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Luisa Valenzuela's *La travesía*:  
A Search for Order

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BORN IN ARGENTINA AND residing frequently in New York since 1979, the short-story writer and novelist Luisa Valenzuela is associated with the themes of women, exile, and coercion by linguistic means. *La travesía* (2001), Luisa Valenzuela's latest novel, set principally in late-1990's New York, develops the writer's concerns regarding authoritarian rule in society, as well as patriarchal domination and relations between men and women. Also, it evokes the persistent unease generated by the repressive Argentine military regimes of 1973-1982. To date, *La travesía* has been the subject of an essay by Ksenija Bilbija, as well as the focus of several interviews: Bilbija's essay, "Poniendo las cosas boca abajo: *La travesía* de Luisa Valenzuela," centers on the novel's motif of the stolen letters; in a piece for *La Nación*, Guillermo Saavedra questions Valenzuela as to whether *La travesía* marks a shift in focus in her writing; and Cecilia Sívori discusses with the author the work's themes of desire and secrets. Building upon these contributions, the purpose of the present investigation is twofold: 1) to suggest that in addition to the novel's emphasis on the inner reality of the individual, the theme of a quest for order runs through *La travesía*, relating it not only to other parts of Valenzuela's work, but linking it, as well, to an ongoing preoccupation of other Latin American writers, and 2) to demonstrate that the novel reflects a shift in Valenzuela's writing away from an

approach reflecting Western society's nostalgia for explanatory patterns, toward a vision that does not bind hope and fulfillment to traditional notions of intelligibility and coherence.

The theme of a search for order, one of the central themes in Latin American writing, surfaces prominently in Luisa Valenzuela's fiction. Donald Shaw, in his article "Boullosa's *Llanto* and the Quest for Order in Spanish American Fiction," traces the viewpoint's origin through the Boom to the spiritual crisis of the end of the nineteenth century that is visible both in naturalism and *modernismo*. Shaw notes that from the end of the nineteenth century there was a growing awareness first, that the various cosmic explanations which had formerly been accepted were no longer convincing to the intellectual minority, and second, that any replacement was likely to be no more than a construct of the mind, perhaps to meet the need to find justification (64). Regarding the theme of a search for order with reference to Valenzuela's work, at its deepest level, her hope for an explicable world in which love and human solidarity are meaningful is coupled with misgivings, expressed as late as *Novela negra*, that the world may function differently than we imagine, that "no hay orden," ("La palabra" 78) that "nadie se encuentra" ("Cambio" 80). Notably, prior to *La travesía*, the quests of Valenzuela's characters to find a more satisfying life have tended to fail.

*La travesía* offers a portrait of a heroine, in the third person but presented from her perspective, who remains anonymous until she speaks her name on the next to last page. Ella, as she is known until the end of the novel, is an anthropologist living in self-exile in the United States and working in a post at a prestigious university. She lives in New York where she teaches and meets Bolek Greczynski, an ambiguous and genial artist who is creating a living museum inside a mental hospital. Bolek serves as catalyst for the plot's action, given that under strange circumstances he found some sexually explicit letters in Buenos Aires that the protagonist had sent to her secret ex-husband Facundo Zuberbühler. The buried secret of an Argentine past and a bizarre marriage to a senior professor come back to trouble the central character. The much older husband used his status as senior male professional,

along with his manipulative skills, to keep his young wife at a distance and at a disadvantage. Apart from exemplifying patriarchal domination, the long-past marriage had some dark aspects, evidence of which surfaces in the present, via the letters that Bolek finds in Buenos Aires, and creates plot complications. Ella's marriage, during which she was consumed with satisfying her husband's demands, coincided with the paralleled rise of military authoritarianism in Argentina. While the marriage is linked to the repression of the Argentine Dirty War during the 1970s, it is also connected to the heroine's current existence in New York. Not unlike Roberta of *Novela negra con argentinos*, ella tends to be a participant in other people's projects. In contrast to Roberta, however, she finds something satisfying and life-enhancing at the novel's close, after having realized the impossibility of self-discovery through another human being.

The theme of searching guides the course of the protagonist's evolution and governs the selection, distribution, and direction of the work's episodes, as well as the symbolism. Importantly, the purpose of ella's quest is dual in that she hopes to retrieve the sexually explicit letters she wrote to her secret ex-husband and to understand her motive for writing them. Her task throughout her search is to understand herself in order to be cured and to escape from any further temptation to submit mindlessly to another's desires. The underlying metaphor is psychological analysis, and ella's admission at the close of the prologue, while speaking in the third person to herself and about herself, that she has been involved for too long in others' lives, will motivate her to undertake a search to uncover what Valenzuela has called the "deep unspeakable thing" in oneself:<sup>1</sup> "Caminó tres pasos y supo que no había terminado, no: recién empezaba. Debía encarar ahora *su propia* cita a ciegas con la parte ignorada de sí que la había metido en esa loca historia" (25).<sup>2</sup>

Episodes depicting ella's search to recover her letters are set in New

<sup>1</sup> Gautier, *Interviews* 316.

<sup>2</sup> Valenzuela, Luisa. *La travesía*. Buenos Aires. Norma, 2001. All further references will be to this edition.

York City, whereas episodes concerning her search for deeper self-awareness occur within the psychic space of memory. At the beginning of the novel's first section entitled "La pesca del deseo," ella sets out from the Museum of Modern Art to stroll the New York streets, venturing into different neighborhoods, constantly crossing boundaries. As readers, we view Manhattan via her outward gaze; however, as she traverses the city, swiftly changing exterior scenes prompt her to recall episodes of her past in Buenos Aires. The unfolding of her recollections, which are tied to her search for the reason she responded to her ex-husband's request for the letters, both interrupt the novel's forward movement of time and expand the text's narrative space, thereby taking memory episodes into account. In contrast to the more concrete, coalesced New York of *Novela negra con argentinos*, the protean quality of the New York City of *La travesía* allows Valenzuela to blur the present and embed interludes of memory into the framing narrative of the search for letters.<sup>3</sup> Eventually, memory segments expand to such a degree that an individual scene cannot stand as a representation of ella's "real time" search for secret letters, with memory interludes considered as external or secondary. More precisely, elements of memory on occasion appear to exist contemporaneously with episodes from the surrounding narrative. The end result of this technique is a plot structure that undermines traditional concepts of historical evolution and intelligible sequential time and foregrounds, instead, an aspect of wholeness or a relationship of connectedness with regard to past and present human experience, not unlike the model for order offered in quantum theory.

In contrast to the randomness implicit in the search for order by the Spanish American writers to whom Shaw refers in his article, a vision of connectedness or wholeness regarding experience and time can be posited in physics through quantum theory back to relativity theory. If we consider the primary focus of attention in traditional worldviews, we

<sup>3</sup> For an account of New York City's role in *Novela negra con argentinos* see María Inés Lagos' "Displaced Subjects: Valenzuela and the Metropolis," in *World Literature Today* 69.4 (Fall 1995): 726-32.

see that it has always been on discerning the order of the universe as it manifests itself in the laws of nature, and the principal path to human happiness has been in the discovery of these laws, and in complying with them, for the benefit of humankind. At the end of the nineteenth century, the model offered by Newtonian physics for order was that of the particles and the way they moved. A step away from this vision was relativity theory, in that instead of having separate small particles as the constituents of matter, Einstein thought of a field not so different from flowing water that spread through all space and time. Nonetheless, relativity theory retained certain essential features of Newtonian physics, because the fields at different points in space were thought to exist separately and not to be internally related. The separate existence of these basic elements was emphasized by the idea that they were only locally connected; there was no direct effect of a field on something far away. An important change in the attitude toward reality occurred, however, with the emergence of quantum theory, a shift that we argue *La travesía* reflects at the level of narrative. The order that physics had been using up until quantum physics was the order of separation, but, according to quantum physics, an internal relationship exists between the parts and the whole and among the various parts. At the same time, an indivisible connection that cannot be analyzed further exists between elements. Interestingly, in much of her fiction prior to *La travesía*, Valenzuela alerts readers to the inherent danger of acting in accordance with worldviews that stress separation and privilege fragmentary thinking, because such a view is seen to give rise to a reality that is constantly breaking up into disorderly, disharmonious and destructive partial activities.

The challenge for Valenzuela in translating a vision of connectedness becomes how to further develop a notion of wholeness with the context of the central character's search, while taking into account that our means of analysis, analytic language, commits us to analyzing into parts, even though our intuition may be the opposite. Of signal importance in this regard are two images Valenzuela includes in *La travesía*, a memory theater constructed by the sixteenth century thinker Guillo Camillo and

a fan. Both of these images, along with Valenzuela's technique of situating them in the narrative, allow her to probe the nature of order and to formulate a worldview that emphasizes connectedness. The sixteenth century memory theater that Valenzuela transplants early on into the narrative (29-32) helps convey to readers how the protagonist will proceed in what essentially is to be a work of mourning that will allow her to assemble, by means of a laborious journey of memory, the pieces of her autobiography—broken by uprooting and a loss of autonomy—and to ultimately rearticulate herself. The image of the theater comes to readers via ella's internal monologue that we "overhear" as she walks New York streets. We learn that the theater allowed one or two individuals to enter at a time, and its interior was decorated with a variety of highly symbolic figures related to medieval religion and history. Supposedly, upon entering the theater, the spectators would be able to speak with fluency on any subject as they stood on stage looking out towards the auditorium where the symbolic figures were placed on seven levels. The purpose of examining the figures was to shock the viewer into a new conception of wonder for the divine expressions of God. Each level represented the expanding history of thought. Within the theater, the symbolic value of the number seven stood for perfection and eternity, and as the sum of three and four, it also denoted the union of the spiritual world (the number three) and the material world (the number four). Relations or links between the powerful images guided the viewer's gaze around the room. The highest grade of the theater was the seventh level, which, notably, was assigned to all the arts. Valenzuela's technique of inserting ella's description of Camillo's Memory Theater into the narration of the protagonist's walk invites readers to infer that New York streets will supply her with the architectural background, i.e. a personal memory theater, against which to arrange visual images that, in turn, will prompt her to recall her past. Also, in light of ella's detailed description, it can be argued that the theater furthers the text's emphasis on connectedness with regard to human experience.

In addition to inserting the description of the Memory Theater into

the event of ella's walk, Valenzuela frames the walk with episodes in which Schwitters' collages at the Museum of Modern Art are mentioned, although not described. After viewing the collages and later declaring, at the close of the prologue, her intention to launch a quest of self-discovery, ella goes on to state, in the opening paragraphs of Section 1, Chapter 1, the following about herself: "Y la verdad es que ella a veces hasta piensa de manera original. Le convendría recordar, también" (29). Ella's account of the Memory Theater immediately follows and comprises the remainder of Chapter 1, with Chapter 2 opening as the protagonist plans her return to the museum and the collages: "Piensa que debería tratar de dormir, o mejor planear para mañana un retorno al lugar del crimen, es decir al MoMA, a enfrentarse una vez más con los Schwitters" (33). By framing the narration of ella's walk and internal monologue regarding Guillo Camillo's Memory Theater with episodes that concern the Schwitters collages, the text underscores the importance of memory and creativity to a search for integration while at the same time fast-forwarding readers more than three hundred years to contemplate the period when Cubism, Futurism, and Dada affected viewers in much the same manner as Camillo's theater had affected spectators; i.e. to wake them to a new artistic reality of space and time. Characteristically, Valenzuela leaves it to readers to infer from imagistic threads that one of the intents of *La travesía* will be to awaken us to a new notion of order.

Valenzuela introduces the figure of an open fan in Section 1, Chapter 4, entitled "Movimiento espiralado hacia las arcanas profundidades del ser." Here, she embeds the fan in a segment of ella's internal monologue that concerns the protagonist's recollection of a conversation between Facundo and her. It is worth quoting the text in full to give a sense of Valenzuela's aesthetic aim:

Si me voy con otro no me vas a querer más, arriesgó otra noche cuando ya la conversación se estaba haciendo demasiado densa. ¿Quién te dijo que te quiero, bella?, le preguntó él con cierta lógica; lo nuestro es otra cosa.

Ella encontró consuelo oyéndolo decir "lo nuestro" por primera vez, y se dejó envolver en una telaraña de luz. Lo nuestro tiene forma del abanico, repetiría él más adelante y en diversas ocasiones; lo nuestro tiene forma de abanico: vos podés y hasta debés dispararte por todas las varillas, pero yo soy el centro, el corazón en el que se asientan las varillas, el punto nodal sin el cual no hay abanico. (51)

The fan reference in ella's recalled conversation allows Valenzuela to artfully present expository material about the early days of the central character's relationship with her ex-husband. For example, when we take into account Facundo's portrayal of his role in the relationship as being synonymous to the fastening pin of a fan, we immediately intuit that ella's involvement with him will rob her of her autonomy; and Valenzuela's clever placement of the spider's web image before and adjacent to the fan image reveals that from the very beginning ella's attraction to Facundo blinded her to the fact that her function in their relationship was to satisfy his demands, i.e. submit to his will. Furthermore, Facundo's suggestion that ella explore all of the fan's ribs can be seen as prefiguring the point in the story when he will offer to finance her independent travels provided she write back the details of her sex life.

The construction of fans and the opening out of the fan enable Valenzuela to continue to address with narrative subtlety the thematic concern of connectedness of human experience, as well as other issues related to memory and searching. For instance, it can be suggested that as a fan's design is hidden from view when the fan is closed, ella's memories remain similarly buried inside her psyche prior to her efforts to reach a greater understanding of herself. The opening out of the fan, on the other hand, suggests ella's endeavor to recover her memories, whereas the pin calls attention to the issues of responsibility and autonomy with respect to a quest for self-awareness. Also, as the location where the ribs intersect, the node seems to propose a linking of human experience, especially since in the above conversation Facundo continues the fan metaphor to set up the ribs as a reference to experi-

ences he suggests ella try.

Late in the work, after the protagonist has recovered the sexually explicit letters, the recurring image of the fan helps readers grasp that ella's efforts to comprehend how she submitted to Facundo's domination have led her to a newfound self-awareness:

Cartas disparadas desde muy diversas partes del orbe convergiendo en este nuevo centro que es ella. El nódula.

Sin mí no hay abanico, advierte entre dientes parafraseando a cierta sombra de quien ya ni la inicial perdura; abanico, reitera, qué idea absurda...sin mí en realidad no hay nada... para mí. (412)

If we continue the fan metaphor, the words "...sin mí en realidad no hay nada...para mí (412)" would suggest, as well, an alternative to Western society's fondness for pre-existing explanatory patterns in that the truth about ella's life was not "out there" waiting to be discovered.

One paragraph later, ella's capacity to understand her role in betraying her own desires triggers the novel's climax. At this moment, surrounded by friends, and with the secret letters before her, she refers to herself for the first time as "yo" and pronounces her real name, Marcela Osorio: "Y sí, yo, Marcela Osorio, de cuerpo entero, créase o no me vuelvo a BAires. Falto desde hace más de veinte años, sonó la hora de enfrentar tanto gato encerrado que dejé por allá (412)." By marking the conclusion of ella's journey into memory with the revelation of her true name, Valenzuela conveys to readers that the protagonist has indeed succeeded in rearticulating herself as free and uninhibited. The choice of ella's real name further underscores the fact that her quest has enabled her to achieve a more autonomous pattern of behavior: the name Marcela recalls Cervantes' Marcela of the *Quijote*, the honest shepherdess who represented absolute independence. As well, the protagonist's statement that she intends to return to her homeland and confront her past in Buenos Aires offers what readers realize may be a fragment of an unwritten sequel to *El gato eficaz*, Valenzuela's most

radical novel to date. Valenzuela wrote *El gato eficaz* in the late 1960's, and its stress is on narrative experimentalism. It is a baffling and innovative text, and the verdict of criticism regarding it is still open.

The novel's last paragraph returns readers to the themes of searching and connectedness of experience. What follows is the conclusion of *La travesía*, though not the end of Marcela's journey:

La mesa alrededor de la cual están todos sentados parece iluminarse. Gabriel pretende cantar Volver repitiendo eso de Veinte años no es nada y febril la tralála. Primero Raquel y Vivian, al minuto Jerome y Bolek, todos intentan seguirlo como pueden improvisando un coro de alegres borrachitos hasta estallar en carcajadas. Marcela, a quien cierto hombre miles de kilómetros y de años atrás alguna vez apodó Mar-bella/bella/ ella, se incorpora con entusiasmo a la algarabía general; el viejo tango de la pura nostalgia no le importa, la felicidad le importa.

FIN (413)

By placing the protagonist's name and nickname near each other on the page, Valenzuela links three of her earlier central characters and their failed quests to Marcela and her successful search for autonomy. In this context, the nickname Mar-bella/bella/ella can be understood as establishing a bond between the protagonist of *La travesía* and the following central characters from Valenzuela's fiction: 1) Clara of *Hay que sonreír*, who never achieved her goal of making it to the sea, hence the name "Mar," 2) Bella, of "Cuarta versión," who surrenders to el tío Ramón, with tragic results for herself, and 3) ella of "La palabra asesino," who in the final stage of her quest, realizes that she, like her captor, was potentially a murderer. The reappearance of Valenzuela's protagonists hints that she has imagined a happier ending for them here in *La travesía* by allowing their searches to be brought to fruition within the context of Marcela's. The conspicuous absence of Facundo Zuberbühler's name from the passage is another indication that Marcela has understood the

part of herself that submitted to oppression, and that she henceforth will be able to live life in the present, taking it on her own terms, and savoring the satisfaction it offers.

Thus *La travesía* ends with an acceptance of the way life is, a better understanding of the way it was, and with happiness rescued for the time being. If we question that happiness has been saved from our human mindset for an ultimate order, we need only reread the text's last words: "el viejo tango de la pura nostalgia no le importa, la felicidad le importa" (413).

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