpretation. When Montes Huidobro’s original Spanish text was staged in Miami, many spectators there no doubt perceived the metaphorical Cuban subtext. Were Mary-Alice Lessing’s translation, *Blackout*, to be staged before a diversified English-speaking audience, that subtext would be lost. Spectators in the United States who recall the sensational real-life drama probably do not think of Kitty, Lyle and Erik as belonging to a Cuban family at all; as time passes, even the historical intertext of the Menendez murders will fade from memory. The saga of violence and power, and what Lessing has called “a certain lugubrious fascination to this play” (xvii), will remain.

For some readers, *Oscuro total* likewise invites interpretations that place it within the trajectory of the playwright’s theatre. With respect to *Sobre las mismas rocas* (1951), Febles already finds in this early work the presence of Montes Huidobro’s characteristic elements: “la metáfora y el juego alucinante, el lenguaje figurado y la concepción ritualista de la acción teatral” (Metáforas 115). The aspect of ritual, which in *Oscuro total* relates to the absurdist theatre of cruelty and Greek tragedy, is equally applicable to the use of Afro-Cuban myth in Montes Huidobro’s *La navaja de Olofé* (written 1981, published 1982, staged Miami 1986; Eng. trans.: *Olofé’s Razor*, published 1992). While the African

origins of ritual in *La navaja de Olofé* set it apart from *Oscuro total*, there are various elements in the earlier work that foreshadow the play under study: interwoven themes of love and hate, of eroticism and violence or death; references to incest and bisexuality; and, above all, the shifting identities of the characters, that is, role-playing within the role.¹

The playwright has often acknowledged his preference for metatheatre. He attributes it in part to his love of cinema: “Como el cine posee una libertad de espacio y tiempo que no tiene el teatro, siempre he querido llegar a esa liberación de espacio y tiempo por medios teatrales. De ahí mi preferencia por el teatro dentro del teatro” (Interview Febles and González-Pérez 230).² This tendency toward metatheatricalism is likewise characteristic of absurdist theatre. With good reason, Lionel Abel included Genet in his groundbreaking study on metatheatre. Genet’s maids take turns playing the role of their mistress. The set for a recent revival in Madrid visibly emphasized this aspect by featuring three levels of wardrobe, filled with costumes, constantly on view behind transparent walls.³

Montes Huidobro foregrounds the play within the play in *Su cara mitad* (1992), a text that anticipates *Oscuro total* not only for its overt metatheatricalism but also for its melding of genres. All of the characters are theatre professionals and lead double or triple lives. Because of their current successful play on Broadway, they are strong candidates for Tony awards and are also in the process of writing another play; but they have a soap opera relationship with one another. In Abel’s terms they are all would-be dramatists, attempting to write and rewrite each other’s scripts both in the frame story and in the plays within the play. Raul, a Latino playwright, “que escribe su nombre sin acento,” according to the cast list (631), struggles with El Tizado, the darker side of his own personality. José Escarpanter astutely notes that the work is filled with ambiguities and we constantly question the true relationship among the characters (Escarpanter “Una confrontación” 626-27). Therefore, it becomes impossible to discern truth from fiction.

The true story of the Menéndez family, when juxtaposed with *Su cara mitad*, reads like life imitating art. As Febles observes with respect to Montes Huidobro’s *Oscuro total*, “La existencia de un libreto previo, de una suerte de plan criminal redactado por uno de los asesinos, acaso le sugeriría inquietantes matices metateatrales” (Transmigración 188). The fact of the real José Menéndez’s connections to the entertainment world, as executive director of a videotape distribution company, likewise served the author as a catalyst.

All four of Montes Huidobro's characters in *Oscuro total* are would-be dramatists, writing and re-writing the frame story as well as the plays within the play. They are also actor-characters, overtly and self-consciously performing for one another, sometimes with script in hand. They thus fulfill one of Abel's conditions for metatheatre: that the characters within the play be conscious that they are living theatrically. The sons now bear the metatheatrically symbolic names of Oscar and Tony. The relationship between the parents, now named Tita and Paco, and the violent characters from the pre-existing script, Gina and Giorno, is not unrelated to that of Raul and El Tiznado in *Su cara mitad*: in their shifting roles, all of the characters reveal a dark side. The difficulty in discerning truth from fiction was as true in the real-life tale of the Menéndez family as in Montes Huidobro's fictionalized version. The first jury hearing the murder case against Lyle and Erik could not reach a verdict.

When we examine *Oscuro total* as an example of absurdist theatre, initially the set appears misleading. The stage directions call for an upper middle class living room, with a stairway leading to an upstairs bedroom. Such a design would normally indicate a realistic drama or even a bourgeois comedy. The sound of gunshots, the entrance of Tony and Oscar – descending the stairs, pistols in hand – and their opening dialogue, point in the direction of a realistic suspense tale. The subsequent dialogue is thus disconcerting. The brothers have carefully planned the double murder but Tony is now surprised to learn that they have to dispose of the corpses. The telephone rings but they do not answer; the phone will ring mysteriously at intervals throughout the play. As the action continues, its underlying non-illusionism becomes more and more apparent. Lessing explains:

The play, while initially realistic in plot and dialogue, becomes expressionistic with the appearance on stage of two murdered characters and with the creation of a second, parallel and coinciding plot, and a third sub-plot. The distortion of time, the erotic, at times grotesque ambience, and the ambiguous ending make it another example of Montes-Huidobro's mastery of theatre of the absurd. (x)

Through her choice of the term “expressionistic,” that is, the implication that the dead parents are evoked through the sons' consciousness, Lessing leans toward a psychological explanation for the bizarre twists of plot. Such an explanation is hinted at within the text, for example when Oscar tells his mother: “Te estamos haciendo, mamá, con el recuerdo de ti misma” (150); or when he similarly says how Gina and Giorno could be evoked: “Es como si los hubiera olvidado, pero como si alguien, todavía, estuviera recordándolos” (144).

Nevertheless, the action unfolds on an absurdist plane of irreality, one marked at times by “un imperceptible cambio de luz” (128). Thus the murdered mother herself realizes that she does not exist: “Después de todo, nadie, en definitiva, existe en realidad.... Es como si fuéramos el resultado de una memoria, la memoria de todos y cada uno de nosotros, que nos construye en medio de su propia desaparición...” (164).

In the opening act, Oscar and Tony discuss how and why they have just murdered their parents; they tell of the sexual abuse and psychological harassment they have suffered because of their father, and, to a lesser extent, their mother. Borrowing from the film script they and their mother were writing, they plot to attribute the savage murder to those fictional characters: Gina and Giorno, a pair of criminals, who have allegedly been seen loitering outside the house. Tony hopes that the cruel deed can thus be explained by “una buena mentira que enseguida sería la verdad...” (120).

As Act Two begins, Tita descends the stairs. Paco soon joins her. Both are costumed in elegant, red dressing robes. The four exchange accusations that end in a scene of physical, erotically-suggestive violence. By means of a theatricalist change of costumes and make-up, carried out in full view of the audience, Tita and Paco transform themselves into Gina and Giorno: drug-dealing hoodlums dressed in black leather garb. Tita and Paco, in their roles as Gina and Giorno, ascend the stairs, followed by Oscar and Tony, pistols in hand.

Act Three returns to the events of Act One, but this time Tita and Paco descend the stairs, discussing why they have killed their sons and how they will attribute the savage murder to the criminals Gina and Giorno. Again, they openly make a costume and character change, this time converting themselves into elderly, poorly-dressed, grotesque versions of themselves. On a darkening stage, they tremble in fear when Oscar and Tony enter through the outside door. As the play ends, the parents have climbed the stairs and the sons follow them, pistols in hand.

On the surface, the structure of *Oscuro total* is circular. We are perhaps back to the moment preceding the beginning of the play, or perhaps not. The parents, who would be in the upstairs bedroom, vulnerable to the murderous attack by their sons, are old people, not the middle-aged victims we first saw following their death. Perhaps the second and third acts are produced in their entirety by the guilty sons' nightmares. But perhaps the first act is equally unreal. We have no way of knowing if the metatheatrical game is played over and over – like the ritualistic daily re-enactment of *La noche de los asesinos* – has ended with an irrevocable murder – as happens in *Las criadas*. Moreover, the play's

third act invites us to read the action two ways: as a story of sons who kill their parents, or as a story of parents who kill their sons. The ambiguous ending, with its lack of closure, serves to underscore the absurdist elements of the text.

At times the dialogue in *Oscuro total* likewise calls attention to its affinity with the theatre of the absurd. There is a moment of nonsensical conversation in the scene between the elderly Tita and Paco; they are amused that in common with the victims of “los que mataron al padre y a la madre” (184), they have the same names and address (187). Their lines are reminiscent of a moment from Eugene Ionesco’s *La Cantatrice chauve*. On the philosophical level of the absurd, Tony’s comment to his brother, “No te puedes ir. Ahora nos quedaremos juntos para siempre” (161), might be interpreted as an allusion to Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Huis clos*. But it is in structure that *Oscuro total* clearly falls within the category of absurdist theatre of cruelty, not Greek tragedy.

The frequent interstitial references to figures of classic mythology, as well as to Shakespeare’s tragedies, cannot be ignored.⁴ Even in his consideration of the text as metaphor of the Cuban family, Fables felt impelled to include a footnote citing those references: to Greek characters “Medea, Edipo, Yucasta”; to Pace’s view of Greece as the “cuna de la civilization”; to Tita’s attribution of “Incestuosos y maricones. Criminales y parricidas” to Mediterranean culture (Transmigración 197; Re-textualización 111). Recalling a particular family episode involving a young woman, Tita says the visitor found herself “metida de pronto en aquella tragedia griega” (160).

The references are sometimes just this overt and sometimes considerably more subtle. Several of the intertextual references to Greek mythology are fleeting ones. When the elderly Tita and Paco list a series of horrifying news stories, Tita includes “el caso de Medea” (182). Oscar’s suggestion that they cut up the corpses and eat them might allude to Thyestes (123) while his later suggestion that the pieces be thrown to the dogs is a possible reference to the Bacchantes (136). Oscar may be thinking of the *Odyssey* when he speaks of siren songs that lure sailors lost at sea (129), and Tony may have *Pygmalion* in mind when he says the sons are statues carved by their parents: “Era... como si fuéramos unas estatuas de barro.... Nos hacían con la espátula, el cincel y el estilete” (134). When Paco says that he and Tita will be “un par de cadáveres insepultos,” there may be an ironic reference to Antigone (150).

As might be expected, the most frequent motif is that of the Oedipus myth. Oscar affirms that their father feared and hated his sons before their birth: “Como si hubiera consultado un oráculo antes que nosotros nacióramos...” (137). He later links the oracle with Afro-Cuban ritual: “como si hubiera hablado con un

oráculo, con una santera” (138). Consistent with the Oedipus myth, Tony responds that consulting the oracle served no purpose: “No había oráculo que pudiera evitarlo” (140).

The inevitability of their fate is emphasized over and over. Oscar echoes Tony: “Era inevitable, mamá. Tú lo sabías” (142). Tita, in self-consciously theatrical style, later proclaims to Paco: “La fatalidad es la fatalidad. El destino es el destino” (169). Paco is in full agreement: “Era inevitable. Tarde o temprano” (179). Melding metatheatricality with Tita’s parody of Greek tragedy, Paco defines the fate that led to the double murder not as an act of the gods but rather as a script written by the victims: “Habíamos planeado todo esto, paso a paso, gradualmente, para que ellos cayeran en la trampa y nos fueran a matar” (178).

On the other hand, Paco is well aware of the Oedipus connection. He suggests that the title of the film script in progress could be “Edipo en Sodoma” (160). In Act Three, when the murder victims are the sons, he informs Tita: “Aquí no hay ningún Edipo que se te meta en la cama para acabar conmigo. Si lo hubo, eso quedó atrás” (177). The Tita-Jocasta connection is perhaps hinted at in her reported desire to commit suicide (128) and then clearly established in terms of her incestuous relationship with Oscar (159).

The classic tragedy is structured on the gradual discovery of Oedipus’s hidden secret: that he killed his father and married his mother. Tita alludes to a similar “terrible secreto” (149) but the revelation, which she, assuming the role of protagonist, uncovers, is that the father has sexually abused their son:

¿Cómo podía imaginarme? Estaba fuera de todo cálculo, de toda posibilidad, de toda perversión. Hasta que un día fui siguiendo las huellas, como un sahuero que va detrás de su presa. Una huella seguía a la otra como si estuvieran marcadas en la arena y me llevaran al lugar del crimen. (163)

Mindful of Frank Dauster’s definition of tragedy (1982), we might perceive in Tita’s words the indication that she is the tragic figure, victim of circumstances beyond her control. Dauster suggests that tragic action is interior, “the movement of purpose, of conflict and of recognition of our limitation” (11); he thus posits that “any human being capable of this kind of inner activity is a potential tragic protagonist” (8). Although it may be difficult to develop any sympathy for Paco, in *Oscuro total* there are glimmers of such inner activity in the characterizations of Tita, Oscar and Tony.

But Montes Huidobro’s references to Greek tragedy are always imbedded within the theatre of cruelty. Just prior to Tita’s speech expressing recognition,

she and Oscar engage in a violent, erotic struggle. While she speaks the words cited above, she caresses Oscar head, which rests in her lap. In the meantime, Paco and Tony continue their counterpart struggle. In a total rupture with the moment of tragic perception, in the next scene the parents transform themselves into Gina and Giorno. In metatheatrical, absurdist fashion, the roles of the characters are always in flux.

In *Oscuro total*, Montes Huidobro has taken the horrifying, real tale of a dysfunctional family in the United States and re-created it as a powerful meld of classic Greek tragedy and contemporary absurdist theatre of cruelty. He thus foregrounds the connection between the genres that Esslin merely alluded to in passing. By juxtaposing intertextual references to classic tragedy with his structure of cruel, metatheatrical games, Montes Huidobro effectively invites us to reread other works of absurdist theatre.

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Notes

¹ In his now classic study of metadrama, Richard Hornby defines five manifestations of the metadramatic: the play within the play, the ceremony within the play, role-playing within the role, literary and real-life reference within the play, and self-reference. Montes Huidobro makes use of all of these in *Oscuro total*.

² The cinematographic appeal of the Menendez case is readily apparent. The news story gave rise both to the book *Blood Brothers*, by John Johnson and Ronald L. Sabale, and to a movie made for television: *Honor Thy Father and Mother*. Dir. Paul Schneider, 1994.

³ *Las criadas*, by Jean Genet. Dir. Mario Gas. Teatro La Latina, Madrid. 22 May 2002.

⁴ Gina and Giorno are compared to Romeo and Juliet, as a couple whose names are inseparably linked (141). References to bloodstained hands are an allusion to Lady Macbeth, first implicitly (145) and then explicitly (177). The initial entrance of the murdered mother may recall the ghost of Banquo in *Macbeth*. The use of Shakespearean characters further underscores the ties between *Oscuro total* and tragedy, but the play also contains numerous intertextual references to cinema, with characters and actors ranging from Frankenstein and Dracula to Marilyn Monroe and Fred Astaire.

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