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Carla Harryman

Memory Play

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Thought...thinks at boundaries, it thinks the boundary, the limit of interiority. And to do this is also to think the art of memory as well as the memory of art. Jacques Derrida

In *Memory Play*, Carla Harryman refuses to present memory as a simple interiorization of experiences or the art of theater as a representation of an interiorized experience. Instead memory, theater, text and visual art think together, inspiring and requiring an active participation on the part of the reader. The inkspot drawing on the cover creates a Rorschach puzzle and invites our first speculations--perhaps a black hole or the site of a bomb on which someone has played a game of tick-tack-toe around the cross hairs. Four other drawings on translucent velum interrupt the narratives, emphasizing the visual nature of writing and the interplay with memory. *Animals, children and toys talk and I am reminded, not only of Alice in Wonderland, but also of Socrates and his pals talking and thinking about thought and recollection in the marketplace.*

Initial stage directions describe a bedtime story/conversation in a little tent town out on the salt flats. To converse is to play together, to turn oneself about in company with others; a bedtime story promises to entertain, to seduce with a once-upon-a-time; but the slash adds a complication. Indeed, we are dislocated in a waterless place with three animals, two of whom definitely need water to exist. Despite (and perhaps to combat) their desperate situation, they jabber, losing and finding themselves in and through their own tunnels of thought and language, linguistically deferring and

leaping, jarred ever so slightly by the talk of the other, all the while defending their particular ways of playing over the bomb site. And I am carried along writing in the margins, reading off the page.

Why do you think non-existence is so bad? Why do you think it means diminishment?...You and I are part of the great chain of nature. If you jump off the pier in my movie, honey, you and I reaffirm the great dynamic between the predator and the prey. Even though Pelican (as he tries to manipulate the others) usually speaks with the rhetoric of a used car salesman or a corporate spokesperson, there is some truth in what he is saying. Why does Fish think of non-existence as a diminishment? Why do I think of it as a diminishment? Fish seems to be in a state of perpetual anxiety about the stability of her identity. Pelican, as a predator--afterall a pelican eats four pounds of fish a day--uses his logic in an attempt to reshape and seduce her. In the real world of houses and parades, a child appears and disappears, along with an Instruction, who sits between Pelican and Fish, and a large toy, the Miltonic Humiliator (It's the machine made of words) who sings about doubt's and shall's and be's and ultimately commits suicide. He was a lousy singer anyhow and an orator living in the wrong age, explains Pelican, who ultimately profits from the suicide, confiscating the Humiliator's ice skates.

Early in the play, Fish poetically plays the opposition between being and nothingness with a beautiful soliloquy (one of many): In the beginning, there was nothing to hold and nothing to hold in mind, since there was no beginning, no nothing, and no mind. The end also did not exist. Nothing stopped. There was no gender, no extremes, no image or lack of image and no money. There were no pencils...In the beginning, there were no names...no apoliticized moment of the absolute and no political critiques. Neither was there the hibiscus flowering bearded orchid cunt juices or a male suspect. Neither black nor brown nor white. No maiming and nothing to maim. There is no future. Nothing to preserve.

Appearing lost to herself, she passes through the parade in a fishbowl, these are the things nobody wants to hear anymore...a series of small conclusions folded into someone else's domestic memory...puffs of untamed...events that organize separate adornments of another situation. Fish changes. She stops suffering and becomes more analytical, explaining that the bowl was not her real self, but instead a metaphorical presentation. Pelican immediately loses his desire for her.

An intelligent reptile commentator (who I visualize intermittently as an alligator, a small lizard and a snake) explains how theater uses the retelling of memories in order to seem more real. (I keep wanting to interject and add my own speeches about memory and realism); S/he offers allegories within allegories; despite the illusions, people enjoy themselves; Men wandering into floating labial fences...The spectator, I, a lady a gentleman, seats itself in the buzz. Reptile elaborates on patterning, pity, ceremony, the way remoteness gives pleasure. S/he tells the fish what it was like to live solely among my own species, within that dry scaly geometry, among spectacular diamonds and golden bands, and onyx dotted kinsmen. The silence, the indifference was spectacular The indifference and silence of sameness, of equality, of a pursuit of commonality as the crucial relationship between the past and present harkens us back to Plato's theory of recollection and essential forms. The reptile's final contributions confirm his interest instead in the evolution of language through difference and linguistic play. He recites a list of words beginning with "e" and this list provides the clues for the final speeches.

Things happen in this play--a pelican loses his toy and his love object; a fish stops worrying about herself and rises to her true height; a child insists on the value of play and storytelling; a reptile becomes more playful with his intelligence; Instruction replaces the Humiliator as the superego of our times--the voice of the information specialist; and a Milton Humiliator commits suicide.

But these dramatic events are not central to the play. It is the proliferation of meaning that is the most remarkable here, culminating in rich and luxurious stages of life and trains of thought. Literary madness! *Memory Play* is a seductive, inviting, experimental and thought-provoking work. With a polyphony of voices and little winds of conversation, Carla Harryman humorously attacks our all too familiar ways of talking about identity, memory and history, and she invites her readers to join in with the other animals, "Well, I think..."

Barbara Henning 1995