

MEMORY IN THE NARRATIVE WORKS OF SOLEDAD PUÉRTOLAS

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## ABSTRACT

The work of contemporary Spanish writer Soledad Puértolas (1947-) provides a unique glimpse of the psychological struggles of the individual in postmodern democratic European society. Puértolas's realist style emphasizes storytelling and character portrayal, and her urban middle-class characters seek satisfying interactions with others and a sense of meaning in their own lives. Memory aids characters in their quest for meaning, and their use of memory reveals their self-perception and outlook on life. Memory works in different ways for different characters, and I propose four memory modes in Puértolas's narratives: baggage, escapist, relational and amnesic modes. These distinct and sometimes contradictory memory modes represent approaches to the same problem: the individual's search for purpose and identity in contemporary society.

The baggage mode of memory, seen especially in *Días del Arenal* (1992) and *Burdeos* (1986), describes characters who reflect upon a painful self-defining memory from the past that affects their present mood and/or behavior. For some, this burden causes them to withdraw or to act irresponsibly; others are able to accept and overcome the scars of the past. When characters take an escapist approach to memory, as seen in *Queda la noche* (1989), their reminiscences are a place of mental retreat. Nostalgia is less a desire to return to an idyllic past than a restless dissatisfaction with the present. In the

relational mode, a character reflects upon a specific relationship from the past, often with an extroverted foil whose presence highlights the protagonist's introspective nature; examples are found in *El bandido doblemente armado* (1980), *Una vida inesperada* (1997) and *La señora Berg* (1998). Memory of this unusual relationship motivates the protagonist to mentally order his or her life through the life review process. Finally, in the amnesic mode, Puértolas departs from realism to varying degrees to experiment with different forms of amnesia, as in *La rosa de plata* (1999) and *Si al atardecer llegara el mensajero* (1995). Memory loss highlights the centrality of memory to personhood and identity, while at the same time it draws attention to the inadequacy of memory to explain the totality of existence.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgments.....	iv
Vita.....	v
Table of Contents.....	vi
Chapter 1 Introduction.....	1
Memory in Spanish New Realism.....	5
Memory in Critical Study.....	12
Modes of Memory in Puértolas.....	18
Chapter 2 Baggage Mode and the Scars of the Past: Self-Defining Memories of	
Abandonment.....	25
Introductory Case Study: “Lento regreso a casa” and the Self-Defining	
Memory.....	28
Myth of Abandonment: “El andén vacío”.....	33
Burden of Regret: “La hija predilecta”.....	37
Success Story: “La dueña del restaurante chino”.....	42
<i>Burdeos</i> : René’s Chase after Security.....	46
<i>Días del Arenal</i> : Guillermo’s Oblivion.....	49
<i>Días del Arenal</i> : Antonio’s Renewed Purpose.....	52

<i>Una vida inesperada</i> : The Disappointment of Personal Weakness.....	56
Conclusion.....	60
Chapter 3 Escapist Mode of Memory: Nostalgia for a World of Possibility.....	63
Childhood Spaces: Realms of Possibility in <i>Recuerdos de otra persona</i> .....	70
Nostalgia and <i>Queda la noche</i> .....	72
Return to the Beginning: “Zapatos” and “Accidente”.....	77
Holding on to Optimal Moments: “Buenos deseos,” “El pañuelo de Macke” and “La necesidad de marcharse de todos los sitios”.....	81
Empathy for a Lost Self: “El inventor del tetrabrik” and “La corriente del golfo”.....	86
Historical Nostalgia in <i>La rosa de plata</i> , “La vida oculta” and “La orilla del Danubio”.....	91
Conclusion.....	97
Chapter 4 Relational Mode of Memory: Interpersonal Conflict and the Life Review.....	99
Acquaintances as Memory Triggers: “Presente”.....	102
Memory and the Jungian Shadow: “Billetes”.....	104
Relational Memory in <i>El bandido doblemente armado</i> .....	111
Relational Memory in <i>Una vida inesperada</i> .....	113
Life Review in <i>Una vida inesperada</i> .....	118
“Gente que vino a mi boda” and the Memory of Disapproval.....	124

<i>La señora Berg</i> and the Memory of Connection.....	128
Conclusion.....	134
Chapter 5 Amnesic Mode of Memory: Oblivion’s Effects on Identity and Relationships.....	139
Forgetting the Past to Live in the Present: Constrasting Cases of “La extranjera” and “Ventajas de la primera persona”.....	145
Forgetfulness and the Bar Scene: “Los nombres de las mujeres” and “A la hora en que cierran los bares”.....	149
Amnesia and Physical Trauma: “El mar en los aparcamientos subterráneos,” <i>Historia de un abrigo</i> and “La inspiración de dedos azules”.....	155
Forgetting and Strained Relationships: “Gente que vino a mi boda”.....	163
Oblivion in the Realm of Fantasy: “El ciclón,” “La orilla del Danubio,” <i>La rosa de plata</i> and <i>Si al atardecer llegara el mensajero</i> .....	166
Conclusion.....	177
Summary and Conclusion: Memory as a Key to Personal Identity.....	179
Bibliography.....	185

CHAPTER 1  
INTRODUCTION

Through writing that is both accessible and evasive, Soledad Puértolas (1947-) offers a unique vision of the psychological struggles of the individual in postmodern democratic European society. Her style is simple, yet through understatement and ellipsis she presents the world as complex, always partly hidden from view. Characters cannot prevail against the inevitable mystery and frustration in the world, and Puértolas's skill as a writer stems from her ability to capture and sustain these tensions. Puértolas's literary achievement was recognized as early as the publication of her first novel, *El bandido doblemente armado* (1980), for which she received the Premio Sésamo. The subsequent Premio Planeta for *Queda la noche* (1989), and the Premio Anagrama de Ensayo for her essay collection *La vida oculta* (1993) have further secured her prominence among current Spanish writers.

Most critics agree that Puértolas is an important figure in recent literature, though they differ somewhat over how to situate her within literary history or, indeed, how to describe or summarize this recent history. Different literary theorists have attempted to group writers of the second half of the twentieth century into "generations," in keeping with twentieth-century Spanish critical tradition, and several different schemas have been proposed. For example, Santos Sanz Villanueva assigns Puértolas to the generation of

'68, specifically to a second wave within this group (253-54); according to Vance R. Holloway, she belongs to the generation of '70 (17-20); and Santos Alonso refers to the same group as the generation of '75 (35).<sup>1</sup> Despite the disagreements regarding the organizing date for the group, similarities emerge in each of these critics' assessments which may help in understanding Puértolas, whether considered alone or in comparison to her contemporaries. The generation or group which includes Puértolas also includes Eduardo Mendoza, Luis Mateo Díez, José María Merino, and Lourdes Ortiz among about a dozen others (Holloway 20; Sanz Villanueva 253; Alonso 44-47). These writers comprise the first generation after the Civil War, born between 1939-49 (Alonso 44; Holloway 19). They grew up during the dictatorship and were exposed to the social realist novels of the 1940s and 50s and the experimental literature of the 1960s and 70s; they began to write and publish during the years of the transition to democracy, the late 1970s (Alonso 44).

With the death of Franco in 1975 and the subsequent approval of the new democratic constitution in 1978, the end of official censorship and the changing political and social climate promised a new era of artistic expression, including literary publications. Contrary to expectations, however, the anticipated *nueva novela* did not appear as a sudden proliferation of radically new texts. María Isabel de Castro and Lucía Montejo suggest that democracy did not lead to creativity; *nueva novela* was a meaningless label applied as a marketing tactic by publishers (11-13). Other critics, including Alonso and Chris Perriam et al., nevertheless find the *nueva novela* a helpful

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<sup>1</sup> Sanz Villanueva notes that this generation of prose writers parallels the *novísimos* in poetry, though there is no similar descriptive term for the writers of prose (249).

concept in describing the novels of the transition, even if, as Castro and Montejo assert, “la primera tendencia de la narrativa española actual es la pluralidad de tendencias” (15).

An important similarity among the diverse fictional works called *nueva novela* is the rejection of experimental forms in favor of a return to realism (Alonso 60). While the use of realist forms implies a return to tradition, the new novel generally exhibits a new approach to realism that is thematically different from the socially committed realist works of the midcentury (Alonso 61). Along with formal characteristics of realism such as emphasis on linear plot and character development, one of the tendencies of the transition novel cited by Alonso is the focus on the individual’s struggles or adventures, as opposed to the postwar writers’ concern for exposing problems of a collective society (66). Likewise, Ruth Christie, Judith Drinkwater and John Macklin write, “The prevailing tendency of the new novel is seen as one of internalisation, of a looking inward, and a turning away from the preoccupation with external social or political themes” (5).

In keeping with some of these commonly cited traits of the so-called new realism or *nueva novela* of the post-transition era in Spain, Soledad Puértolas writes in the realist tradition, with particular emphasis on storytelling and character portrayal. Her urban middle-class characters are primarily portrayed as individuals, because their identity derives from individual experience, as opposed to collective experience in family, community, nation, or any other group. The quest for meaning in Puértolas is not defined by an attempt to discover the place of humans in the universe or in history but, on a smaller scale, to achieve satisfying interactions with others and to find a sense of meaning in one’s own life. Characters seek purpose and fulfillment in a world in which traditional moral codes have lost their authority and affective relationships are governed

not by institutional convention nor personal commitment but by fleeting desires. Their lives are open-ended; their identities are uncentered. The protagonists, typically introspective and reflective, search for meaning as if resigned not to find it. They seek relationships, even knowing that true union with another person is a myth. Solitude is the only reality, though in contrast to earlier novels of existentialism, this solitude does not imply anguish and despair. Christie, Drinkwater and Macklin observe this view of self and identity to be common among contemporary Spanish narrative, that even though the notion of “core identity” is alluring (7), authors are no longer concerned with “pinning it down, but on revealing and exploring its elusive, even non-existent, nature” (6). New realism implies an emphasis on character, yet Puértolas’s writing demonstrates the impossibility of fully describing or understanding any character’s identity.

In addition to character, the *nueva novela* also generally emphasizes plot above other elements of discourse. In Puértolas, parallel to the uncertainties inherent in character, the plots of her narratives are frequently open-ended, with loose ends and ambivalent events left uninterpreted. Some of her novels display a linear chronology, while in others the plot is discontinuous and tells a partial story about each of multiple protagonists. Puértolas frequently seems to sidestep the norms of storytelling, such as the expectation that a conflict should build to a climax followed by a denouement. Even Puértolas’s texts that diverge from realism and narrate, for example, medieval adventures (such as *La rosa de plata*) or myth (as in *Si al atardecer llegara el mensajero*), defy the usual genre form by leaving elements of uncertainty at the conclusion of the quest or experiment. Neither are the events that make up the novels and stories particularly noteworthy. In most, unremarkable characters are simply doing ordinary things: they

travel abroad, they fall in love and break up, they interact with family, co-workers, friends and strangers, they work, they write, they swim. Nonetheless, these mundane activities provide insight into the characters' world and also provide a stage for self-revelation and self-discovery.

As Puértolas's narratives unfold, the plot advances insofar as their ordinary experiences help the characters to understand the world, themselves and others. To differing degrees, the characters explicitly reflect on their experiences, and thus the narration is driven less by the external events than by the thoughts they generate. During the process of introspection, these introverted characters often reflect on the past when they try to make sense of life. Memory becomes an important tool to understand and articulate personal identity, and it is also linked to other important motifs in these narratives: illness, frustrations, failures, solitude, and also relationships and achievements.

### **Memory in Spanish New Realism**

Many of Soledad Puértolas's protagonists focus their interest on the past, and for these characters, contemporary urban Spaniards like Puértolas herself, the past has been tumultuous. Born a decade into Franco's dictatorship, Puértolas grew up in a time of political oppression and experienced the transition to democracy as a young adult. These politics have had a profound effect on literary production in Spain, first with writers killed or exiled and official censorship in place during the dictatorship period, and later with the reversal of these conditions during the transition to democracy. Therefore it may be surprising that these experiences which impacted Spanish literature and society are of so little apparent importance in Puértolas's writing; collective history and politics are all

but irrelevant to the individuals' remembered experience. Alonso notes that historical memory becomes a less important motif for writers of Spain's new realism by the 1990s (179), yet even Puértolas's earliest novels and stories disregard the specifics of Francoism or transition as a backdrop for personal memories. *Todos mienten* (1988) is the first novel by Puértolas in which Spain is even certainly the setting; despite a few passing references to politics, the Civil War and exile, these episodes pertaining to national memory do not overly concern any of the main characters. However, perhaps it is not so much that political happenings are unimportant, but that the characters have forgotten them—or “disremembered” them, as proposed by the volume titled *Disremembering the Dictatorship: The Politics of Memory in the Spanish Transition to Democracy*. This collection of articles describes and attempts to explain what seems like a lack of collective memory in Spain. Spaniards' amnesia may not be due to apathy but results from the difficulty in constructing a coherent national narrative around the events of the Civil War, dictatorship and transition. Looking for a reason for the lack of national consciousness in Puértolas's writing requires making an argument from silence, yet the theory of disremembering offers an intriguing explanation of the general atmosphere, the lack of a remembering community, against which the novels and stories unfold.

One reason collective memory may be missing in Spain is that the trauma of the dictatorship hindered its development. Dario Paez, Nekane Basabe and Jose Luis Gonzalez discuss the effects of political trauma and note: “In the specific case of dictatorships, these impose a pervasive climate of fear, denial, or forced silence of the traumatic events (e.g. torture, collective violence). Repeated acts of violence generate a climate of diffused fear, which is linked to communication inhibition, individualism, and

social isolation” (149). Jo Labanyi posits that surveillance during the dictatorship may have prevented individuals from remembering together in social spaces, effectively limiting the social function of memory (67). She notes that, as a result, some individuals who have lived through a period of military dictatorship lack not only political but also personal memories from that time (67). Ofelia Ferrán explains that the transition required an active forgetfulness, disremembering. She explains the consensus among Spaniards “that the past had to be laid to rest in the name of the ‘reconciliación nacional’ ...” (194). It seemed that everyone could benefit equally from this disremembering: conservatives, whose former support of Franco would now be overlooked, and liberals, who feared another civil war similar to the one that had overthrown the Second Republic (Ferrán 195). Laurence J. Kirmayer writes of traumatic memory in general: “It is easy to forget when there is a tacit agreement not to remember” (188), and this seems to be the situation of contemporary Spanish society regarding their history.

An unfortunate result of this consensus to disremember, according to Ferrán, “...was the loss of an opportunity to reflect deeply on the nature and legacy of the Franco regime and of the recent Spanish past in general” (195). Paloma Aguilar has made a similar observation of Spanish silence about the Civil War: afraid that collective remembrance would threaten peace, for some “...this recourse to silence amounted to a form of resignation, and finally spilled over into frustration” (8). Others, it seems, have been able to free themselves of the past so that it is no longer a matter of concern. As Paez, Basabe and Gonzalez observe, these two attitudes describe a split in Spanish public opinion regarding the dictatorship period: condemnation of Franco on one side, and “collective forgetfulness” on the other (165-66).

Whatever reason has motivated Puértolas's silence on Spain's political climate, she is not alone in her omission of political issues in her writing. Christie, Drinkwater and Macklin relate the emphasis on storytelling (*narratividad*) in Spanish literature of the 1980s to a general disenchantment with the new government and loss of interest in political matters (4). Joan Ramón Resina observes that literature of the 1980s and 90s that does evoke historical memory is nostalgic in tone, offering a "utopian resolution of the gap between memory and experience" (96) and is generally received as anachronistic (104). Still, not all writers have resigned themselves to an indifferent or frustrated silence about, or utopian revisionism of, Spain's political past. Within the spectrum of the *nueva novela* are some works which challenge official history and foreground the dictatorship and its impact on the individual, with the goal of reclaiming a sense of personal identity.<sup>2</sup> David Herzberger calls this type of text a "novel of memory" which he sets in opposition to novels of social realism. While both types of novels challenge the official historiography of the Franco regime, the novel of memory does not propose an alternative totalizing view but allows for a decentered, open-ended view of history which is subjective and open to reinterpretation (Herzberger 36-38). Herzberger (38), Alonso (83) and Perriam et al. (63) cite Carmen Martín Gaité's *El cuarto de atrás* as probably the best example of this type of novel of memory. Memory employed thus has a personal as well as a collective component, as the protagonist of *El cuarto de atrás* evokes political and cultural history from an interior perspective (Perriam et al. 64). The insistence on memory as a unique individual vision of history in Martín Gaité's novel is a departure

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<sup>2</sup> Perriam, et al. cite seven authors who have written such "transgressive works:" Juan Benet, Juan Goytisolo, Luis Goytisolo, Carmen Martín Gaité, Luis Martín Santos, Elena Quiroga and Gonzalo Torrente Ballester (62).

from social realism, in which a personal story was often presented as merely symbolic of collective political reality (Castro and Montejo 17).

The “novel of memory” is an important category of Spanish literature of the transition period, but while memory is indeed an important and even critical component of Puértolas’s narratives, she does not write “novels of memory” as Herzberger has defined them. Like Martín Gaité, Puértolas focuses on the interior perspectives of urban middle-class characters, but unlike *El cuarto de atrás*, when Puértolas’s characters reminisce they think mainly about personal experiences and interactions that have shaped them as individuals. They do not generally attempt to examine the personal impact caused by their society nor to integrate political history into their personal histories.<sup>3</sup> Castro and Montejo’s observation of a trend in transition-era writing aptly describes Puértolas’s use of memory: “A veces no sólo se explora el pasado para encontrar la propia identidad y dar sentido al presente, sino para crear un mundo autónomo, personal, cuyo principal punto de referencia se sitúa en la propia interioridad” (39). Memory, a tool for personal inquiry, also defines the texts’ limited, subjective scope.

As Puértolas focuses on the subjective concerns of her individual protagonists, her systematic avoidance of weightier themes of politics, social injustice or oppression causes some critics to characterize her writing as “*novela light*.” The “light” category is imprecisely defined as writing that feels frivolous and shallow, politically correct and making concessions to the readership out of commercial interests. Alonso, for one, indicts Puértolas’s *Queda la noche* and *Una vida inesperada* as portraying light, trivial sentiments unproblematically, with the aim of attracting readers (139, 249).

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<sup>3</sup> James Olney would probably identify this elevation of personal, subjective experience as descended from Romantic tradition originating in Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Confessions* (Olney 406).

Even though some would counter that the “light” label need not discredit literature (e.g. Ignacio Soldevila-Durante, cited in Wang 9), I would argue that such a confining descriptor is improperly applied to Puértolas because it ignores the complexities of her writing. The narratives of Puértolas can hardly be considered satisfying and unproblematic. As mentioned above, the plots are not driven by crowd-pleasing action and happy endings but often feel incomplete and enigmatic, with many unspecified details, gaps and loose ends. The uncertainty within the texts is not due to carelessness or incompetence; on the contrary, the narratives’ openness is a deliberate attempt by the author to reflect her view of reality as never completely knowable. In her book of essays *La vida oculta* in which she addresses questions related to her writing, she aptly states: “La novela es como la punta de un iceberg” (25). Secondary threads in the plot are often left undeveloped, which she explains reflects the breadth of reality (26-27). Furthermore, the characters tend to be contemplative and melancholy; they do not merely seek romance and adventure but attempt to understand the impact of their experiences on their sense of identity. Because nostalgia and the memory process are so often highlighted in the stories and novels of Puértolas, the reader’s attention is directed toward the influence of the past on the present and the ways in which the characters use their experiences to understand themselves.

In considering Soledad Puértolas’s place among current Spanish writers, it is worth mentioning that while Puértolas is a woman, in this study I will not be treating her as a “woman writer.” Puértolas and other contemporary female Spanish authors resist being classified by what they see as the limiting label of “feminine literature;” her frequent use of first-person male narrators, a trend which began in her first novel, may

reflect her intention to defy this characterization. She has said: “Yo voy a escribir de lo que quiera y como lo han hecho los hombres siempre” (Carmona et al. 159). Apart from Puértolas’s stated wishes, to force a feminist framework onto her works would be incongruent with her project. Her writing generally does not highlight gender inequities, but rather portrays the human situation, the problems that affect both men and women.<sup>4</sup> The same is true of the realm of memory. Characters’ approaches to the past vary according to personality and life experience, but gender is not an important factor in describing these differences; therefore it will not be a focus of my inquiry.

My aim in this research on memory in the narrative works of Soledad Puértolas is to address a significant aspect of this notable current author whose writing, despite the dubious accusation that it tends toward the “light” side, is generally lauded for giving insight into the contemporary human condition. Existing literature on Puértolas continues to grow, yet there is still much room for exploration. Puértolas is mentioned in many volumes on contemporary Spanish literary history, and scores of interviews and book review articles have appeared in periodicals over the years. A few scholarly studies devoted to her writing have also been published. Wang Jun’s volume provides an overview of the novels of Puértolas, and a few articles discuss specific novels or stories. Some dissertations, books and articles examine Puértolas along with other writers, such as the books by Ramón Acín and Katica Urbanc, for example. Marguerite DiNonno Intemann’s book on Puértolas discusses the central theme of solitude, and more global studies like this are warranted. However, there are no substantial studies devoted to the

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<sup>4</sup> While I contend that Puértolas does not primarily aim to promote a feminist message, there are certainly instances in which female characters evade men’s attempts at domination and subvert expectations imposed by the patriarchy. The insightful studies by Akiko Tsuchiya and Katica Urbanc, for example, discuss specific cases of such independent, subversive women in Puértolas’s writing.

topic of memory, so I believe that my research may provide a helpful vantage point from which to understand much of Puértolas's narrative.

### **Memory in Critical Study**

Memory, an important resource for writers of Spain's new realist and psychological realist styles, is a concept that affects practically all aspects of human life and that virtually everyone seems to understand. At the same time, memory is mysterious and unpredictable, which makes it a fitting tool for describing human experience.

Research cannot adequately explain why, what and how people remember and forget, though many different fields of study attempt to describe it. For instance, on one level is the biological component of memory, which is studied through the neuroscience branch of psychology. Another branch, cognitive psychology, describes not the workings of the brain but the behavior of human subjects in the remembering process. In contrast to these scientific and quantitative studies, theoretical studies emphasize the philosophy of memory as it relates to the touchstone topics of ontology and epistemology in the individual's ability to understand him- or herself and to make sense of life events. As I describe the manifestations of memory in Puértolas's narratives, I will cite some of the research and theories of psychology and philosophy as they illuminate the self-construction process of the remembering (or forgetful) protagonists.

Memory is a popular area of current clinical and theoretical study, though this universal human phenomenon is hardly a recent topic in critical research. Philosophical and theoretical interest in and models of the workings of memory are at least as old as ancient Greece. For instance, Frauke Berndt calls Aristotle's *On Memory and Recollection* the "primal text of the discourse" (24-25). In their article James M.

Lampinen, Timothy N. Odegard and Juliana K. Leding cite the ancient Greek Heraclitus, whose metaphor of a river which remains the same although the water keeps moving and changing describes the paradox of the passage of time and memory. Memory, like the river, establishes a person's identity as relatively stable and unified across time, even while life circumstances keep changing. Another important classical figure is Simonides, a legendary Greek poet credited by Cicero with establishing *ars memoriae*, the art which associates memory with order (Ramadanovic 71). In the legend, Simonides leaves a banquet just before the house collapses on the remaining guests. He is able to identify the bodies by recalling the order in which they had been seated around the table (Ramadanovic 67). This technique involves loci, encoding memory by mentally conjuring vivid images and placing them in order (Schacter 46-47). Petar Ramadanovic observes that this view of memory was shaped by culture, as it "conforms to the political order of the Roman empire" (72). In the postmodern situation of Puértolas's literature, characters' approach to memory is likewise congruent with their culture, and predictable order is no longer part of characters' experience. Accordingly, memory no longer summons an orderly picture of the past but is unstable and even capricious.

The observation that memory is not always reliable is foundational to a proper view of memory in Puértolas's writing. One's view of memory's order and accuracy relates to beliefs about how memories are stored and recalled. It would seem logical that memories are preserved in the mind as in a warehouse or computer database from where they may be retrieved later if properly archived. Freud once proposed such a model by suggesting that psychoanalysis works like archaeology to retrieve fragments of buried truth from memory (Neisser 6). However, critics now agree that this model is insufficient,

even inaccurate. Even Freud demonstrates a shift from his understanding of memory as recall of factual data to memory as an interpretation of something in the unconscious (Terdiman 272).<sup>5</sup> Memory is not a matter of simply storing and recalling, but of interpreting, shaping and even inventing details so that the represented story of the past is coherent with the present. In his article Wägenbaur calls these two contrasting models of memory “storage” and “story.”<sup>6</sup> Campbell describes the distinction between the two views: “Scientists now explain that our memories do not faithfully reproduce past scenes. Instead, we combine information from various times in our past with information from the present, and with general knowledge, our imaginings, and the views of others to creatively reconstruct a rendering of our past experience” (Campbell 4-5). Jens Brockmeier uses the term “retrospective teleology” to explain the way autobiographical narratives are shaped in the retelling (251-52). As memory becomes story, it assumes a dramatic shape: “In the process of being narrated the flux of life seems to be transformed into a flux of necessity” (Brockmeier 253).

Story is important to memory not only in that recollecting involves constructing a narrative, but this narrative process itself is what makes events memorable. Roger C. Schank explains: “One phenomenon of memory is that people talk to themselves—not necessarily aloud, of course, but they do tell themselves stories and ask themselves questions about those stories, collecting disparate events into coherent wholes” (101).

While this theory affirms the constructive and interpretive nature of memory as opposed

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<sup>5</sup> Olney similarly observes that St. Augustine in the *Confessions* employs an “archaeological model” of memory (19) though in other moments, memory is to Augustine a “...dynamic process, not far removed from invention and imagination...” (Olney 59).

<sup>6</sup> I will use Wägenbaur’s terminology, though the contrasting concepts of “story” and “storage” have been given different names by other memory theorists. Kotre calls them the “librarian” and the “mythmaker” functions (116-18), and Campbell refers to the views as “archival” and “reconstructivist,” respectively (85).

to its recording function, ironically there is an aspect of “storage” that accompanies the “story.” That is, once a person begins to relate his or her memories in story form, the story itself can be stored in memory, and the narration is unlikely to change much from one retelling to another. Schank theorizes that the story becomes archived in memory as a complete unit, obviating the need to recreate the narrative each time it is recalled (Schank 105). Even if the memory saved in story form does not evolve over time, however, it does not mean that the narrative is necessarily accurate in its details. One example in which Puértolas indicates her awareness that memories are best understood as stories is seen in “El mar en los aparcamientos subterráneos” from *Gente que vino a mi boda*, which I will explore later in more detail. The narrator of this story relates a past event but admits that each time she remembers it she also conjures up all previous retellings of the event; her memory cannot distinguish the original occurrence from the narratives she has constructed about it.

The story model of memory is evinced by Puértolas’s writing; memories are not merely testimony of past events but are reconstructed and interpreted according to the characters’ current circumstances. Nonetheless, the storage model has not been completely displaced and sometimes is a helpful way to understand memory. For instance, in most novels and stories the accuracy of memory is never called into question,<sup>7</sup> and sometimes the remembering character treats his or her memories as if they had indeed been preserved in an archive. An example of the apparent storage function of memory is expressed in the memoir “La puerta del verano” of *Recuerdos de otra persona*. Here Puértolas sees her mind as “llena de pensamientos que iban guardándose

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<sup>7</sup> With notable exceptions that I will discuss in my chapter on amnesia.

unos encima de otros, como se guarda la ropa blanca en los armarios” (20). Despite this facile declaration of memory as an orderly closet, upon closer examination it is clear that the events selected for recall, the sequence in which they are remembered and the significance the character assigns to each memory show that the remembering subject is actively constructing a story, ordered according to present concerns, not those at the time of memory’s encoding.<sup>8</sup> The purpose of remembering is not to simply entertain by retelling past events but to investigate the subject’s present identity. In the writings of Puértolas that portray remembering characters, these subjects examine the continuity of self from past to present; through their memory narratives they interpret the present in light of the past and vice-versa.

In addition to the foundational concept that remembering is more about creating stories than retrieving facts from storage, one must also recognize the differences between the storyteller and the one about whom they are told. Memory is complex because, apart from age and circumstance, the self who remembers and the self who is recalled are technically the same person. Yet the remembering subject can somehow provide a first-person narrative account about him- or herself as if from an outsider’s perspective, as if that person from the past were a different person. For instance, Freud distinguished between “field” and “observer” memories as between first- and third-person perspectives; in observer memories the rememberer sees him- or herself as from

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<sup>8</sup> Campbell argues that memory is largely constructed through its narrative retelling, yet in some cases it is appropriate to focus on the accurate record-keeping aspect of memory as in photographs, videos, diaries and other records (125). She advocates a balanced view: “...we need to make room for both archival and reconstructive dimensions to remembering” (126).

outside and is more emotionally distanced from the event (Schacter 21-22).<sup>9</sup> This paradox of the simultaneous unity and multiplicity of the self raises a classic philosophical problem, related to that of subjectivity: the question of how one can really think about self, when the self being examined is also the self doing the thinking. St. Augustine's *Confessions*, perhaps the first text of personal memory, addresses this problem; Wägenbaur notes that Augustine asks how the mind can create a model of itself (13).<sup>10</sup>

This problem of memory persists into the roots of modern psychology. William James in his 1890 *Principles of Psychology* discusses at length the constant split of the self into present subject and past object. James contends "...that personality implies the incessant presence of two elements, an objective person, known by a passing subjective Thought and recognized as continuing in time. Hereafter let us use the words ME and I for the empirical person and the judging Thought" (371). Despite James's use of only two terms, "I" and "me," to describe the self, he acknowledges that the self has many components and many social masks (292, 294). "And if from the one point of view they are one self, from others they are as truly not one but many selves" (James 335). He further describes these multiple selves metaphorically as a herd of cattle bearing the "self" brand, corralled by the "Arch-Ego" as herdsman (337-38).

Researchers of memory find James's I-me description of the self a helpful concept for understanding memory, though they struggle to precisely describe the nature of the relationship between subject and object. Ulric Neisser expands the discussion of "I" and

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<sup>9</sup> A memory in which one "sees oneself" as though watching a movie instead of reliving the event as a first-person participant must be a reconstruction and lends support to the story model of memory.

<sup>10</sup> The studies on autobiography by Philippe Lejeune and Angel G. Loureiro explore the question of how to reconstruct the past self through narrative.

“me” by proposing four aspects to the self in autobiographical recall: the historical self, the self as perceived in the past, the remembering self of the present and the self as remembered. These correspond to four aspects of the actual episode being recalled: the actual event, the event as experienced by the subject, the recall process and the reconstruction of the remembered event (Neisser, “Self-Narratives” 2). Daniel Albright adds another dimension to the I-me binary: while it is common to speak of the “me” as constructed by the “I” in the process of narrating memory, one could equally say that the historical “me,” through its life experiences, has in fact constructed the present “I” (37-38). James, too, understands the “I” as an accumulation of all the selves that have preceded (401). Soledad Puértolas likewise acknowledges this division of the self across time. The sense of alienation that results from the distance between the past and present selves is evident, for example, in the title of her collected memoirs, *Recuerdos de otra persona*, as though the memories recalled and recorded happened to someone else. Thus while memory is a useful tool in examining personal identity, the I-me puzzle signals that identity can be slippery. This study charts the attempts of Puértolas’s characters to gain a footing on this unstable ground of “I” and “me,” past and present.

### **Modes of Memory in Puértolas**

Just as the new realism of the 1980s and 1990s in Spain is marked by diversity of literary tendencies, memory functions in diverse ways within Puértolas’s work. Her strength as a writer stems from intimate inner portrayal of ordinary characters, and just as each has a different story, not all share the same thought patterns. Memory is not equally salient in every text, and in a few works it seems all but insignificant. However, the topic of memory warrants special attention when it appears because it interconnects with other

central aspects of the texts as an important way for characters to reveal and explore elements of their values and personal identity.

Personal memory as a key to the human experience appears to be as important to Puértolas herself as to many of her protagonists. Her autobiographical memoirs, including those of *Recuerdos de otra persona* and *Con mi madre*, provide insight into her own view of memory's influence on her self-understanding. Many of her protagonists reflect on memories that are quite similar to her own experiences as described in these collections. However, her protagonists generally reflect on memories from adolescence and adulthood. In her memoirs Puértolas more frequently describes her own early childhood than her characters do; thus analysis of these texts can provide an additional dimension to the present discussion. For example, in *Recuerdos de otra persona* she dedicates "Primeros recuerdos" to a description of her earliest memories, three moments at which she suddenly felt an awareness of her own discrete, solitary existence. These moments of insight from childhood continue to shape her view of individual human experience.

For Puértolas, childhood memories can also explain the source of irrational fears and desires. The memoirs "Sueños, casas, luces" and "El piso de Zaragoza" from the same collection relate her memories of the threatening dark corners and hallways in her home and her grandmother's home, in contrast to the safe sunny areas. These childhood memories of contrasting regions of darkness and light return to her in dreams, and the protagonist of "Los sueños no son sueños" of *Adiós a las novias* has these same kinds of dreams. The contrast between light and shadow, pleasant dreams and nightmares, is emblematic of the range of memory's effects as past moments return unbidden. Memory

is shadowy and uncontrollable, yet it is also an inviting place of refuge. Throughout the following chapters, I will analyze autobiographical narratives alongside fictional texts as they describe the range of memory's functions in identity formation.

In this project I will discuss different ways in which memory functions in Puértolas's novels, stories and autobiographical memoirs and the importance of the memory process to the different remembering subjects. Most texts employ multiple or hybrid modes of memory, but after studying Puértolas's works with some care, I propose that memory works in four modes, outlined below, which I call baggage, escapist, relational and amnesic modes, respectively. I hope to show that these distinct and sometimes contradictory tendencies actually represent different approaches or responses to the same problem: the individual's search for purpose and identity in postmodern contemporary society.

Puértolas's protagonists reminisce in a variety of styles for varying reasons, and I will describe these memory modes separately with the understanding that the overall sum of their memory styles approximately reflects Puértolas's concerns relating to personal identity. My research is not the first to classify memory types into categories. Clinical researchers Paul T. P. Wong and Lisa M. Watt have also identified categories of reminiscence as observed in the memory narratives of elderly research subjects. Their schema is a 6-part taxonomy of reminiscence types, the first two of which indicate good mental health: integrative, instrumental, transmissive, narrative, escapist and obsessive reminiscence. Puértolas's characters are certainly not a cross-section of society and do not exhibit the full range of reminiscing styles in Wong and Watt's classification.

However, certain categories of Wong and Watt's overlap with what I find in Puértolas and I will cite their observations accordingly.

In chapter two, roughly equivalent to Wong and Watt's unhealthy "obsessive reminiscence" category (273), I will describe what I will call the baggage mode of memory. In many texts, characters find painful memories of the past persisting in the present. For some characters, these memories involve physical or emotional abandonment by a loved one, while others recall deep disappointment with their own shortcomings. These memories survive because of their importance to the protagonist, and in many instances they meet the criteria of Singer and Salovey for "self-defining memories." Their theory is that memory episodes that are recurrent, vivid, emotional, related to other memories and revealing of persistent concerns can provide a key to self-understanding (Singer and Salovey 12). In this chapter I explore the memories of characters from *Burdeos*, *Días del Arenal*, *Una vida inesperada* as well as characters in several short stories who struggle under the burden of painful self-defining memories. For many of them, self-defining memories of failure become self-fulfilling prophecies, reflected in feelings of solitude and despair and actions that show a lack of purpose. However, a few of these characters overcome the despair caused by past pain, not because the disappointment can be reversed, but because they choose to bring purpose to their life stories by helping and serving others.

Chapter three deals with the escapist mode of memory, in which characters do not seek a release from the burdensome past; rather, their memories become a place of mental refuge through nostalgia. Citing the research of Svetlana Boym among others, I discuss nostalgia as a postmodern phenomenon, a self-perpetuating longing for the

unrecoverable past. Boym writes: “Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one’s own fantasy. Nostalgic love can only survive in a long-distance relationship” (xiii). I discuss nostalgia in *Queda la noche* as well as several stories in which characters feel lost, displaced and with vague yearnings for something unreachable, perhaps from the past. For some, the past is the object of their fantasies because it represents the beginning, which they associate with excitement and promise, in contrast to the disappointment which inevitably follows in time. Others cling to the past because memory allows them to recapture its fleeting happy moments, in which they find meaning. A further type of nostalgia looks back fondly even on unpleasant memories because they somehow belong to a version of oneself that has been lost to time. In addition, texts such as the Arthurian romance *La rosa de plata* exemplify a historical nostalgia, a longing for an idyllic past that appears to answer a felt lack in contemporary society. In all cases the past as object of longing is unattainable, yet nostalgia’s futility does not negate the mystique and attraction of the past.

In chapter four, I describe the relational mode of memory. In a significant number of narratives, the organizing force behind a protagonist’s reminiscences is the presence of another character. Notably, this other person tends to play a marginal role in the adult protagonist’s life, often a childhood friend whom he or she rarely sees in the present. However, for some reason this person gains prominence when viewed through memory’s lens; a possible Jungian explanation is that this outspoken, dynamic character is a shadow projection, uncomfortably embodying the opposite character traits of the contemplative, introverted protagonist. This mode is not exactly a reminiscing style like those outlined in the previous two chapters, but more precisely it describes how characters organize their

mental contents around the relationship in question. I will consider such relationships as they spur the protagonists' memory in *El bandido doblemente armado*, *Una vida inesperada* and *La señora Berg* as well as several short stories. As these protagonists consider the presence of this other person, their memories often take the form of a "life review," which Robert N. Butler describes as the process of constructing a coherent narrative about one's past, often as an aging adult facing the last stages of life. A function of life review, according to Butler, is to integrate or resolve problems, and for these protagonists, the contrasting character spurs life review because he or she actually embodies unresolved conflict. By retrospective contemplation of this awkward relationship, the protagonist gains self-knowledge and flashes of self-recognition.

The fifth chapter explores the many texts which to varying degrees examine memory from its flip-side: the phenomenon of amnesia or forgetfulness. Some of the texts that feature forgetting explore the realm of fantasy, where a memory potion or curse can magically erase the past, while other texts teeter uncomfortably on the edge of reality, portraying disconcerting mental lapses in the real world that can plausibly be caused by physical or emotional trauma. Because these latter texts appear to be set in contemporary society yet test the reader's credulity, they indicate the slippery, magical potential of memory. In this chapter I will discuss the magical *Si al atardecer llegara el mensajero* and *La rosa de plata* as well as the realist *Historia de un abrigo* and a range of short stories. Memory loss, with its varying causes, is shown in these texts to have a wide range of effects, just like memory itself. Memory can be painful, reminding one of past mistakes or trauma, but it is also essential to daily activities, relationships and one's sense of personal identity. In the same way, forgetting can be alternatively helpful or

devastating. For some characters, amnesia serves a beneficial purpose, allowing them to forget a painful or incongruous past and start afresh. Frequently, however, memory loss interferes with characters' relationships with friends and loved ones, prevents them from performing an assigned task and destabilizes their sense of identity and self-knowledge. The borders between reality and fantasy, between healthy forgetting and pathological amnesia, are difficult to define, just as memory's impact on identity is elusive. The dangers and benefits of amnesia expose the spectrum of uses of memory and point to the centrality of memory to human experience and personal identity.

## CHAPTER 2

### Baggage Mode and the Scars of the Past: Self-Defining Memories of Abandonment

One of memory's effects is that unpleasant moments from the past can linger and haunt the present. For some people, painful memories become burdensome, like heavy baggage. It is no exaggeration to say that everyone, with the possible exception of amnesiacs, can trace beliefs and behaviors of the present to concrete experiences of the past.<sup>11</sup> Thus this is the most intuitive and straightforward of the memory modes that I will explore. The idea that the past, especially past mistakes and suffering, can determine a person's present and the future is nothing new in literature. Determinism is a prominent feature of the realist and especially naturalist traditions, and because Soledad Puértolas can be considered part of the new realist tradition, it is appropriate that characters' pasts are often important in explaining who they are. While Puértolas's characters are relatively autonomous, refuting the reductive notion that a person is nothing other than the sum of his or her past experiences, sometimes the baggage of the past can subjugate them and direct, if not dictate, who they become.

The metaphor of baggage as applied to memory is not meant to refer to any and every memory of past experience but to particularly weighty matters from the past that

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<sup>11</sup> As Daniel L. Schacter explains, even amnesiacs can often learn new information and recall it later, though they may not be aware that they are remembering (164). This is referred to as "implicit memory," as opposed to "explicit memory" in which a person is aware of remembering.

persist as a burden in the present. “The emotional baggage and the scars we carry can sap our energy and reduce our sense of well-being,” writes clinical researcher Paul T. P. Wong (23). This description can be applied to many characters in Soledad Puértolas’s writing; many are affected by the weight of the past, especially past disappointments and relational failures. Like baggage, these unpleasant memories may be kept out of sight, but the character can open the trunk and review its contents, whether rarely or frequently, in solitude or in the company of others.

This model should not, however, be taken as a strictly archivist or “storage” model of memory; as described in the introductory chapter, the contents of the mental suitcase are vulnerable to change and reinterpretation over time. Bruce M. Ross begins the preface to his book with a whimsical comparison between memory and luggage, indicating the reconstructive nature of the memory process.

Rumor has it that the unexamined life is not worth living. But what from one’s past can reasonably be known and subjected to examination? And there is a further troubling complication: what psychological baggage is retained from one’s past with all identification lost? Every person possesses not only a waiting room of memories where old favorites are recalled but also a Lost and Found where recollections from the past appear without being recognized. Other less accessible memories are hidden in mental suitcases to which we have misplaced the keys; elsewhere suitcases are discovered empty that we thought were full. Piled in with the rest are convenient imitation packages of memories constructed out of dreams and fantasies that were never paid for with experience. Every baggage room of memories is open day and night, for no living traveler rides free of the burden of old luggage. (vii)

When memory operates in the baggage mode in Puértolas’s novels or stories, a character reflects upon a painful memory from the past, from childhood or any stage of life, which continues to impact the present. While it might seem advisable to jettison these burdens, in reality the effects of the past on our present selves are so far-reaching

that it would be impossible to be rid of them, or indeed, to identify them. Nor is a painful past, depending on the use one makes of it, always something best eradicated.

In Soledad Puértolas's writing, these burdens of the past are generally caused by a character's disappointment with one or more of the following: a parent or family member; a spouse, lover or friend; or oneself. As Puértolas focuses on these scars of disappointment with self, family and lovers, many other potential painful memories are simply absent. These characters are not ostensibly burdened by Spain's historical and political woes. They are not recovering from child abuse nor violent trauma, nor are they stricken by mental illness or neuroses. In addition, their painful memories are generally manifest, available to consciousness, and thus Puértolas avoids the sensational, facile resolution of revealing a secret repressed truth that will put all the characters' troubles to rest. The characters are aware of their pain and are also aware that it cannot be undone. How they choose to respond is what differentiates them.

It must be noted that while many of Puértolas's characters are lonely and isolated and appear to be burdened or unsettled by something, memory is not always a key to understanding them. Often the reader is left to speculate about the unstated cause of characters' disillusionment, because they do not necessarily narrate all their thoughts and memories, if indeed they reflect on their past at all. These silences and open endings are signature features of Puértolas's writing. However, among characters who explicitly reminisce, the frequent memories of having been abandoned or otherwise disappointed by self or others merit examination because they inform her wider project. While the characters rarely lapse into despair, these stories point to the essential loneliness and isolation of the individual. The character does not choose solitude and self-sufficiency

but longs to be loved and understood, yet often painful isolation is the default result when the desired relational connection is shown to be impossible.

The past need not burden the future by making recurrent failure inevitable, even though this is often what happens. A survey of the baggage memories of Puértolas's characters leads to at least two conclusions: that disappointment is inevitable, but also that a character has a choice in how to respond to frustrations. The aim of this chapter is to explore the situation of a variety of characters burdened by disappointment with family members, lovers or self and to examine the range of possible responses by characters who have been scarred by the past. Some overcome, some accept, some retreat and others become paralyzed.

### **Introductory Case Study: “Lento regreso a casa” and the Self-Defining Memory**

We will begin our analysis by looking at several short stories before moving to a study of novel protagonists. First we turn to a short story that not only exhibits but also provides a definition of the baggage type of memory, “Lento regreso a casa” from *Adiós a las novias*. The first-person narrator is a typical Puértolas protagonist in that she longs for relational connection yet tends to be withdrawn, introspective and melancholy.<sup>12</sup> She introduces the memory she is about to narrate by describing the profound sadness that overcomes her on certain days. On one such day, she relates, “me acordé de repente de mi primera historia de amor, o de mi primer dolor de amor, ya que no llegó a ser una historia” (25). The narrator describes a summer day from her adolescence in which she is unexpectedly escorted home from the pool by Nacho, a boy she admired. As they walk, the narrator feels dizzy, disoriented and unsure of her footing on the pavement, but Nacho

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<sup>12</sup> In fact, she may be Soledad Puértolas herself, as essentially the same memory is related in the explicitly autobiographical memoir titled “La puerta del verano” of *Recuerdos de otra persona*.

represents utter confidence, "...porque, para él, ni el suelo ni nada en el mundo era hostil" (28). On their stroll through the city, Nacho treats her to a lemon ice and later promises, "Nos vemos mañana" (30). All night, as she relives the thrill of the afternoon, she wonders excitedly whether this "nos vemos mañana" was meant merely as a pleasantry or as a promise of a deepening love. Her hopes of repeating the encounter are devastated, however, when the euphoric dizziness and disorientation she felt during the walk prove to have been the warning signs of illness. She wakes up feverish the next day, too ill to go to the pool, and she never sees Nacho again. The memory of this disappointment still haunts her as an adult.

At the conclusion of the recollection, the narrator asks herself why this memory has suddenly surfaced. The answer she proposes describes this mode of memory: it is a pain from her past that she continues to carry in the present like baggage, and this memory is not only emblematic of her occasional days of depression but may in fact be their very cause. "Y me dije: Quizá esta historia haya sido muy importante, quizá haya determinado muchas otras historias, quizá esa historia me llenó de dolor y desconfianza, y por eso tengo a veces estos accesos de tristeza..." (31). She is neither defeated by nor dismissive of this scar of memory she has uncovered but reacts with a resigned acceptance. "Pero regreso, regreso de esos días negros, y lentamente recupero las fuerzas que el mundo, para seguir girando, pide de mí" (31). This acceptance implies a recognition that disappointment is inevitable, but while she may not always be able to overcome the pain of the past, at least she will not be incapacitated by it. The last sentence's emphasis on "regreso" recalls the title, "Lento regreso a casa," referring not

only to her stroll home with Nacho, but also to her reluctant return to the present world and its obligations after her mental journey backward in time.

The memory the narrator recalls here is a memory of disappointment: an enjoyable experience inspired her to imagine more excitement to come, but her hopes were left permanently unfulfilled. Her illness and the subsequent bad timing of both adolescents' respective summer travels prevent the relationship from continuing. This memory is best described as a time when the narrator disappointed herself; most likely, the frenzied excitement and anxious sleeplessness caused by her desire for Nacho ironically led to the very ailment that kept her from fulfilling that desire. Any regret she experiences is not a wish to have done something differently but is rather a frustration about her own weakness and vulnerability caused by uncontrollable emotion. The story of the thwarted relationship is for this reason more bitter than if Nacho were at fault for rejecting her; the message is that when hopes are raised, they are certain to be disappointed. Because of her weakness, happiness is made impossible by something that looks like chance circumstance but feels more like an impersonal force conspiring to frustrate her.

The narrator of "Lento regreso" implies that she has been disillusioned other times. Yet for some reason the story of Nacho, her "primer dolor de amor" (again indicating that she has other painful memories in this category), sticks in her memory as especially poignant, which is presumably why she has chosen to retell it. She explicitly states that this scene as she recalls it informs an understanding of her life story. David Gross explains the importance of what he terms "episodic memory," the recall of specific life events, to one's concept of personal identity: "To a considerable extent, what an

individual is or becomes is directly shaped not only by the nature of these autobiographical events, but by how they are interpreted and made use of later in life. We *are* the things that happen to us, or rather we are what we make out of them” (12). “Lento regreso” exemplifies this principle in that the narrator uses her memory and her interpretation of the episode with Nacho to explain who she is.

Clinical researchers Jefferson A. Singer and Peter Salovey might identify the episode as a “self-defining memory,” a concept to which I will refer throughout this chapter since it is particularly useful to our current discussion of memories that act like baggage. Singer and Salovey identify self-defining memories by these five traits: “affective intensity,” “vividness” (clarity of details), “repetitiveness,” “linkage to other similar memories” and “focus on enduring concerns or unresolved conflicts” (Singer and Salovey 12).<sup>13</sup> The memory of Nacho does not fit the definition perfectly because it has not been recalled repetitively; the narrator specifically mentions that it suddenly came to mind for the first time, as though repressed. However, Singer and Salovey’s other four traits are evident. Most notably, this memory represents an “enduring concern” and is emblematic of the narrator’s identity, because she acknowledges the similarity between this early disappointment and other unspecified experiences later in her life.

Perhaps it is surprising that this episode, which the narrator now deems “muy importante” (31), has never come to her mind before. The mystery of why she has suddenly remembered the encounter with Nacho so many years hence may be partly

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<sup>13</sup> Self-defining memory is a helpful concept in this discussion of baggage memory, though Avril Thorne and Kate C. McLean note that its application is limited: “Self-defining memories may make the most sense to European-Americans who are transitioning to adulthood and beginning to develop a personal life story” (183). While this is a culturally limited concept, it generally speaks to the culture of Puértolas’s characters, Westerners who are concerned with articulating their life stories.

explained by her current emotions: her depressive state, whose cause is unstated (and perhaps unknown to her), enabled this disappointing memory to come to mind. She hypothesizes that "...era una historia que seguramente sólo se podía recordar en un día de éstos" (31), that is, on "uno de mis días tristes" (31). As Douwe Draaisma writes, "Depression and insomnia transform our autobiographical memory into a tale of woe: every unpleasant memory is linked to other unpleasant memories by an oppressive network of cross-references" (1). Singer and Salovey refer to this same concept, "mood-congruent recall," which among other things shows: "An individual's thoughts, recollections, free associations, fantasies, interpretations, and judgments are likely to be thematically congruent with their mood state" (136-37). Laurence J. Kirmayer likewise cites the theory of "affect or mood state-dependent learning, whereby knowledge acquired in one affective state can only be accessed in a similar affective state" (180-81). In its most dramatic form, this is observed when a victim of abuse or trauma dissociates or represses the painful memory, and the memory only resurfaces when the subject again finds him or herself in a similarly stressful situation. Even if the narrator of "Lento regreso" has not suffered brutal trauma, the effect of the missed opportunity with Nacho was emotionally traumatic in a way, and mood-congruent recall may suggest why it is only now resurfacing, invoked as part of "an oppressive network of cross-references" during a bout of depression (Draaisma 1).

This self-defining episode in the narrator's memory, brought up by mood-congruent recall, could also be considered a "turning point memory" as theorized by Jerome Bruner. Turning point memories, like self-defining memories, are also affectively vivid and detailed and relate to a person's beliefs or attitudes. An important dimension

included in this concept is that they lead to a change in behavior, and a turning point memory may become a trope or leitmotif when told as part of a life story (Bruner 50). In the case of “Lento regreso,” there may not have been an appreciable turning point in the narrator’s life or course of action, but perhaps this disappointment has affected her outlook on life and her personality, possibly engendering her melancholy, depressive dimension. For this reason, the narrator feels it is appropriate to set up this episode as a leitmotif for her life story. Perhaps because of that summer day she has become conditioned to expect to disappoint herself, becoming weak at inopportune moments and missing out on life’s promises, like Nacho’s promise “Nos vemos mañana.” The heartbreak of the situation is the narrator’s inability to direct her anger toward the person who made the promise that went unfulfilled. Though she never says so, she may even feel a burden of guilt herself for leaving Nacho with no explanation of her absence from the pool. She must accept the frustrating conclusion that blame can only be directed toward her own weaknesses, her inability to control her emotions and their physiological consequences.

**Myth of Abandonment: “El andén vacío”**

The narrator of “Lento regreso” resigns herself to the reality of the aborted relationship with Nacho, the love that was thwarted by her very enthusiasm to keep it alive. After a melancholy struggle with this memory, she says that “lentamente recupero las fuerzas que el mundo, para seguir girando, pide de mí” (31). This attitude of acceptance might be calibrated as “neutral” on a spectrum of possible responses to a burdensome past. In stark contrast, at the negative end of the scale, is Bernardo of “El andén vacío,” from *Gente que vino a mi boda*.

“El andén vacío” is an example of a wound of memory caused by a parent or family member (in this case, a favorite uncle). In such cases the characters, perhaps during childhood, have been disappointed or abandoned by someone responsible for nurturing and caring for them.<sup>14</sup> These characters thus bear no fault for the painful memory but have been innocent victims. These seem to be the most oppressive type of memories, scars from which the characters do not easily recover.

The narrative of “El andén vacío” relates that as a boy, Bernardo had a favorite uncle Bernardo, his namesake. He recalls his uncle as “el tío que era mucho más que un tío para mí. Yo hubiera querido que hubiese sido mi padre...” (77), and “El hecho de llamarme como él...creaba entre nosotros un vínculo fuertísimo...” (79). Though everyone in young Bernardo’s family apparently fawned over this uncle, one day he disappeared from their lives forever without saying goodbye. Bernardo has tried to imagine the reason: his father’s jealousy for his son’s affection, his mother’s anger, or, as he finally concludes, his mother’s attraction to his uncle which caused too much temptation, perhaps even a sexual encounter. This abandonment occurred an indeterminate number of years ago, but Bernardo’s suffering is still acute. The memory of the pain has become especially vivid at the time of this story since Bernardo recently heard news of his uncle’s death, definitively signifying the impossibility of his reconciliation and return.

“El andén vacío” is not narrated by Bernardo but by a friend acting as an outside observer. Bernardo relates his story to the narrator at an abandoned train station,

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<sup>14</sup> Sometimes the family member who disappoints is a brother, not a member of the older generation. Such is the case in “La vida que al fin llevo” (*Gente que vino a mi boda*) and the title story of *Una enfermedad moral*.

referenced by the title. He explains that when his uncle first left, he used to spend lots of time at the station, still operational at that time, fantasizing about the train Uncle Bernardo might have taken, where he might have escaped to, whether he had started a new life and forgotten all about him and his family, or whether he might return. He would even dream about becoming a traveler himself, “desorientado, la vida en blanco, sin pasado, sin futuro” (81). Bernardo here says he wishes to be free of the past and the lingering suffering caused by this memory, yet his obsessive visits to the train station prove how strongly the past still influences him. Clearly he cannot be free of the past, nor does he make any effective attempt to heal his emotional wounds. Bernardo engages in what Wong calls “obsessive reminiscence,” which is “persistent rumination on unpleasant past events,” resulting in “guilt, shame, resentment, or despair” (Wong 27). Someone like Bernardo who displays obsessive reminiscence cannot come to terms with a painful memory nor integrate this memory into an overall successful life story.

Bernardo does not realize the extent of his obsession with his uncle, which is why the narrator’s perspective is critical in revealing the irony of what Bernardo cannot see for himself. “Pensé: Qué equivocado está, a lo mejor todos estamos equivocados con nuestros recuerdos, con nuestros mitos” (83). The narrator believes Bernardo to be mistaken in his memories, and one reason is his naivete regarding the cause of his uncle’s flight. While Bernardo believes his mother was the instigator, the narrator has his own, more plausible, theory. His sister was once a close friend of Bernardo’s sister, Alba, who was also very fond of her uncle, as were all her friends. At the time of Uncle Bernardo’s escape, Alba apparently had a nervous breakdown and was mysteriously taken away to recover somewhere. The narrator and his sister speculate that an affair with Alba—not

her mother—was the true reason for the uncle’s leaving. Perhaps Alba followed him for a while, or maybe she was pregnant with his child and was absent just long enough to give up the baby for adoption. After her return, Alba ignored her former best friend, as though “no quería saber nada del pasado” (83). Alba’s denial of the past is opposite her brother’s obsession, and equally unhealthy.<sup>15</sup>

The narrator’s indictment of Bernardo’s error does not only refer to his ignorance of Alba’s situation but is also a comment on the nature of memory itself, the potential of an individual to manipulate or misuse it. He recognizes that Bernardo’s memory is not merely a record of the past, but that he has created a myth out of his uncle’s escape, and this myth has become a guiding belief of his life. As Singer and Salovey point out, the myth we create about our past will direct our future. “One of life’s ironies, of course, is that how we interpret the story, how we feel about past incidents of our lives, will influence the story still to come” (Singer and Salovey 80). Bernardo, by elevating his uncle’s departure to the status of self-defining memory, has chosen to identify himself as someone who was abandoned and unloved, and this myth is shaping his present and future. His self-defining memory is becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy: not only was he abandoned by his uncle but also by all the rest of his friends. The narrator observes: “Mi amigo Bernardo se ha hecho más y más melancólico, más cerrado en sí mismo. Quizá sea yo el único amigo que le queda. Está claro que vive fuera del mundo” (84). Now that Bernardo has cast himself as “abandoned victim” within the myth of his life narrative, it seems he cannot or will not allow himself to be anything other than a victim. Unlike the

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<sup>15</sup> A word may be said regarding these siblings’ unusual names, a clear reference to Federico García Lorca’s famous despotic mother of *La casa de Bernarda Alba*. Sending away a man who incites passion, cover-up of a possible scandalous pregnancy, radical lack of communication among family members and the imposition of “silencio” are all points of thematic connection between this story and Lorca’s play.

narrator of “Lento regreso,” it seems Bernardo is unwilling to summon even the minimum “fuerzas que el mundo, para seguir girando, pide de mí” (“Lento regreso” 31).

The narrator, who suspects that Bernardo meant nothing to his uncle, concedes that his friend is not unique in using misguided or exaggerated beliefs about the past to limit his choices in the present: “...a lo mejor todos estamos equivocados con nuestros recuerdos, con nuestros mitos” (83). This is a recognition of the interpretive and even distorting function of memory when we choose to turn memory into a self-defining myth, told in such a way as to explain who we are. Unfortunately for Bernardo, his adherence to his self-defining memory of abandonment has kept him from a meaningful life in the present. His abandoned life has become a desolate ruin, as empty and useless as the abandoned train station.

### **Burden of Regret: “La hija predilecta”**

In “El andén vacío,” Bernardo has been burdened by the memory of his uncle abandoning him and his family. But it is not only victims who carry baggage of abandonment. Rather, the one guilty of abandoning a family member (or who perceives him or herself to be so) can feel equally burdened by that memory, as demonstrated by the narrator of “La hija predilecta” (*Gente que vino a mi boda*), who feels that she failed her mother, abandoning her and neglecting her duty as the favorite daughter. Both this and the previous story are also instances of how memory—especially melancholy memory, exemplifying mood-congruent recall—may be stirred on the occasion of a family member’s death.<sup>16</sup> In “La hija predilecta,” the narrator mourns the loss of her

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<sup>16</sup> Additional protagonists burdened by a parent’s death, given to melancholy introspection and reminiscing, include Pauline (*Burdeos*), Antonio and Guillermo (*Días del Arenal*), Mar (*Historia de un abrigo*) and Puértolas herself in her memoir collection *Con mi madre*.

mother, which triggers a complex process of reflection and self-evaluation. As the story begins, the narrator is traveling by train to her ailing mother's bedside, having received urgent word that she has worsened and is dying. She arrives in time to speak with her and spend a few last days together with her four sisters. After her mother's burial, she returns home. The narration is introspective, relating a few lines of dialogue but mostly the narrator's thoughts and memories, which reveal her to be burdened by guilt and plagued by emptiness and lack of direction.

One of the burdensome memories for the narrator is her designation as "la hija predilecta" and her failure to live up to this title. She always had a special relationship with her mother, since she is much younger than her sisters and does not share their memories of their deceased father. It seems that mother and daughter have the same introspective nature; as a child the narrator recalls her mother "pensando hacia dentro, cuando creía que pensar era algo que sólo hacíamos tú y yo..." (168-69). However, as she watched her sisters move away one by one, rather than stay with her mother, she recalls: "...yo me embosqué en el grupo que huía, como si nunca hubiera sido la hija predilecta, la única que no recordaba a mi padre, y no hubiera tenido que distinguirme de mis hermanas y permanecer más tiempo al lado de mi madre. Me asustó quedarme, estaba cansada de tanto pensar" (164).

Not only does she feel twinges of guilt at the memory of her moving far away from home, but she feels she again failed her mother by not offering to nurse her in her failing health. She remembers feeling left out of the conversation in which her sisters decided to send their mother to live with their cousin Ángela. "Nadie habló de mí, la hermana pequeña, a nadie se le ocurrió que yo pudiera hacerme cargo de mi madre. Yo

no contaba...” (165). While she could blame her sisters for discounting her, it is she who chose not to intervene: “No dije, nunca dije: Me la llevaré conmigo, yo la cuidaré” (167). The burden of this decision, or indecision, causes her guilty conscience to dwell on “la acusación que nunca formuló: la abandonamos” (162). The memory of the sisters’ decision to send their mother to Ángela has become a self-defining memory for the protagonist, in that her passivity with her sisters has caused her to neglect her duties as the favorite daughter and, indeed, to prove herself unworthy of that title.

Her deep regrets at deserting her mother are complicated by her disappointment that her mother did not give her the support and understanding she needed. Even though she could identify with her mother’s pensive nature, she remembers her as emotionally distant, “refugiada en [su] mundo de sombras y silencio” (170). In her old age, she was no longer silent and pensive but became an incessant talker, which made it even harder for the narrator to relate to her. She recalls phone conversations in which she heard all about Ángela’s and her sisters’ families, but her mother never stopped to ask her about herself. While she is hurt by this, her guilt at abandoning her mother prohibits her from speaking honestly about her own loneliness and disappointments.

Another reason for the distance that has come between mother and daughter is that the narrator feels she is living a life her mother does not find meaningful. She apostrophizes: “Pienso en la vida que te podría contar.... Sé que lo que tengo te parecería poco. La casa donde vivo, la oficina donde trabajo, mis compañeros, la gente que me busca y que me quiere, todo eso es poco para ti. No me he casado, ya no voy a tener una familia mía” (169). In the words they exchange at the bedside, one of her mother’s few questions is whether the protagonist has any children. She reminds her mother about

Raúl, her boyfriend, even though she inwardly admits he is young enough to look like her son. She conjectures, not without a sense of shame, “que tal vez él esté cumpliendo el papel del hijo que no tengo...” (170). It seems that the self-conscious narrator, internalizing her mother’s judgment, is likewise inclined to think little of her own life. She wishes she could cry on her mother’s shoulder and tell her “que la vida se me ha escapado.... Ni siquiera sé qué vida se me ha escapado” (174). Her mother is the only person who could potentially understand her desperation, but there are too many barriers to this kind of intimacy, and it is too late to break through them now.

The narrator has many regrets about her relationship with her mother and how they have failed one another, yet this relationship has helped her to orient her life, and its end marks the end of a phase of her life. “Y sé que ahora empieza otra vida, la vida sin mi madre...” (180). Her mother’s death is not merely a significant event in her life; something about her mother’s passing has stripped away an important marker of her personal identity. “Estos cuarenta años que he vivido están unidos a la infancia, pero con la muerte de mi madre, se ha roto todo vínculo. He dejado de ser la hermana pequeña, mi infancia de cuarenta años se ha descongelado, soy ahora una persona cualquiera que envejece” (181). She suddenly becomes aware of her anxiety about aging and feels like her life is slipping away, headed in no particular direction.

The return train ride overnight affords the narrator another long opportunity to evaluate her life. To evade anxiety over her lost youth, she dresses in a suit that makes her feel “extraordinariamente joven” (182) and tries to convince herself: “La vida no se me ha escapado” (182). She sleeps with a young man she meets in the bar of the train, perhaps in an attempt to grasp at life and youth and to stave off the loss and emptiness

that threaten to overwhelm her. The next morning, part of her tries to think positively about the milestone of her mother's passing: "Una parte de mi vida empieza ahora" (184), while another part laments: "Pienso en la vida que se escapa. He perdido a mi madre para siempre, tengo más de cuarenta años, ya no puedo tener hijos" (184). She does not have time to fully contemplate the significance and the impact of her sexual liaison, because her boyfriend Raúl unexpectedly meets her at the station. Raúl's untimely appearance makes it uncomfortably clear that the night on the train, instead of an assertion of her new-found identity as an adult without her mother, has been a failed attempt to conjure vitality and meaning in the face of death and emptiness.

The narrator's burdensome memories of her mother reveal her frustrated search for connection and meaning. The narrator repeatedly brings up the idea of fleeing, as though running away from everything but toward nothing were a theme of her life. Years ago, she fled to escape the unpleasant, strained relationship with her mother. "Huí de todo, de las sombras, los silencios, las esperas, los abandonos" (164). During the train ride out she also finds herself mentally fleeing from one unpleasant thought to another: "...pienso en mi madre, huyendo de mi amor por Raúl, y pienso en Raúl, huyendo de la sombra de mi madre que agoniza..." (171). It is not simply that she flees from her mother or from Raúl, but she wishes she could flee from herself: "Miro hacia dentro y veo el vacío del que huyo" (169). Now that her mother has died, she thinks, "...ya no puedo seguir alejándome de ella, huyendo de ella" (181). As she returns from her trip, she tries to sustain the illusion: "La vida no se me ha escapado" (182), and "Ya no huyo de nadie" (184); her one-night stand with the anonymous train passenger is an attempt to convince herself of this. Her feeling of calm confidence is quickly displaced by the urge to flee

once she sees Raúl on the platform, when she again thinks about “mis cuarenta años que han empezado a correr” (185). As the story concludes, she and Raúl move together through the station “apresurados, huyendo” (186). The narrator’s travels and her mental journey through memory have not resolved—have rather heightened—the feeling of emptiness and the urgent but impossible desire to flee from an unsatisfying life.

**Success Story: “La dueña del restaurante chino”**

Puértolas shows that disappointment in relationships, and in life generally, is unavoidable. For some characters, the pain of being abandoned—or the guilt of having abandoned—can incapacitate. However, melancholy despair or attempts to escape from reality are not the only possible responses to painful memories of relational failure. In “La dueña del restaurante chino” from *Gente que vino a mi boda*, the title character is an impressive woman who has overcome adversity and the pain of being abandoned. Her pain has become a key element in her success.

Like “El andén vacío,” this story is narrated by a secondary character, a journalist. The narrator has scheduled an interview at a Chinese restaurant in Avilés, but when el señor Palacios calls to cancel the appointment, the restaurant owner Mai Li decides to tell the reporter her own life story, after generously treating her to an exquisite meal. Mai Li is one of a recurring type of protagonist in Puértolas’s short stories. These are women who reside in a foreign country, as Puértolas’s memoirs show that she has done herself (in Norway and the United States). Each short story collection has a story focused on the situation of one of these foreign women in exile. In addition to Mai Li are la señora Mussorgsky (“El jardín de la señora Mussorgsky” of *La corriente del golfo*), Carla (“La extranjera” from *Adiós a las novias*) and la señora Ebelmayer (“Un país extranjero” of

*Una enfermedad moral*). Each responds differently to the strain of being away from her home country, and some are more successful than others at learning the new language and assimilating into the new culture and community. It is not surprising that these characters would have a unique need for memory, because each of their lives is the story of a literal journey, and memory is the only way for them to return home. Of these four geographically displaced women, Mai Li is probably the most successful, as hers is the only story which is confidently told as a story of victory and fulfilled ambitions. Wong would categorize her story as “instrumental reminiscence,” which he deems a healthy use of memory and which is characterized by recalling goals attained despite challenges and struggles (Wong 25). Indeed, Mai Li weaves the elements of antagonism and adversity into the narrative in order to enhance her triumph.

The autobiography she relates to the reporter revolves around the two themes of her career ambitions and her devotion to her lover Ton. She describes leaving China to work in New York, where she meets and falls in love with Ton, despite his shiftlessness and exploitation of her hospitality. He insists they move to Madrid where she would have a better opportunity for opening a restaurant. Soon Ton disappears in Madrid, pursuing a life of drug trafficking. Nevertheless, Mai Li refuses to be abandoned: after careful searching, she finds Ton ill in Avilés and leaves her small Madrid restaurant in order to nurse him to health. While in Avilés, she finds the perfect spot for a new restaurant (the scene of this story), which she sees as the culmination of her lifelong entrepreneurial dreams. The narrator concludes Mai Li’s tale saying “Ton se había evaporado nuevamente, pero eso a ella ya no le importaba demasiado” (93).

One may wonder why Mai Li “se quedó desolada” (92) when Ton abandons her in Madrid, while in Avilés, the second time he leaves, “ya no le importaba demasiado” (93). A possible explanation is that in Avilés, she is not completely alone: she now has a successful business and two of her sisters as employees to console and support her. It may also be that she is not as worried about Ton now that she knows he is healthy again. The narrator also infers that she has a new lover, the narrator’s intended interviewee el señor Palacios (even though Mai Li implies that he is as unreliable a lover as Ton). After hearing the story and experiencing Mai Li’s hospitality firsthand, the narrator concludes that Mai Li “era una protectora nata. No trabajaba para sí misma, sino para derramar beneficios sobre los demás” (94). If this is true, then perhaps the worst thing about Ton leaving her the first time was that he denied her someone to take care of, a need which is now being met by Palacios and by her restaurant clientele.

What is clear is that even though Mai Li has been abandoned, she is resilient and determined to succeed. Her history with Ton is an important part of her life story, and she does not regret having loved him. Mai Li does not interpret the memory of his abandonment by despairing or withdrawing, but she rather recognizes its instrumentality to the plot of her life narrative: thanks to Ton’s ill treatment of her, she was able to show compassion plus move to Avilés and open the restaurant. Instead of casting herself as a victim, she overcomes by repaying good for evil and refusing to abandon the man who abandoned her, offering him a second chance (though not a third). The journalist reflects on Mai Li’s life story and sees it as a tale of “amor y sacrificios, llena siempre de empresas y sentido” (95)—presumably part of her good “sentido” is knowing when to leave Ton alone—and the narrator finds her story inspirational. Contrasting her story to

the others we have examined, perhaps we can conclude that scars of abandonment, the baggage of a disappointing past, do not determine character so much as reveal it. The painful memories of the other protagonists mentioned appear to have heightened these characters' loneliness and emptiness, whereas Mai Li's painful past fuels her pre-existing confidence and determination.

Mai Li stands out in Puértolas's writing, not only among women who have emigrated, but also as one of the many who are burdened by the memory of past relational failures. Some of these women are unable leave the pain in the past, since the disappointing relationship never definitively ends. In "Viejas historias" (*La corriente del golfo*), "Cuando los hombres te llaman" and "Siempre comunicas" (*Adiós a las novias*), the female protagonists contemplate and reminisce about the problems of a particular extramarital affair, but despite the painful memories they cannot escape from the men who have disappointed them. They are unable to permanently separate from their lovers or literally "hang up" on them in the latter two stories. Other women, like Mai Li, more successfully overcome the pain of a disappointing relationship. Included in this group are the anonymous protagonists of *Una vida inesperada* and "El inventor del tetrabrik" (*La corriente del golfo*), Aurora of *Queda la noche* and Pauline of *Burdeos*. For these women, the key to recovering from a painful separation seems to be a change of scenery: Mai Li's restaurant, Pauline's new job writing for a fashion magazine, Aurora's travels to the Far East, a trip to Quito for the narrator of *Una vida inesperada*, and an unspecified "rescue" for the narrator of "El inventor." The protagonist of *Una vida inesperada* relates, for example, referring to her unhealthy relationship: "el viaje me había curado de mi obsesión" (287). Thus it would seem that for these women, or for any of the characters

who have suffered a failed love relationship, as they contemplate the narrative shape of their life stories they need to see a definitive break, a new chapter, in order to conclude the old episode of pain and disappointment. The burdens of past heartbreak do not disappear, but those who focus their energies on the pursuit of new goals are less troubled by the past.

### ***Burdeos*: René's Chase after Security**

Some of the clearest examples of the baggage type of memory in Puértolas can be found in the short stories, such as those outlined above. Because of the focused nature of the genre, which often presents a single episode or flashback, these texts can easily isolate a character's self-defining memory and show the impact of this moment on his or her life in the present. In the novel genre however, the characters' motives tend to be more hidden and complex, and even if they explicitly recall the past, it can be more difficult to identify self-defining memories. Unlike some short stories, none of the novels' structural unity is based on a character's fixation on a single disappointing memory.

This is not to say that the baggage mode of memory is limited to the short stories. It is notable, however, that a novel which presents a clear example of the baggage mode of memory is *Burdeos*, which diverges from the typical novel's formal unity, as it resembles a collection of three interrelated short stories.<sup>17</sup> A section of the novel focuses on René, whose mother abandoned him during his adolescence, divorcing her husband to marry a millionaire. Before this point his mother had been distant, and he had mostly been cared for by servants, yet losing his mother's affectionate presence and hearing her

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<sup>17</sup> *Días del Arenal* (explored below) and *Historia de un abrigo* are other novels by Puértolas that are structured thus, as loosely interconnected short stories.

constantly criticized instead of praised by the household employees was disconcerting for him. This self-defining memory of his mother leaving does not remain intense and vivid for René but fades and blurs in his memory, yet it is a scene from the past that comes to determine the tone and direction of the rest of his life. The omniscient narrator explicitly reports regarding this episode of René's past: "René sabía que la desaparición de su madre era lo más importante que le había sucedido y jamás le podría suceder en la vida. Vivía con la certeza de que no habría ya ninguna emoción intensa reservada para él" (42). He believes that he will never again be happy nor should he try; like Bernardo of "El andén vacío," he has assumed the role of victim and this becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. When his mother comes to town to visit him years later, he realizes that the pain of her leaving has been replaced by emptiness, as though his happy childhood never existed.

The burden of being abandoned and rejected by his mother results in René's inability to find direction or take responsibility. After narrating René's family history, the rest of his section recounts his general apathy and many romantic liaisons, involving a prostitute, a friend's wife, and girlfriends to whom he cannot commit beyond giving one a half-hearted marriage proposal over the phone. What he really wants is someone to give him the love and security his mother denied him; thus he proceeds directly to his girlfriend's house after his unsettling reunion with his mother. Finding her not at home, he pursues a prostitute. These casual sexual encounters with no thought for establishing a meaningful relationship are much like the affair between the narrator of "La hija predilecta" and the man on the train. While these actions seem like an assertion of youth

and freedom, they are impotent to heal the wound of a broken relationship with a parent and merely accentuate the characters' feeling of emptiness and lack of direction.

One conversation that is particularly revealing of René's attitude toward life is with the leftist activist Durmont. When el señor Durmont tries to engage René in a conversation about politics, he is shocked at René's lack of enthusiasm for changing the world. René's indifference to politics parallels his apathy in all other realms of life. While he recognizes the injustice of the world, he concludes: "No es tan fácil cambiar el mundo...y quienes se lo proponen no siempre están llenos de buenas intenciones" (78). His statement does not appease el señor Durmont, but it reflects the resignation with which he is able to cope with the inexplicable injustices in his own family.

The divorce has not only affected René's relationship with his mother but also with his father, el señor Dufour. Even though both men share a key memory of abandonment, this does not serve to unite them; instead they live parallel isolated lives. The adolescent René has no one to talk to about losing his mother: "El hermetismo de su padre era absoluto y René se sentía desesperado" (42). René's coming of age does not deepen the connection between father and son. El señor Dufour is somewhat successful in overcoming his divorce in that he is not incapacitated by despair. However, his lack of relationship with René, exhibited by his inability to confront him about some money he correctly suspects René has stolen, testifies to his impotence to address the problem of the rift in the family. He desires connection with his son and wants to let him know he will not judge him, but no words come out. The two men just look at each other for a long time and it seems as though they understand each other, as if they have just had a long talk. This is an ambivalent moment in the story; while they do not succeed in

sharing any verbal content, they do exchange silence. Perhaps the only way father and son can communicate the emptiness they both feel is through this silent conversation. Unfortunately, it does not seem that identifying their mutual emptiness helps to bring them together. Both are resigned to silently bearing their separate burdens.

René convinces himself that attaining happiness in the present or future is just as impossible as it would be to return to his happy childhood. Whether consciously or not, his past confines him to the role of isolated, abandoned victim; he feels that there is a fundamental gap between him and the rest of humanity. His greatest need is to talk about his mother and his unhappiness, and even though this never happens with his father or in his romantic relationships, he does succeed in connecting with two people on some level. One is Leonard Wastley, a stranger he meets on a cruise. “Wastley había dado a René algo que le había faltado siempre: comprensión” (86-87). René also feels he can relate to el señor Bernard, the cynical misogynist father of one of his girlfriends. René sees no hope in undoing the ruination his mother caused in his adolescence, nor does he have a plan to move ahead with purpose in life and overcome this adversity. However, he clings to these brief moments of connection, and though they can hardly be called friendships, they do bring the smallest measure of hope to René’s desperate life.

### ***Días del Arenal: Guillermo’s Oblivion***

A second novel which presents examples of characters struggling under the weight of past pain is *Días del Arenal*. Structured like *Burdeos*, this novel is told by an omniscient narrator, and each semi-autonomous section focalizes through a different character. Two characters in particular, Guillermo Aguiar and Antonio Cardús, bear

emotional scars of the pain of abandonment; each allows these memories to affect his present values and behavior, with opposite results.

Guillermo, like René or Bernardo of “El andén vacío,” was abandoned by family, specifically his parents. Guillermo’s chapter, which occurs in about a 12-hour frame, describes the thoughts of the 40-year-old character, staying at his mother’s house on the night of his father Leandro’s burial. As he reflects on his father’s life, his memory inevitably returns to the difficult time decades earlier when his parents divorced so that Leandro could marry Olga. Although it seems Guillermo accepts his stepmother, he has never forgiven Leandro for the pain he caused by abandoning him and his mother. He never succeeds in connecting with his father on an emotional level, despite his father’s attempt to share his excitement about the Socialist victory in 1982. Like René, Guillermo seems indifferent or resistant to political discussion, especially when this is his father’s only attempt to connect with him emotionally. His father’s unfaithfulness has profoundly affected Guillermo’s capacity for idealism. As was mentioned earlier, characters in Puértolas’s writing like Guillermo, who have been abandoned by a trusted family member, seem to bear the heaviest burdens.

Guillermo struggles to fall asleep, so he decides to go out for a drink. On the way out, he notices his mother is also awake, and they reminisce together. She tells him her most guilty secret: when Guillermo was five years old, she left him at home alone while she spent the night with a man she had just met that day. The next morning she discovered that her friend, whom she had expected to babysit, had also stayed out all night, and Guillermo had been left alone. As she confesses this, Guillermo silently remembers the vivid details of that traumatic night when he awoke and found himself all

alone in a strange house, and he relives in his mind, as he has done many times before, the horror he has never spoken to anyone. It is not surprising that this memory of neglect, the only episode resembling child abuse in any of Puértolas's narratives, stands out as a particularly burdensome memory for Guillermo. That night has become a self-defining memory for its "focus on enduring concerns or unresolved conflicts" (Singer and Salovey 12); Guillermo interprets this trauma as a singularly important event of his life because it initiated him into the role of abandoned victim, an identity later reinforced by his father's remarriage. The omniscient narrator describes his thoughts: "¿Quién hubiera sido él si no hubiese vivido esa noche?" (158). It seems to Guillermo "...que el dolor y el abandono sentidos en la remota noche de su infancia eran el anticipo de todos los dolores y abandonos" (161), which is very similar to the way the narrator of "Lento regreso" interprets her memory of Nacho. For both of these characters, the childhood memory relived is not merely thematically similar to other important disappointments but is also perceived as responsible for causing them. It may also be noted that Guillermo's sense of abandonment is exacerbated by having attended his father's burial, just as the recent deaths of an uncle and a mother, respectively, have accentuated the melancholy of Bernardo and "La hija predilecta." Mood-congruent recall may partly explain why these characters' sad memories arise in the context of their present grief.

Guillermo believes that being abandoned by his parents—both father and mother—has been a leitmotif of his life. Unlike the passive Bernardo of "El andén vacío," whose negative response entails isolation and withdrawal from life, Guillermo recoils from his memory with reckless and destructive behavior. As he goes out to a bar, he consciously determines to forget the pain of his past. He gets drunk and sleeps with a

woman he met an hour earlier. Like René and “La hija predilecta,” Guillermo attempts to dull his pain with fleeting sensual pleasure.<sup>18</sup> The novel does not enumerate the consequences of this night out; the chapter ends as Guillermo returns home in the morning, omitting any ensuing conversations between Guillermo and his mother or his wife. However, one may conclude that in his attempt to escape the painful memories of being abandoned, ironically he perpetuates the pain by betraying his wife and by leaving his mother alone in the house, with no explanation of where he has gone, an inversion of the horrible night 35 years earlier. For Guillermo, memory thwarts his ability to live responsibly in the present because he shrinks back from the pain of the past. He knows no way to interpret the suffering he has relived, and the ironic result is that he in fact inflicts wounds of abandonment himself.

### ***Días del Arenal: Antonio’s Renewed Purpose***

Another character of *Días del Arenal* who is hurt by memories of a broken relationship and death is Antonio Cardús. The first chapter of the novel describes the reclusive 70-year-old man who rarely ventures beyond the end of the street, then flashes back to give a history of his parents, his schooling, and most importantly, his affair with Gracia. When he is 30 years old, Antonio meets Gracia at a wedding. He seduces her, and a series of liaisons at the Hotel del Arenal follows (hence the title of the novel), whenever Gracia can make a pretext to her husband for a trip to Madrid. Antonio becomes obsessed with her and is shocked and hurt when she calls off the relationship.

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<sup>18</sup> One additional example of this type of behavior is seen in the (unreliable) narrator of “Ventajas de la primera persona” (*La corriente del golfo*). Divorced, unemployed and miserable, he lives with his parents and spends every night in bars with a friend who lives a similarly rootless, purposeless existence. Like Guillermo, René and “La hija predilecta,” his desperation is revealed by his irresponsible choices with no thought for future consequences, including sleeping with his friend’s wife.

Despite Gracia's advice, he cannot be content to consider the affair as merely a happy memory; like Mai Li, he fights against being rejected, but the affair ends nonetheless. The pain of this failed relationship and the news of Gracia's death several years later, compounded by his mother's death and his failure of his law exams, leaves Antonio unmotivated and reclusive. In the story of Antonio's life, the accumulation of these disappointments, especially the irreversible end of his affair with Gracia, takes on the dramatic function of a turning point memory, according to Bruner, meaning that the vividly-recalled experience causes a change in Antonio's behavior and becomes a leitmotif of his life story (Bruner 50). Specifically, Antonio has accepted failure and loss as the central defining themes of his life story. He subsequently distances himself from relationships and abandons his vocational plans, as he now assumes the role of innate unlovable failure.

Like Bernardo by the desolate train tracks, Antonio's initial response to being hurt is withdrawal, refusal to participate in community. Fortunately, Antonio's life story eventually reaches another turning point; he finally turns the memory of his painful past with Gracia into motivation to help others. The final chapter of the novel is focalized through Susana, Antonio's young neighbor. After collecting a year's worth of indecipherable notices from the bank, Antonio humbly approaches Susana for financial help, and she resolves the situation. Motivated by extreme gratitude, and also by a whetted desire for relationship after years of solitude, Antonio then tries (somewhat awkwardly) to interact with Susana frequently in the stairwell and on the street. During the course of these interactions, they learn that Susana's friend Covadonga has been badly hurt after an assault in the street. When confronted with this crisis, Antonio chooses

not to retreat to safety and isolation but rather accompanies Susana to the hospital and is eager to help the women in any way possible. These decisive actions, following a lifetime of inactivity, have been inspired not only by gratitude for Susana's financial help but also by memory of the past. Antonio's acts of compassion are motivated by the fact that Susana and Covadonga both remind him of Gracia in some way. An important benefit of identifying self-defining memories, according to Singer and Blagov, is that it allows the subject to recognize his or her power as the author of his or her own life narrative (134). Antonio's conscious recollection of Gracia does motivate him in this way, as he sheds the comfortable role of wounded victim and assumes a new posture as a servant to those in need, advocate for those who have been truly victimized.

Antonio's change in attitude is most evident when he decides to walk across the city, which he has not done in decades, to confront the man whose negligence caused Covadonga's attack. During his walk, he relives his memories of Gracia and is aware of a sense of purpose he has not felt in a very long time. He realizes how valuable his memories are, and that these present actions, inspired by the memory of Gracia, will change his life forever.

. . . [Él] era un hombre absolutamente desconocido y anónimo, pero tenía su historia, no sólo en el pasado, sino en ese mismo momento, y experimentaba un remoto placer al pensarlo, como quien lleva mucho dinero en el bolsillo sin que nadie pueda sospecharlo. Cualquiera podría decir que era la misma persona de siempre, desconectada del mundo, una persona sin intereses privados, sin alma, sin corazón, sin pensamientos propios sobre sí mismo y sobre los demás. Pero ya no era así, y probablemente nunca volvería a ser así. (222)

Antonio's memories of Gracia come back to him with the purpose of helping him to understand his life and his past. He undertakes a life review, a phenomenon observed

and described by Robert N. Butler.<sup>19</sup> Life review is a process especially notable among the elderly whereby past experiences and conflicts are brought to mind in attempt to interpret these events as an integral part of the life story (“The Life Review” 66). While life review does not invariably yield positive results, in Antonio’s case it seems that he has been able to reinterpret his relationship with Gracia by focusing not on its failure but on his own worth as someone to be loved. Butler describes possible benefits of life review, which are evident in Antonio:

...the righting of old wrongs, reconciliation with enemies, acceptance of mortality, a sense of serenity, pride in accomplishment, and a feeling of having done one’s best. Life review gives people an opportunity to reflect on what to do with the time they have left and to work out emotional and material legacies. (“Foreword” xviii)

The pain of the past has long kept Antonio from pursuing friendships, but that same pain recalled in a life review at last motivates him to reach out to his neighbors.<sup>20</sup> After Covadonga recovers, Antonio extends his friendship and generosity to his neighbors once again by inviting them for tea. This communal scene of the neighbors having tea, with which the novel concludes, must not be interpreted too optimistically however. First, the overall scene is rather awkward. The invitation is unusual, and Susana cannot persuade her boyfriend and son to accompany her and Covadonga. Antonio appears over-eager, having prepared an elaborate meal and dressed very elegantly, grotesquely contrasted with his shabby apartment and its “muebles que

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<sup>19</sup> I give life review a more extensive treatment in chapter 4.

<sup>20</sup> Characters similar to Antonio include the narrator of *Una vida inesperada* and Pauline of *Burdeos*. The aging Pauline, like Antonio, lives alone after the death of her parents and is prone to live in her memories (Wang 131). Her pattern of isolation is disrupted when Florence asks her for help. “Hasta ese momento ella se ha conformado con la inactividad solitaria, porque este tipo de vida le da tranquilidad y seguridad. Pero descubre ahora que la acción le puede liberar un poco de la soledad y la depresión” (Wang 76). The narrator of *Una vida inesperada* is likewise reclusive until Olga sends her on a mission to Quito. This trip helps her to recover from a bad relationship; she concludes that the mission “me había salvado a mí” (285).

deprimían” (234). In addition, the scene is tinged with Antonio’s bittersweet emotions: “el saber que ese momento y esa sensación pudieran ser irrepetibles añadía un tinte de dolor anticipado, pero algo más, algo placentero e indefinible...” (238). As tears fill his eyes, he realizes that perhaps this moment is no different from the past but is in fact following the same pattern: “todo lo que en ese momento se tenía y se estaba perdiendo era semejante a las muchas cosas que había tenido y perdido, a todo lo que no había podido alcanzar, a las cosas que ni siquiera había conocido” (238-39).

This suggests that for Antonio, as for all the characters who have been scarred by broken relationships, disappointment is inevitable. Yet Antonio, in attempting to overcome his pain, realizes that the risk of failure does not outweigh the value of pursuing relationships and showing hospitality. Antonio is not nearly as self-assured as the restaurant owner Mai Li, and he delays several decades before overcoming his reclusiveness. Yet both of these characters, who were disappointed and abandoned, make a conscious choice not to disappoint or abandon.

### ***Una vida inesperada: The Disappointment of Personal Weakness***

Most of the burdensome memories examined in this chapter have related to relational failure. Some characters are abandoned by family members, whether due to death or betrayal, and in such cases the abandoned character is an innocent victim. Other characters’ baggage relates to a relational separation, and in these cases, though the circumstances might have been outlined only vaguely, often blame cannot be assigned to just one partner. Now we will examine a third type of burdensome past experience, where the character assigns blame to him or herself for a disappointment caused by some kind

of personal weakness.<sup>21</sup> This type of baggage easily overlaps with the other two categories, as personal failure is often a factor in relational failure.

The burdens of personal inadequacy take many forms. Some characters' quirky mental disabilities impede their connection with others. For example, the protagonist of "Los nombres de las mujeres" of *Adiós a las novias* is troubled by his inability to recall women's names at the right moment. Another example is Irene of "A la salida del cine" (*Gente que vino a mi boda*), whose inability to interpret movies led to a breakup.

Perhaps the most common reason for characters to be frustrated with themselves is illness.<sup>22</sup> As was already mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, physical illness, possibly triggered by an emotional weakness, prevented the narrator of "Lento regreso a casa" from pursuing a relationship with Nacho. Initial illness, combined with subsequent inertia, is also what prevents Antonio from taking his law entrance exams. Frequent illness during childhood afflicted novel protagonists Mario of *La señora Berg*, Aurora of *Queda la noche* and the anonymous narrator of *Una vida inesperada*. Just as illness in "Lento regreso" prevented a relationship with Nacho, these characters' illnesses have led to strained relationships, particularly with their mothers, who tended to become impatient

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<sup>21</sup> Not all characters who carry baggage from the past are struggling with a history of weakness. The male protagonists of "El reconocimiento" (*La corriente del golfo*) and "La inspiración de dedos azules" (*Adiós a las novias*), have the opposite problem: the burden of greatness. Both are famous writers struggling with writer's block while trying to create something new, and both are eventually assured of their success only when they find a receptive audience.

<sup>22</sup> Many of Puértolas's memoirs and essays reveal that she herself was a sickly child. In her essay "¿De qué sirve la enfermedad?" of *La vida se mueve* she notes her concern that today health is often equated with wisdom and virtue. She asserts in contrast that people with the most wisdom and vision are often those who are physically weak, those whose illness gives them time to reflect on their limitations.

with their nursing tasks and frequent doctor visits.<sup>23</sup> Mario and the narrator of *Una vida inesperada* remember with indignation their mothers' suspicions that their illnesses were imagined and the tacit comparison to their healthier siblings; while they were frustrated with themselves for their sickly disposition, even greater was the frustration over the strained relationships with their mothers caused by their weakness.

While Mario and Aurora seem to be reasonably healthy adults, the protagonist of *Una vida inesperada* often still finds herself as an adult incapacitated by headaches, fevers and fainting spells; illness is an important element in her identity. It shapes her self-perception and occasionally prevents her from working and swimming, two activities that give her life a sense of order and stability. The narrator's weakness also affects her more trivial plans and errands, since she tends to panic and even faint in public spaces.<sup>24</sup> As she gets older, she says that she now knows the back room of practically every store she frequents, because the employees carry her there when she faints. For the narrator of *Una vida inesperada*, her disappointment with herself—that is, her helplessness before her frequent illnesses—is not merely a nuisance but has caused a strain on both family and love relationships throughout her life. As described above, this tension begins with her mother, and she recalls: “Yo tenía la impresión de que mi sola existencia le molestaba” (136). Her mother's annoyance and even offense caused by her constant ailments, “como si yo la estuviera acusando de algo” (135), introduce her to the

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<sup>23</sup> Aurora is the exception; she recalls her mother indulging her with pickles as a treat when she stayed home from school. The strained relationship is between her mother and the cook, who believes Aurora needs to be strengthened with a healthier diet.

<sup>24</sup> Other characters who inexplicably faint in uncomfortable situations are the protagonists of “El cuarto secreto” (*Adiós a las novias*) and “El mar en los aparcamientos subterráneos” (*Gente que vino a mi boda*). Also, the mysterious interlocutor in “A la hora en que cierran los bares” (*La corriente del golfo*) faints in the psychiatrist's office, leading the latter to wrongly diagnose memory loss and send him to a mental clinic.

alienation and isolation that become lifelong struggles. She has a hard time shaking off the burden of disappointing her mother in this way, and the theme of disappointing people by her physical weakness haunts her for much of her life. She reaches a point at which she no longer goes to restaurants, for example, and this prevents her from spending time with her friend Clara. She also says that one of her boyfriends, Carlos, “pertenece a la estirpe de personas que creen que todo dolor tiene curación, porque deriva de una causa concreta... Precisamente la estirpe a la que pertenece mi familia, tanto mi madre como mi padre” (104). Her mother’s incomprehension isolates the narrator in this recurring role of a helpless and misunderstood invalid. She feels the same helplessness before Carlos’s patronizing suggestions on how to recover her health. Eventually she stops telling people about her illnesses; her isolation is increased by her inability to find anyone to sympathize with her sufferings and indeed by the hostility aroused by her sickness.

Eventually, however, this protagonist is able to accept her life with its disappointments and her body with its limitations, and she also takes decisive action to combat her fears. As mentioned earlier, she travels to Quito, which is a severe deviation from her safe routine and quite out of character for her, given her paralyzing fear of travel. Even though the first day of the trip is agonizing, the result is liberation: “el viaje me había curado de mi obsesión” (287). Principally, the trip affords her the opportunity to forget a bad breakup by focusing her emotions on helping someone in need, but in addition the trip cures the narrator of her fear of leaving her routine and entering into the unknown. This fear relates to her physical ailments and limitations, so it is therefore significant that she uses the word “curado” to describe the effect of the trip in her life.

Another way in which the narrator chooses to take control over her life and her physical being is through her daily swimming, which is a constant throughout the nearly four decades of the novel. Although she is sometimes too ill to swim, this physical act allows her to feel free; she controls her movement instead of being subjected by her body's weakness. Swimming is a common motif throughout Puértolas's narratives; for example, in "Lento regreso a casa," Nacho's swimming ability and fearlessness in the water is a large part of his attraction for the narrator. In the memoir "Piscinas" (*Recuerdos de otra persona*) the author explains her own affinity for the activity. Puértolas recalls her childhood fear of the water, the panic that overcame her in the pool; learning to swim well helped her to confront and master this fear.<sup>25</sup> The narrator of *Una vida inesperada* takes the same approach: swimming is her way of mastering the body that has otherwise given her so much trouble over the years. In the last chapter of the novel, after describing her trip to Quito, she explains that remarkably, she is once again living with Carlos. They have been able to reconcile the rift exacerbated by his lack of sympathy for her illness. She observes a change in him: he is now more able to accept her limitations, and when he lapses into giving health advice, she is now able to laugh about it. It seems that at last she is not hindered by the baggage of her past physical disabilities. While much of her life and her health are out of her control, she accepts this burden and nonetheless embraces life and love.

## **Conclusion**

The narrator of *Una vida inesperada* is an example, along with Antonio of *Días del Arenal* and Mai Li of "La dueña del restaurante chino," of a character who carries

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<sup>25</sup> This is the same reason why the narrator of the title story of *Gente que vino a mi boda* became a professional seamstress: to master the one skill that she struggled with most as a student.

burdensome memories of suffering, yet whose story comes to a somewhat hopeful conclusion. All three of these characters have taken some type of decisive action, in the context of serving others, that has helped them to find meaning in the present despite the pain of the past. More common, however, are the characters who have not been able to assimilate the pain of relational failure or personal inability into a success story. The unsuccessful examples we have studied include René (*Burdeos*), Guillermo (*Días del Arenal*), Bernardo (“El andén vacío”) and the narrators of “La hija predilecta” and “Lento regreso a casa.”

In examining the difference between these characters divided thus into two groups, it seems that their success or failure is not necessarily determined by the type of baggage they carry in their memories. For example, the narrators of *Una vida inesperada* and “La hija predilecta” both struggle with the sense that they disappointed their mothers, yet only *Una vida inesperada* ends hopefully. At the same time, it must be noted that no characters who were abandoned by parents are optimistic about their lives. While decisive action, taken in the service of someone in need, seems to help characters to overcome the pain of memory, it may be that those who were abandoned as children will always be incapable of such action.

Perhaps the difference between the three more successful characters and the five less successful ones examined in this chapter is actually not very great. Both in the case of Antonio and the protagonist of *Una vida inesperada*, the story covers about four decades and there is some progression in the characters’ self-image and outlook on life. If *Días del Arenal* had ended before Antonio’s interactions with Susana and Covadonga, his life story would be characterized by despair and failure, just like Bernardo or René.

Similarly, the trip to Quito affords the narrator of *Una vida* a new perspective on her purpose in the world that she could not have achieved simply by willing it. Also, both these characters are approximately seventy years old, whereas the less successful protagonists are all probably (and some certainly) younger than that. Mai Li is probably younger than seventy but is at least middle-aged. Her story is a bit unusual because her personality seems exceptionally sanguine among Puértolas's characters, and her temperament is an important factor in her ability to pursue her dreams despite her disappointment with Ton. Yet for a certain span of time, her life felt desolate as well. Time alone is not sufficient to heal these characters' wounds, but for the successful characters, time is certainly essential.

Puértolas's narratives show that disappointment is certain and pain persists in memory. As Ross observes, "...no living traveler rides free of the burden of old luggage" (vii). Scars of the past and burdens of memory cannot be easily disregarded; all characters hindered by baggage from the past experience a period of suffering. This time of struggle is often a lifelong process; it may span decades or last indefinitely. Those who succeed are those who can accept their emotional wounds and weaknesses as elements in a life story over which they have authorship. Though they cannot forget, they can achieve freedom from the past when they use these painful memories as motivation to ease the pain of others.

## CHAPTER 3

### Escapist Mode of Memory: Nostalgia for a World of Possibility

The baggage mode of memory as seen in the narrative works of Soledad Puértolas shows how the past, particularly past relational failure, burdens a person's life in the present. This dynamic implies a causal relationship or integration of past and present. As we have seen, this is not to suggest by any means that an unhappy past causes an unhappy present or vice versa, merely that the present is a continuation of the past, and a person's memories of the past will influence him or her in the present and future. We have seen that an individual's life and identity may be greatly influenced by self-defining memories, those recurring memories that are vivid, emotionally intense and related to enduring conflicts or concerns central to the individual's life and identity. These episodes in themselves do not determine an individual's present and future; the critical question is how he or she interprets and uses them. For example, Singer and Salovey note that a person who recalls a positive self-defining memory may be inspired by it, or alternatively the memory "may serve more of a nostalgic than a motivating function. It may play a soothing or escapist role for the individual who feels unable to continue direct pursuit of the memory's theme" (Singer and Salovey 34). Memory as a site of mental retreat or escape is a frequent theme in Soledad Puértolas's narratives, the theme that I will explore in this chapter.

Characters in Puértolas's works who use memory in the escapist mode are at least as numerous as those who reflect on past scars, as described in the previous chapter. By contrast to the baggage mode of memory where the past is continuous with the present, the escapist mode is something of a dissociation of past and present. Both the baggage mode and the escapist mode link memory to personal disappointment and dissatisfaction, but in this case memory provides a refuge from disillusionment of the present. "Escapist reminiscence" is one of the six categories of memory styles among the elderly classified by Paul T. P. Wong, which he identifies as a tendency to focus on positive aspects of the past, the "good old days" glorified in contrast to the perceived shortcomings of the present. People who escape through their reminiscings may do so to remember past successes; the past can be a source of self-esteem as well as comfort, yet it can be an unhealthy way to avoid present circumstances (Wong 26-27).

Wong's description of escapist memory supports what I observe as the escapist mode in Puértolas, but only partially so. Puértolas's protagonists who longingly cling to memories often do so in attempt to avoid the present. Many times these memories are happy, but it is significant that this is not always so. The escapist urge is often not simply a desire to mentally relive a pleasant past experience. In many cases, the past was not particularly happy, but the protagonist, discontent with the present, nonetheless wishes to return to it because at least it is different from the unfulfilling present. The longing for the past is a really a symptom of their general restless discontentment.

The critical concept that best explains this desire to escape to the past is nostalgia. Svetlana Boym provides an excellent definition and discussion of nostalgia in *The Future of Nostalgia*. "Nostalgia (from *nostos*—return home, and *algia*—longing) is a longing for

a home that no longer exists or that has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy. Nostalgic love can only survive in a long-distance relationship" (xiii). While once understood as a physiological ailment, treated with opium, leeches and vacations in the Alps, nostalgia is now "the incurable modern condition" (Boym xiv). She explains that the progress of modern societies always entails an irreversible loss and a wish to return.

In counterpoint to our fascination with cyberspace and the virtual global village, there is a no less global epidemic of nostalgia, an affective yearning for a community with a collective memory, a longing for continuity in a fragmented world. Nostalgia inevitably reappears as a defense mechanism in a time of accelerated rhythms of life and historical upheavals. (Boym xiv)

Boym's description of the progressive technological milieu most conducive to nostalgia accurately reflects the atmosphere in which Soledad Puértolas's characters are steeped, including the "historical upheavals" that have made collective memory so problematic in Spain.

In particular the urban space, with its rapid and constant changes, can exacerbate this sense of fragmentation. Most of Puértolas's protagonists live in major cities, especially Madrid, and the author herself has spent most of her life there or nearby. As shown in her memoir "Alrededores de Madrid" (*Recuerdos de otra persona*), the disorienting city can be conducive to nostalgia in part because it awakens a desire for unmediated connection with nature. Puértolas notes the city dweller's compulsion to go on long walks through the countryside, which can temporarily appease one's longing for beautiful natural surroundings. Likewise, in "Piscinas" (also from *Recuerdos*) Puértolas muses that people who have chosen to live in a land-locked city often swim in pools, trying in vain to satisfy their nostalgia for the ocean.

In addition to alienating its residents from nature, the city can also threaten its inhabitants' connection to their past. The constant changes in appearance to what were once familiar settings are a threat to memory and an inspiration for nostalgia. This is one of the most important themes in the memoirs of *Recuerdos de otra persona*; many pieces in this collection address Puértolas's anxiety over returning to old familiar places from her past, especially cities, that have been changed beyond recognition. These include "Paseos por Madrid," "La puerta del verano," "Desapariciones," "El mundo conocido," "Tiempo de cafeterías," "Noruega" and "Sábado tarde." Returning to the site of the past becomes literally impossible as urban progress disrupts a person's sense of physical continuity. Nostalgia, in Puértolas's view, is not so much hope for a romantic notion of a simpler time as it is "a longing for continuity in a fragmented world" (Boym xiv).

Boym divides nostalgia into two types, a distinction which is useful to the current discussion. These categories correspond to the two etymological components of the word *nostalgia*. She calls "restorative nostalgia" that which focuses on *nostos*, the recovery of the lost home, and "reflective nostalgia" that which emphasizes *algia*, a wistful longing that prefers to delay the homecoming. It is the latter "reflective nostalgia" which best describes the escapist mode of memory in Puértolas's writing. Many of the protagonists of her narratives seem restless and discontented, characterized by a generalized longing, without being able to articulate what they long for.

Nostalgia has multiple dimensions and causes. James Phillips identifies what he terms phenomenological and psychoanalytical components of nostalgia. The former refers to "...distance from the spatio-temporal world—a distance in which temporal factors predominate over spatial ones..." and the latter is "...a response to the absence of

the other...” (Phillips 71). “In both cases we are dealing with a kind of negativity of the present—the nostalgia expressing a regret over the fact and the necessity of the negativity. Further, in both cases the nostalgia reveals the negative present and virtually creates the anterior state of plenitude” (Phillips 71). In Puértolas’s narratives, characters experience nostalgia both for past time and for lost objects of affection; the two become indistinguishable when the passage of time is implicated in the absence of the object of longing.

Susan Stewart’s *On Longing* identifies a further element of absence besides Phillips’s phenomenological and psychoanalytic categories; a linguistic negativity is another cause for longing, or “the social disease of nostalgia” (Stewart ix). For Stewart, nostalgia is essentially the desire for unmediated, authentic lived experience as in a prelapsarian utopia (23). In her view, the major obstacle to this is language, the gap between signified and signifier.

Nostalgia is the repetition that mourns the inauthenticity of all repetition and denies the repetition’s capacity to form identity....The inability of the sign to “capture” its signified, of narrative to be one with its object, and of the genres of mechanical reproduction to approximate the time of face-to-face communication leads to a generalized desire for origin, for nature, and for unmediated experience that is at work in nostalgic longing. (23-24)

The nostalgic, reminiscing characters throughout Puértolas’s work exemplify this principle, because as they seek to relive the past through narrative, they are faced with the inadequacy of their narrated memories to ease their insatiable longing.

Soledad Puértolas’s characters focus more on longing for something—especially something in the past—than actually attaining it, because they perceive the impossibility of conjuring reality through their words nor of restoring the lost things of the past. Linda Hutcheon explains: “Nostalgia, in fact, may depend precisely on the *irrecoverable* nature

of the past for its emotional impact and appeal. It is the very pastness of the past, its inaccessibility, that likely accounts for a large part of nostalgia's power..." (195, original emphasis). Phillips also emphasizes nostalgia's recognition of the past as irrecoverable. "The past as experienced in nostalgia is both pleasurable and painful. The precious moments are at once bitter and sweet—bitter because lost, all the more sweet for being lost" (Phillips 66). Mary Warnock similarly theorizes that the past is fascinating and enticing simply because it is past; time being unidirectional and irreversible often leads to an anxious sense of "paradise lost" (77). Memory is the only way to reverse time and approximate a return to the paradise of the past. "Memory then comes as a saviour. Like a Messiah, it is to save us from the otherwise inevitable destruction brought by death and time" (Warnock 141).

Warnock's use of religious terminology is appropriate here, because it contrasts with Puértolas's characters' lack of faith. In post-Christian Europe, these fanciful nostalgic longings may be the only Messiah these characters can imagine. Malcolm Chase and Christopher Shaw point out that this anxiety associated with nostalgia most fully expresses itself in a secular society, in which death's only perceived dimension is that of biological finality (5). At the individual and the collective level, interest directed toward the past signals an absence of hope in the future. Futile longing for paradise lost has replaced pious hope for the paradise to be regained beyond the grave.

The nostalgic characters in Puértolas's narratives, disappointed in the present and lacking hope and direction for the future, take refuge in memory and cling to the past. Memory shifts focus away from the pain of the present and brings back the best moments of life, the moments of excitement and new beginnings. As many critics note, life looks

better in hindsight; according to David Gross, many psychologists believe that "...most people tend to misrepresent their pasts by unwittingly bathing them in the glow of nostalgia and sentiment" (59). Fred Davis writes, similarly, that nostalgia has the effect of minimizing unpleasant experiences (37). David Loewenthal hypothesizes that the past often looks more attractive than the present because hindsight facilitates a more complete and objective understanding of events that may have been difficult to interpret at the time ("Nostalgia" 29-30). As Hutcheon writes, "Nostalgic distancing sanitizes as it selects, making the past feel complete, stable, coherent, safe from the unexpected and the untoward, from accident or betrayal—in other words, making it so very unlike the present" (195).

A further attraction of reminiscence is that through memory, one can return to a previous stage of life and, more importantly, to an earlier version of oneself. According to Davis, "...it is of the essence of nostalgic experience to cultivate appreciative stances to former selves" (36). Puértolas's characters tend to be introspective, so an attraction of memory and nostalgia is that it is a form of self-examination and even self-love. In any nostalgic venture, memory will frustrate, not only because of memory's limitations but because nostalgia is always a longing with no attainable object.<sup>26</sup> However, in the quest for personal meaning through self-knowledge, these characters are resigned to keep fueling the longing as they seek traces of their past.

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<sup>26</sup> Stewart writes, "Nostalgia is a sadness without an object, a sadness which creates a longing that of necessity is inauthentic because it does not take part in lived experience. Rather, it remains behind and before that experience" (23). According to Stewart, nostalgia's object is ultimately unreachable because it is a narrative construction and not a material reality.

### **Childhood Spaces: Realms of Possibility in *Recuerdos de otra persona***

A trace of the past that reminds one of the inevitable passage of time and inspires nostalgia can be found in spaces associated with the past and with childhood, including urban spaces as described above. A physical return to “paradise lost” may be possible geographically, though it usually heightens awareness of the distance between present and past as the changes made to these places are as irreversible as time itself. Returning as an adult to a familiar place from childhood or adolescence is also a reminder of the irreversible changes in oneself. In “Paseos por Madrid” (*Recuerdos de otra persona*), for example, Puértolas describes how a trip through Madrid causes her to nostalgically recall some now faded and blurred memories, resulting not in a desire to return to her youth, but in a striking awareness of certain neighborhoods’ aura of “pastness” for her. Returning to a space of the past conjures for her “la mera nostalgia del transcurrir del tiempo” (91).

Puértolas’s memoirs recorded in *Recuerdos de otra persona* are filled with references to the spaces of her childhood: rooms, homes, stores, streets and cities. These stories are a good starting point for an exploration of nostalgia because in her reminiscing she frequently theorizes about the nature of memory and nostalgia. Another memoir of this type from the same collection is “El piso de Zaragoza,” in which Puértolas describes the terrace of her childhood home, where she and her sisters used to play. When her parents renovated the apartment and enclosed the terrace, it ceased to be the inchoate space of childhood imagination and disorder and became a respectable, grown-up room. Puértolas notes the parallel between this transformation and her own maturation into adolescence. However, she says that at night, presumably in dreams of past memories, the darkness and disorder of childhood return. This is memory in its savior-role as noted

by Warnock above, rescuing the adult rememberer “from the otherwise inevitable destruction brought by death and time” and by, we might add, home renovations (Warnock 141). Chase and Shaw theorize that a reason childhood memories can be so dear is because children experience time differently from adults. Children naturally orient their sense of time around private, subjective experience, such as play-time on the Zaragoza terrace, and this is lost when they learn to measure their lives by the clock. Adults nostalgically dream about becoming unaware of the relentless clock once again (Chase and Shaw 4-5).

Like the unfinished, unstructured play space of the terrace in Zaragoza, the past is a realm of undifferentiated possibility, a point at which the future was unknown, undetermined and exciting. Another autobiographical sketch from *Recuerdos* offers an image that conveys this same sense of anticipation and indeterminate possibility in the future. In “Casas a medio hacer,” Puértolas recalls her childhood fascination with a construction site near her school. During class she would find herself imagining the work that was materializing at that same moment, and every afternoon she and her friend would explore the unfinished building. The reason for this fascination is also why memories of the past and of childhood are compelling: “Puede que lo que se está haciendo nos pertenezca más que lo hecho y terminado. Está más lleno de posibilidades y sueños. Lo terminado lleva en su seno la renuncia y la frustración” (64). Both this and the previous story use a construction metaphor to aptly illustrate the irreversible transformations caused by the passage of time. Only through memory can one unbuild what has been completed, to reverse the frustrations and failures of life and return to the

point at which these disappointments were still unknown, when the life one has since built was still a construction zone.

### **Nostalgia and *Queda la noche***

Nostalgia as a longing to escape to a time and space of unknown possibility, as portrayed in the memoirs above, is also an important impulse among Puértolas's fictional narratives. *Queda la noche* is the novel which best illustrates nostalgia as discontentment with the present and a vague wish to escape to a figurative construction zone, a time and place of indeterminate possibilities. The past is just one possible object of this wistful longing; desire is also directed to the future, a foreign country, or the house next door. Boym agrees that nostalgia is not always directed backwards, but sometimes forwards toward the future (xvi) or even "sideways," a vague yearning for "St. Elsewhere, another time, a better life" (xiv).<sup>27</sup> In the first part of the novel, the protagonist Aurora narrates her travels to Asia and describes Delhi in particular detail. The city is rich in history and tradition, but this context is subordinated to the internal history of the protagonist; as usual, collective memory is irrelevant to individual experience. Aurora meets Ishwar who takes her to a religious festival in the city at night. After being blessed by a priest in a ritual she does not understand, Aurora notes: "Habíamos asistido juntos a un rito, todo lo desordenado y rápido que se quiera, pero un rito que debía tener un sentido del que nos podíamos apropiarnos a nuestra manera y eso era lo que habíamos hecho..." (38). The significance of the priest's blessing is not that it allows the couple to participate in an act

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<sup>27</sup> Hutcheon agrees that the nostalgic and the utopian, her term for a longing for the future, are similar in that they "share a common rejection of the here and now" (204). Davis wishes to maintain that nostalgia must look backwards and reasons that if people can be nostalgic for the future, perhaps they really imagine looking back on the future once it is past (12). I believe Boym and Hutcheon are correct that nostalgia can be interpreted more broadly as a longing for any inaccessible time or space.

of collective, cultural remembrance but rather they interpret it how they will, the personal story of their relationship taking precedence over any other communal significance of the religious act.

Following Aurora's initiation into her adventures in Delhi, in this strange city of chance encounters, intoxicating substances and fleeting love, two moments during a day trip to the Taj Mahal are particularly significant for her. First, from the taxi window Aurora sees a woman wearing a brightly colored sari and gold jewelry doing road construction, an odd task considering her apparel, but appropriate in light of the recurring metaphor of the enticing work in progress. Aurora finds herself wondering what her life would be like if she were that woman. Second, outside the Taj Mahal, she sees a muddy, stagnant river with expansive yellow fields on the other side. Although she is unsure why, she identifies herself with the river, and this image becomes a recurring memory throughout the rest of the novel. Both the exotic woman and the river represent Aurora's discontentment and longing. Aurora does not really want to be an Indian construction worker, but the woman's striking appearance evokes her curiosity; she and her work represent Aurora's dream of the unknown and the incomplete. Like the river, Aurora's life feels dull and stagnant, and she fantasizes about the expansive and unexplored opposite shore; she observes "lo mejor siempre está en la otra orilla" (51). The vivid, emotionally significant recurring mental image of the muddy Indian river becomes a self-defining memory for Aurora, emblematic of the unresolved (and unresolvable) concern of her perpetual nostalgia.

As Aurora's return flight to Madrid lifts off the ground, she feels strongly nostalgic for what she is leaving behind. This is not because she would rather stay in

India; she does not lament the end of her affair with Ishwar, because she realizes that the most interesting part, the moments of anticipation and seduction, are over and cannot be recovered. Rather she is again vaguely wishing for something she cannot have. This illustrates Boym's claim: "Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy" (xiii). Aurora has not suffered loss so much as she has been awakened to her fantasies of another kind of life, one that she cannot attain.

Back in Madrid, India seems to Aurora as distant as if it had never existed, yet little by little all the memories and people unexpectedly resurface and intertwine. These reminders of her trip make Aurora nostalgic mainly because Asia represents something other than what she knows in Spain—like the elusive opposite shore which, when compared to the dismal, muddy river, seems full of promise. Aurora again expresses her wish for a different life in the final chapter of the novel as she looks at the people in the windows across the street from her family's apartment. "Imaginé cómo sería mi vida en su casa, siendo yo esa mujer u otra cualquiera, moviéndome por habitaciones ahora desconocidas y que serían las mías. Ése era el vértigo de lo eternamente conocido, de los secretos desvelados. Mejor ignorarlo" (225).<sup>28</sup> This disgust for "los secretos desvelados" echoes Puértolas's stated fascination for the building under construction in "Casas a medio hacer": what is still unfinished and unknown is more attractive, because "[l]o terminado lleva en su seno la renuncia y la frustración" ("Casas" 64).

For Aurora, part of the appeal of travel is that it allows an escape from "lo eternamente conocido." The theme of travel abroad is an important recurring motif in

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<sup>28</sup> Puértolas recalls in "El piso de Zaragoza" (*Recuerdos de otra persona*) that as a child she used to do the same thing: "He imaginado muchas vidas al otro lado de las ventanas y balcones que, como las nuestras, daban al inmenso patio" (68-69).

Puértolas's writing, closely akin to the recurring character type of the foreign woman living abroad permanently, described in the previous chapter.<sup>29</sup> Wang Jun identifies travel as a means of self-discovery, especially for female characters (412). Aside from the benefits of travel as an escape from familiar and mundane surroundings, the downside is that physical dislocation can also expose characters' solitude and disorientation. Travel, especially the time actually spent in the airport or on the train, is a liminal, in-between space of solitude that often induces characters to reflect upon life and provides ample time for their introspection.<sup>30</sup> A further important theme in Puértolas is relationships established due to chance encounters, especially fleeting love affairs, and travel provides ideal conditions for these random interactions, as demonstrated in this novel by Aurora's associations with Ishwar and the other hotel guests.

Travel is also the perfect theme for exploring the phenomenon of nostalgia. For instance, the narrator of "Nosotros los viajeros" (*Gente que vino a mi boda*) theorizes in the opening sentence: "...cogemos trenes, aviones, barcos, coches, autobuses, siempre en busca de algo, un recuerdo que se escapa, un sueño a punto de cumplirse..." (31), thus linking travel to memory and longing. As Boym has pointed out regarding the word's etymology, nostalgia is essentially homesickness. However, she further notes that travel in the modern context may entail an ironic reversal of homesickness. She specifically cites Jorge Luis Borges's poem about Ulysses, a perfect example of "reflective nostalgia," who prefers longing (*algia*) to the actual return home (*nostos*). After his return

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<sup>29</sup> Characters who travel abroad are abundant and include Lilly of *Burdeos*, Dolores of *Todos mienten*, Blanca of *Historia de un abrigo* and the anonymous narrators of *Una vida inesperada*, "Camino de Houmt Souk," "El pañuelo de Macke" and "Buenos deseos" (*Adiós a las novias*), "Citas" and "Nosotros los viajeros" (*Gente que vino a mi boda*) and "En el límite de la ciudad" (*Una enfermedad moral*).

<sup>30</sup> A perfect example of this is seen in the round-trip train journey of "La hija predilecta" (*Gente que vino a mi boda*), outlined in the previous chapter.

home, Borges's Ulysses realizes that he preferred to be out wandering, calling himself "Nobody" and longing for home (Boym 50). According to this thinking, the more significant journey is not geographic but psychological; what the modern traveler really longs for is not a literal place, but a discovery of self. "Homecoming does not signify a recovery of identity; it does not end the journey in the virtual space of imagination. A modern nostalgic can be homesick and sick of home, at once" (Boym 50). Similarly, Vladimir Yankelévitch in *L'Irreversible et la nostalgie* has affirmed "the goal of the odyssey is a rendez-vous with oneself" (cited in Boym 50). In *Queda la noche*, Aurora feels perpetually nostalgic (homesick) because she is not satisfied with her life, and perhaps she realizes that a "rendez-vous with herself," whatever that would look like, is never going to be possible.

The novel's title *Queda la noche* expresses Aurora's nostalgic desire for anything other than what she has now. Life is a dim, fading twilight, but at least night remains; the coming of night promises something new (if not different or better). The other shore of the river, the life of the Indian woman and the life of the neighbors across the street are, like night, the realms of the new and unknown. Aurora's desire to enter these worlds is a longing for a new beginning; nightfall and a love affair likewise begin in excitement and promise. Unlike the various reminiscing characters outlined in the previous chapter, Aurora's memories neither inspire her to embrace nor reject responsibility in the present. Instead, her memory is the site of longing, and the process of recollection highlights her impossible desire for escape.

## **Return to the Beginning: “Zapatos” and “Accidente”**

An aspect of Aurora’s nostalgia relates to her interest in the beginning of a love affair, and this is one of the most important facets of nostalgia that Puértolas explores in her works. The beginning is the best part of everything and is the main cause of Aurora’s longing for the past, as everything which has become familiar and boring once had an exciting new beginning in the past. As she reflects on her adventure with Ishwar, she decides that the most exciting moments in any encounter are “...los preámbulos, la preparación, a distancia, todavía, de esa hipotética culminación o satisfacción...” (70). These tenuous beginnings are only poignant in retrospect, as “[l]o que hace que la aproximación quede en nuestro recuerdo como la mejor y más rica etapa de las relaciones es, precisamente, la llegada a la meta” (70).<sup>31</sup> Because she and Ishwar have arrived at a common “meta” during their brief intrigue, she explains, “...podíamos despedirnos con satisfacción, aunque con dolor, con pena, con nostalgia” (70). The nostalgia and pain in their parting stems more from regret that the moments of initiation and anticipation are past than from a thwarted desire to deepen their meaningful intimacy.<sup>32</sup> This is again consistent with the observation cited above: “Puede que lo que se está haciendo nos pertenezca más que lo hecho y terminado. Está más lleno de posibilidades y sueños” (“Casas” 64).

Nostalgia for the beginning often relates to love affairs, but it can also describe the excitement associated with any new beginning. The memoirs “Pamplona,” “Viajes a

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<sup>31</sup> Similarly, in *Si al atardecer llegara el mensajero*, as Estrella and Nichi discuss recent sexual liaisons, the women conclude that love is better before it is consummated, in the phase of anticipation.

<sup>32</sup> Borja of *Historia de un abrigo* feels a similar nostalgic regret when Elena ends their affair. Specifically, Borja longs for the future he will now never share with her. “Por unos instantes, mientras la miraba y sabía que todo había terminado, había añorado la vida que nunca viviría con ella” (96).

Madrid” and “La puerta del verano” (*Recuerdos de otra persona*) describe this anticipation surrounding the beginning of a promising summer vacation. Puértolas mentally returns to her experiences as a child at the first sign of summer: “...pienso y deseo que pase algo, que suceda algo, y presiento que sí, que sucederá” (“Pamplona” 57). She recalls this same anticipation the first time she ever visited Madrid. While approaching the city on the highway on a summer afternoon: “Pensé que iba a pasar algo después de aquello” (“Viajes a Madrid” 83). Summer always makes her feel like something is about to happen, but “La puerta del verano” states this anticipation pessimistically: “Posiblemente, esos primeros días del verano en Zaragoza se hayan ido convirtiendo en símbolo de lo que se desvanece, de todo lo que iba a llegar y no llegó” (20). This latter quote, which resonates with the disappointment in “Lento regreso a casa” (*Adiós a las novias*) of “mi primer dolor de amor, ya que no llegó a ser una historia” (25), is most representative of Puértolas’s work; the vague hope that something exciting will happen provides temporary comfort but typically evaporates without delivering the promised excitement.

Memory trained on the point of origin or the beginning of something is not original with Puértolas; it is a concept that can be traced to ancient history. David Gross notes that Roman citizens directed their attention toward their origins and the founding of Rome. Focusing on the greatness of Rome’s origins was understood as the solution to its many contemporary political problems.

The solution to this breakdown of order was that Rome needed to renew itself by returning to the mystique of its beginnings. And it needed to see these beginnings...as rich with possibilities, a font of creative vitality and moral energy.... Quite literally, to the Roman way of thinking the origin

was the goal, for ontologically the origin never had been and never could be surpassed. (Gross 94)

This act of recalling Rome's origins refers to the collective memory of a momentous event in history, one that the individuals had not actually experienced. In many important ways the corporate memory of Rome's founding is distinct from the private reminiscings of Puértolas's protagonists regarding such trivialities as the initiation of summer or of a new relationship. However, in both scenarios the point of origin is idealized as the moment of maximum significance, "rich with possibilities" (Gross 94); in the absence of a remembering community or nation, personal life events may assume significance formerly reserved for happenings pertaining to the national consciousness. Both the founding of Rome and the beginning of a love affair can be understood to contain the seeds of potential and anticipation of greatness to follow.

Nostalgia as a mental return to the moment of encounter or initiation that potentially unfolds as a romantic drama can be seen in the short stories "Zapatos" and "Accidente." In "Zapatos" from *Gente que vino a mi boda*, the male narrator describes a chance encounter, a mundane scene in a shoe store. As the narrator sets the scene, he describes it in cinematic terms: the lights are "focos" (24) and the clothing, or actors' costumes, were shabby even "cuando la estrenaron" (25). The narrator says, "...me dediqué a observar la escena" (24), a scene made more interesting by its compound voyeurism. The narrator gazes at the male clerk, who in turn watches "la actuación de una mujer joven" (25) as she gets advice from her mother and her aunt, who are also situated as "espectadoras" (25), about which pair of boots to buy.

As the scene plays out in the shoe store, the narrator becomes increasingly attracted to the young customer. As she walks around the store to test out the boots, she

challenges his objectifying posture by meeting his gaze and furtively dropping a card into his pocket. The final paragraph is an apostrophe to the young woman: “Sólo te pregunto algunas veces en qué momento... decidiste deslizar la tarjeta con tu nombre y tu mensaje en el bolsillo de mi chaqueta...” (30). It is implied that their initial chance encounter has taken on great significance because it led to “la llegada a la meta,” as Aurora euphemistically describes it. The narrator explains the reason for his question: “Si te lo pregunto es para volver a revivir aquel tiempo lento que tuve que atravesar hasta fijarme en ti y desear que te acercaras a mí y me rozaras y me dejaras una señal por la que guiarme, ese tiempo lento en el que tú ya te habías instalado y del que ya eras la dueña” (30). The narrator’s nostalgia for this past moment is a desire to return to the beginning, to relive in slow motion that specific point at which a chance encounter became a moment of erotic initiation, the happy moment when, through no effort on his part, his desire became reality.

Another example of a chance encounter that becomes significant in retrospect is “Accidente” from *Adiós a las novias*, in which Raquel has a minor car accident while driving to an exclusive party. She and the other driver shout insults at one another, but as they exchange identification information he notices her elegant party dress and looks at her with curiosity. At his gaze, Raquel also feels curious and expectant, but the two silently part ways. At the party, which turns out to be rather dull, Raquel finds herself suddenly thinking nostalgically about the other driver and his look of curiosity. She describes him in hindsight as “extraordinariamente amable” (44) and even regrets not inviting him to the party.

Raquel's assessment of "amable" is excessive and unwarranted, considering his aggression toward her, and the only basis for her admiration is the curious look he gave her. Most likely, Raquel only wishes she had gotten to know that man because now it is impossible. Even though she recorded his name and other identifying information, unlike the relationship begun in "Zapatos" there is no evidence that Raquel thinks of tracking him down. When she met him, she had been thinking about the party, and now that the party has turned out to be a disappointment, she is thinking about him, wishing in both cases for what she does not have, like Aurora's wish for the muddy river's far shore. Aurora says, as cited above, that the only reason to remember the first moments of an encounter is if they culminate satisfactorily; if this is true, then it is surprising that Raquel remembers her encounter with such fondness, since it apparently led nowhere. Perhaps the story between the two motorists will continue, but Raquel's nostalgia more likely indicates that she has not yet accepted the futility of her fantasies about that other driver. This accidental encounter has become the object of Raquel's irrational longing; like Aurora, it seems she too is merely wishing for the beginning of something, with no factual basis for believing that it holds any promise.

**Holding on to Optimal Moments: "Buenos deseos," "El pañuelo de Macke" and "La necesidad de marcharse de todos los sitios"**

Puértolas's characters often direct their nostalgia toward those early moments of tenuous anticipation and sexual attraction that promise to unfold in a love affair. These moments of initiation are more interesting and memorable than the continuation of the affair, as though the wanting is better than the having. Another reason characters may feel nostalgic is simply because they do not want to lose their happy experiences (the first

moments of an affair being just one type of pleasant memory). Phillips explains that nostalgic memory has "...a tendency to crystallize into precious moments" (66). The reinterpretive "story" function of memory works actively to preserve these happy moments and to "...assign them more nostalgic valency. Events are fashioned into a kind of imaginary product in which memory, distortion, forgetting, and reorganization all play a role" (Phillips 66). The narrator of "Buenos deseos" of *Adiós a las novias* clings to such precious memories of love, excitement and happiness; she longs for future happiness as well but with no rational expectation of fulfillment. In this story, the liminal space of travel leads this narrator to nostalgic introspection. As she waits in the airport writing in her journal, her pending travel to Lisbon causes her to reminisce about an evanescent sexual liaison from a past vacation, somewhat like Aurora's affair with Ishwar in India. She recalls her lover René's theory about "momentos óptimos, decía, momentos que le hicieran elevarse sobre la realidad, volar" (105) and wonders about the optimal moments in her own life.

By chance, a fellow passenger both to and from Lisbon who looks much like René wishes her "*bon voyage*." These well-wishes, noted by the story's title, cause the narrator to hope that "[a] lo mejor vuelven los momentos óptimos" (110). Her nostalgic longing is directed both backward and forward in time; memory of her affair with René was a high point for her, and it reminds her that she might have a similar experience in the future. The reader may realize the problem with the narrator's hopeful attitude: these "momentos óptimos" are of no appreciable duration, as fleeting as the kind words from the other traveler. Still, the narrator seems to think that fleeting moments of pleasure are

the best to which she can aspire in life, and she directs her nostalgic energies toward remembering past optimal moments and creating or imagining future ones.

Irene, the narrator of “El pañuelo de Macke” from *Adiós a las novias*, also reminisces about a lover she met while traveling internationally, Gustav. At the beginning, the affair is exciting and idyllic. Gustav writes to her of eternal love and promises that they will see each other often. However, Irene is doubtful, and on her tearful return flight to Spain thinks, “El amor ya había alcanzado su culminación. Sólo quedaba alejarse de él” (208), much like Aurora’s melancholy thoughts during her flight home upon leaving Ishwar in India. When Gustav visits her, the excitement is gone, and soon Irene ends the relationship. Even though she understands that “ya es una historia pasada, irrecuperable” (216), at the same time she still holds onto the memory, especially the memory of the beginning of their love story, because it represents an optimal moment of her life.

As she evokes the memory of their first night together, she says she wants to savor it, sink into it as into a bath. Similar to Aurora’s anticipation of nightfall, that night Irene also anticipated a new beginning. She felt “...descansada y feliz, como si me esperara la mejor de las noches. Y así fue. Así fue” (205). Even in retrospect, knowing the disappointment that followed their relationship’s exciting beginning, Irene still considers meeting Gustav as “...la historia clave de mi vida. Quiero recordarla para que siga con su categoría de historia clave, que no la pierda, ¡Dios mío!, que no se me borre de la memoria, que tenga yo algo importante que evocar, algo a lo que agarrarme, aunque esté en el pasado...” (202). Though it is really only a moment of fleeting pleasure, she calls this memory her most significant life event, which despite its happiness suggests the

essential emptiness of her existence. The only way she can find to live with purpose is to nostalgically cling to that moment of past happiness.

Another character who expends unusual energy reliving the moments of her life is the narrator of “La necesidad de marcharse de todos los sitios” of *Gente que vino a mi boda*. This narrator finds times of solitude and reflection not during travel but at night. Her life is so hurried she feels she cannot properly evaluate it as it happens; instead she lies awake almost all night to reflect on each day’s events, “intentar retener, o alcanzar, todo lo que se me ha ido escapando durante el día” (113). She takes refuge and comfort in the private space of her nightly reminiscings, like Irene luxuriating in the bathtub of her recollections. Here she relives the day and other important moments of her life, acknowledging at the same time that this habit is motivated by a fear that her life would escape from her if she relinquished her strange insomnia. She scoffs at her husband’s and doctor’s concern that she adopt healthy sleep patterns and keeps her nightly vigils secret from them.

This narrator’s habit of resisting sleep, convincing herself that her life will be more orderly if she can spend the night organizing her thoughts, is so unusual that the reader is likely to be unsympathetic toward her. We might even be inclined to assign to her Freud’s diagnosis of hysteria, as he noted that “hysterics suffer mainly from reminiscences” (qtd. in Gross 41). Her insomnia, instead of providing a cure for her frantic life, is merely another symptom of it. Though she treasures her nightly sessions of reminiscence, Draaisma affirms that this type of excessive memory is actually a curse. “Sleep is temporary oblivion and he who has to dispense with that blessing is delivered over to his memories.... Every insomniac lives temporarily with the curse of an absolute

memory” (71).<sup>33</sup> Perhaps the narrator does not see her sleeplessness as a curse because it is overshadowed by an even greater curse, a “paradise lost” anxiety (Warnock 77) about life passing by before she has a chance to live it. We may infer that she does not know how to live because she cannot decide what her life really is. She says that by dawn, the course of her thoughts and memories brings her to conclude vaguely that “quizá mi vida tenga su destino” (125), and with this thought she can sleep contentedly for a few minutes before the next day’s responsibilities again overwhelm her. This character’s escape into memory is not merely a search for optimal moments to cling to but is a survival technique, a self-destructive attempt to cope with life’s perplexities, daily compounded by the anxiety of the passage of time and the approach of death. In Wong’s reminiscence taxonomy, she is engaging in escapist—also appropriately called *defensive*—reminiscing, which is not associated with good health. “Like any form of fantasy, escapist reminiscence may provide instant relief from a painful present, but it becomes unadaptive when it is prolonged and excessive to the point of engulfing one’s waking hours” (Wong and Watt 273); certainly it is even more extreme when memories engulf one’s sleeping hours. As Stewart would point out, this character’s incessant retelling of her life, converting experience into narrative, will in fact exacerbate rather than pacify her yearnings by fueling the frustration caused by the inadequacy of language.

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<sup>33</sup> In Draaisma’s discussion of absolute memory, he refers to the famous Jorge Luis Borges protagonist of “Funes el memorioso,” whose unusual curse was the inability to forget anything. “In an interview, Borges once let slip that his story about Funes was a metaphor for insomnia, an affliction from which he suffered himself” (Draaisma 71). Like Borges, Puértolas also seems to connect excessive memory with sleeplessness.

### **Empathy for a Lost Self: “El inventor del tetrabrik” and “La corriente del golfo”**

As time moves steadily forward, characters like the above narrator from “La necesidad de marcharse” may feel that life’s experiences are slipping through their fingers before they can really savor them. Through memory they can grasp the fugitive moments and attempt to interpret their importance and to assimilate them into their life stories. The memories a character savors may not necessarily be pleasant “momentos óptimos,” as the following examples show, but the characters still look back on these difficult periods with nostalgia. This may seem surprising or even inappropriate, yet Davis has noted that there is no antonym for *nostalgia* (15), and as Janelle L. Wilson writes, “there cannot be a so-called negative nostalgia” (27). Because of nostalgia’s inherently bittersweet quality, there is no separate concept to describe reminiscing about pain as opposed to joy. Regardless of whether memories are happy or sad, there is something about the past that compels us to remember, because it is *our* past. Recalling the diachronic split of the subject into present “I” and past “me,” the urge toward self-understanding will evoke nostalgia of “me,” notwithstanding what that past version of myself may have suffered. This nostalgia for a past self is another important feature of memory in Puértolas’s works.

In “El inventor del tetrabrik” from *La corriente del golfo*, the narrator describes a difficult period of her past. Recently laid off from her job, divorced and trying to raise two children, she found herself desperately lonely and disoriented, as though stripped of major outward components of her personal identity. This narrator describes her responsibilities during this lonely time of unemployment, basic housekeeping and

childcare tasks, and her monotonous chores are interspersed with overeating, napping and crying.

This story involves three time frames: she is writing about this past experience from the vantage point of the present, and she also goes further into the past, describing her marriage and its failure. The differentiation of time frames lends interest to the story, because the detailed description of the past draws attention to the fact that the narrator does not explain what her present situation is. She indicates that somehow she has gotten out of the frustrating situation, stating enigmatically: “Me rescataron, es cierto, y debo agradecerse al destino, pero es curioso que al recordar esa época sienta nostalgia” (122). This begs the question of who rescued her and how, since no clues are provided. Also perplexing is why she would feel nostalgic for a memory of misery. She apparently asks herself the same thing: “Me aferro a esa época en busca de algo, ¿quién era yo? Me veo de lejos, a mucha distancia” (122). The few remaining sentences of the story provide a possible answer as well as explaining the importance of the title. She recalls a specific day when she was feeding her children, and as she was cutting open the milk container, her son Daniel asked who invented the Tetra Brik.<sup>34</sup> Her response to her son is: “Puede haberlo inventado cualquiera, alguien como nosotros. Debe de haberse hecho muy rico” (122). They continue by describing the life of this rich hypothetical inventor, his world travels, his luxurious mansion and beautiful gardens; “Nuestra imaginación se disparó mientras caía la noche” (123). She and her sons almost certainly will never become rich and famous, so this sort of dreaming may be as useless as Aurora’s wish for nightfall or

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<sup>34</sup> According to the corporate website of Tetra Pak, manufacturer of the Tetra Brik package: “The Tetra Brik package has a rectangular shape and is specifically designed to be stacked on the European pallet... In the Tetra Brik package you can pack pasteurised milk and juice products for chilled distribution.” 17 Feb. 2006 <<http://www.tetrapak.com/index.asp?navid=65>>.

the other shore of the river, yet the narrator was comforted in the past by her imagination and in the present by the memory of her imagination.

An advantage of difficult times is the hopeful anticipation that circumstances must improve sooner or later, and indeed it seems that the narrator's life has since improved, whether or not by her becoming a rich inventor. This phase of her life is like the construction site, chaotic and empty in appearance but actually "lleno de posibilidades y sueños" ("Casas" 64). The narrator remembers this time with tenderness precisely because her misery inspired her to freely dream about a better life. Those distressing days were days of longing, of a sort of nostalgia directed toward the future. By directing her nostalgia back to this time, it is as if she reaches a new level of yearning; *meta-nostalgia* might be a term to describe this longing for a time of longing. Stewart has noted that nostalgia in itself is always a compound longing: "This point of desire which the nostalgic seeks is in fact the absence that is the very generating mechanism of desire....nostalgia is the desire for desire" (23). The nostalgic character of "El inventor del tetrabrik" adds yet another layer of longing as she creates her nostalgic past self through narrative.

Apart from her circumstances, the narrator's interjected "¿quién era yo?" suggests that reminiscing about this time makes her think about herself and her identity. As she looks at the past, she is disconcerted by the uncanny feeling that "[m]e veo de lejos, a mucha distancia" (122). Her question "who was I" signals the disparity between "I" and "me," her past and present selves. As Phillips notes: "It is the self as divided and split temporally which is lamented in nostalgia" (67). Not only can she not recover the past, she can never again be who she was. Part of her identity belongs to that lost paradise of

the past; the fact that the situation was less than paradisiacal does not nullify its lostness. Her nostalgia is motivated by a longing for self-knowledge, for wholeness, and only through memory can she recover that lost part of herself. Incidentally, her stated desire to cling to the memory of herself is the same as what motivates the memory of the Irene, the narrator of “El pañuelo de Macke.” Irene’s nostalgia also correlates to the perceived gulf between past and present self: “...debo recordar el tiempo aquel y aferrarme a él, a la persona que lo vivió y lo disfrutó porque siento admiración y envidia hacia esa persona y quisiera parecerme un poco a ella” (“Pañuelo” 198). This recalls Davis’s analysis that nostalgia helps one to “...cultivate appreciative stances to former selves” (36). Again, Stewart would contend that these past selves can only be evoked imperfectly through language, so these narratives merely emphasize the distance between that past “me” and the present “I” telling the story.

“La corriente del golfo,” from the collection of that title, is another memory of a frustrating episode in the protagonist’s life. In this story the newlywed narrator (Puértolas claims in the prologue that she is here narrating one of her own real-life memories) describes the eight months she and her husband spent in Norway as he studied with a university scholarship. Somewhat like a *cuadro costumbrista*, she describes the country’s cold climate, landscape, parks, movie theaters, bookstores, ice cream shops, tourist attractions and winter sports, as well as their living spaces and the people they meet—Norwegian natives and other international students. While the whole experience is starkly different from what the couple knew in Spain, their overall experience is not that of exotic adventure but of discomfort. They feel out of place in Norway and long for friends, a familiar language and a warm climate. At the first sign of spring, the warm

weather makes them long for their own country, and they decide to go home, cutting their trip short. Her nostalgia for the difficult time in Norway may be considered another example of meta-nostalgia, a wistful longing for a past time when she found herself literally nostalgic (homesick).

Despite the difficulties of these eight months, which eventually became unbearable, the narrator now recalls the experience in Norway with fond nostalgia. As she recites the images that flashed through her mind as they pulled away from the train station, it seems that even at that time she was aware of the way these now-familiar surroundings were being relegated to memory. The last sentence fragment of the story, concluding the list of things being left behind is “Mis veintidós años” (186), as though her twenty-two-year-old self has also been left in Norway. This indicates that this story is not just about Norway but about a memory of her past self which cannot be recovered. Still, these memories which are now so distant belong to her and form part of her identity.

The story is told as a memory of a life experience, yet other than the closing images of memory, the narrator does not specifically discuss nostalgia within the story. However, in the prologue to the collection Soledad Puértolas comments on her attitude toward this text and this chapter of her life story: “Una vez escrito, supe que yo sentía nostalgia de ese tiempo difícil, una nostalgia que, incluyendo a la vida, está por encima de ella, nostalgia literaria” (14). She does not define *literary nostalgia*, and perhaps Stewart would contend that the term is redundant. It is the very act of narrating a memory that generates and perpetuates nostalgia, since the nature of language is that it denies direct access to the lived experience it attempts to signify. “Nostalgia is the repetition that mourns the inauthenticity of all repetition and denies the repetition’s capacity to form

identity” (Stewart 23). In “La corriente del golfo,” it seems that the narrator does attempt to recapture her past identity and not only to relive her memories. Her attitude toward that time of desperation is “cariño hacia mí misma, y hacia mis perdidos y poco experimentados veintidós años” (“Prólogo” 14). Like the narrator of “El inventor del tetrabrik,” the nostalgia that motivates her to tell this story is not fondness for the difficult circumstances but nostalgia for herself and the lost paradise of her youth.

An additional aspect of the narrator’s yearning for memories of Norway is that her days as a young newlywed point to the future of her adulthood. Just as Aurora in *Queda la noche* longs for the beginning of anything new and exciting, Puértolas looks back on this episode as a new beginning: “. . . todo cobra forma de un preludio, repentinamente hermoso preludio de una vida por hacer” (“Prólogo” 16).<sup>35</sup> This “vida por hacer” evokes the same wonder as the “casa a medio hacer.” Like the half-built house in a construction zone, the beginning of a new phase of Puértolas’s life as a young adult is full of possibilities and dreams.

### **Historical Nostalgia: *La rosa de plata*, “La vida oculta” and “La orilla del Danubio”**

The most important use of nostalgia, in Puértolas and in everyday speech, refers to a person’s reminiscing about his or her personal experiences. However, as Davis explains, by expanding the definition slightly one might concede the possibility of feeling nostalgic toward past events, or historical time periods, that a person never experienced personally (8). As cited earlier, nostalgia seems to be exacerbated in the context of perceived sociohistoric instability and discontinuity; Boym writes: “Nostalgia inevitably

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<sup>35</sup> An additional example of a character who fondly recalls the expectations of her youth is in “Una casa con jardín” (*Gente que vino a mi boda*): “Estábamos convencidas de que algo tenía que suceder y que todo lo bueno que habíamos esperado llegaría al fin” (98).

reappears as a defense mechanism in a time of accelerated rhythms of life and historical upheavals” (xiv). Loewenthal has likewise noted: “A perpetual staple of nostalgic yearning is the search for a simple and stable past as a refuge from the turbulent and chaotic present.” He points out that this collective sense of uncertainty can manifest itself in an interest in a specific historic time period; for example, during Victorian times there was an impulse toward glorification of the medieval as an idealized time of “shared and ordered spirituality” (Loewenthal, “Nostalgia” 21). Almost all of Puértolas’s writing is set in the contemporary urban realist world, but the few exceptions reveal that this type of historical nostalgia is another memory-related concern which motivates her writing. Puértolas refers to historical nostalgia in the essay “Los infantes de Aragón” of *La vida se mueve*. She points to this section of the medieval poem of Jorge Manrique as evoking two nostalgias, nostalgia of life and of history. The most notable examples of historical nostalgia in her own narratives are the novel *La rosa de plata* and the stories “La vida oculta” and “La orilla de Danubio” of *Una enfermedad moral*.<sup>36</sup> The nostalgia of these texts is not only that of characters for their personal lived experiences but also the authorial voice’s longing for a mythical premodern past, which appeals to a presumed corresponding nostalgia on the part of the reader.

*La rosa de plata* is an Arthurian quest story in which seven knights rescue seven maidens who have been enchanted and imprisoned by Morgana. In the tradition of the chivalric romance and in contrast to Puértolas’s realist narratives, the plot is a series of heroic, even magical, feats, and characterization is less important than the action to fulfill

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<sup>36</sup> In the essay “Los infantes de Aragón,” of *La vida se mueve*, Puértolas further explains that she created Casto of “La orilla del Danubio” to be from Aragón because of this region’s historical evocations.

the quest. It is notable, however, that within the romance some of Puértolas's typical concerns are still evident. For example, while some of the characters are relatively uncomplex (even described by a single salient trait), often they are more self-reflective, even nostalgic, than one might expect in this genre. The enchanted damsels, each of whom suffers from a different unusual affliction, discuss the profound ramifications of their ills. For example, Findia is forgetful and expounds upon the impact this has on her identity.<sup>37</sup> She says, "Moriré sin tener un solo recuerdo, vacía, estupefacta. Mi vida ha sido un constante morir, porque todo se ha ido borrando en cuanto quedaba atrás" (92). Even the evil enchantress Morgana reminisces on the transformation that took place in her life so that she is now consumed by vengeance. She reasons, "Tener nostalgia de la inocencia perdida no sirve para nada, sólo de tristeza, desánimo. Tener nostalgia de la inocencia perdida es peligroso, porque mina el espíritu, lo desarma" (109).

Other elements of the story are also suggestive of Puértolas's typical narrative concerns. Aside from the quest story, a secondary plot relates to the famous love triangle, the ongoing concern of King Arthur over Guinevere's attention to Lancelot. This is consistent with Puértolas's frequent theme of the individual's inability to remedy inevitable relational failure. Furthermore, even though the quest is completed and celebrated, Arthur's worries about Guinevere give *La rosa de plata* the structural open-endedness that is characteristic of Puértolas's texts. The narrative voice wonders aloud whether the story has really ended, or whether it marks the beginning of another one.

*La rosa de plata* represents Puértolas indulging her nostalgia for a world of magic and heroism, yet in departing from contemporary reality she does not thereby abandon

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<sup>37</sup> Findia "la desmemoriada" is an example of Puértolas's fantastic experimentation with memory loss, which I will discuss in more detail in my subsequent chapter on amnesia.

the psychological concerns that characterize her other narratives. One might ask why, if she is writing a fantasy, does she not wrap things up in an idealized “happily ever after” ending? As the preceding examples of nostalgia have shown, particularly “El inventor del tetrabrik” and “La corriente del golfo,” the past can be remembered fondly without its having been ideal. The medieval milieu as perpetuated through chivalric narrative exudes a sense of inaccessible distance and otherness, and it does not cease to be the focus of nostalgia for the absence of a happy ending. In fact, Arthur’s melancholy is a form of nostalgia for his lost love, which provides this text with a dimension of meta-nostalgia.

Puértolas’s story collection *Una enfermedad moral* includes two short stories that exemplify a similar historical nostalgia. In the introduction to the work, Puértolas explains that both “La vida oculta” and “La orilla del Danubio” “ocurren en algún lapso de tiempo del siglo XVII y sus protagonistas fueron soldados del Imperio” (13). In fact, both stories depict the protagonist’s life beginning immediately after leaving the army: Jacomo of “La vida oculta” becomes nostalgic and Torreno of “La orilla del Danubio” is amnesic; I will discuss the latter story more fully in my chapter on amnesia. To Puértolas, it seems the situation of the seventeenth-century soldier can speak to questions of memory and identity, the types of questions that she regularly explores. In the Prologue to the second edition, Puértolas describes her fascination with this time period enigmatically: “Es un siglo extraño. Es como una enfermedad moral” (13). Puértolas does not elaborate on her diagnosis of a moral infirmity, but it seems to contradict what Loewenthal has observed about Victorian culture’s fascination with the medieval for its “shared and ordered spirituality” (“Nostalgia” 21). Perhaps Puértolas is nostalgic for this time period not because it represents virtues which society has long since forsaken, but

because it seems to best embody the struggles of the contemporary moral subject. Indeed, she seems to indicate in the second edition Prologue that nostalgia is the unifying theme of this collection. “Porque muchas veces, al escribir estos relatos, he pensado en todas esas personas desconocidas cuyas vidas han sido marcadas por la melancolía de lo inaccesible” (15).

“La vida oculta” is the story of Jacomo, a soldier who finds himself stricken with melancholy at the end of his military career. This is another example of meta-nostalgia because of the layers of longing portrayed: within the whimsical historical setting, Jacomo languishes with nostalgia, or “la melancolía de lo inaccesible” as Puértolas puts it (15). The story opens with Jacomo unable to return home because he has been stricken with some unspecified physical and emotional exhaustion. His memories of home are no consolation to him, and he can barely remember his victories in war nor the face of his wife. During his recuperation, he is awakened from his apathy by the beautiful singing of a beautiful woman. He meets her face to face and confesses his desire to embrace her, but she says that he has made her jealous, and in a bizarre dream-like scene, he is forced to watch her make love to an equally beautiful man (her brother? he wonders). As a result, “Aquella escena le perdió para siempre” (95).

Jacomo returns to his family, but he now wears a vacant expression and pays little attention to his wife María. She understands his ailment to be that of all retired soldiers: “La nostalgia de las batallas los acompaña para siempre...” (96). However, she cannot guess the real reason, that of his having witnessed the captivating scene of love, beauty and erotic attraction. As Boym has noted, “Nostalgic love can only survive in a long-distance relationship” (xiii), thus it seems that Jacomo’s perpetual yearning is fueled by

the fact that he did not actually participate in that encounter. The attractive woman and her attractive male counterpart are forever present in his nostalgic thoughts and are forever unattainable. At last, “En seguida estuvo claro para todos que el pobre Jacomo había perdido el juicio” (97). This phrase, especially in this sociohistoric setting, is a clear homage to Cervantes, adding another nostalgic element to the text. Perhaps this could be considered another category of Puértolas’s term *literary nostalgia*.

While Jacomo is a seventeenth-century character, perhaps like the King Arthur of *La rosa de plata* he really represents the late twentieth-century psyche. Some of the early diagnosed cases of nostalgia involved soldiers like Jacomo, especially Swiss soldiers longing for their home country (Davis 3), but note that Jacomo’s illness is not truly homesickness. While he is away, it is not memory of home that aggravates his melancholy. He cannot see his home clearly in his memory, and his return home does not ease the condition. The object of his longing is not home but rather the unattainable ideal beauty he has glimpsed. As was mentioned earlier, “Homecoming does not signify a recovery of identity; it does not end the journey in the virtual space of imagination. A modern nostalgic can be homesick and sick of home, at once” (Boym 50). Because his return home leaves him unfulfilled, Jacomo is in this way a “modern nostalgic.” His obsession with his memory of perfect unattainable beauty means he fails to enjoy beauty when it is within his reach. The story ends by describing how the years have increased María’s beauty, yet her husband fails to notice this. María is not bothered by Jacomo’s indifference but is cheered by her own beautiful clothes, hairstyles and melodious singing voice. This detail is especially ironic, because Jacomo was first attracted to the other woman by her singing, yet he is oblivious to his wife’s music. The story’s open ending

leaves room for speculation that María's beauty has caught a man's attention, just not her husband's, implying that Jacomo is doubly foolish for ignoring her.

## **Conclusion**

Unlike certain characters described in the previous chapter, whose use of memory guides their sense of obligation in the present, these nostalgic characters do not connect memory to responsibility. Nostalgia is instead directed toward things they cannot control, a longing for the unattainable, whether from the unrecoverable past, from the future out of reach or from the realm of fantasy. In fact, these characters' nostalgia requires that they be unable to grasp its object. According to Boym: "Nostalgic love can only survive in a long-distance relationship" (xiii), and Stewart: "The nostalgic is enamored of distance, not of the referent itself. Nostalgia cannot be sustained without loss" (145). Likewise, E. B. Daniels writes, "...this very evanescent, transitory quality is characteristic of nostalgia: in grasping it, like cotton candy, it disappears" (77). For Puértolas's characters, nostalgic longing may relate to their desire to capture and revisit happy memories or to escape from a frustrating present situation, imagining a new beginning. It seems that a common trait among these reminiscing characters is an uncertainty about what is really important in their lives, or at any rate they feel helpless to achieve meaning by their own efforts, because what they value and strive for is so often dependent on chance. For example, when Aurora sees uncanny coincidences result from her chance encounters in Delhi, she muses, "Era el azar, pero parecía un complot" (111). It seems that for Aurora and others, chance not only appears to dictate small details of life but actually conspires to shape one's whole existence.

Whether characters are reflecting on the power of chance in their affective encounters or are simply homesick for the past, a key element of nostalgia is a search for identity. Sometimes a character feels that identity has been lost, manifested in a longing for a twenty-two-year old self that is gone forever or yearning after the self that slips away little by little every day (or night). Even for characters who do not specifically mourn for a past “me,” their nostalgia may yet be motivated by an anxious uncertainty about identity and the meaning of their lives, like Aurora’s sense that her life is being dictated by an outside force. As we saw in the previous chapter, characters whose memory operates in baggage mode see that the past has created the present, the scars inflicted on “me” have determined who “I” have become. In contrast, when these nostalgic characters escape to the past, they do not recognize themselves, which highlights the discontinuity and fragmentation of their identity.

The problem of a decentered identity and a lack of clear purpose in life is not unique to Puértolas’s characters; this type of existential doubt may be considered a feature of the postmodern condition. An individual’s sense of personal discontinuity may be related to the progress, reversals and upheavals of society. Just as “I” might not recognize “me” in my distant early memories, Western society has seen such rapid, radical changes that what it was a hundred years ago is now like an unrecognizable paradise lost. Boym writes aptly: “Survivors of the twentieth century, we are all nostalgic for a time when we were not nostalgic. But there seems to be no way back” (355). Even so, awareness of the futility of nostalgia does not deter the reminiscences of those who are comforted by their memories, longings and fantasies.

## CHAPTER 4

### Relational Mode of Memory: Interpersonal Conflict and the Life Review

I have used the baggage and escapist modes of memory to describe characters' relationship to their memories, whether the world and self of the past is primarily portrayed as something *to* which the character longs to escape, or whether the past invades the present as something *from* which the character cannot escape. Now I will describe an element that emerges from memory to help many protagonists of Soledad Puértolas, especially in the novels, to evaluate their identity, both in the past and also as it has continued to develop into the present: relationship with someone of a contrasting personality type. The relational mode of memory in Puértolas may overlap with either of the previous two; within the relational mode, the memories triggered by the acquaintance may function either as integrated with or dissociated from the present (baggage or escapist mode). Rather than provide a third alternative to the baggage and escapist modes, the relational mode is instead an approach to encoding and recovering recollections. The protagonist has retained vivid memories surrounding a certain acquaintance, and the relationship gives the character access to memory by triggering the remembering process.

As has been mentioned, Puértolas's protagonists are typically introspective and melancholy, and they tend to be isolated. Characters who engage in relational memory

are no different. When relationships are important to a character's story, typically it is their impermanence, certainty of disappointment and failure to provide connection that are highlighted, as opposed to understanding and loving companionship. Thus relational memory is not the same as memory of a beloved person. The presence of other people in a character's memory is significant not because of the relationship in itself, but insofar as the other person provides a measure for comparison and self-assessment.

Nor is relational memory the same as collective memory. Researchers have cited the importance of remembering together, the influence that other people can have over what and how an individual remembers. Sue Campbell's *Relational Remembering* addresses this issue, affirming that people, especially women, are influenced by their relationships as they recall and interpret their individual memories in conversation with others (191-92). I wish to differentiate my relational mode of memory from Campbell's "relational remembering" by reaffirming that in Puértolas's writing collective memory is not emphasized, that memory is a solitary process and that individuals cannot rely on community—or choose not to do so—as they try to make sense of the past.<sup>38</sup> This may not mean that the individuals' recalled memories are constructed free of evaluative feedback. Bruce M. Ross argues that even those who remember in solitude never really produce a soliloquy but "...the apparent monologue is always an implicit dialogue with oneself....we ourselves often act as audience to our own memory evocations..." (11). This seems to be the dominant trend in Puértolas: characters retell and reconstruct their memory narratives as though the stories are being received by an audience, but none is

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<sup>38</sup> Puértolas herself is a possible exception: she relates in "El mes de las flores amarillas" (*Con mi madre*) a memory ritual she and her mother observed. Every year, her mother called to wish her happy birthday, and they always reminisced about a particularly snowy birthday when the buses and taxis stopped, and the two struggled home from Mass together on foot.

present but the teller and the invisible reader. The stories are shaped in accord with the rememberers' own interests, free of the contribution of outside perspectives.<sup>39</sup>

In the relational memory mode, relationships are not particularly important to the process of remembering, but they are significant within the content of memory. While the character portrayal of the individual protagonist is the focus of the texts, often it is in relationship, and specifically through contemplation of memories of a relationship from the past, that character is revealed. Frequently, both in the novels and short stories of Puértolas, a character's memory fixates on a childhood acquaintance. Notably, this acquaintance is an unlikely companion with few identifiable similarities to the protagonist but rather is someone inaccessible with a certain mystique whose social class, age or personality distances him or her from the protagonist. Such characters serve as foils to highlight important traits of the protagonist as he or she recalls memories linked to these characters. In addition, this other person who may have only played an incidental role in the protagonist's life becomes surprisingly significant in the reminiscing process. This foil provides an organizational locus for the protagonist's memories, triggering thoughts of self and other people and events that have been significant.

As I described earlier in my discussion on the baggage mode of memory, many characters have been wounded by being abandoned or disappointed by a parent or other loved one. Even though these are indisputably important relationships in the characters' memories, I do not wish to include them in my category of relational memory. Though these characters may ultimately have greater influence over the protagonist, their impact

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<sup>39</sup> Consider the example of "El andén vacío," outlined in a previous chapter. Even though Bernardo does tell his memory to his friend the narrator, his reconstructed memory-turned-myth is one-sided and not a collaborative work. The narrator conspicuously refrains from sharing his perspective, information that might have allowed Bernardo a more complete understanding of his past.

is difficult to measure, and they do not inspire the same kind of introspection as the acquaintances who stand at more of an emotional distance. It is no wonder that a protagonist would have vivid memories about her mother, for instance, but it is less obvious why her thoughts would return with disproportionate frequency to someone she has seen perhaps only a few times since high school. The latter type of relationship in these texts provides insight into the workings of memory and self-perception.

### **Acquaintances as Memory Triggers: “Presente”**

Puértolas’s use of secondary characters as memory triggers is not particularly innovative, nor is it necessarily surprising that the people who trigger memory most are those who have played less prominent roles in the protagonists’ lives. Considered logically, the people who stir memory most strikingly are those who reappear after we have lost contact with them and have nearly forgotten them, not those with whom we interact regularly, even if these are the people with whom we share more memories in common. The power of one person’s presence to stir memory in another has been noted by Daniel L. Schacter. “This may be one reason why encountering acquaintances we have not seen for years is often such an affecting experience: our old friends provide us with cues and reminders that are difficult to generate on our own, and that allow us to recollect incidents we would ordinarily fail to remember” (63). Note that Schacter does not specify what these forgotten “incidents” are; Puértolas would affirm that the range of possible retrieved memories can be much wider than just those directly involving our past interactions with that person.

Soledad Puértolas has described this phenomenon in her memoir “Presente” from *Recuerdos de otra persona*: the unexpected appearance of a past acquaintance stirs

memory and brings a sudden awareness of the passage of time. “Inesperadamente surge ante los ojos una persona que trae a la cabeza el pasado. Y a partir de ese encuentro casual, de ese breve repaso a nuestras vidas, el presente parece irreal” (139). During such encounters, Puértolas focuses on the changes in her own life since last communicating with the acquaintance, the fact that many steps in her life’s journey, the path that was hitherto future and unknown, have since been traveled. As she and her interlocutor describe where their lives have since taken them, Puértolas is less struck by her friend’s narrative than by her own; the changes she observes in him or her are less surprising than those in herself. This does not necessarily reflect a lack of interest in or compassion for the other person, but the most remarkable result of the encounter, and the reason for its narration, is reflection and self-assessment by the narrator. The other person serves the purpose of memory trigger, and in this sense it is unimportant who he or she is.

The appearance of the narrator’s friend induces her to marvel at the passage of life and time; the past feels weighty as she takes stock of her life. Her sudden awareness of the present, contrasted with so much life that has passed, leads (not surprisingly) to the unsettling dissatisfaction so characteristic of Puértolas. In the ensuing introspection, “...nos encontramos allí, atrapados, luchando contra pequeñas cosas abrumadoras” (140). She mentions a desire for escape, presumably from these burdensome petty troubles and perhaps also from the relentless procession of the years. Her remembering is not only relational but also nostalgic, as her friend’s appearance causes her to yearn for the past self who shared experiences with this friend (or more precisely, with that friend’s former persona); the relationship is the inspiration for the nostalgia. Puértolas is disconcerted more because her life—and less because her friend—has slipped away from her.

## Memory and the Jungian Shadow: “Billetes”

“Presente” describes not a specific event but a general category of experience, that of running into any long-lost friend. The most notable feature of the anonymous past acquaintance in “Presente” is that he or she is associated with memory and the past. However, where relational memory is evident for Puértolas’s fictional protagonists, the secondary characters stir their memories not simply because they had been forgotten but more so because they are enigmatic to begin with. In Wang Jun’s volume on Puértolas’s novels, she describes the novels as falling into one of two types, and her schema can inform our present discussion of the relational mode of memory. In one category are those novels which are structured as a series of chapters that are really separate stories, though related through a subtle common denominator. Examples she cites are *Burdeos*, *Días del Arenal*, and *Si al atardecer llegara el mensajero*. We may also add more recent novels *La rosa de plata* and *Historia de un abrigo* to this list. The second type of novel, Wang notes, is a unified story based on one individual’s subjective reconstruction through memory of his or her experiences, as seen in *El bandido doblemente armado*, *Todos mienten*, *Queda la noche*, *Una vida inesperada*, and we should add *La señora Berg* (Wang 401-02). The texts which best exemplify the relational mode are novels from this second category. Excepting *Queda la noche*, the other four novels include, either incidentally or as a focal point, a relationship from the past that stands out in the protagonists’ memory. Secondary characters whose relationships with the protagonists inspire memory in these novels include Terry Lennox (and his family) in *El bandido doblemente armado*, Olga Francines of *Una vida inesperada*, Marta Berg of *La señora Berg*, and Chicho Montano of *Todos mienten*.

A major concern in Puértolas's writing is character portrayal, and the presence of these secondary characters aids in providing a portrait of her protagonists. These characters serve as foils, revealing the protagonist's personality by contrast. Wang notes the frequency with which Puértolas designs binary pairs of characters, especially contrasting passive observers, those who follow traditional norms, with active participants who are emancipated from societal constraints (316). Such active/passive pairs include Olga and the narrator of *Una vida inesperada*, Terry and the narrator of *El bandido*, Hélene and Agnes of *Burdeos*, Chicho and Javier of *Todos mienten*, Aurora and Raquel of *Queda la noche* and Susana/Covadonga and Araceli/Herminia of *Días del Arenal* (Wang 317).<sup>40</sup> Wang's identification of these binary pairs is helpful, though she perhaps oversimplifies matters when distinguishing between "traditional" and "liberated" women. For one thing, this wrongly implies that Puértolas's project is to promote the latter over the former, whereas in fact she reveals the emotional destruction caused by so-called emancipated women like Hélene of *Burdeos* or Claudia of *La señora Berg*, who abandon their families in selfish pursuit of wealthy lovers. Secondly, the binary does not always hold up: the narrator of *Una vida inesperada*, as the passive and introverted counterpart to Olga, is a divorced working mother who pursues a series of lovers and can hardly be called traditional.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, the contrast between the women's lifestyles in each case should be understood primarily as a function of personality and character and not because they are guided by socially directed roles or principles.

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<sup>40</sup> Marguerite DiNonno Intemann identifies the binary pairs found in *Días del Arenal* as "...Gracia y Herminia, Araceli y Doña Carolina, Olga y Dolores Riquelme, Susana y Covadonga" (130).

<sup>41</sup> Wang later does include both Olga and the narrator of *Una vida inesperada* in a list of the liberated, postmodern women in Puértolas's novels (412).

The recurrence of these binary pairs of characters, and in particular the fascination of the introverted character for his or her counterpart, suggests that the latter is like an alter ego, a *Doppelgänger* or a shadow, to use a concept of Carl Jung. The shadow originates as part of the unconscious and is not necessarily another person: “The shadow personifies everything that the subject refuses to acknowledge about himself and yet is always thrusting itself upon him directly or indirectly—for instance, inferior traits of character and other incompatible tendencies” (Jung, *Archetypes* 284-85). Jungian analyst Marie-Louise von Franz further explains what some of these “inferior traits” and “incompatible tendencies” may look like. A person’s shadow involves “...those qualities and impulses he denies in himself but can plainly see in other people—such things as egotism, mental laziness, and sloppiness; unreal fantasies, schemes, and plots; carelessness and cowardice; inordinate love of money and possessions...” (Franz, “Process” 168). As we shall see, this brief list of traits that people typically deny or try to hide accurately describes the way some protagonists would define their counterparts in relational memory.

Though the shadow originates in one’s own unconscious, when a person perceives these shadow characteristics in someone else, it may be the result of projection. Franz describes projection as “...an unconscious, that is, unperceived and unintentional, transfer of subjective psychic elements onto an outer object,” this object being a person who already exhibits these traits to some measure (Franz, *Projection* 3). In addition, just like the binary pairs of characters found throughout Puértolas’s narratives, Franz notes that an introvert’s shadow is usually extroverted and vice versa (“Process” 171).

Northrop Frye has observed that the archetype of the shadow can be helpful in analyzing characterization in literature, though this is perhaps less apparent in the novel than in the genre he terms *romance*, where characters are not "... 'real people' so much as stylized figures which expand into psychological archetypes" (4). As Frye explains: "It is in the romance that we find Jung's libido, anima, and shadow reflected in the hero, heroine, and villain respectively" (4).

Puértolas's creations are complex characters typical of Frye's novel category as opposed to romance, yet even in the absence of archetypal villains in her stories, Jung's shadow may help explain why memory of a particular acquaintance is so durable. Because of their peculiar personality clash, the protagonist continues to wrestle with the conflicts stirred by this relationship, which illuminates character traits of both people. Franz explains: "The shadow usually contains values that are needed by consciousness, but that exist in a form that makes it difficult to integrate them into one's life" (170-71). Just as it is difficult to harmonize one's own unconscious shadow traits with one's conscious personality, it appears to be equally difficult to understand or accept these qualities when exhibited by—or projected onto—another person.

In all of the active/passive pairs in Puértolas mentioned above, the dynamic presence is dramatically necessary to define the contemplative counterpart, or rather to allow that person, through the contemplation of his or her memories of this relationship, to understand him- or herself. The extroverted counterpart gives the protagonist much to consider and analyze, and in some cases he or she may trigger a comprehensive self-assessment as in the case of *Una vida inesperada*. The deeply-thinking introvert desires an intimate understanding in a friendship and is baffled by the lack of thoughtfulness he

or she perceives in the other person.<sup>42</sup> This type of frustration, when a friend fails to provide the desired intimate connection and deep understanding, is a common theme in Puértolas and is the focus of the memoir “La mirada del adiós” from *Recuerdos de otra persona*. In this essay Puértolas describes, from the perspective of a perceptive, reflective personality type, the type of person who seems distant and is always saying goodbye too soon. “Todo lo que puede ofrecer es esa melancólica despedida, sin explicaciones, reproches o promesas. La puerta se cierra. La escena ha durado demasiado poco. El eco del golpe de la puerta al cerrarse es lo único que queda, y el rumor de sus pasos al perderse” (144-45). Such a person is intriguing because he or she tantalizes acquaintances with the promise of friendship yet leaves them unfulfilled, straining after the echo of the door and the retreating footsteps. The unanswered questions of what motivates this character’s abrupt exit add a further level of mystique.

The short story “Billetes” of *Gente que vino a mi boda* provides a case study of such a character. Billetes is friendly and outgoing, always buying drinks for everyone he meets at the bar. He is a man of leisure because of his wealthy family of famous artists. His friends secretly call him Billetes because of his strange habit of inviting friends to a bar and suddenly announcing he has to leave, handing them cash for the taxi. The narrator is the only one among Billetes’s friends who defends him despite this inexplicable, unsociable behavior. The narrator cannot simply dismiss Billetes, because he finds him and his family fascinating because they are so unlike his own. The narrator’s family is of the working class. “Era una familia sin memoria, anclada en el presente, en la comida del día y el trabajo del día” (13). Living to fulfill basic material needs does not

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<sup>42</sup> Recall that Franz lists “carelessness” among the traits of the archetypal shadow (“Process” 168).

suit the narrator: “Yo quería que los sueños fueran más importantes, que cambiaran la vida, que la suplantaran” (14); thus the excesses of Billetes’s family are attractive. Their success in their artistic dreams ostensibly allows them to disregard the economic realities that preoccupy the narrator’s family. Billetes’s father is a painter and his mother is an actress, in contrast to the narrator’s mother’s futile aspirations to an acting career: “Eran simplemente sueños, fugaces, irreales” (13). It seems that Billetes has everything the narrator lacks, and at the same time he perceives that Billetes might be able to relate to his own feeling of emptiness and dissatisfaction with life, which is why the protagonist pursues a friendship with this intriguing acquaintance.

As the narrator looks back on what he now calls “el año de Billetes” (9), he marvels, “¡Vaya temporada llevaba yo!” (15). During this period, to his family’s dismay, he is unemployed, out all night and sleeping all day.<sup>43</sup> He senses that Billetes, also unemployed, feels the same lack of purpose, so one night he calls him. The two go out to a bar together, where the narrator pours out all his troubles and stories of failed love relationships and asks Billetes, “¿No echas de menos un poco de dulzura en la vida?” (20). Billetes seems to consider this and sits silently for a long time. At last, he repeats the narrator’s question back to him and abruptly leaves, handing over cash for the taxi as a final unwitting insult. The narrator’s reaction is unstated, but he must conclude, probably with disappointment or shame that he had hoped otherwise, that Billetes’s solitude is completely hermetic. He was wrong to imagine that Billetes would especially

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<sup>43</sup> This behavior is a recurring motif in Puértolas, seen also, for example, in the narrator of “Ventajas de la primera persona” in *La corriente del golfo*, René of *Burdeos*, and Javier’s cousin Hércules in *Todos mienten*.

appreciate him as a friend and confidant; even if his suspicions about Billetes's feelings of emptiness have been confirmed, he has failed in his quest to find a companion.

“Billetes” is an example of relational memory because the narrator's relationship with Billetes (or more accurately, the lack thereof) stands out in the narrator's mind as a point against which to measure himself. It is precisely the impossibility of establishing a connection with Billetes that has brought a new awareness: not only is there apparently no remedy for solitude, but a person who has the advantage of material success is equally susceptible to existential emptiness. The narrator was probably correct in his instinct to defend Billetes, his sense that, despite their socioeconomic differences, Billetes is a kindred spirit, suffering the same doubts and fears as himself. However, Billetes's nonchalance about money, initially so attractive, becomes the obstacle to their friendship. The taxi fare which creates a barrier to intimate friendship is not merely a confirmation of Billetes's insecurity, but more significantly indicates the impossibility of relationships in general. A less wealthy man could have found another equally effective means of escape. Perhaps what the narrator learns from this memory is not that he chose the wrong friend, but that the right friend is certain to retreat in a moment of crisis. The discovery of mutual solitude precludes intimacy.

As the narrator looks back on this so-called “año de Billetes,” he is reticent about what exactly this year has come to mean to him. Like “El inventor del tetrabrik” (*La corriente del golfo*), this story is told in retrospect from an unspecified vantage point, with no explanation of what the present situation is or how the season of desperation

concluded. Part of the story's impact is that the reader is left in the same position as the narrator: inexplicably abandoned, left to contemplate the taxi fare.<sup>44</sup>

### **Relational Memory in *El bandido doblemente armado***

Whereas some of these contrasting characters appear as marginal figures in the text, because of the narrow focus of the short story genre, "Billetes" is all about Billetes; the protagonist describes little of his own life except in comparison to his acquaintance. Despite its greater length and breadth, *El bandido doblemente armado* is similarly limited in scope. The anonymous narrator describes his relationship with Terry Lennox and his fascination with the Lennox family, revealing little about his own life and family.

Whereas the previous narrator interacted with Billetes for just a year, this protagonist maintains a relationship with the Lennox family for many years. The dynamics of the relationship between the narrator and Terry are similar to that of the other narrator and Billetes. The Lennox family is fascinating: the four siblings are very popular in school, their mother is the widow of a millionaire, their stepfather is an American cowboy and their home is stunning. The adolescent narrator is determined to win Terry's friendship and succeeds; he is even invited along on the family's vacation. During the summer, the boys enjoy spending time together and empathize with each other's experience of unrequited love.

Following this summer, however, the boys' interests diverge, and the narrator feels increasingly distant from his adolescent friend. The narrator still maintains contact with the Lennox family and works on a project with Terry's melancholy brother-in-law

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<sup>44</sup> Chicho Montano of *Todos mienten*, an old school acquaintance of the narrator Javier's, is similar to Billetes. He is an impeccable dresser with a flashy smile, a fashion designer who dates a movie actress. Javier gets a brief glimpse of Chicho's unhappiness and his fears about becoming a father, but after the baby's birth Chicho resumes his flashy smile and the façade of perfection and control.

Luis, with whom the narrator feels a special bond. After a long time of separation from Terry, the narrator finally gets a phone call from his old friend who asks him for help. He has been counterfeiting passports and needs an accomplice to help him destroy evidence.<sup>45</sup> The narrator reluctantly agrees to help but cannot prevent Terry's arrest. He is equally dismayed by Terry's illegal pursuits and by his treatment of his girlfriend Lili, whom Terry neglects because he has grown tired of her. What most upsets the narrator is that when his friend and co-worker Luis commits suicide, Terry is unsympathetic and condemns Luis for being a coward. The traits in Terry of which the narrator disapproves correspond to the archetypal shadow with its "...unreal fantasies, schemes, and plots; carelessness..." (Franz, "Process" 168). DiNonno Intemann observes this correspondence between the boys: "De cierto modo, el narrador reconoce en Terry partes de sí mismo: su brillantez, su indiferencia, su mezquindad" (53).

The narrator's final interaction with Terry occurs as a confrontation, which the narrator initiates with an accusatory letter. Terry explains in response that the two of them are best described by the problem of "el bandido doblemente armado," which he recommends as a book title if the narrator ever writes their story: from this metafictional element it is clear that the narrator has followed Terry's suggestion. In the problem, Terry explains, there are two coins, one of which is weighted such that it comes up heads more often. The goal is to toss one coin at a time to achieve a maximum number of heads. The

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<sup>45</sup> In *Todos mienten*, Chicho Montano is similar to Terry in this way; he also gets involved in an illegal pyramid scheme, and Javier becomes marginally implicated.

two extreme approaches, neither of which is necessarily effective, are to stick with only one coin or to constantly switch coins.<sup>46</sup>

In Terry's view, the two of them represent these two extremes of risk-taking and passivity. Terry, in constantly switching coins, acts in destructive and thoughtless ways; life means taking risks. "El único sentido que puedes dar a la vida es apostar por delante de ella—decía" (83). On the other hand, the narrator's problem is inertia: "El único riesgo que conllevaba mi elección era el de haber apostado por la mala moneda" (123). Their friendship ends in mutual incomprehension, without the narrator attempting to emulate Terry or overcome his inertia. His interactions with Terry have made him recognize his contemplative nature: having observed the alternative to his passivity, he learns to accept this in himself. DiNonno Intemann suggests that the narrator's writing helps him to resolve the tensions between Terry and himself that persist in his memory. "La parte perversa de Terry, y por extrapolación el lado oscuro del narrador, tiene que ser extirpado y superado por algo transcendental. El narrador encuentra la solución en la escritura de la novela" (DiNonno Intemann 53).

### **Relational Memory in *Una vida inesperada***

In both "Billetes" and *El bandido doblemente armado*, each narrator's understanding of himself in that particular period of the past is best described when he considers his interactions with Billetes or Terry, respectively. The scope of the memories

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<sup>46</sup> Terry seems to be describing the psychological research of Richard Herrnstein. As Richard F. Thompson and Stephen A. Madigan describe it, the "two-armed 'one-armed bandit'" (21) is not a pair of coins but rather a casino-type machine where both levers are adjusted to give a reward a certain percent of the time. If the right arm wins 57% of the time and the left 43% of the time, a subject asked to try to achieve the maximum number of wins will eventually end up pulling the right lever 57% and the left 43% of the time, which Herrnstein terms "matching law." "Your behavior will come to match the exact probabilities of payoff, even though you are unaware of this and even though you would have done better by pulling the right lever all the time" (Thompson and Madigan 22). Based on Terry's analysis, he seems to feel that both he and the narrator defy Herrnstein's matching law.

connected to Billetes is limited to a season of the narrator's life, encapsulated in the single episode he relates in detail. In *El bandido doblemente armado* the time frame is much wider, yet the range of memories related is still limited to the protagonist's interactions with the Lennox family; he is silent about other details of his life. In contrast, in *Una vida inesperada* the narrator's memories of Olga are literally the organizing force behind her whole life narrative. This novel provides the best example of relational memory because the relationship between the anonymous narrator and Olga, and specifically the narrator's memories of that relationship, frames the whole novel. Structurally, the novel consists of five sections narrated as memoirs by the unnamed protagonist, who sits down at the typewriter five different times over a span of several decades. At the time the narrator begins composing her memoirs, her friendship with Olga is already past, but their lives have intersected at several important points, and thus—like baggage—this relationship of the past continues to impact the present. The logic of the narration is ordered by cognitive association rather than chronology or causality. Wang notes that the narration in this novel is inward-focused, subjective and emotional and not directed by objective clock time; she proposes that this subjective, unstructured approach to chronology is distinctly feminine (Wang 301). Each memoir begins with a reference to Olga which then triggers a nonlinear flow of memories of other important relationships, experiences and events of her life. The flood of memories she records becomes a narrative of her life, an attempt at defining her identity.

It is more than fortuitous that Olga should be a memory trigger for the narrator. Olga is connected to the protagonist by common experiences in their adolescence and young adulthood which give evidence of the narrator's character traits. For example, as

discussed earlier in chapter two, an important recurring memory is that of her frequent childhood illnesses and the lack of sympathy her mother expressed; fittingly, she first met Olga in one of her many trips to the school nurse's office. Olga's presence in the memoirs is also important as she reminisces about some of her love affairs. The two women re-establish their adolescent friendship when they attend the same political *tertulia*, and soon they become entangled in each other's love lives. Olga confides in the narrator about her simultaneous affairs with Rafael Uribe and Luis Arévalo, and the protagonist, apparently drawn by some unexplained impulse, secretly pursues intimate relationships with both Rafael and Luis. The protagonist is further involved in Olga's love life in that she introduces Olga to her future husband Leandro Aguiar. On Olga and Leandro's wedding day, Olga pulls the narrator aside and confides that she is still seeing Luis. This apparently upsets the narrator enough that she withdraws from her relationships with both Olga and Luis.

Incidentally, affective entanglements are frequent in this type of relationship. Wang points out, for example, that in *Todos mienten* Javier is seduced by Leonor and Bárbara, Chicho's girlfriend and wife, respectively, and the narrator of *El bandido doblemente armado* gets involved with both of Terry Lennox's sisters (Wang 143). These rivalries provide further evidence that in these texts of relational remembering, the contrasting character is not so much an admired friend or hero of the protagonist as a shadow or *Doppelgänger*. The active character is a reference point for the passive protagonist's identity and thus becomes a central organizing force in the latter's narrated life memories, possibly because he or she has an unconscious affinity toward the other; they are like two halves of one personality. A Jungian explanation would suggest that

because the extroverted character is a shadow projection of the narrator's unconscious, the love rivalries presented in these stories are symbolic of the internal struggles and obstacles the narrator must overcome in a successful romantic pursuit.

In *Una vida inesperada*, the narrator discovers that she and Olga cannot be friends, because of her jealousy as a rival lover but also because of their opposite personalities and their difficulty in relating to one another. Still every time the protagonist makes contact with or hears news of Olga, it stirs her to remember, to write another chapter of her memoir. The first chapter begins with the narrator mentioning that she saw Olga in the street yesterday. In the second chapter, she describes attending the funeral of Olga's husband Leandro that morning. At the start of the third chapter, she mentions getting a letter from Olga and even seeing her on television, talking about a humanitarian organization she has founded. In the fourth chapter, she has recently been surprised by Olga calling and asking her to travel to Quito to help Sergio Núñez, her lover's son, with legal trouble. The protagonist writes the final memoir as she sees in an obituary that Olga has died in a car accident. While Olga's direct contact with the narrator is mostly confined to the years preceding the first chapter, Olga unknowingly keeps affecting the narrator's life. The most dramatic change Olga causes occurs when, between the writing of the fourth and fifth chapters, the narrator does take the proposed trip to Quito, in which she conquers her fears of traveling away from her safe, known routine in order to help someone in need.

Apart from what the women have in common—their interactions and shared experiences—their differences are especially useful to the narrator's construction of identity. She admires Olga because she is bold, friendly and classy, but she is

disillusioned by the sense that Olga takes advantage of people in order to avoid inconveniences. For example, when the narrator returns from the most significant trip of her life, having traveled to Ecuador as a favor to Olga, she tries to report the outcome of her meeting with Sergio and his lawyer. Incredibly, Olga interrupts and announces dismissively that she is no longer interested in the case.<sup>47</sup> Despite Olga's rude indifference, the narrator has been so inspired by visiting the young prisoner that after her return home she sends him packages of books to encourage him in prison. Even though she is the opposite of the dynamic Olga, she proves that she is not restricted by the "contemplative" label. In fact, her association with Olga inspires and enables her to act, to show charity to someone in need.

In addition, as the narrator remembers her frustration with Olga's thoughtless actions, she comes to value her own tendency toward thoughtful reflection. Long after her trip to Quito, she sees Sergio and Olga together and marvels that Olga "...no me había llamado para decirme siquiera que Sergio estaba libre, aunque a decir verdad si lo hubiera hecho me hubiese sorprendido" (294). She no longer regrets the end of her friendship with Olga, because she hopes for friends who, like the implied reader of her memoir, will listen to her story, something Olga would never do: "...no era de esas personas de quienes yo tenía ganas de hablar sino de mí misma" (294). The narrator further perceives that Olga would not appreciate her story because Olga lives oblivious to the sorts of mundane experiences that fill her own memory, such as the frustration of standing in line for an hour to renew her identification card or the simple pleasure of

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<sup>47</sup> Olga in this episode displays some of the shadow traits cited by Franz, including "...egotism, mental laziness, and sloppiness; unreal fantasies, schemes, and plots; carelessness and cowardice ..." ("Process" 168).

sitting with the lifeguard on a bench by the pool, waiting for a thunderstorm to subside. Though she remains curious about Olga's fame and adventures, by the time she writes the last chapter, Olga has died and the narrator has come to accept her own life, including her mundane experiences of inactive waiting, and perhaps she even comes to embrace being timid and ordinary.

### **Life Review in *Una vida inesperada***

Through suggestion, association and indirection, without a clear plot, Soledad Puértolas reveals a comprehensive portrait of her anonymous narrator in her complexity. Wang rightly calls this novel Soledad Puértolas's most ambitious work (289). *Una vida inesperada* is also the novel in which the element of memory is most central. Olga is clearly the most important catalyst for the outpouring of the narrator's memories, but Olga's appearance is not sufficient to explain the narrator's need for memory, her need to evaluate her past and mentally (and physically on paper) organize her life.

Memory specialists would probably concur that the narrator of *Una vida inesperada* has been undergoing a life review. The concept of life review was introduced by Robert N. Butler in an influential article of 1963 and has since guided many researchers studying reminiscence. As I briefly discussed earlier, Antonio of *Días del Arenal* is another character who assesses his memories through a life review. He re-evaluates his memories of Gracia and uses them as inspiration to make the most of his latter years by assisting his neighbors. *Una vida inesperada* is another instance of life review, much fuller and more comprehensive than Antonio's.

Butler's original description of life review is

a naturally occurring, universal mental process characterized by the progressive return to consciousness of past experiences, and, particularly, the resurgence of unresolved conflicts; simultaneously, and normally, these revived experiences and conflicts can be surveyed and reintegrated. Presumably this process is prompted by the realization of approaching dissolution and death, and the inability to maintain one's sense of personal invulnerability. It is further shaped by contemporaneous experiences and its nature and outcome are affected by the lifelong unfolding of character. ("The Life Review" 66)

Life review is a helpful concept in understanding the memories narrated in *Una vida inesperada*. The narrator puts her memories on paper because she needs to work through them, with the final goal of understanding herself. Life review can be differentiated from the baggage and escapist modes of memory discussed in previous chapters, though it may include elements of both. The life review process differs from nostalgia, though it may involve nostalgia, in that the motive for looking back is not primarily a longing for the lost past, but a desire to assess the meaning of one's life as a whole and to shape one's outlook for the future. Life review may also include identification of self-defining memories, but the scope of the recollections is often broader than just isolated episodes. The remembering subject may also identify certain burdensome baggage-type memories, with the important distinction that he or she takes a further deliberate step of incorporating these memories into a comprehensive self-understanding.<sup>48</sup>

The memories that surface in *Una vida inesperada* reveal some of the protagonist's deepest concerns, such as her illnesses and weaknesses and her struggles to connect with others in relationship. While her past sufferings are burdensome to her, she remembers them with the purpose of integrating them into her life story. Butler notes that

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<sup>48</sup> In this way, life review fulfills a similar purpose to that of a confession. Aside from that genre's religious nature, Richard Terdiman has observed that confessions "...narrate the process by which a defective past is transformed into an integral present" (78).

the life review may include memories that surface spontaneously as well as memories that are deliberately recalled (67); the memoir composed by the protagonist does include both types. She begins to write each chapter with the deliberate purpose of commenting on what she has recently heard or seen of Olga, but from there her memories take a spontaneous course and even surprise her with their wanderings. Butler further mentions that life review need not be a systematic retelling of one's entire life story; it is not necessarily an orderly process and may not focus on all parts of the story equally (67 n. 14).<sup>49</sup> The spontaneity and nonlinearity of the protagonist's composition in *Una vida inesperada* indicate that her life review is disorderly, yet it seems she gains self-understanding through the process without needing her story to neatly culminate with some sort of solution.

Butler describes life review as a result of his observations of the reminiscing process among the elderly in particular, and by the final chapter of *Una vida inesperada* the narrator has perhaps joined the ranks of the reminiscing aged as she approaches seventy years of age. Butler's related hypothesis that the approach of death can be a significant impetus for such reminiscing is borne out by the fact that the final chapter of *Una vida inesperada* is written in response to Olga's death. Death's presence generally becomes more palpable towards the end of the novel. Aside from Olga's death, the narrator also recalls that the last time she saw Olga was at a funeral, that of their former lover Luis. While the narrator does not seem to fear death, she is aware of it, and the parallels of the two women's lives bring death to the foreground. She apostrophizes: "¡Cómo pesa la vida! Más que la muerte, Olga" (317). She repeatedly suggests her

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<sup>49</sup> Thus even the short text "Billetes" might represent a partial life review, though the narrator does not explicitly specify his interpretation of his interactions with Billetes.

consciousness of death: in the fourth chapter, for example, she relates a memory of a moment at which she felt “el presentimiento de la muerte” (227); she muses about “la idea de matarme” and wonders about “lo que hay después de la muerte” (246). In the last chapter, she says that she writes these memoirs as a way of defying death by preserving something of herself: her words. “Y es que la muerte me espanta y creo haberle visto la cara muy de cerca, instalada dentro de mí, queriéndome devorar. Pero he huido...” (294).<sup>50</sup> Finally, the novel’s closing image again evokes death: “[...] esta calle por la que ando y ando como si ya no pudiera cansarme, se elevará, se despegará del mundo, se perderá entre las nubes...” (318).

Death is present not only in the final chapters but earlier in the novel as well. She writes the second chapter on the day she attends Leandro’s funeral, and she writes quite a bit in the third chapter about Ernesto, whom she befriended and lost to a drug overdose in the period since the writing of the previous chapter. Certainly death is an important theme throughout *Una vida inesperada*, yet it is not sufficient to fully explain all the narrator’s lengthy reminiscings. Death is not the novel’s only theme nor the only reason for the narrator’s life review. Research by Sharan B. Merriam and Jeffrey D. Webster has called some of Butler’s assumptions about life review into question; both researchers found that frequency of life review is not a simple function of age and thus cannot solely be attributed to advancing years. The two also questioned whether death is a primary

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<sup>50</sup> The idea of flight, the desire to escape brought on by contemplation of death, is similar to that seen in “La hija predilecta” (*Gente que vino a mi boda*), as described in chapter 2, whose protagonist mentally flees from unpleasant thoughts and symbolically rushes away from the train platform. This narrator of *Una vida inesperada* addresses her fears more constructively and serenely than “La hija predilecta,” whose life review prompted by her mother’s death ends in a state of unresolved crisis. Similarly, at the end of *La señora Berg* Mario emphatically describes himself as fleeing his dying mother’s side; he uses *huí* in four consecutive sentences (271).

motivation for life review and their findings led to conflicting conclusions.<sup>51</sup> While Butler maintains that death is the main cause of life review, he concedes that “people of all ages review their past at various times” (“The Life Review” 73). Another reason why reminiscing is so often observed in the aged, he explains, may be that retirement affords them time and freedom from mental distractions to do so. Butler further explains that younger people may undergo life review if they find themselves preoccupied by death for some reason, or if they are physically or psychologically isolated (“The Life Review” 67). Though the narrator is aging, she has not yet retired from her work at the library nor her daily swimming routine. However, these activities, especially swimming, are conducive to her reflections rather than distracting her from them, and her preference for solitude affords her the mental space for searching through memory.<sup>52</sup>

Butler concludes: “Reviewing one’s life, then, may be a general response to crises of various types, of which imminent death seems to be one instance” (“The Life Review” 67). Among the mixed reasons for the narrator of *Una vida inesperada* to review her life, isolation and death among them, perhaps the central salient “crisis” or “resurgence of unresolved conflicts” that comes to her mind, to use Butler’s definition (66, 67), is in fact Olga herself.<sup>53</sup> The life review is necessary because the narrator has a need to assimilate her memories of her bewildering interactions with Olga into a cohesive life story. She partially achieves this goal of her life review even in the first chapter. She recalls many

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<sup>51</sup> Webster finds that older adults apparently do reminisce in preparation for death (98), whereas Merriam contends that none of the older subjects she interviewed cited death as a reason for their reminiscing (86).

<sup>52</sup> DiNonno Intemann notes that *Todos mienten* is a record of Javier’s thoughts as he reviews his memories while convalescing from hepatitis, a scenario conducive to solitary reflection (77, 91).

<sup>53</sup> The enigmatic Terry Lennox likewise embodies an unresolved conflict and is a focal point in the memory of the narrator of *El bandido doblemente armado*, as are Chicho Montano to Javier of *Todos mienten* and Billetes to the narrator of “Billetes.”

details of the intersection of their lives, how she was once “la confidente de Olga” (31), but soon found that “la odiaba un poco” and “me separé un poco de Olga” (33). Their separation was eventually so complete that the narrator now believes: “Finalmente, nada nos une” (64). Though she distances herself from Olga, their separation is not as absolute as she might hope; they are still united in the memories that are unearthed in every chapter with each subsequent appearance of Olga. At several moments in earlier chapters of the narration, the protagonist believes she is saying goodbye to Olga, but memories of her keep reappearing nonetheless. In the final chapter, on the day of Luis’s burial she again recalls feeling that few links had remained between the two of them (294), and she theorizes that all the pages of her memoir “...han sido una lenta despedida de Olga a lo largo de los años” (314). Only with Olga’s death can the narrator put an end to her writing and her mental struggle to make sense of her memories: “...no te volveré a ver, Olga, y todo lo que piense de ti será ya distinto, será algo acabado” (315). Perhaps her life review has been successful only by default: she is finished writing because there is no more to say. She has not really been able to resolve the differences between herself and Olga, not because she has not attempted to do so but because they are irreconcilable. While the life review process has not changed Olga, it has brought the narrator self-awareness and given her the power to say goodbye. As Mark Freeman has suggested, “...only when memories are *appropriated* into the fabric of the self—which is to say, only when one commences to rewrite the self by incorporating one’s memories within the context of a plausible narrative order—can they be coincident with a measure of psychic healing” (171, original emphasis). As this protagonist puts her memories in order, she brings order to her life as well.

The narrator's writing exercise is complex in its results and implications. On the one hand, she writes to integrate her life into a unified story and to achieve immortality through her words. On the other hand, she writes to say goodbye, to put her memories to rest, and perhaps in the process she distances herself from her own identity. When she looks at the memories that link her to Olga, she asks, "¿Serán de otra persona?" (69). Again, reflecting on what she has written of her life: "Ni siquiera estoy muy segura de que estas palabras me pertenezcan, de que sean las que yo deseaba pronunciar, más bien tengo la impresión de haber estado escribiendo como al dictado..." (139). The idea that her memories now written on paper do not seem to belong to her agrees with what Puértolas writes in the "Nota preliminar" to *Recuerdos de otra persona*:

Al escribir sobre nosotros mismos no buscamos, quizá, sino, precisamente, huir de todo lo que somos, de nuestra identidad, convertirla en algo palpable, objetivo. En suma, hacerla de los otros.... Así, a través de la memoria del pasado y de la indagación en lo que somos, salimos también de nosotros mismos y nos hacemos otros, y nuestros recuerdos se convierten en los recuerdos de otra persona. (10-11)

Thus the integrative effect of life review is counteracted by a distancing effect; as she gathers her thoughts into her memoir, she says goodbye to them.

### **"Gente que vino a mi boda" and the Memory of Disapproval**

A short story that warrants comparison with *Una vida inesperada* is "Gente que vino a mi boda" from the collection of that title. This story stands apart because it is Puértolas's longest story, about 45 pages, and unlike most of her stories, it is written in the same indirect, nonchronological, free-associative style as *Una vida inesperada*. This narrator is not writing but sewing; the text records the thoughts evoked by that activity. While her memories are not initially triggered by the presence of any certain person, her past troubling relationship with her sewing teacher Benita Valle emerges as an axis

around which her memories pivot. This text is thus another example of relational memory, a partial life review prompted by a crisis or conflict embodied by a person.

While the act of sewing brings Benita Valle to mind, the most important relationships that occupy the memories of this seamstress have nothing to do with her teacher: those with her mother, father, stepmother, ex-husband and his family, and her clients. Because she is sewing a bridal nightgown, her thoughts turn to her own wedding and the people who attended (hence the title). When she pulls out her wedding photo album, the distance between past and present is painfully clear, as many of the individuals and relationships pictured have since deteriorated—most notably her failed marriage to Eduardo and the death of her father. Her mother is absent from the photos because she had died years earlier. As she recalls her mother's death, she still regrets forgetting her childhood wish to wear her mother's wedding gown.

Despite the many failures and disappointments in the narrator's life, the tone of her narrative is tranquil. Even as she reviews her regrets, she seems to have reached self-acceptance, integrating her memories of pain and failure into an acceptable life narrative. An important tool in helping her reach this sense of resolution is her sewing, an occupation which serves the same ordering function fulfilled by the library work, writing and, especially, swimming of the narrator of *Una vida inesperada*. As she sews, she recognizes her power to create order and calm. “Lejos quedaban las turbulencias, los laberintos intrincados de las emociones, los desconciertos e inquietudes, las oscuras objeciones y hostilidades del mundo, todo se alejaba, desaparecía” (235).<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> In the memoir “El doce de octubre, algo que estrenar” of *Con mi madre*, Puértolas talks about both swimming and sewing. Both are activities she enjoys, but both have frightening aspects: she describes her

Sewing has not always meant order and calm to the narrator, and her recognition of her progress in this area is emblematic of her ability to overcome adversity. Just as Olga and Billetes are the embodiment of unresolved conflict, causing their respective narrators to evaluate their lives, in “Gente que vino a mi boda” Benita Valle also represents an obstacle in this narrator’s life. Unlike Olga and Billetes, Benita is a teacher and not a peer; the narrator never aspired to friendship with her. Her memories of the sewing teacher are filled with conflict and failure. While she excelled at all her academic classes, her sewing revealed her flaws that were usually invisible. Her embroidery projects were uneven, knotted, dirty and wrinkled, to the disapproval of Benita Valle. “Tenía un miedo pavoroso a Benita Valle [...]. Ella era la única que sabía la verdad, sabía que yo era chapucera y torpe; mis dedos se adherían a la tela y a la aguja como si las quisieran retener, cuando lo que había que hacer era dejar que se deslizaran, que todo se deslizará, sin obstáculos, sin nudos...” (207-08).

As the teacher scrutinizes her embroidery, it is as though she examines her soul and discovers the deficiencies that she usually succeeds in keeping hidden. “Benita Valle sabe algo que todos ignoramos, conoce el verdadero valor de esta muestra de tela y sabe que es como un espejo en donde nuestros defectos quedan atrapados, no hay manera de engañar a esta pieza de tela, todo queda aquí, adherido, junto al sudor que empapa los dedos” (231). This shameful feeling suggests that these embarrassing flaws belong to the narrator’s shadow. Mary Ann Mattoon’s definition of the shadow is appropriate to this protagonist: “It consists of psychic contents that a person prefers not to show or even to acknowledge. They are the parts of oneself that one considers unpresentable because they

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childhood fear of the water in “Piscinas” (*Recuerdos de otra persona*), and here she recalls her horror as a child watching the fast-moving sewing machine needle.

seem weak, socially unacceptable or even wicked” (28). Benita may not embody a projection of the shadow, but she seems to bring the narrator’s shadow to light, whereas it would be best kept hidden. These thoughts of Benita and memories of her fear and shame in displaying her imperfections in her handiwork bring memories of gratitude toward her mother, who would finish, wash and iron her projects. “Si no hubiera sido por mi madre, todo el mundo se habría enterado de mi torpeza, no sólo Benita Valle” (209).

Benita’s judgment remains like baggage in the narrator’s memory, yet the narrator has been able to overcome the effects of Benita’s presence. One day, Benita disappeared from the school without explanation and never returned. This helped her to realize: “No había merecido la pena temblar mientras me iba acercando, silla a silla, a Benita Valle. Ya no era nadie y nunca había sido nadie, lo que ella veía en las piezas de tela no eran nada, sólo el sudor de los recreos...” (232). Perhaps Benita’s dethroning has allowed the narrator to discover her enjoyment in sewing, her determination to master that which was once impossible. “Allí se descubrían mis emociones, todos mis temores, y mi gran ambición era verles la cara y combatirlos, acabar con ellos” (234-35). The narrator recognizes the irony in her decision to become a professional seamstress and wonders with amusement what Benita Valle would think.

Unlike Olga who literally reappears repeatedly, this narrator has not seen her old teacher since the day she disappeared from the school. Still, the narrator cannot make Benita Valle disappear from her memories; her profession constantly brings her to mind. She recalls the white graceful hands of the fearsome instructor as she looks at her own skillful hands at work. Her mastery of her sewing techniques exemplifies her overcoming

the source of her former feelings of inferiority and inadequacy. Benita holds an essential place in the narrator's memory because she is a reminder of this triumph.

### ***La señora Berg* and the Memory of Connection**

The narrators of "Gente que vino a mi boda" and *Una vida inesperada* revisit their memories of Benita and Olga because they represent frustration and conflict; the latter conflict endures for decades and is only resolved by Olga's death. Like Billetes and Terry Lennox, Olga has an attractive personality and a life of privilege, yet the narrator's attempts to comprehend her fail. In contrast, *La señora Berg* is a life review inspired by the memory of a person who embodies not unresolved conflict but unexpected connection with the protagonist, Mario. Marta Berg is Mario's neighbor, mother of four sons including Mario's childhood friend Pedro. Like Olga, Billetes, Benita and Terry, Marta is a memory trigger in the relational mode. Whereas Olga, Billetes and Terry disillusion the respective protagonists by the impossibility of relational connection, Marta, equally attractive and intriguing as those other foil characters, reveals her inner thoughts and preoccupations to Mario despite their dissimilarities of age, culture and socioeconomic status. To the surprise of both Mario and Marta, the two understand each other more deeply than anyone.

Among these characters whose story of memory prominently crystallizes around a certain relationship, this is the only male-female relationship, which suggests that in Jungian terms Marta represents not a shadow but the anima. For Jung, the anima is the archetypal feminine found in men's unconscious. The anima can encompass diverse and conflicting female qualities. For every man, "...in the realm of his psyche there is an image not only of the mother but of the daughter, the sister, the beloved, the heavenly

goddess, and the chthonic Baubo. Every mother and every beloved is forced to become the carrier and embodiment of this omnipresent and ageless image, which corresponds to the deepest reality in man” (*Aion* 12-13). Franz points out that the anima appears on different planes. On the low end, woman represents biological attraction. Above this, the anima appears as a romantic ideal or an object of spiritual devotion. At the highest level, the anima embodies transcendent wisdom (Franz, “Process” 185). Mario’s view of Marta changes over the years and varies depending on circumstances, but at different times he seems to project all of these archetypes of the anima onto her. Franz also observes that the anima, like Dante’s Beatrice, can assume “...the role of guide, or mediator, to the world within and to the Self” (183). Mario tells his life story with Marta as a central figure as though he views her in this capacity as moral guide.

The novel, undivided into chapters, is told by the middle-aged adult Mario as he sits in a bar across the street from the building where his parents and the Berg family still live. Just as the narrator of *Una vida inesperada* reminisces when Olga is present, the physical proximity of la señora Berg prompts Mario to review memories of his life; he has been watching the building to see if Marta will emerge. Despite some similarities between Olga and Marta, such as the fact that both women have been “muses” to their respective writer-lovers, they have opposite effects on the respective narrators, and there are other important differences between the two novels as well. Unlike *Una vida inesperada*, Mario does not seem to be actually writing but only mentally reviewing his memories; *La señora Berg* is a record of his thoughts. The narrator of *Una vida inesperada* periodically refers to herself in the present and alludes to her present activity of writing, whereas Mario does not indicate that he is at present sitting in a bar until the

very end of the novel. This has the effect of minimizing the importance of the perspective from which the story is told and bringing the story itself to the foreground, which in turn suggests that Mario is somewhat less conscious than the *Una vida inesperada* narrator that he is undertaking the life review process and measuring the impact of his past on his present. However, both stories are self-narratives of relational memory, life review organized around interactions with a contrasting personality. As in *Una vida inesperada*, this narrator begins his reflections with his memory of past interactions with Marta Berg, and from there his thoughts interconnect with other concerns of his life. His memories span from childhood to the present, so they represent a fairly comprehensive life review. While they are more orderly and chronological than the mental associations related in *Una vida inesperada*, lending further support to Wang's theory that the latter novel is organized by "feminine" time (301), Mario nonetheless frequently disrupts the timeline by interjecting recurring childhood memories involving la señora Berg.

Mario is a middle-aged working adult with adolescent children, so he does not fit the typical profile of the person undergoing life review, a solitary retiree reflecting on the approach of death. It is possible that his reminiscence is spurred by his awareness of death, though not his own: at the end of the novel he reveals that these reflections have unfolded following a disconcerting visit to his aging parents. Mario is especially concerned for his ailing mother; he senses her loneliness and feels like his visit today was a prelude to her death. As he leaves, he feels "[a] salvo, pero con la muerte ya dentro de mí, la sensación de incomprensión total que produce el ver desaparecer lentamente a una persona delante de ti...La incomprensión de toda desaparición irreversible" (279). He wonders what will happen when she dies and if there is any way to save her from

becoming merely “una muerta más” (281). Mario’s preparation for his mother’s death is not the main purpose of his life review, since so few of his thoughts are directed to memories of her, yet her impending death provides a context of crisis that leads him to self-reflection.

Thoughts of Mario’s mother are closely associated with his memories of la señora Berg, especially in childhood. The novel begins with a summary of Mario’s childhood interactions with Marta and her family. He went to the Berg house often to visit Pedro, and Marta would always greet him and would often confide to him her concerns about her children. “La señora Berg estaba permanentemente ensimismada, dándoles vueltas a las vidas de sus hijos, y si hablaba conmigo de ellos era porque no tenía, en fin, nada especial que decirme a mí” (17). The adolescent Mario is impressed with la señora Berg’s constant preoccupation with her sons; she represents the ideal mother figure to him, suggesting that he has projected this anima quality onto her. In contrast is the reality of his own imperfect mother: “Mi madre no era ni mucho menos así, desde luego; no podía evitarse esa comparación” (11).<sup>55</sup> His mother resents the comparison to la señora Berg and criticizes Marta’s expensive clothing and perfumes to Mario, though she secretly admires her style; one day she eagerly accepts Marta’s offering of free samples from the perfume store, and eventually she forgets her hostile thoughts of her neighbor.

Once Mario is a father himself, he finds himself thinking about Marta as the idealized mother once again. Now instead of comparing her to his own mother, he identifies with Marta as a fellow parent, especially once his wife leaves and he is left as a single parent. As he waits impatiently with one of his sick daughters in a doctor’s waiting

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<sup>55</sup> The comparison between these two mothers is similar to that in “Billetes;” the narrator is fascinated that Billetes’s mother was a successful actress whereas his own mother only dressed like one.

room, he recognizes in himself the same impatience his mother used to show towards him during his frequent illnesses. In contrast, he remembers the constant worries about her sons that la señora Berg used to share with him.

Not only does la señora Berg represent the perfect mother, she embodies Mario's projection of the ideal feminine with respect to the sexual or romantic aspects of the archetypal anima. During one summer visit to the Berg household, he recalls that he and two of the Berg sons were playing with a hose and soaked Marta as a joke. Mario becomes obsessed with the memory of his vision of her wet, clingy dress. "Y, de todos modos, aun a partir de ese día, luché por mantener mi admiración por la señora Berg en un plano ideal, platónico, porque sabía que no podía ser de otra manera... Puede que la señora Berg haya sido siempre el modelo de todas las mujeres de las que me fui enamorando..." (24-25). This corresponds to Franz's observation that "...men can attribute almost anything to a creature who is so fascinatingly vague, and can thus proceed to weave fantasies around her" ("Process" 180). Mario notes that he always managed to forget about the unattainable ideal when in the presence of real women; looking back, he sees that he forgot Marta Berg when he fell in love with his wife Claudia, again when he and Claudia separate and again when he gets involved with his girlfriend Coral. His immediate relational concerns temporarily displace his admiration for the idealized señora Berg, yet she is never far from his consciousness.

Even though Marta is not present in Mario's everyday life, he never really forgets her, partly because of the lasting impressions he formed of her during his childhood. Also, he still sees her occasionally, like the narrator of *Una vida inesperada* occasionally crossing paths with Olga in the decades after their friendship has ended. Mario, now a

husband and father, has the opportunity to turn his admiration for Marta Berg into an actual affair when the two of them end up spending the night together. The circumstances are awkward; Marta has been asked to chaperone her friend Amalia overnight, to make sure her date does not become violent, and Mario gets dragged along with the group with no ride home. After the two lovers disappear into the bedroom, Mario and Marta are left in the darkened living room, talking philosophically about life, its frustrations, and its magical moments, which they both realize they are experiencing right then. Their talk ends in a prolonged silence and mutual understanding, unbroken by physical contact, contrary to Mario's expectations.<sup>56</sup> Following this encounter, the two meet at other times in connection with Mario's visits to his parents. In their platonic liaisons, they talk deeply about life's disappointments and the inability of others to relate to them.

Similar to *Una vida inesperada*, Mario's self-evaluation through life review is prompted by the inner conflict that Marta stirs in Mario. Unlike Olga, whose bold and apparently unthoughtful persona is so difficult for her friend to understand, Marta evokes confusion for Mario because they do understand each other deeply, and he struggles to understand why. Even though their encounters always feel unreal or incomplete, he reasons: "...si mis encuentros con Marta Berg habían sido siempre incompletos era, sobre todo, porque Marta y yo, uno a uno, por separado, éramos dos seres incompletos" (255). Mario's deep personal connection to Marta is rooted in the fact that she is the only person who fully understands this incompleteness, even if neither is capable of providing what is lacking in the other.

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<sup>56</sup> The downside to this night of magical moments at Amalia's house is that Mario fails to call home, which infuriates Claudia. Mario recognizes that her anger is justified; he was equally furious the one time she stayed out all night. Thus Mario associates this night of emotional closeness with Marta, inversely, with the widening gap in his marriage.

At the end of the novel, Mario's solitary observation of the bright lights in the bar lead to this epiphany: "De repente siento que ésta es la verdad de la verdad, la verdad indiscutible: vivimos en la más total oscuridad, pero hay destellos de luz que nos hacen avanzar o simplemente movernos de aquí para allá, en una u otra dirección" (284). As Mario rehearses to himself his mundane autobiography, la señora Berg's periodic appearances have become focal points of his memory and her unseen presence has guided him, as an anima embodying spiritual wisdom. Though he does not explicitly acknowledge this, Marta has been for him a flicker of light to guide his dark path. These flashes of light are really what Mario—and perhaps all of Puértolas's characters—are seeking. They cannot or dare not aspire to find real answers to their existential doubts; rather they wish to know that another soul feels the same way. Such a connection provides a flash of light, a moment's orientation and encouragement to persevere.

### **Conclusion**

Ultimately the secondary characters recalled in this relational mode of memory are judged by how they connect with the protagonist, whether they provide flickers of emotional connection or whether they say goodbye prematurely. Characters like Chicho, Olga, Terry and Billetes are like the person who shuts the door too quickly in "La mirada del adiós"—the protagonists are intrigued by and attracted to them, but the obstacles in their personalities frustrate this hope. Any insight they offer is due to the lack of connection; their impenetrability reminds the narrator of his or her own isolation.

In some rare moments, Soledad Puértolas's characters do experience these relational connections, usually in unexpected places. If Mario finds an unexpected affinity to his parents' neighbor, the stories "El reconocimiento" and "Juan en verano"

portray even more unlikely sources for such kinship or flickers of enlightenment.<sup>57</sup> While the narrators of *Una vida inesperada* and *El bandido doblemente armado* use writing as a way to bring meaning to their remembered experiences, indirectly and through reflection, for the protagonists of these two stories writing is a direct means of finding companionship.<sup>58</sup> In “Juan en verano” (*Adiós a las novias*) the swimming motif again appears; the narrator is a lifeguard (whether male or female is unclear—for simplicity I will use the feminine pronouns). She describes the weekly visit of a group of autistic children to the pool. On one particular day, one of the students, Antonio, is feeling agitated. He comes to her lifeguard table, grabs a pencil and scrap of paper and writes an ungrammatical paragraph about Juan and the qualities of the morning and afternoon sunlight in summer. The narrator is astonished at Antonio’s insight despite his impairment and recognizes her own melancholy in what he wrote. Through his literary self-expression she realizes that she can identify with his fixation on 4:30 on a summer afternoon. “Es una hora que me asusta. Este miedo me liga a Antonio. Juan en verano. Ese deseo” (18). Reading Antonio’s poem does not alleviate her fear or her existential sense of desperation and longing, yet this moment of encounter is a flicker of light, literally, the summer afternoon light, that heightens her self-awareness.

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<sup>57</sup> Further moments of connection occur in *Burdeos*, in René’s conversations with his girlfriend’s surly father el señor Bernard and with Leonard Wastley whom René meets on a cruise. “La comprensión que recibe René de Wastley es como un bálsamo” (DiNonno Intemann 67). Also, in *Historia de un abrigo* Julián explains that even though he has never been able to truly reveal himself to a person, he found intimate connection with a camera: “Se lo dije todo a aquella cámara de fotos” (27). He believes anyone who sees the photo could truly know him; ironically, however, his former girlfriend sees the photo and misidentifies him.

<sup>58</sup> DiNonno Intemann finds that Herminia of *Días del Arenal* is similarly affirmed when Olga asks to publish her poems, even though this encouragement is ultimately insufficient to prevent her suicide (148-49).

In “El reconocimiento” (*La corriente del golfo*), the protagonist is the writer and not the receptive reader, but the flash of awareness is present in the final moment of connection through writing. The protagonist Minch is a famous poet who is inspired to pour himself into a new kind of story. To his dismay, his usual readers (his wife, friends and colleagues) are unimpressed. Undaunted, Minch keeps looking for readers because he is confident in the quality of his work. In his search for readers, he at last sees Wapoo alone in a bar. Wapoo is a schoolmate Minch has not seen in decades and who still actively resents having been bullied in school. However, it turns out that Wapoo is just the reader Minch hoped to find. Once Minch can convince him to read the story, Wapoo responds: “Es exactamente eso que uno quiere leer y nunca ha visto escrito” (52). Wapoo introduces the element of relational memory into this story. Like Olga, Chicho and Marta, he has shared past experiences with the narrator during adolescence, but a relationship between them seems unlikely. Their past antagonism makes Wapoo’s embrace of Minch’s story even more remarkable. This type of relational success is infrequent in Puértolas: the moment is brief and probably unrepeatable, yet it injects hope like a flash of light.

Puértolas also describes a source of her own inspiration as a writer, again using flashes of light as a metaphor. In the memoir “El tifus y la gallina petirroja” (*Con mi madre*), Puértolas recalls spending a long quarantine with her mother recovering from typhus at age three, during which time she learned to read. She repeatedly read a story about a valiant hen who escaped captivity and then shone her benevolent light of freedom on all the animals she met. This light is akin to what motivates her to write: “Cuando estoy escribiendo un relato o una novela y me aproximo al final, estoy muy atenta a los

más mínimos destellos de luz. Eso es lo que me empuja a escribir. Esa luz fue lo que la gallina petirroja que me acompañó durante mi larga enfermedad encontró al final” (31). However, the real source of her inspiration was not the story but the one who taught her to read: “Pero yo tenía a mi lado, durante los largos días del tifus, otra luz más cálida y esencial, la que provenía de la cama de mi madre” (31). This story is an example of relational memory, and thus Puértolas is unlike any of her protagonists in that the secondary character whose presence is most instrumental in her memory and her self-concept is her mother.

Throughout Puértolas’s works, secondary characters serve the significant purpose of aiding the protagonists in their self-understanding. Bo Hagberg describes the importance of other people in an individual’s memories and the formation of self-concept. In Hagberg’s report of a study of life review that specifically measured subjects’ memories of significant others and their evaluation of their relationships, he affirms: “It is well known from psychodynamic research that one of the strongest influences on the development of the self-image as well as other personality characteristics is one’s relationships to significant others” (63). Hagberg’s affirmation is confirmed by the relational mode of memory as employed by Puértolas, with the important difference that the “others” that are most “significant” to her protagonists are in fact usually marginal figures in their lives, with the autobiographical “El tifus y la gallina petirroja” as an exception. The self-image is most clearly developed through reflection on others who do not conform to expectations, sources of surprising connection or dissonance. Those unanticipated moments in relationships where one is left holding money for the taxi or

when one catches a brief glimmer of light, though useless to settle doubts and confusion,  
provide momentary orientation and insight into life, love and self.

## CHAPTER 5

### Amnesic Mode of Memory: Oblivion's Effects on Identity and Relationships

Soledad Puértolas constantly affirms through her writing that memory is important to personal identity and provides orientation and meaning for life. As the previous chapters have shown, memory has diverse effects. Through memory, the pain of the past persists and haunts the present, or memory can provide a mental shelter from the pain of the present. Memory may highlight past conflicts with others, or it can be a tool for integrating disparate events into a coherent life narrative. In exploring the many facets of memory, Puértolas occasionally examines memory by presenting its negative image, the intriguing phenomenon of amnesia and its consequences. Is forgetting good or bad; does it heal or destroy? The answer depends on whether memory is a burden or a comfort. Michael Lambek and Paul Antze write that memory and the past stabilize identity and threaten it at the same time, providing information that may be either congruous or dissonant with the present (xvi). Likewise, losing the memories that stabilize or, alternatively, threaten identity can be good, bad or both. Forgetting is as ambivalent as remembering.

On the one hand, because memory is crucial to everyday functioning, forgetting in the form of amnesia and dementia are serious hindrances. Beyond the ability to live independently, memory provides information that is essential in understanding oneself

and others. As demonstrated in chapter three, nostalgia is in some cases a reaction against the threat of forgetting, the impulse to relive valued experiences lest they be lost.

Furthermore, calling memory into question has grave consequences. At the individual level, Sue Campbell has noted that Western culture understands memory as a key component of the self, and therefore questioning someone's memory is "...a way of undermining his or her claim to full moral personhood" (Campbell 17). Similarly, Lawrence E. Sullivan points out the devastating effects of memory failure at both the personal and collective scale:

Memory distortion carries negative consequences for individuals and communities in such disturbing forms as personal disorientation, fractured identities, broken relations, litigious action, propagandist rewriting of the historical record, and war-time demagoguery. Memory distortion, it would seem, places human beings at risk of losing touch with their grounding sense of reality. (386)

While there are many practical reasons to fear forgetfulness, it must be recognized on the other hand that forgetting is also a common—and necessary—human experience. Marc Augé describes oblivion as the flip-side to memory, as death is to life, and the two must be defined in relation to one another (15). "Memories are crafted by oblivion as the outlines of the shore are created by the sea" (Augé 20). As John Kotre says, "...you have to forget in order to remember. Forget some things, that is, in order to remember others" (64). Augé agrees: "Remembering or forgetting is doing gardener's work, selecting, pruning" (17). The goal of the pruning process is to encourage a coherent life story to emerge, with a clear sense of oneself as protagonist. Just as Rebecca Rupp says: "We are what we remember" (10), by the same logic Augé can affirm, "...tell me what you forget and I will tell you who you are" (18). Memory and forgetting are equally essential to the selective process that constitutes individual identity.

Just as remembering has a community aspect, forgetting is also often a social activity. The opposing forces of memory and forgetting actively construct community identity in the same way as individual identity. Sullivan, cited above, alludes to some of the dangers of politically motivated forgetting, yet David Lowenthal in the preface to *The Art of Forgetting* suggests the need for selective amnesia to maintain a healthy state: “Artfully selective oblivion is necessary to all societies. Collective well-being requires sanitizing what time renders unspeakable, unpalatable, even just conveniently outdated” (xii). Likewise, Laurence J. Kirmayer affirms: “It is easy to forget when there is a tacit agreement not to remember” (188). As I discussed in my introductory chapter, it seems that this is precisely what has been deemed necessary in post-Franco Spain; in order to create a harmonious society (or the semblance thereof), unpleasant facts about Spain’s past must be overlooked, or *disremembered* as Joan Ramón Resina’s collection indicates. Salvador Cardús i Ros writes, “...the Transition is, basically, a process of historical and social amnesia, and the invention of a *new* political tradition (the contradiction is valid)” (18, original emphasis). “We could even say that the Transition lasted as long as it took to overcome the fragility of the newly invented memory” (Cardús i Ros 25). It is troubling to recognize that certain unpleasant facts may have been expunged from public memory, and one result, according to Ofelia Ferrán, “...was the loss of an opportunity to reflect deeply on the nature and legacy of the Franco regime and of the recent Spanish past in general” (195). It is tempting to speculate about the reasons for Puértolas’s own choice not to “reflect deeply” on the dictatorship through her writing. Perhaps she would agree that Spain’s operative national amnesia is troublesome, yet remembering properly is difficult. For whatever reason, Puértolas’s characters live as though untouched by any

national sensibility. The reference point is always the individual: the realm of meaning through memory and oblivion is the individual mind, and community is limited to the level of personal acquaintance.<sup>59</sup>

In the selection process of memory in identity construction, June Crawford et al. suggest the types of memories that are most often forgotten. One category would be considered non-problematic forgetting, memories that are unremarkable and thus unmemorable; culture designates what may be discarded as unimportant. The other type of forgetting involves memories that are unbearable, because they are painful or somehow inconsistent with our beliefs. The memories may either be deliberately suppressed or unconsciously repressed (Crawford et al. 155-57). The type of memory in itself does not determine whether it will be forgotten: as I have discussed in my chapter on baggage memory, Puértolas's writing shows that painful memories frequently cannot be eradicated and often persist in the present. Also, just because distant memories feel strange and inconsistent with one's present identity, they may yet persist in memory as Puértolas indicates in *Recuerdos de otra persona*. However, when amnesia strikes in Puértolas's writing, it is often linked to one or both of the categories of transition and trauma, rough equivalents of the two categories of motivated forgetting as proposed by Crawford et al. (157).

While Puértolas's writing is typically realist in nature and verisimilar in the way it rings true to life in contemporary society, some of the cases of amnesia are an exception.

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<sup>59</sup> Even though Puértolas focuses more on the individual than the collective side of memory, *La señora Berg* provides examples of the interface between personal and shared memory; remembering together reveals the selection process of individual memory. Marta Berg is surprised to hear the adult Mario's version of their past encounters, that she talked constantly about her sons' problems, whereas she has no recollection of this.

At an extreme are the forgetful characters who inhabit fantasy stories like the Arthurian romance *La rosa de plata* or the philosophical experiment *Si al atardecer llegara un mensajero*. Others, however, coexist with the supposedly normal characters in the realist novels and stories. Among the amnesiacs portrayed in the realist settings, oblivion may be severe enough to warrant psychiatric treatment, or it may be merely a small anomaly in an otherwise healthy mind. Texts that feature forgetting vary widely and are difficult to categorize. Any proposed boundary line, such as the one dividing realist from fantastic texts or pathological from “normal” forgetting, is a tenuous and uncertain demarcation. This uncertainty surrounding amnesia is a crucial, indeed the central, feature of Puértolas’s project on oblivion and must be left unclear and unresolved. By showing that the spectrum of oblivion overlaps with real-life experience, Puértolas in this way indicates that memory loss, though remarkable, is not merely hypothetical but lurks at the edge of normal experience.

As with the other memory modes discussed, Puértolas describes her own forgetfulness in her memoirs. The forgetfulness she describes is not related to pain nor to an event that is difficult to assimilate into her life story. Her oblivion is rather a cause for her to muse on the fallibility of her mental capacity, the level of forgetfulness that overlaps with everyday life. In “Escribir en el coche” of *Recuerdos de otra persona*, she relates that while driving or sitting in traffic, she finds story ideas taking shape in her mind. Though she is certain she will remember the ideas, when she parks the car, the stories are left behind in the parking garage, never to be recalled. Puértolas does not explicitly interpret this story, but it demonstrates the irrational, involuntary selectivity of memory and forgetting. She does remember looking at an ivy-covered wall at a highway

entrance ramp during that drive, but she cannot bring back the story she was creating as she drove by the wall.

Forgetfulness in this case would be considered non-problematic, as opposed to suppression or repression of a painful or incongruous memory (Crawford et al. 155). Its consequences are not devastating and probably will not destabilize her sense of identity, but her forgetting does inhibit the creative process, which is a component of her identity as a writer. One may note the importance of her physical space to her ability to remember. The car is a good place for imagination, a space—like other modes of transportation seen throughout Puértolas’s works—that allows for reflection and memory. The parking garage is another space that is set apart from the real world, yet unlike the car, it is a place of forgetfulness, negating what was created during the drive.<sup>60</sup> Perhaps her inability to remember the story is governed by the “encoding specificity principle,” the psychological phenomenon by which information is best recalled in the same context in which it was first stored in memory (Henderson 54). If it were possible for Puértolas to return to the original context, repeat her drive and look at the ivy-covered wall again, perhaps the story would come back to her. However, the finality of the memoir implies that the creative moment is unrepeatably; both context and content are lost forever.

Though forgetting is a normal experience, it causes disorientation and regret as the case of “Escribir en el coche” illustrates. However, forgetfulness alone is not responsible for these sentiments, disorientation and regret, which in fact characterize many of Puértolas’s protagonists. Those who seek relief in their memories are never completely satisfied. Sullivan affirms, as cited above: “Memory distortion, it would

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<sup>60</sup> The parking garage as a place of forgetting is even more clearly seen in “El mar en los aparcamientos subterráneos” (*Gente que vino a mi boda*), which I will examine later in this chapter.

seem, places human beings at risk of losing touch with their grounding sense of reality” (386). This may be true, but in the world as envisioned by Puértolas it is legitimate to wonder whether the forgetful characters in particular—or indeed, any characters at all—ever firmly grasped a “grounding sense of reality” in the first place, whether Puértolas perceives that such groundedness is possible. With this question in mind, I will now examine a range of texts in which forgetting is brought to the foreground. I will begin with examples in a realist setting and progress toward the fantastic, mythical end of the Puértolas literary spectrum.

### **Forgetting the Past To Live in the Present: Contrasting Cases of “La extranjera” and “Ventajas de la primera persona”**

In “Escribir en el coche,” Puértolas’s forgetting is apparently caused by a change in scenery. The creative milieu of the car cannot be sustained in the garage nor in the city. On a larger scale, major life changes cause forgetting in some characters. Their lives have been radically changed, and they find it difficult to remember the previous phase because of its incongruity with the present. An example of this is “La extranjera” (*Adiós a las novias*). As mentioned in a previous chapter, the title refers to Carla, one of the many women in Puértolas’s writing who travel internationally or reside in foreign countries. As seen above in “Escribir en el coche” and in previous chapters, the experience of travel in itself allows characters to reflect and privately construct a story from memories. In the case of *Una vida inesperada*, for example, the narrator travels to Quito with the explicit purpose of forgetting and is apparently successful. “Era cierto, se había cumplido el exorcismo: el viaje me había curado de mi obsesión...” (287). Not only does escape from her familiar routine afford physical and emotional distance from her painful breakup with

José Ramón, but the mission she completes by visiting Sergio in prison provides a new focus for her mental energies, displacing her former unhealthy obsession.

In the case of Carla, her trip from her homeland Germany to her current residence (a coastal city of an unidentified country) was perhaps not originally intended as a means of forgetting the past, yet her life in Germany has been definitively left behind. The immigrant's refusal to think about the country of origin is a common phenomenon; Svetlana Boym notes that first-generation immigrants often resist nostalgia. She explains that only succeeding generations can look back to their roots without the proverbial fear of turning into a pillar of salt (xv). Whether or not Carla fears looking back, her past and her reason for immigrating are unknown to the community: "Las historias que se contaban de ella eran contradictorias..." (115). The truth of her past is transformed into various myths, some more sensational than others, that aim to explain her presence in the community. Some people say she is a rich noblewoman who came to be cured of an illness. Others say that in her home country she had various lovers ranging from a priest to a Nazi officer, or that she came to escape the Nazi regime. Another believes she was a show dancer and after many illicit affairs she came as an act of penance—in this case, her repentance would represent a deliberate attempt to forget. Her current identity is independent of, and perhaps incongruent with, the details of her past, and so these details are forgotten. All the community knows about her is that she is a foreigner and an outsider who is not well understood but whose presence is welcome at gatherings, especially at sickbeds and funerals. "Se inventan su pasado porque necesitan su presente, necesitan cruzarse con ella por la calle y decir en voz baja: Es Carla, la extranjera, la que va a todos los entierros y cuida de los enfermos" (116).

The narrator is particularly interested in Carla because, as she says enigmatically, "...yo soy también un poco extranjera" (112). She visits Carla once and finds out that in fact her past involves a lover or husband Julián who died young. Despite the narrator's journalistic impulse to clear up the persistent mystery surrounding Carla, she realizes later that "...me olvidé de preguntarle los datos concretos de su vida..." (113). Even more surprising than the community's ignorance of the foreigner's past is Carla's own apparent oblivion. "Ella también parecía haber olvidado todos esos detalles, los había arrinconando por insignificantes, por inútiles" (114). During the narrator's visit to Carla, the questions cease and become irrelevant as the two women look out to sea. Carla is drawn to the solitude of the sea, yet she is also motivated by sharing the pain of others in community. Months later, after the narrator has moved away, she receives a card from Carla in which she again alludes to the lonely sea. The narrator perceives the coexistence in Carla of the solitary sea: deep, mysterious, eternal, emblematic of death and oblivion; and the civilized land: needy, full of life in the present moment. Carla's mission is in the present, yet perhaps as she gazes at the sea she longs to evoke what has been lost, her forgotten past.

Another example of a character who lives in the present moment is the narrator of "Ventajas de la primera persona" (*La corriente del golfo*). Like Carla, he has experienced a major transition, that of his wife leaving him, and he seems unable to make his understanding of the present fit with his memories of the past. His experience is less that of forgetfulness than an avoidance of memory. He does not literally forget his wife's departure, because he relates this in vague detail at the beginning of the story. However, he indicates that he has forgotten his memory of love. At the opening of the story, he

says: “Hay un día en el cual te enamoras. Lo acabas por olvidar” (127). Since he has lost the memory of his happiness, he lives for the present moment. His life does not feel like an integrated story of past, present and future but feels meaningless and empty. His habit of lingering in bars every night indicates his avoidance of the problems in his life, especially his memories of his failed marriage. His brief affair with his friend’s wife proves the impossibility of creating new memories and moving forward with purpose. He says at the end: “El recuerdo del amor se desvanece” (136). His new love fades, just as he forgot falling in love with his wife.

Like Carla, the narrator is not literally amnesic, but he chooses to ignore a painful part of his past. However, unlike the German immigrant, he has not replaced the painful past with a useful present. This is the advantage of being a first-person narrator, as the title hints. He can modify the story he relates to the reader so as to avoid telling his past mistakes, thus allowing them to be forgotten. In the same way, he can conveniently omit the episode with his friend’s wife in their future conversations. In fact, both of these men recognize the power of not talking about certain things in an effort to forget them. “El recuerdo del amor se desvanece. Y nosotros mismos ya no nos recordamos. No hablemos tanto de nosotros, eso nos pierde” (136). They have power over their memories insofar as they are the narrators of their lives. As long as they remain silent about the past, it is forgotten.

While such selective forgetting can be therapeutic, the narrator’s avoidance of his painful memories merely causes his life to stagnate. As I noted in a previous chapter, this narrator’s habit of wasting time in bars while pursuing fleeting relationships is akin to the self-destructive behavior of René of *Burdeos* and Guillermo of *Días del Arenal*. All three

of these characters have painful memories they wish to forget; seizing the present moment in empty physical pleasure is a form of oblivion that dulls the shocking reality of past and future.

**Forgetfulness and the Bar Scene: “Los nombres de las mujeres” and “A la hora en que cierran los bares”**

Incidentally, bars seem to be an appropriate setting for forgetting. Part of the attraction of alcohol is that it helps characters to avoid certain realities that are difficult to integrate into a life story. Augé writes: “The discontinuities of lived duration generally prohibit an integral regaining of what one has left, a picking up of things where one left them behind, a regaining of an unchanged self: for that, the movies tell us that one needs the help of a potion or of complete drunkenness” (71).

Aside from the element of alcohol which may aid in oblivion, bars, like parking garages, sometimes serve the dramatic function of a space apart from reality, a disruption or pause in the flow of life and of memory. Puértolas herself writes in “La ausencia” (*Con mi madre*) of a time a bar provided a refuge from painful memories. The year her mother died, on Christmas Eve she and her husband tried to escape from the emotional memories brought about by her mother’s absence. They traveled out of town and spent Christmas Eve in a philosophical conversation with a bartender. A bar can be a place of refuge for those who want to forget, though in contrast for some who want to remember, the bar exacerbates memory loss. The latter is true for “Los nombres de las mujeres” (*Adiós a las novias*). The melancholy narrator of this text interacts with three different acquaintances during several hours sitting in a bar, and all three times his encounter is burdened by his forgetfulness.

In the first encounter, a man greets the narrator: “Soy Pablo” (90). Pablo is vaguely familiar, but the narrator cannot place him. He takes a risk and asks Pablo to greet Margarita, at which point Pablo corrects him: his wife is Esmeralda. These few words are the extent of their conversation; the two part ways at this awkward moment. Pablo is “decidido a perdonar, a olvidar mi error,” while the narrator likewise is glad that “...ya puedo olvidarme de él...” (91). After a few hours, the narrator claims that “...he olvidado por completo mi encuentro con Pablo...” (91), and he has a second encounter. A woman he recognizes approaches, and he greets her as Patricia. She laughs and explains that she is Vanessa, Patricia’s twin sister. Now the narrator cannot recall whether he had ever been in love with either or both of the twins; Vanessa explains that she would fall in love with men who loved Patricia and vice versa. Vanessa leaves the narrator again in confused solitude. After more hours, he finds himself watching another woman who looks familiar. When she finally makes eye contact, they look at each other for apparently “muchas horas” (95), but no words come to him. He leaves the bar, and as he walks away he remembers too late that her name is Cati.

The narrator of “Los nombres de las mujeres” suffers the painful effects of his failure to make contact with others in the initial moments of a conversation, by the simple act of recalling their names. Perhaps he suffers from onomastic amnesia, the clinical term for the inability to remember names, according to Rupp (199). However, perhaps his particular memory lapses are within the realm of what could be considered normal, and the coincidence of all three is just bad luck. The narrator is in a bar he has never frequented and thus the acquaintances are all appearing apart from their usual context. In addition, the problem of confusing the two identical twins is not really a failure of

memory but raises questions about the nature of identity.<sup>61</sup> Even if he could remember Vanessa's name, he is inevitably prevented from having a relationship with her, because if he loved her, Patricia would be the one who loved him in return. Following these three unfortunate interactions, the narrator leaves more lonely than he came. He says "...me apiado de mí y de mi mala suerte y de mi mala memoria y me vengo a mi casa a llorar..." (96).

Though the narrator's visit to the bar is clouded by these humiliating interactions, whether he really has a memory problem may be called into question. Even though he claims he completely forgets about his encounter with Pablo, he now remembers enough to retell his story. He is not generally amnesic but is actually "...lleno de recuerdos y de nombres..." (96) and feels "...nostalgia por todas las mujeres que había perdido, que se me habían escapado de la vida..." (93). What memories he can retain, however, are "malos recuerdos" (95); he is as troubled by what he remembers as by what he fails to recall. In fact, he does remember names; he just cannot grasp them at will. Like the name of Cati, the names come to him too late when the possibility of relationship is over.

Acuden a mi memoria los nombres de las mujeres, uno a uno, todas las mujeres que han pasado delante de mí, mirándome unas veces, ignorándome otras, amándome, huyendo, nombres frágiles, evanescentes, que se iban con un solo roce, con un suspiro, que se quedaban en la punta de los dedos, enganchados, hasta caerse al suelo y romperse en mil pedazos, irrecuperables. (95)

Because the narrator is so lonely and has so little self-confidence, it is plausible that his failure to identify women properly by name is just a symptom of his inability to have a

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<sup>61</sup> This example of masks and games of identity in a bar setting calls to mind "Citas" (*Gente que vino a mi boda*). In this text, the narrator meets Inés in a bar, who mistakes him for her blind date Augusto. The narrator plays along until the real Augusto arrives, when Inés introduces the narrator as her cousin Tomás and reschedules her date with Augusto. After dismissing Augusto, Inés also takes her leave, explaining that Inés is not her real name either. The narrator consequently feels disconcerted, uncertain of his own identity.

relationship, an excuse that prevents him from taking more responsibility for his social inhibitions. At the same time, the cause is inseparable from the effect and perpetuates the distressing cycle: relational failure causes him to forget names, which prevents further relationships.

The importance of the bar setting is likewise ambiguous. Perhaps the bar is responsible for his memory failure. Because it is a social space where he must be ready to identify any acquaintance at a glance, his difficulty with names becomes immediately apparent. He hopes that in the bar he will find what he is seeking, the chance to connect with others and end his solitude, yet reality is far more disappointing. The bar frustrates his expectations and hopes, but at the same time it provides refuge for him when his memory does fail; he can retreat into anonymity between his abortive attempts at conversation. A central feature of this text is its ambiguity, its position on the blurry border between reality and fantasy, between coincidence, mental illness and conspiracy. The protagonists's experience with oblivion raises these doubts about the stable nature of reality.

Another particularly intriguing case of amnesia set in a bar is seen in "A la hora en que cierran los bares" of *La corriente del golfo*. This story illustrates not only the importance of the proper functioning of memory but also questions the relationship between reality, memory and imagination. The narrator of this story always notices a certain solitary man sitting in the local bar until closing time, not unlike the previous narrator of "Los nombres de las mujeres." One night, the narrator gets a chance to talk to this man and learns part of his life story: he spent a year in a mental clinic because he could not remember doing things his wife assured him he did. He is alone because his

marriage could not sustain the pressure of his forgetfulness. Like the previous narrator, for this man the bar is a place of solitude, anonymity and refuge from his failures of memory and relationships.

After the night of their long conversation, the narrator no longer sees the man in the bar. Six years later, however, he finally sees him again in a bar in a different neighborhood. This time the man's story is even more amazing: the very night of their previous conversation, he was hit by a drunk driver and spent months recovering in the hospital. By chance, he ran into his old psychologist who informed him that his ex-wife was now in a mental clinic. All the time he believed he had amnesia, in fact it was his mentally disturbed wife who confabulated memories of events that never happened. While the diagnosis for her is not clear, perhaps she had sustained a physical injury to the brain; Alan J. Parkin cites confabulation as the most common memory ailment for patients with frontal lobe damage (114). The man in the bar owes all of his troubles to an improperly functioning memory, and only recently did he discover that the problem was not his amnesia but his wife's confabulation. The dramatic reversal that occurred in the man's life between the two encounters—suffering and recovering from a serious injury, then the anagnorisis in which he discovered that he never had amnesia in the first place—has caused significant changes for him; he admits, "...mi vida cambió radicalmente" (70-71). Despite the changes in self-perception that may have resulted from the past six years of trouble, the result seems to be that the man still has the same habit of sitting alone in the bar each night until closing time.

The man's life story indicates the difficulty of distinguishing with certainty between memory and amnesia, reality and fantasy. The bizarre accident and the

sensational internments in the mental clinic arouse suspicion regarding the story's believability to a greater degree than in the stories discussed above. Though this possibility is not mentioned, one wonders whether he might have suffered a head injury during the accident and thus be basing his account on his own unreliable memories or confabulations. No clues raise this suspicion, but neither was the man suspicious of his wife's confabulations. Also, the puzzling question of why he accepted the diagnosis of amnesia without objection casts further doubt on the man's story. In fact, the narrator does question the plausibility of the man's far-fetched tale. After the first encounter, he tells his girlfriend Flory; "Lo contaba como si no acabara de creérselo, como si no le hubiera pasado a él" (67); during their second conversation he again wonders, "¿sería cierto lo que me acababa de contar?" (72).

The whole story is framed by the narrator's memory, as he recalls his own life and the circumstances under which he met the man both times. The reader may likewise doubt the narrator's reliability regarding, for example, the way he retells his memory of his breakup with Flory, providing almost no details other than: "Estaba llena de defectos..." (68). Perhaps he also tries to downplay his neglect or mistreatment of his current girlfriend Clara. "A mí me gustaba llegar a casa cuando todos dormían. Mis amigos decían que Clara no me iba a aguantar así por mucho tiempo, pero yo creo que me aguantaba por eso" (69). Even though this text does not belong to the category of fantasy, it is mysterious enough to test the boundaries of realism. The amnesic mode is a reminder to the reader that while memory is a useful tool in describing an elusive personal identity, the tool itself can be elusive and unstable, as it can be difficult to tell the difference between forgetfulness and fabrication.

**Amnesia and Physical Trauma: “El mar en los aparcamientos subterráneos,”  
*Historia de un abrigo*, and “La inspiración de dedos azules”**

“A la hora en que cierran los bares” introduces the element of clinically diagnosed memory disorder, and other texts also explore the implications of characters whose memories have been affected by physical or psychological trauma. Another example is the narrator of “El mar en los aparcamientos subterráneos” (*Gente que vino a mi boda*). This character’s story, like the previous one, pushes the boundaries of verisimilitude, as she is almost too unlucky to be believable. Similar to Carla of “La extranjera” gazing at the sea, she narrates her story from the beach, where she has gone in attempt to escape from her painful memories involving underground garages. She describes the anxiety she would routinely experience in parking garages and then recounts three separate episodes in which she was actually assaulted in a parking garage.

On a typical trip into the city, this narrator would steel herself against her phobia of driving into the dark enclosure of the garage, convincing herself she could be like the rest of the normal, fearless people in the world. Every time she survived the trip and safely exited the garage following her errand, “...me juraba que no volvería...” (193), but every time she would think fondly of her visit downtown and would quickly be overcome by “la nostalgia de volver en un futuro próximo, nada lejano” (193).<sup>62</sup> The result of this anticipatory nostalgia is that “...el miedo, que parece que se va a quedar grabado en la memoria para siempre, también se olvida...” (194). She would forget about her panic attack until the next trip.

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<sup>62</sup> Puértolas’s explicit use of *nostalgia* in reference to the future recalls the affirmation of Svetlana Boym that nostalgia need not look only to the past (xiv).

At a certain point, her fear of the garage corresponds to actual harm.<sup>63</sup> One day she descends the ramp very cautiously and slowly and makes another driver impatient. As she gets out of the car, he stands in her path, and she falls in terror. He helps her gather the spilled contents of her purse and then takes her hand, but instead of helping her up, something sinister happens. “Lo que sucedió después no lo puedo recordar con exactitud, porque sentí tal ataque de pánico que la realidad se desvaneció” (195). The parking attendant rushes to assist her but does not mention what he saw happen. A month later, she returns to the same garage against her better judgment. This time she is so nervous she actually gets into an accident, and she falls unconscious when the other driver walks threateningly toward her. Again, the same garage guard helps her get up but does not say what happened nor explain what caused her bruises. There was also a third incident, which required her to go to the hospital and of which she has no recollection at all.<sup>64</sup>

As she retells her memories, she examines the interplay of memory and forgetting on her well-being and her relationships with others. Her story involves extremes of memory, from obsessive remembering to complete oblivion. This paradoxical coexistence of memory and forgetfulness surrounding trauma has been noted by Sullivan: sometimes trauma hinders memory, and sometimes the trauma itself is memorable (394).

For this narrator, her trauma does both simultaneously. On the one hand she says: “...me

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<sup>63</sup> Franz makes note of a similar uncanny case in which a phobia manifested itself in physical harm. “Jung was once consulted by a patient with a number of different phobias, all of which gradually disappeared except an insuperable fear of outdoor stairs. Later this person was killed on an outdoor flight of steps by a stray bullet in a street battle. This fear, unlike his other phobias, was not a projection, it was a genuine premonition!” (Franz, *Projection* 94).

<sup>64</sup> Perhaps during this and the previous attacks, a head injury or concussion has caused post-traumatic amnesia, which is associated with both retrograde and anterograde memory loss—respectively, loss of old memories and inability to remember new information (Parkin 149). If the cause of the amnesia is not organic but psychogenic, then this narrator may have dissociative amnesia for the time of the attack (Parkin 163). Either diagnosis would explain her inability to recall details of the assault.

acuerdo, no puedo dejar de acordarme, de los sucesos espantosos que me han pasado, todas esas historias en los aparcamientos subterráneos que durante tanto tiempo se me grabaron en la cabeza y que no conseguía olvidar ni por un minuto...” (187). She claims she can never forget, but at the same time she cannot remember, or never knew, exactly what happened during any of the three attacks. What she does remember may not be accurate, and she admits the details in her memory are “cada vez más confusos” (188), because she was always alone with no one to corroborate her memory of the episode. The third and worst attack does come back to her in fragmented dreams, and she speculates that she might recover her memory of what happened by putting the fragments together. However, she says, “...la verdad es que no quiero esforzarme, aunque el médico me haya dicho que el olvido total es peligroso, que no es real, y que repentinamente, cuando menos se espera, en el momento más inoportuno, la memoria vuelve” (198). She nonetheless ignores the doctor’s advice and the advice of all her friends who warn her not to forget her trauma. She breaks contact with all these well-intentioned friends and travels to the sea with her dog, believing that not just time but also distance will bring forgetfulness and healing.

This narrator fears that remembering the episodes in the garage will cause her to be subjected again to the horror of the attacks, paralyzed by a fear that threatens every part of her life. She correctly acknowledges that “con su memoria constante no podría vivir” (188), yet she fails to realize the extent to which fear has already taken over her normal activities. First of all, the first two garage encounters might have been avoided if her panic had not prevented her from driving safely or, certainly, if she had been strong enough to run away instead of falling down both times. Furthermore, she does not appear

to be troubled by isolating herself from the people who urged her to confront her fears instead of repress them. Perhaps this narrator's rejection of this reasonable advice should be compared to the narrator of "La necesidad de marcharse de todos los sitios" (*Gente que vino a mi boda*), who scoffs at the doctor and her husband who urge her to sleep at night. At the same time, it seems that these well-intentioned friends do not really understand her problem. This lack of understanding is also akin to the experience of Esther of "Poderes" (*Adiós a las novias*). The narrator sees Esther at three different parties, and each time she is relating a disconcerting episode of extra-sensory perception. Soon after the last party, Esther separates from her husband, presumably because of his inability to relate to her troubling powers. Amnesia for trauma falls into the same category as insomnia and psychic powers; all are mental ailments that alienate the sufferer from others, probably less because other people are normal than because their troubles are less sensationally apparent.

As the story ends, the narrator of "El mar en los aparcamientos subterráneos" wants to command the sea to inundate the garage that occupies her memory. Apparently the oblivion she has sought by fleeing has not been complete. She does not admit the likely reality that the garage will always haunt her, that the more she flees the more it will be present in her memory. Though she hopes forgetfulness will free her from fear and pain, in fact her attempt to forget fragments her relationships and fails to end her fearfulness.

Another character who loses his memory as a result of injury is Cecé, the focal character of one chapter of *Historia de un abrigo*. As in the previous stories, his forgetfulness likewise leads to a broken relationship and a confused sense of identity. For

Cecé, these consequences are even more extreme and unbelievable than in the previous texts. Even before his accident, Cecé feels unsure of himself and constantly wonders, “¿Por qué seré así, se preguntaba, esta especie de cosa que no se sabe qué es, este ser flotante, indefinido y amedrentado?, ¿habrá algo debajo de todo esto?, ¿descubriré algún día quién soy...?” (61). Strict routine helps him cope with this uncertainty, until one day he disappears. Exactly why is unclear, but the narrator speculates that Cecé fell, lost consciousness, and awoke with no memory and no identification, his wallet having apparently been stolen. Thus begins the new phase of Cecé’s life as an amnesiac.

Lo que sí se sabe es que este nuevo Cecé era, en el fondo, muy parecido al anterior. No sabía cómo se llamaba, no sabía dónde estaba, no sabía qué hacía en el mundo. No sabía con entera certeza si estaba vivo o muerto. Pero, a diferencia de lo que le pasaba en la etapa anterior, ahora la ignorancia no le causaba la menor preocupación. No sabía quién era y no le importaba. (66)

Cecé’s loss of identity is apparently just a way of making manifest what he has felt all along. With his loss of concern for his identity, he also loses his moral sense. He steals as necessary with no thought for personal consequences or the good or harm of others. Eventually he becomes ill, lying unconscious on the street, and is taken to a hospital. By unlikely coincidence, Cecé’s abandoned wife Dolores sees him in his bed while she makes a charity visit to his ward. At the climactic moment of this encounter, Cecé wakes up and identifies Dolores and himself by name, her presence having brought back his memory of his identity in detail.

It seems that Cecé spends much of this story in a “dissociative fugue,” which Parkin describes as wandering around with a clouded consciousness, unable to remember one’s identity nor the event which precipitated the disorder. Dissociative fugue has been known to occur because of either injury or psychological trauma, and the confusion may

eventually clear up (Parkin 165). Cecé probably suffered physical injury, but psychological trauma is an equally plausible explanation for his fugue state, considering his prior insecurities and disorientation. It is notable that Cecé's dissociative fugue ends with the appearance of Dolores; as noted in a previous chapter, Daniel L. Schacter has observed the power of a familiar face to trigger memory: "...our old friends provide us with cues and reminders that are difficult to generate on our own, and that allow us to recollect incidents we would ordinarily fail to remember" (63).

Even more remarkable than Cecé "awaking" from his state of confused identity is the fact that he, the mentally disturbed patient, recognizes the mentally healthy Dolores before she recognizes him. She is shocked when Cecé calls her name: "...¿si es que se había olvidado de él! Claro que Celedonio Covaldo era su marido, pero ¿es que ese hombre podía ser él?" (70). Only after he produces many unspecified proofs does she believe him; the institutionalized patient sees the truth more completely than the healthy outsider. This draws attention to the fact that forgetting and confusion about identity are not pathological symptoms limited to the mentally ill, but that everyone is susceptible to such confusion. Just as forgetfulness is sometimes part of sane experience, Dolores's response to her reunion with Cecé shows that sometimes forgetting is actually necessary. In order to be reconciled, Dolores tells him: "Estos años han de olvidarse, por mucho que hayan sido necesarios. Vamos a olvidarlo todo. Estos años y los anteriores" (70). Even though Cecé's oblivion has been disastrous for himself and his family, oblivion in the form of absolution is now necessary for reconciliation.

Even though Cecé's life has been disrupted by years of amnesia, as he recovers his memory he also gains a sense of continuity and unity in his life. In contrast to the

narrator of “El mar en los aparcamientos subterráneos,” Cecé recovers from his physical and psychological sufferings. Instead of retreating with his pain and withdrawing from the realm of shared memory, he reconnects with his wife and calls to mind the happy memory of a friend. As his chapter concludes, he finds himself looking at his hands and recognizing them as his own. What specifically comes to mind is the time during his adolescence when that same hand held a cigarette while he posed for a photograph with his friend Julián.<sup>65</sup> He remembers that moment of friendship as a happy time onto which his hands have been able to hold through the years. While everything in his life has changed, “...las manos son siempre las mismas, lo recogen todo, lo absorben todo, todo cabe en las manos, todo está aquí” (72). Even when his mind has not retained an accurate record of memory, he carries the traces of the past in his body. While the previous narrator’s body betrays her, causing her to collapse in the threatening space of the garage, Cecé’s body helps him to overcome his mental weakness by faithfully reminding him of who he is.

Puértolas also explores the body, and specifically the hands, as a site of memory in “La inspiración de dedos azules” (*Adiós a las novias*). The type of forgetfulness that plagues this particular protagonist is writer’s block, his inability or his feared inability to continue playing the role of the celebrated writer. When called upon to give a speech to initiate a local festival, Teodoro freezes. He has not written much lately and despairs of writing the speech. “Teodoro se entregaba a la desesperación, casi olvidado del encargo. Pero el tiempo discurría y una noche se acordó de repente de su compromiso” (50).

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<sup>65</sup> This photograph is a focal point of the novel. Another chapter describes this photo session from Julián’s point of view, and in others different characters react to this prize-winning photograph of Cecé and Julián on display in the photographer’s home.

Teodoro sits to write and tries to evoke the past when stories flowed from his pen with ease; now that is “un pasado que parecía irreal, soñado” (52). This past is not forgotten, but it is out of reach. His former inspiration is irrecoverable and incomprehensible. “Le dolía el pasado como una equivocación” (54).

After an agonizing and fruitless night, Teodoro wakes up the morning of the festivities and automatically writes a speech without thinking. “Todos los recursos del escritor de oficio permanecían en el fondo de su alma y fueron saliendo a la superficie, convertidos en palabras, en versos, en rimas” (55). Without time to review his work or even wash his hands, he is summoned to read the speech, which is surprisingly well-received. The story concludes as Teodoro returns home to write again “con una extraña mezcla de profunda calma y fiebre interior” (56), apparently having recovered both his inspiration (“fiebre interior”) and his self-assurance (“profunda calma”). He looks at his hands, still stained with ink, “...y supo que el vacío, la parálisis, habían concluido” (56).

Like Cecé, when Teodoro observes his own hands, he recognizes in them himself and his past, despite circumstances that have intervened to call his identity into question. The ink stains reveal the hands of the successful writer he was and will continue to be. An element of doubt in the text, however, relates to the speech itself. Teodoro writes it mechanically, and he dramatically pronounces it without being conscious of what he is saying. The audience applauds the speech and congratulates him, “Pero nadie le habló del pregón” (56). This suggests that the text as written, performed and received has been form without substance, which would belie the optimistic ending of the story and give credence to the fatalistic, nihilistic message that Teodoro had originally felt like writing. Alternatively, perhaps Teodoro is such a gifted writer that, drawing unconsciously on his

inner resources, he can easily produce a brilliant text. The new writing project he begins after the speech will be even more ingenious because he is now fully engaged in the creative process.

### **Forgetting and Strained Relationships: “Gente que vino a mi boda”**

One more reason for Teodoro’s recovery of his mission as a writer is his interaction with the public, similar to the way in which the presence of Dolores inspired Cecé to remember his identity. Praise from Teodoro’s audience has served to remind him of his purpose and inspiration for writing. Incidentally, this is exactly what motivates the poet Minch in “El reconocimiento” (*La corriente del golfo*) as described in a previous chapter; he cannot rest until he finds a receptive audience for his story. Because shared memory is an important component of relationships, forgetting can significantly affect the way people relate to one another. While good relationships can counteract forgetfulness, many other stories, including some discussed above, demonstrate the inverse, the relational strain caused by forgetting. During Cecé’s dissociative fugue, he is estranged from his wife, as is the mysterious man in “A la hora en que cierran los bares” and the narrator of “Ventajas de la primera persona.” The narrator of “El mar en los aparcamientos subterráneos” avoids people who criticize her resistance to remembering her assaults. In “Los nombres de las mujeres,” the narrator’s forgetfulness prohibits him from even starting conversations, and Carla’s forgotten past is a barrier to some relationships as well. While amnesia can hinder good relationships, forgetfulness can also provide a solution to unpleasant relationships, such as the narrator of *Una vida inesperada* who wishes to forget her affair with José Ramón. Also, in *Historia de un*

*abrigo*, on separate occasions both Mabel and Dani have dinner with Augusto Riofrío and then wish to forget the unsettling encounter.

Another story that explores the implications of forgetting for a relationship is seen in the title story of *Gente que vino a mi boda*, but in this case the relationship has already been disrupted by death. In this story, as discussed in a previous chapter, the narrator reflects on memories of her wedding as she sews a bridal nightgown for a client. This protagonist apparently has a normally functioning memory, but her thoughts repeatedly return to a moment of forgetfulness from her past: she forgot her lifelong dream of wearing her mother's bridal gown in her wedding. This is something that the protagonist has in common with Puértolas herself. In "El silencio, el teléfono, la moral" (*Con mi madre*), Puértolas explains that she had planned to wear her mother's wedding dress, but during the wedding preparations she and her mother both forgot. Unlike Soledad Puértolas, however, this narrator's mother had died years before her wedding. Thus it is not quite accurate to say that her forgetfulness caused tension in her relationship with her mother, but her repeated mention of this memory lapse suggests her regret. When she sees her trendy custom-made suit and hat in her wedding album, the photos are, paradoxically, a constant reminder of her forgetfulness.

In retrospect, the narrator believes that she forgot the wedding gown because of the stress of making wedding plans, compounded by opposition from her future in-laws and lack of support from her father and his new wife. She does not explicitly interpret the significance of her forgetfulness, but she attributes the lost dream of the heirloom dress to that particular stage in her young life when she fought with determination to get married. Her mother, once her ally against the criticisms of her teacher Benita Valle, has now left

her to navigate these family pressures alone. However, she has recovered from her fear of her old sewing teacher. Here is another example of memory inspired by the sight of one's own hands. The narrator recalls Benita's white, flawless hands, the hands of an expert seamstress, and as she looks at her own hands sewing she recognizes her skill, her triumph over her clumsiness. Just as her hands represent her strength and determination in sewing, the narrator also believes that she has become stronger and less vulnerable to accusations from family since the era of the forgotten dress. When her now ex-husband's mother criticizes her, she reflects: "¡Cuánto me hubieran herido esas palabras unos años atrás, cuando luchaba por casarme con Ernesto, cuando llegué a olvidarme de que había soñado siempre con casarme con el traje de novia de mi madre guardado en una caja en la parte de arriba del armario del pasillo!" (223).

While the dress was forgotten, it has not been lost. Now that the narrator has recovered her memory of the dress, she could potentially physically recover the dress itself. Her reflections lead her to wonder if the dress is still in its box in the hall closet. "Y me digo que tengo que ir a buscar el traje de mi madre, pero en el fondo sé que no iré, porque me horroriza volver a casa de mis padres" (223). The urge to recover her mother's dress is essentially the same as what drives Mar of *Historia de un abrigo* on a quest to recover her deceased mother's familiar astrakhan coat. Somehow for both women these garments promise to powerfully evoke the mothers' presence, yet both articles have been consigned to the forgetfulness of time. After searching every closet imaginable, Mar finally discovers the coat, altered and belonging to a neighbor, thus in all ways irrecoverable. The narrator of "Gente que vino a mi boda" seems to recognize that unearthing the wedding gown would only be disappointing. The dress holds only a

shadow of her mother's former presence, and it is too late to recover her former dream by wearing the dress in her own wedding. The forgotten gown, now remembered, represents the loss of the narrator's mother. Even if she had worn the dress, the heirloom is insufficient to revive a relationship interrupted by death.

**Oblivion in the Realm of Fantasy: “El ciclón,” “La orilla del Danubio,” *La rosa de plata* and *Si al atardecer llegara el mensajero***

The stories described thus far have explored forgetfulness in the setting of contemporary society. Though some of the characters' memory loss has been caused by unbelievable misfortune, the stories are essentially realist, though they test the bounds of plausibility to differing degrees. Now I will examine some stories in which Puértolas departs from realism and explores oblivion from the standpoint of myth, fantasy or allegory. One example is the brief story “El ciclón” (*Adiós a las novias*). The narrator is a prisoner, unjustly sentenced for a crime she did not commit. The space of the prison, perhaps a bit like a parking garage, is set apart from the real world and invisible to it, a place of forgetfulness. The narrator has been imprisoned for so long that she has forgotten the crime of which she was falsely accused, and her accusers have certainly forgotten her. She vaguely remembers that she used to serve a high government official and is certain of her innocence. However, prison has removed her certainty about everything else, even the meaning of words like “sol, aire, lluvia, nubes” (131).

From her cell, the prisoner begins hearing murmurings that something is about to happen, that the world is going to end. She decides she would like to see an apocalyptic cyclone destroy the world and all her accusers—and this is what happens. Her cell is

reduced to rubble, and when she climbs out she is alone.<sup>66</sup> The first thing she does as a free woman is bask in the sea, perennial symbol of forgetfulness, as though inviting oblivion to wash away her painful past, emptying her mind of her life in prison and of the world that has been destroyed. That night on the beach, she is surprised to see the moon, which she had forgotten completely: “...¿cómo había podido olvidarme de ella? Este olvido sólo puede explicarse por las horribles condiciones en las que he vivido estos últimos años. Eso sí que lo quiero olvidar, pero me vuelve a la cabeza una y otra vez, el sombrío calabozo...” (136). Much like “El mar en los aparcamientos subterráneos,” this narrator observes the interplay of memory and forgetting and recognizes her helplessness over what she wants to remember clearly and what she wants to forget entirely.

Like it or not, the world is gone and entirely forgotten; soon grass will grow over the ruins. Prison makes the narrator forget the outside world, and the apocalyptic cyclone aids her forgetfulness by obliterating all traces of this unjust world. This earth-shattering event also helps her to forget the years in prison. Perhaps with these past burdens eliminated, she can move forward without mistakes. The narrator believes herself to be the sole survivor, chosen to start over and perhaps repopulate this new Eden with the help of a man who will be brought to her. She wonders if, commanded to avoid the fruit of the tree of knowledge, she will be able to resist. Perhaps she will be driven to rebel like the first Eve; after having suffered years of unjust punishment, she reasons that rebellion might be her destiny. Or perhaps, she imagines: “A lo mejor me es presentado, quién sabe

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<sup>66</sup> This element of the story is similar to “Los guardianes” (*Adiós a las novias*). The narrator relates the story she heard from her childhood cook: two prison inmates find their cell doors inexplicably unlocked one night, and they easily escape together, as though led by destiny, through a series of mysteriously unlocked doors. Oddly, one of the men proceeds to take a job as a guard at a hospital described as “una especie de cárcel” (72).

por quién ni cómo ni cuándo, un hombre, y todo vuelve a empezar, y esta vez sale bien” (138). That is, things can turn out well as long as the past is forgotten. The story ends at this point, with the narrator still speculating and hoping for a new beginning, yet this optimistic open ending leaves room for doubt. The narrator supposes that after her troubles have been supernaturally eliminated, she will be free to build a better world. At the same time, her prediction that “Los ciclones sobrevendrán cíclicamente” (138) suggests that even if the past is forgotten, and even if life is better for the narrator personally, the future is likely to see the same injustices of the past.

Torreno of “La orilla del Danubio” from *Una enfermedad moral* is another character who gets several chances to erase the past and start a new life. Because the story is not constrained by realist norms, his transitions from one phase to the next are more abrupt than those observed in texts like “La extranjera” or “Ventajas de la primera persona.” Like “El ciclón,” this is another fantastic story in a mythical setting, but in this story Torreno’s world is not destroyed by disaster but by his choice to abandon one way of life after another. The use of historical nostalgia in the setting of this text in itself requires a certain amnesia. According to Augé, “...one must forget the recent past in order to find the ancient past again” (3). “La orilla del Danubio” is a legendary quest narrative set in the romanticized past, at least three centuries ago according to the text. The protagonist Julio Torreno is a soldier who passes through several different phases of life, leaving each behind and forgetting it, with the recurring symbol of the Danube River appearing at each change of career.

Torreno exemplifies a life completely devoid of the baggage of the past, where his accumulated experiences have no bearing on his present identity, beliefs and actions. His

military career ends soon after the army advances across the formidable Danube, when he protects the honor of a princess by killing a fellow soldier. He escapes punishment for the slaying by deserting the army. After a period of wandering, he settles in a town, learns a trade, marries and has five children. After two decades, he then abandons the life of family man after meeting an old army comrade Casto, another deserter who has also lived several different lives, first in an Anabaptist community, then among savages, then as an itinerant doctor. The two men flee together along the Danube riverbank, but they eventually part ways when Torreno refuses to cross the Danube with Casto. Torreno explains enigmatically: “Un río como éste sólo puede atravesarse una vez” (112). Next, Torreno lives in a cave which he makes into a hermitage, and he turns his lack of memory to his advantage; people come seeking his wisdom and he becomes famous.

Torreno era un hombre sin memoria, de modo que, cuando los hombres le relataban sus penas, sus desgracias, sus pequeños contratiempos, él no podía entenderlos y daba la solución adecuada, iluminada por la luz de la imparcialidad. Recomendaba cosas extrañas, que todos consideraban mágicas.... Y era eso lo que ellos querían de él. Algo terminante, no un dulce consejo. (113)

Torreno’s wisdom is not based on life experience, which would apparently be detrimental to his ability to give advice. His mind emptied of memory is an advantage as he relates to other people.

While Torreno’s oblivion is advantageous to his activities as hermit, it hinders his ability to understand the meaning of his own life. Torreno’s life in the hermitage, like all previous phases of his life, also comes to an end; then all his memories come flooding painfully back. He is overcome with nostalgia as he remembers all the people he has known and loved: his parents and siblings, the dishonored princess, his wife and children, his army captain, the soldier he killed and his friend Casto. He starts walking towards the

Danube but dies while attempting to cross it. His death in the Danube secures his legendary status; the land downstream is blessed with seven years of miraculously bountiful harvests and is also spared from the warring Turks.<sup>67</sup>

The text's meaning is somewhat ambiguous with little explicit interpretation, parallel to the ambiguity of Torreno's life. Torreno's forgetfulness affects both his relationships with others and his sense of personal identity, yet oblivion itself does not trouble him—these consequences of his amnesia cause him pain only when he recovers his memory. The reader is left asking why Torreno has acquired a blessed status by dint of his detached, disjointed existence, especially when this means he has systematically abandoned his occupations, family and friends. He is a wise arbiter, but at the expense of an empty existence. His life is an accumulation of discrete experiences, none of which affects or builds upon the previous ones. At last when he tries to tie all the elements of the past to the present, it is too late to revisit the past. It seems that he attempts to fit together the pieces of his life, in a life review process in anticipation of death, but the pieces refuse to fit, and death overpowers him. An additional layer of complication is that according to the story, his life and hermitage are still commemorated by the surrounding towns; the forgetful individual has become part of collective cultural memory.

Another text set in the mythical past is *La rosa de plata*, a chivalric romance based on the Arthurian legend and literatures. This mythic tradition in itself evokes memory, tapping into a cultural, collective historical nostalgia. The plot describes the rescue of seven maidens from the dungeon of Morgana by seven different knights, each wearing a different color. Puértolas's use of the chivalric romance genre, with its

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<sup>67</sup> Marguerite DiNonno Intemann proposes that the Danube is spiritually significant. Torreno's initial crossing is a baptism, and at the end the river purifies Torreno in his passage to death (187-88).

typically flat characterization and emphasis on action, is a departure from her usual deep and nuanced portrayal of character. However, she adds interest to the characters in this romance, the seven imprisoned maidens in particular, by endowing each with a quirky character trait. For example, Naromí is known as “la doncella del sueño infinito,” Bellador is called “la doncella del gran sufrimiento,” and, pertinent to a discussion of memory and oblivion, Findia is “la doncella desmemoriada.”<sup>68</sup>

While *La rosa de plata* is concerned with a literal quest rather than a metaphysical quest for self-knowledge through memory, Findia’s affliction of amnesia gives insight into the importance of memory to personal identity, whether in the realm of fantasy or in contemporary realism. She laments: “Moriré sin tener un solo recuerdo, vacía, estupefacta. Mi vida ha sido un constante morir, porque todo se ha ido borrando en cuanto quedaba atrás” (92).<sup>69</sup> Her life and her sense of continuity is incomplete because she cannot narratively describe how the “me” of her past has become the “I” of the present. She says that part of her, her past identity, is constantly dying, and this death implies the absence of a future as well as the loss of the past. Without memory, she is confined to the present moment; without a life story, she has no life to speak of. The upside for Findia, however, is that she is free from the ache of nostalgia and cannot relive

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<sup>68</sup> This collection of different maidens is similar to the series of diverse animals embodied by Arturo, the hero of Puértolas’s short novel *El recorrido de los animales*. This mythical bildungsroman describes Arturo’s experiences as he takes the form of any animal he chooses, each with its own advantages. The disadvantage of the elephant is that it remembers much suffering; Arturo much prefers the carefree life of a monkey.

<sup>69</sup> Findia’s lament probably accurately describes the experience of a real-life amnesiac. The much-studied patient H.M. suffers anterograde amnesia, complete inability to form new memories, following surgical removal of parts of his brain. According to Rupp, he feels empty and disoriented like Findia. “‘Every moment,’ he once told a team of interviewing doctors, ‘is like a waking dream’” (Rupp 88).

her past sufferings nor long for lost happiness as she sees the other maidens do. Unlike other amnesic characters such as Torreno or Cecé, Findia never recovers her memory.

Some of the knights who rescue the maidens also experience bouts of forgetfulness, with good and bad effects. For example, on his way to Morgana's castle, the silver knight gets distracted and forgets about his mission of rescuing the forgetful Findia. Eventually in a dream—the Freudian realm of repressed memories—he is reminded of his mission and of his identity as a proud, dutiful knight. This renews his enthusiasm, and he successfully completes the rescue soon thereafter. The golden knight is also distracted from his mission to rescue Delia, the prideful maiden. Along his journey to the castle, he encounters a series of needy women who seduce him night after night, so his journey is very slow and he loses interest in Delia. In this case, the solution is not a reminder, but forgetfulness. Merlin's protégé Nimué prepares a memory potion just strong enough for the knight to forget his recent amorous encounters which have dulled his sense of purpose, but not to empty him completely like Findia.<sup>70</sup> Here memory functions as it does in the escapist mode, in which a return to the past implies a release from present struggles. A nostalgic attempt to return to the past may be little more than wishful thinking in the real world, but in this fantastic memory experiment, erasing memory does allow an escape from present frustration. The opposite examples of the silver and gold knights illustrates the ambivalence of both memory and forgetfulness. Both knights' sense of purpose stems from their sense of identity, and through the opposite means of being reminded and being forced to forget, this knightly identity is restored in each. Like the writer Teodoro of "La inspiración de dedos azules," both are

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<sup>70</sup> As mentioned above, Augé has noted that for characters in fiction to overcome disparity or discontinuity, "...one needs the help of a potion or of complete drunkenness" (71).

distracted from their mission and need to recover their identity to forget about the recent obstacles.

Just as Teodoro's ability to write affects his community, these knights' memory has implications for community as well as the individual; the knights' properly functioning memory allows them to rescue the maidens and to be recognized within the chivalric order. In addition, like Torreno of "La orilla del Danubio," the knights' story becomes legend, a part of community memory. As their story is retold throughout Camelot, some of the details get confused, thus illustrating the principle of selectivity, or "gardener's work" as Augé describes it (17), in memory at the collective level.

*Si al atardecer llegara el mensajero* is another non-realist novel in which Puértolas explores memory and forgetfulness apart from the constraints of observed reality. This is a myth about a heavenly being's observation of and experimentation with mortality. The text has the feel of a philosophical allegory, as it addresses many philosophical and theological problems, not just those related to memory phenomena. *Si al atardecer* is even further removed from realism than *La rosa de plata* because in addition to occurring in a far-removed time period, the story's action is not even confined to Earth. The setting is a universe in which human beings are born knowing their date of death in advance. The protagonist Tobías, a non-mortal, thinks that people would be better off if they could live unaware of this morbid detail, and he persuades God to let him perform an experiment. He assumes the form of a mortal until he finds Arturo, whom he selects as the subject of his experiment, and causes him to forget his death date. The experiment is somewhat like *El recorrido de los animales*, in which Arturo takes the form of different animals as rite of passage. Though the parameters of Tobías's

experiment are different, both serve to illuminate the human experience, by contrasting it to either that of an animal or of an immortal being.

Puértolas's experiment, the frame for Tobías's experiment, manipulates not only mortality but also memory, one of the essential components of human existence. Before Tobías meets Arturo, he lives so many different lives from different cultures and historical periods that, somewhat like the silver and gold knights of *La rosa de plata*, he begins to forget his mission, wandering aimlessly, either in solitude or dwelling in bars and brothels. Again the bar is a place of refuge for a character who wishes to forget; Tobías lives "al margen del tiempo, y todo lo que hacía era sostenerse en el rincón de un bar, dormir, hablar y moverse siempre como en sueños, sólo para olvidar, para enterrar cada vez más profundamente los momentos de fugaz lucidez, de insoportable inquietud" (40). He even forgets his true identity, only vaguely aware that he is somehow different from the mortals around him. He is suddenly cured of this amnesia, however, when he meets Arturo, who complains of the burden of knowing exactly when he will die. Tobías realizes this is the sort of person he has been hoping to meet, and this renews his sense of purpose. He comments on how good he feels "al recobrar la memoria y, con ella, mi identidad y el sentido de mi estancia entre los mortales!" (55).

Tobías's experiment is to cause Arturo to forget his predetermined date of death; thus what he forgets is something from the future, not the past. Puértolas in this way challenges the definition of memory: can foreknowledge of one's time of death be considered a "memory?" Ironically, when Arturo forgets that he only has two years to live, he suddenly finds himself overcome with nostalgia for all the people he has known, and he determines to spend his remaining years, however many they may be, revisiting

the past by tracking down his ex-wife and children, the family he abandoned. Arturo's nostalgia is similar to the impulse felt by Torreno of "La orilla del Danubio" when his amnesia is reversed; with the approach of death, both are driven to undertake a life review which involves not only a mental ordering but also a physical return to the sites of the past. Tobías follows Arturo, assuming the form of an invisible guardian angel, and as they travel to Arturo's old neighborhood, Tobías also finds himself reliving his own memories of his most recent life on earth. Perhaps the reason Tobías found himself drawn to Arturo is that the two are like doubles or alter egos, much like the doubled characters described in the previous chapter whose presence is an inspiration for memory. Arturo has reminded Tobías of his present mission in addition to his past personal experiences. Specifically, Tobías realizes that Arturo's ex-wife Marina was once his own lover. Likewise, Arturo spends the night with Blanca, who is coincidentally the wife Tobías abandoned. Questions of sexual morality and propriety are irrelevant; the invisible Tobías is glad to spend time, along with Arturo, in the presence of these women he once loved—and still loves, he realizes. Unlike paired characters from other novels, the affective entanglements between these two men does not trouble either of them nor cause a sense of rivalry.

After Arturo's life ends, right on schedule, he and Tobías go to Heaven and have endless philosophical conversations. They debrief following the experiment; in a similar fashion Arturo of *El recorrido de los animales* is summoned before a tribunal to explain what he has learned as an animal. Tobías finds himself still longing to spend time with the people he had loved in life, and is surprised to see that Arturo now seems indifferent to the outcome of Marina's struggle with terminal illness. The reason is that this Heaven

is a place of forgetfulness, and once people become immortal, they forget what life on earth is like. It is thus a realm akin to the mythological underworld, where souls drink from the river Lethe to forget their lives on earth (Albright 24). Among Heaven's inhabitants, only Tobías really knows what earth is like. What particularly stands out in his experience as a human is the intensity of desire for carnal love. Tobías concludes regarding the memory loss in the transition to Heaven: "El único inconveniente que veo en esta pérdida de la memoria es que las teorías y generalizaciones que corren por el cielo acerca de los mortales reflejan muy pálidamente esta asombrosa realidad" (18), that is, the astonishing reality of sexual impulses. Again, like the distorted information that circulates throughout Camelot regarding the knights in *La rosa de plata*, collective memory in Heaven is selective about its "teorías y generalizaciones" of human experience.

While one might expect Heaven to be the perfect venue for reminiscing and engaging in a life review, instead it proves to be a place of forgetting. Though life review always entails some selection and myth-making, the heavenly generalizations about mortal life seem to Tobías incomplete and inaccurate. The amnesia that distances Arturo from his past has less effect on Tobías, but he too has a hard time defining himself through his memories since they have been so diverse, and he finds himself losing his earthly memories. Tobías is able to summarize his experiences just enough to generalize about humans, as a mouthpiece for Puértolas: "en la pérdida y en la desorientación, en las preguntas sin respuesta, está su esencia" (228). Even if these characters were able to recall all of their life memories, this assessment by Tobías hints that there can be no totalizing theory of human existence nor of a human's identity. This is consistent with all

of Puértolas's narratives: the past is important to a character's self-definition, yet identity cannot be reduced to the sum of recalled life experiences. No amount of searching through memory is ever sufficient to make the characters feel complete.

### **Conclusion**

Forgetting, as the counterpart to memory, is implicated in questions of identity and self-knowledge. Like memory, forgetting affects relationships and communities, and by selection oblivion helps shape the past into a coherent story. Memory both causes pain and provides escape from pain; oblivion is likewise beneficial or harmful according to what type of memories are discarded. As mentioned earlier, Sullivan has noted: "Memory distortion, it would seem, places human beings at risk of losing touch with their grounding sense of reality" (386). Oblivion does threaten characters' relationships and their understanding of the truth. However, memory is insufficient to provide a "grounding sense of reality," so forgetfulness alone cannot be blamed if reality feels unstable. For the characters whose forgetfulness corresponds to uncertainty about identity, such as Cecé, the writer Teodoro, the prisoner in "El ciclón," the princess Findia and the silver and gold knights, forgetfulness may be just another symptom of their unstable existence instead of the sole cause.

As in other memory modes outlined earlier, some characters are more successful than others. Some withdraw to the bar or to the seaside, while others keep on sewing (as in "Gente que vino a mi boda"), writing ("La inspiración de dedos azules") or attending to the sick ("La extranjera"). Even in extreme cases of amnesia, some characters can recover, but not all. Both Cecé (*Historia de un abrigo*) and Torreno ("La orilla de Danubio") completely forget and then recover their former identity, but only Cecé is

ready to resume his life whereas Torreno is swept away by the Danube. Part of the success of Cecé and other characters in fact depends on a judicious recognition of what ought to be forgotten, particularly past failures (including memory lapses—some need to forget about their forgetfulness). Characters' success in the present depends less on their particular memory ailment than on their determination to live with purpose in the present, to gain what they can from the past and to look towards the future with hope. For some characters this is too much to ask; *hope* is a strong word in the literary world of Soledad Puértolas. More precisely, successful characters simply determine to continue the struggle, motivated like the freed prisoner of “El ciclón” by the vague possibility that “...todo vuelve a empezar, y esta vez sale bien” (138).

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

### Memory as a Key to Personal Identity

Soledad Puértolas and her protagonists find meaning through memory, and they attempt to make sense of life by mentally reliving it. The burden on the individual to create and guard personal memories, keenly felt by many of Puértolas's protagonists, is a hallmark of contemporary Western society, where personal mobility and global communications have increased in inverse proportion to the loss of community and shared recollections. As I mentioned earlier, Svetlana Boym has drawn attention to this trend: "In counterpoint to our fascination with cyberspace and the virtual global village, there is a no less global epidemic of nostalgia, an affective yearning for a community with a collective memory, a longing for continuity in a fragmented world" (xiv).

Pierre Nora likewise writes about the sociological shift that has occurred in history whereby, he explains: "There are *lieux de mémoire*, sites of memory, because there are no longer *milieux de mémoire*, real environments of memory" (7). Within *milieux de mémoire*, he argues, memory was a dynamic element of community that anchored people to "the eternal present" (8). By contrast, people in contemporary society can only experience the past indirectly, through the artificial reconstructions of history with its archives and monuments. As a result, memory has become "a purely private phenomenon" (11).

In the last analysis, it is upon the individual and upon the individual alone that the constraint of memory weighs insistently as well as imperceptibly. The atomization of a general memory into a private one has given the obligation to remember a power of internal coercion. It gives everyone the necessity to remember and to protect the trappings of identity; when memory is no longer everywhere, it will not be anywhere unless one takes the responsibility to recapture it through individual means. The less memory is experienced collectively, the more it will require individuals to undertake to become themselves memory-individuals.... (Nora 16)

This imperative for the individual to remember in order “to protect the trappings of identity,” peculiar to contemporary Western culture, underlies the uses of memory in Puértolas’s texts. In her narratives memory has diverse effects as I have discussed in the previous chapters, and these effects depend on the rememberer’s age, temperament and experiences. However, the common denominator of memory’s importance is as a key component of identity and self-understanding.

In texts where memory takes the burdensome form of mental and emotional baggage, often these indelible recollections become self-defining memories, stories that the characters accept and adopt as an explanation of their own identity. Most characters whose memories are like baggage do not reflect upon their own past actions, but on things that have happened to them and that were beyond their control. Several of these self-defining memories involve the actions of another person: some characters were inexplicably abandoned as children or adolescents by a parent or close family member, while a spouse or lover abandoned others in their adult years. Even though the protagonist was not the agent of this betrayal, the memory becomes an emblem of his or her identity, a motivation to perpetually distrust others and to expect disappointment. Other characters are burdened by memories of personal weakness and inopportune illness, as though an impersonal force conspires to thwart their happiness. These

protagonists also see themselves, defined through these memories, as victims with little hope for overcoming their failures. Few self-defining memories involve the burden of guilt. “La hija predilecta” is one character burdened by the guilt of her neglect of her mother, yet even this baggage is better understood as regret than self-blame; her passive nature and uncertainty about life’s direction are the underlying personal weakness that has impeded her from stepping in to save her mother.

Overall, these memories of painful baggage point characters toward a sense of identity and destiny, namely the certainty of disappointment and relational failure. The Chinese restaurant owner Mai Li and the elderly Antonio Cardús are two characters who eventually incorporate their painful memories into a meaningful present, though their stories suggest that this is a process that involves effort, determination and many years. The baggage of the past does not cease to shape their self-understanding; on the contrary, they must learn to reinterpret their memories so that the identity they evoke is one they can accept.

Protagonists who view memory in the escapist mode approach the past differently than those who relive self-defining memories of suffering in the baggage mode. For them the past is a refuge rather than a burden, and this nostalgia is also important in shaping the identity of these characters. For some, their sense of meaning comes from the optimal moments of the past, or at least from the past as they perceive it in retrospect. It is not that they want to mentally relive deeds they are proud of; rather life’s high points of anticipation, whether or not their hopes were later realized, somehow inspire them to keep living. For others, the self-understanding they glean from memory comes from a vague sense that the past belongs to them. A protagonist’s nostalgia for past experiences

may stem from the recognition that these experiences are unique to him or her, like the narrator of “La corriente del golfo” who thinks fondly of her miserable twenty-second year of life spent in Norway. Looking back nostalgically means looking back with fondness at a former version of oneself, and thus nostalgia is driven by an obsession to understand one’s identity.

While nostalgia is certainly related to a desire for self-understanding, it would be inaccurate to suggest that longing for the past actually provides the clear sense of identity characters seek. For these characters, the past is not necessarily full of self-defining memories that tell them who they are. The narrator of “El inventor del tetrabrik” looks back at herself through memory and must ask, “¿quién era yo?” (122). Instead of answering this question, the nostalgic urge to escape to a reconstructed and idealized past highlights the protagonists’ dissatisfaction and lack of grounding in the present. Memories can be glimpsed but never grasped, and in the same way the past promises a self-knowledge that is perpetually out of reach.

The relational mode of memory likewise reveals the protagonists’ uncertainty about their own identity. The reason these remarkable relationships come to mind and drive the flow of reminiscent thoughts is that the melancholy, contemplative protagonists are unable to understand their flashy, outspoken counterparts. The personality clash may inspire a full or partial life review, and the moments of mutual incomprehension between the two are particularly helpful for the protagonist to see him- or herself more clearly. The protagonist gains self-understanding by observing their opposite personality traits at work; for example, the narrator of *Una vida inesperada* recognizes that the self-important Olga would never endure the prolonged solitude and inactive waiting that characterize

her days, yet she herself can endure—and even treasures—these opportunities for introspection. Also, the narrator of *El bandido doblemente armado* discovers in telling the story of himself and Terry that they embody the extremes of recklessness and caution. Through writing and the life review process, these narrators identify the traits that separate them from Olga and Terry and, by making this contrast, come to embrace their own passive, introverted natures.

In relational memory, characters learn about their identity as they see it reflected, and usually inverted, in another person. *La señora Berg* is an important exception; Mario is attracted to his memories of Marta not because he finds her so incomprehensible, but because he feels an uncanny affinity to her. Despite their differences, they seem to share the same introspective nature and the same dissatisfied sense of being “dos seres incompletos” (225). Though his memories of the relationship do not necessarily give him a solid sense of his identity (a goal that few if any of Puértolas’s protagonists ever attain), he is encouraged by her presence to know that he is not alone in his experiences of solitude and frustration.

Memory is equally tied to identity for characters who experience forgetfulness as for those who have more apparent control over their recollections. For some characters, forgetting the past is necessary if they want to forge a new identity, like Carla of “La extranjera,” or on a larger mythic scale, if they are called to found a new, uncorrupted society as in “El ciclón.” However, for many characters who suffer from amnesia, memory loss is practically equated with identity loss. For example, Cecé, Torreno and Tobías of *Historia de un abrigo*, “La orilla del Danubio” and *Si al atardecer llegara el mensajero*, respectively, forget the past and spend part of their lives wandering around in

disoriented bewilderment. One might conclude that if amnesia means lack of identity and direction, memory is the solution; indeed, all three recover their memories and regain purpose and self-confidence. However, it could equally be said that in Puértolas's literary world, disorientation and bewilderment are the true human condition. As Tobías concludes about humans in *Si al atardecer*, "...en la pérdida y en la desorientación, en las preguntas sin respuesta, está su esencia" (228). The uncontrollable and unpredictable capacity of memory provides only a dim guiding light, and without this, amnesic characters are utterly lost.

Memory and identity are closely related in Western thought and are central concerns in Puértolas's works. As Rebecca Rupp has stated: "We assemble ourselves, piece by piece, from recollections. We are what we remember" (10). Despite the undeniable connection between memory and identity, the relationship between them resists definition. Memory can be a painful burden, a place of escape, or a clue to self-discovery. The relationship between memory and self can be understood as a causality: memory causes identity, because past experiences (such as those encapsulated in self-defining memories) shape one's present attitudes and outlook. At the same time, the causality can be reversed: identity causes memory, as a person's memory is likely to select and revise episodes in keeping with self-concept. Though implicated in nearly every type of human action, memory eludes description and definition, and its mysterious nature is precisely why Puértolas finds it to be such an appropriate means for describing personal identity. Memory is not sufficient to still all questions in the search for meaning, but in a world where the scope of meaning is limited to personal experience, memory is a tool which helps characters to navigate the murky river of life.

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