

The New Novel / A New Novel:
Spider's Webs and Detectives in Luisa Valenzuela's
Black Novel (with Argentines)

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A spider's web of mirrors may be the image that best describes the most recent novel of the Argentine Luisa Valenzuela, *Novela negra con argentinos, Black Novel (with Argentines)* (1990). As readers of Valenzuela know, the spider's web is a figure that appears frequently in her works.¹ In this case, it also provides a visual image to describe the structure of a text that itself highlights vision and sight from the opening moment. As prey are entrapped in the spider's web, readers are metaphorically entangled in and by this text, for we are presented with myriad questions, encouraged to pose even more, but denied the concrete (and simplistic) answers we crave, answers that might signal a way out of the web/labyrinth. Thus, in good postmodernist form à la Lyotard, Valenzuela eschews both a master narrative and a narrative of mastery. The characters want to know, and we want to know, but there are no definitive answers here, only obscurely intuited connections, which we would perhaps prefer not to make. Yet there are threads with which the various plots and themes are woven. The threads in this text not only intersect as those of a spider's web do, they also reflect each other as they lead both outward and inward, back to the center and the unanswerable questions. Although ostensibly unrelated except by the unifying presence of the novel's two protagonists, the narrative threads that are set in New York City (a novelist's inexplicable murder of an actress, an erotic torture chamber with its theatrical apparatus, a soup kitchen for the homeless and the drama it embodies, a party at Lara's fairyland loft, the theatre of death at Edouard's) bear an uncanny resemblance to each other and to events in Argentina during the 1970s (the Dirty War, the *desaparecidos*). Specifically, it is through this web

of mirrors that Valenzuela explores the nature of the beast, humankind, and our capacity (perhaps even our demand) for cruelty and theatre.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. Before we look closely at *Black Novel*, how its web develops, and how it meets the aspirations and hopes for the “new,” Post-Boom novel, let us first consider this slippery term, “new novel,” and how Valenzuela’s “new,” “black,” novel fits into the aggregate of her work.

First, the theoretical. In his 1989 article, “Towards a Description of the Post-Boom,” Donald Shaw summarizes and synthesizes some theories (or perhaps better labeled, dreams and projections) about the direction the “new” or Post-Boom novel will or should take. These theories are drawn from a number of Latin American writers and critics, and while there is certainly no unanimity among their voices, some of their prognoses include:

1. a reaction against the Boom, resulting in shorter, more plot-centered, and more accessible novels
2. a consideration of sociopolitical problems in identifiable times and urban settings rather than a focus on the human condition in general
3. an exploration of the erotic
4. the use of a colloquial, Latin American language instead of the erudite language and linguistic virtuosity of the Boom
5. a concern for the experience of the exile and a concurrent search for national identity
6. a penchant for popular forms and/or a parody of established literary genres.

One of the other characteristics of the Post-Boom noted by Shaw and his sources is the increased visibility of women writers.

Although I am not going to suggest that we classify *Black Novel* as a Post-Boom or “new” novel, I think it will become apparent that it does share with Post-Boom novels the traits I have listed. In addition, I would like to suggest that this novel, like Valenzuela’s *Realidad nacional desde la cama* (*National Reality from the Bed*) (1990), manifests another quality that may well be characteristic of many novels of Post-Boom vintage—a preoccupation with theatricality and the visual as both theme and technique.²

It should be noted from the start that Valenzuela's opus has never strictly conformed to any one canon. Her literary career began in 1966. By 1983 she had published four novels and five volumes of short stories. During those seventeen years, her literary production moved from a thematics of the personal and a relatively naturalistic style to a thematics of the political and a more lyrical, metaphoric style.³ Although her 1982 *Cambio de armas (Other Weapons)* merges these two tendencies, I would argue that her prose of the 1970s and early 1980s—particularly *Cola de lagartija (The Lizard's Tail)* (1983)—evinces many of the characteristics we generally associate with the Boom: complicated plots, sometimes inaccessible to the uninitiated reader, as well as linguistic play and virtuosity. On the other hand, while Valenzuela's works have always been readable on a universal level, as dramatizations of the human condition of oppression (personal and political), there can be little doubt that the specific referent for most of her works since *Aquí pasan cosas raras (Strange Things Happen Here)* (1975) is the Argentina of the 1970s and 1980s. In these respects, her prose paradoxically conforms to and diverges from the canon of the Boom: it includes both the universal and the specific, the personal and the political, metaphoric virtuosity and social criticism. Perhaps, then, the "new" novel is not so new in Valenzuela's opus.

In 1990, after a silence of seven years, Valenzuela published two novels: *Black Novel (with Argentines)*, which was a finalist for the prestigious Plaza y Janés prize, and *Realidad nacional desde la cama*.⁴ Both seem to mark that return to simpler plots and texts heralded by critics and theorists of the Post-Boom novel. Similarly, the two might well be considered more "readable" by the average reader—more readable, if indeed not necessarily meaningful on all levels to all readers.⁵ While *Black Novel* exhibits all the characteristics of the "new" novel that I enumerate above, one—the use of popular forms—appears in Valenzuela's works for the first time. As the title suggests, *Black Novel* is a detective novel in some sense, but it is definitely not your standard detective novel. In spite of the fact that much of the plot centers on the endeavors of two Argentine novelists, Roberta and Agustín, to explain the latter's irrational murder of an actress with whom he was about to make love, the novel effectively undermines the genre by challenging its fundamental premises: 1) that one (specifically the detective) can discover or know anything, and 2) that knowledge can be contingent on seeing or witnesses.

One of the ways Valenzuela undermines the genre in *Black Novel* is through her use of language. While certainly the novel's language is distinctly Argentine (as I would argue it always has been in her works), it is perhaps less complicated here than in the past. It is still playful, however, for one of Valenzuela's continued themes is language itself. In this novel as throughout her works, she is ever conscious of the power of language to influence our perception of reality, or what she labels "so-called reality" (9 and 45)—"so-called" because we often perceive only what our language has prepared us to see. In *Black Novel*, as elsewhere, Valenzuela emphasizes the fact that language can be used by dominant groups to shape our perception of experience and thereby repress and oppress. Thus, an employee at the erotic torture chamber assures Roberta, "Things are as we stipulate" (194). The power of language is further reflected in a subway scene where someone has taken a simple statement, "*No se apoye contra la puerta*" 'Do not lean against the door,' and, with a stroke of the pen, converted it into a political statement, "*No apoye la contra*" 'Do not support the contras' (28). Ignoring this message completely, yet another passenger writes his name over it, enacting a graphomania apparently aimed at confirming his existence. But, as the protagonists will later recognize, "We could defend ourselves with the written word but that's not possible, the printed word smudges everything" (81). In this way Valenzuela proposes that while language and linguistic messages are meant to empower the user and corroborate existence, they simultaneously distort everything, including one's sense of power and being. Surely, the potential Agustín feels once the gun is in his pocket parallels the power he feels as he writes, controls the word. And significantly, only once he has disposed of that gun does he again feel the urge to take up the pen.

At other moments the text draws attention to expressions that we use regularly without fully comprehending their significance. Valenzuela posits that because we fail to recognize the illogic inherent in those expressions, we risk miscomprehending the referent. For example, at one point, the gunshot with which the protagonist has murdered a woman is labeled "One more explosion in an explosive city, an almost point-blank shot, for a .22 can't be expected to kill at a distance [literally, one cannot ask a .22 to kill at a distance]" (11). The text underscores the (mis)use of language here by reiterating "Expected to kill? [Ask it to kill?]," thereby accentuating the irrationality and danger of the expression that allows us to take comfort in the

oblique suggestion that the gun functions independently of an agent, a notion that might encourage us, erroneously to be sure, to believe that no one is responsible.

At the same time, as already suggested, *Black Novel* is marked by theatricality and an awareness of the theatre and role-playing that underline our everyday lives: "I've . . . [r]eached the point of not knowing where life begins and theatre ends . . . where life begins to end with all this theatre" (135); "true theatre, also known as life" (177). In fact, in *Black Novel* both the crime and the protagonists' efforts to understand it are specifically labeled theatre: Agustín calls it a tragedy he is writing and is emphatic that it is not a novel (49).⁶ Roberta, his accomplice after the fact, refers to it as theatre of cruelty *à la* Artaud (59). The French playwright, of course, wanted to use theatre to expose the cruelty of which we are all capable, both individually and collectively.⁷ Roberta's goal seems to be similar: "to break down the wall [the fourth wall of theatre?], force him [Agustín] to reveal himself—to rebel against himself" (57).⁸ It is by breaking down that fourth wall that one narrows or eliminates the distance between actors and spectators and compels us to recognize that we are simultaneously both.⁹ By proposing that none of us is an innocent bystander/spectator, that we are all implicated in the action (actors in the theatre of cruelty), Valenzuela explores the correlation between the political and the personal and again reminds us that instruments of cruelty do not act independently of an agent.

From the beginning of *Black Novel*, the question of responsibility (a question that motivates and shapes the detective novel) underlies the interplay among language, agency, and theatre. The text opens with a disarmingly simple and apparently referential description as Agustín leaves the apartment of the actress he had met only hours before: "The man—thirty-fiveish, dark beard—comes out of an apartment, shuts the door carefully, checks that it can't be opened from the outside. The door, of solid oak, has a triple lock; the latch doesn't give" (9). But, as we shall soon learn, the objectivity and directness of this beginning are misleading, for the door is being closed on the scene of a murder, a murder committed by the very man, as yet unidentified, who closes the door. Thus, the opening words themselves function as a metaphoric door, one that provides entrance into the text while it paradoxically locks us out of that apartment, draws the curtain on the scene (in the most theatrical sense) that we and the protagonists want and need to see. Like so many other aspects of this text, the protection (for what is

inside) that the locked door should provide is inverted, and that door itself represents the danger, the threat of the unknown, and the impossibility of knowing.¹⁰ Or we might invert our perspective and read the door as an instrument to protect not those who are inside but those who are outside—us, Agustín—spectators, who perhaps do not really want to “see” the scene of the crime any more than Roberta wants to see at the erotic torture chamber, or Agustín wants or wanted to see: “I . . . don’t want to see them, never wanted to” (112).

Revealingly, the language employed in this opening page is not without its ironies (more apparent in Spanish than in translation), for the man closes the door “carefully,” “con toda suavidad” (literally, with total delicateness, gentleness), a gentleness that contrasts sharply with the brutality he has accorded the woman inside. Furthermore, unlike what we find in the standard detective novel, language and its capacity to capture any referent, except in a metaphoric or metonymic manner, is immediately undermined, for the text adds, “There is no audience. The man, Agustín Palant—an Argentine, a writer—has just killed a woman. In so-called reality, not in the slippery, ambiguous realm of fiction” (9). If there is no audience, who is seeing this very visual, theatrical scene? Where is our detective or elusive eye witness who will see and know all? But, here too the Spanish original is somewhat more ambiguous than the translation, affirming, “No hay espectadores *a la vista*” “There are no spectators *in sight*” (9, emphasis added), a statement that subtly challenges the notion that what we do not see does not exist, while again emphasizing the interchangeability of actors and audience: if someone is seeing that there are no spectators in sight, then we already have at least one spectator (the narrator) and perhaps others who are merely not visible to the first one. At the same time, the reader is also implicated as a spectator here (metaphoric at least), for surely we watch Agustín “perform” along with the narrator. But, at which point is each a spectator and at which an actor? As Roberta will later think, “Seeing is believing, there must have been a witness, a voyeur, an onlooker who served as witness. The Great Spectator, feeling himself omnipotent and Agustín the puppet. There is always another. An outside eye that gets you in a mess” (67). But is that puppet us or the other? Surely, we have been cast in the role of omnipotent Great Spectator in this enactment of the detective novel, but are we the agent (the actor) or the witness, the outside eye that gets one into trouble or the one in trouble? Furthermore, the question of who is the spectator, who the actor, leads to the question: who is narrating?

From whose position are we viewing this theatrical event that would seem to be holding up a mirror to life in the most naturalistic way, *à la Hamlet*? From Agustín's? Can the so-called murderer be a reliable witness?

Admittedly, the reader would not ask these questions until the second reading, but it does appear that Valenzuela is asking and leading us to ask the questions that Susanne Kappeler has suggested we ask of all "realistic" art forms: "who is holding the mirror, for whose benefit, and from what angle" (2). Also in keeping with Kappeler, Valenzuela seems to recognize that in order to maintain the "realistic deceit," those questions must never arise in terms that would make the "concept of the mirror—and hence of reality—problematical" (3).¹¹ But, of course, this is precisely what Valenzuela does: she questions the dividing line between "so-called reality" and fiction (or theatre) and challenges the presumably "natural," epistemological link between seeing and knowing, suggesting that seeing may not be believing and that the mirror itself, language, may be problematical. Paradoxically, she does this by resorting to a prose that enacts the pseudo-objectivity of theatre, visually setting the scene and then letting us "watch" the dialogue or action, which seems unmediated (e.g. Chapter 18 of Part I and much of Part II). But, already in the opening lines, *Black Novel* undermines the fundamental premises of theatre: that the position from which the spectator views the action on stage (from the other side of the fourth wall) is objective and unmediated (in spite of all appearances to the contrary), and that the spectator's position is distinct from (not the same as) the actor's. Obviously no spectatorial position can be completely unmediated or uninvolved, and thus Kappeler's questions become critical.

Yet if even the opening sentence is to be questioned here, where is our *terra firma*, on which side of the theatrical looking glass are we, the readers, anchored? Let us not forget that the genre of the detective novel centers on the endeavors of detectives to explain the crime and discover, know, the perpetrator. Furthermore, that discovery/knowledge is based on seeing, on witnesses. But, in this novel, which undermines these premises from the beginning, how are we, who have also been cast in the role of detectives in this *mise en scène* of the search for truth, to find our answers? Although the traditional detective novel questions neither the ability of language to capture truth nor the power of some superior beings (detectives and readers) to uncover (open the door or curtain) and "see" that truth, in this novel it would seem that the

only place doors do open and one does see (if indeed only more theatre recognized as such and scenes we perhaps do not wish to see), the only place one knows, is "Where You Know," the erotic torture chamber. And what one "knows" there, one would perhaps rather not know. Close the door. Keep the threat (and the theatre) in (or, is it out?).

Although Agustín and Roberta are "above all, writers" (101) and although they recognize that the writer is a witness, the novel dramatizes that to have witnessed the crime(s)—either the one in New York City or the ones in Argentina—is not necessarily to know, to understand the meaning of the scene, the theatrical event, for eyes see only surfaces and one needs to look within, delve deeper. But can one delve deeper, see the threat/monster within, on our side of the closed door? Surely one of the points of the novel is that the monster is always already within; each of us would be capable of monstrous acts. Early in the text, and again reaffirming Artaud's theory of cruelty, Agustín recognizes that he can escape the external threat but not the other one, the one within, that internal something that causes him to abuse power as soon as he gets it, as soon as the gun is in his pocket. For this we cannot blame the gun, only the monster within.¹²

Unlike the traditional detective novel, *Black Novel* is never concerned with "who done it," which we know (if we can attest to knowing anything in this novel), but with the more philosophical and less answerable question, why. Why does one body eliminate "another body with such awesome, unexpected ease" (11)? Why did Agustín gratuitously shoot the woman to whom he was about to make love? Why did he use the revolver rather than his "other weapon," or are the two interchangeable?: "he'd taken the revolver from his pocket. When he should have taken out something else, when he could have responded to her smile with his entire body and not simply with a vicious finger pressing a trigger" (38). Gun, penis, finger. And these imagistic threads lead us to yet another image, another weapon, the pen: "He used to doodle with his pen to escape [death] but had managed with the point of another instrument [the gun] to summon it" (38). Perhaps the pen is as lethal as the gun. But, at the same time, and in good spider web fashion, the image of that finger leads backward, in time and space, to the Argentina of the 1970s and the atrocities that occurred there: "like an accusatory finger. Fingers. Like those that once appeared in the garbage dump behind the general headquarters, in another country, another life, another life story—memories to be stifled" (10). Thus we are reminded that in *Black Novel* the subtext always refers to events in

Argentina in the 1970s, a “stifled” (disappeared, censored) subtext that did its own censoring: the military government’s pen or discourse (“Nothing has happened here”) was equally lethal as it “disappeared” people, erasing them and their lives.¹³

But there are still more questions, and they too will lead back to Argentina and ahead to a new, revised national and personal identity, a new role to be played/forged in the Great Theatre of the World. If Agustín’s crime was one of passion, why did he shoot his victim in the head instead of in the heart?—“It was as if he’d wanted to send her ideas flying. To shatter thought” (105)—again perhaps not unlike the military government that aimed to re-stage the events, change thought, make us see differently.¹⁴ Was it just a testosterone thing?—“the revolver, a violating weapon . . . It all came down to a matter of testosterone” (73). It cannot be irrelevant that the killer is a male, the victim a female, nor that when Agustín tells Roberta about the crime, he alters his victim’s sex, “disguising reality” in the English translation (41), “travistiendo la realidad,” dressing reality in the clothes of the other sex, in the Spanish (40), thereby erasing an essential characteristic, pretending it did not matter, and reminding us of Kappeler’s question, who is holding the mirror.¹⁵ Or, did Agustín kill Edwina because he could not give life either literally (i.e. biologically, by giving birth) or metaphorically (by writing, “giving birth to,” his novel)?—“It would seem that nothing gets created by his hand, only killed: if one is unable to give life, one kills” (27). Let us remember that prior to the crime his novel was not coming along, nor was his sex life. Did he kill her specifically because of her femaleness, as an expiatory victim for other repressed hatreds: his mother, Roberta, the “woman within” him? All these, of course, are plausible motives that a detective might well proffer, but they may ultimately explain very little, for as Hector Bravo notes at one point, “I can give you a slew of reasons, all clever and equally valid. . . . We’re all hung up on sordid, unilluminating motivations” (207-08). Thus, the detective’s “logical” (if not necessarily valid) conclusions reveal little, for, in this case at least, the most important question remains: did he really shoot her at all or was it just theatre, a continuation of the earlier play in which Edwina played the “secondary but essential character” (23), as in fact she does throughout this novel, in a scene completely unrelated to her. How do we know? Since no one has “seen” anything, has anything really happened?—“we ought to be sure that there is a reality behind all this” (61).¹⁶

Of all these questions, explicitly and implicitly posed by the text, this last question again leads to the political subtext. The question of whether anything at all has happened alludes to the political theatre of the Dirty War and the disappeared in Argentina, incidents that, the government long assured the people, had not really occurred. Nonetheless, those events did occasion a crisis of national identity, which in turn produced a loss of self-identity, not unlike what Agustín experiences after his crime: “[He] had become utterly incapable of self-recognition. It was like passing your hands over your arms, your shoulders, chest, and being unable to find yourself, no longer knowing who you are or what it’s all about [literally, who or where you are]” (26); “I’ve completely lost myself” (135). Surely, the text explicitly enacts a search for a new national and personal identity. After the events of the 1970s, the Argentine people, like Agustín, are robbed of their role, their identity, and incapable of recognizing themselves in relation to the atrocities that occurred. Roberta and Agustín are voluntarily exiled in New York, but like many Argentines they are also exiled internally, alienated from what they were, or what they thought they were. Thus, the novel asks of Argentines in general what Roberta asks of herself in reference to Agustín: “Try to understand as always, put yourself in his place, pry a wedge open. Don’t get involved in hating, or killing in reprisal. Just suspend judgment for now and incorporate yourself in the story” (70). In other words, open the metaphoric door, cross borders, incorporate yourself into the story, and recognize that you are an actor as well as a spectator in the theatre of cruelty. Similarly, Roberta’s stance toward Agustín when he ventures out into the world after his seclusion in her apartment seems to reflect Valenzuela’s toward the Argentine people in general. She tries to make him see that everything is different now and help him to reacclimate himself to a new reality (a new Argentina?), a new identity, and a new life. She encourages him to assume the past and the guilt of the past without letting them paralyze him: “ ‘Nothing is erased.’ ‘But everything is transformed’ ” (114), which also might have been translated, nothing gets erased or erases itself; everything gets transformed or transforms itself.

Nonetheless, the facility with which Agustín performs his gratuitous act of violence compels us to ask if we would not all be capable of doing the same. The explicit question of the text “why someone becomes a torturer, a murderer . . . why an upright citizen can one day unawares be transformed into a monster” (143), leads to the implicit question: were the torturers of the Argentine military regime (or anywhere else in the world) so different from Agustín and, in turn, from

us? Are not all Argentines in particular and all of us in general as guilty as the military for not having stopped the abuses, for refusing to see what was happening, for playing our roles of ostriches in the *aquí no pasa nada* theatre? As Agustín indicates, it is impossible for him to go back to Argentina because of all the bodies, bodies which Roberta assures him are not his (i.e. not his responsibility and not his literally—he is not dead). To this he responds, assuming the responsibility that Valenzuela seems to urge all Argentines (and perhaps all of us in the world) to accept: “they might as well be. We’re all responsible. They’re raking up corpses everywhere. . . . It’s a city constructed over corpses, a nation of desaparecidos. There’s no possible return” (78-79). Still, as Roberta later proposes, return is possible, but the “return voyage requires that you complete the outgoing journey . . . and if possible bring something back with you. Some element with which to wipe the slate clean” (193). Perhaps that “something” is a novel (this novel?), words which murder, metonymically to be sure, “that part of oneself so prone to causing death” (179), and which allow one to “kill without killing, by killing” (179), words which help one to fashion a new role, a new self-perception.

At the same time the text asks if it is not power itself that corrupts. Could we all, like Roberta and Agustín, become, with equal ease, either the victim or the victimizer? That the answer to this question is affirmative is underlined in the segments dedicated to the erotic torture chamber where male executives go to be dominated by women, to be relieved of the responsibility of always being the ones who control and command. Just as Agustín had been warned to be careful in New York, warned by friends who never dreamed he could switch roles and become the aggressor as soon as he felt power bestowed upon him by the gun, the clients of the torture chamber switch roles as they play out their desire for and fear of domination by women. He who dominates by day is dominated by night. Here the image of the spider’s web of mirrors is relevant, for the text is explicit about the close connections between the erotic torture chamber and the events in Argentina: “a light in her own brain that switches on the other distant torture scene into which her friends, brothers, compatriots, were unwillingly caught, without the slightest possibility of pleasure, only of pain” (31). But we are again reminded of Artaud’s theatre of cruelty and our capacity for cruelty and theatre, for at times Roberta, ostensibly a secondary victim in all this, imagines using the whip herself, either with Agustín (48) or with Bill (65), and Agustín dreams he is dominated by a woman. It all

depends on who has been empowered by the instrument, be it the gun, penis, pen, accusatory finger, whip. At the erotic torture chamber Roberta is told to laugh because it is good for the victims to believe that they are numerous and powerful—theatre at its most overt that surely recalls that of the Argentine military regime. Roberta's response, "I have no power and don't want any" (195), may summarize Valenzuela's ideological position, but nonetheless, the novel accentuates our infinite capacity to switch from victim to victimizer. Or are the two one and the same, alternate sides of a coin, "reality" seen from different perspectives, the spectacle seen from opposite sides of the fourth wall?

A revealing example of this interplay of victim/victimizer can be found in the story Roberta's aunt told her as a child to encourage (force?) her to eat. It is an almost theatrical tale, narrated from a seemingly objective position. Two men have sought refuge and protection from a stormy night (the external threat) behind the closed door of an abandoned house (an image that takes us back to the beginning of this novel). Once inside, they hear noises they attribute to the storm, the external threat, but the danger is inside: it is a "murdered woman pacing the top floor with an ax in her hand. Her encephalic matter is exposed; someone killed her by hitting her on the head with an ax, and she's seeking revenge" (120). Roberta does not know how the story ends, highlighting the fact that the stories that matter most to us never have endings. (Or is it the other way around? Do they matter to us, do we remember them precisely because they have no ending, no neat resolution, not unlike this very novel?) One of the morals of the story is obviously that the danger we perceive (hope) to be external is already on our side of the closed door. Yet it is important not to lose sight of the fact that the woman with her encephalic matter exposed is the danger, the victimizer, only from the vantage point of the two men, a position that spuriously only appears to be objective. Because of the realistic deceit that obscures the medium, we forget that the mirror is being held and viewed from specific perspectives that seem not to be perspectives at all.¹⁷ From the woman's point of view, she is the victim; she has been murdered with an ax. But the victim/victimizer issue runs even deeper, for the telling of the tale repeats the gesture of cruelty dramatized within the story and emphasizes our capacity for apparently gratuitous cruelty. First, Roberta recognizes that she told the story to Agustín "out of sheer undefined cruelty" (125). Second, we must wonder if her aunt did not tell her the story for the same reason and/or to make her do what she wanted—i.e. to oppress her. Surely, we can

expect little from adults who were exposed to gratuitous cruelty as children.¹⁸ Thus, the woman with her encephalitic matter exposed provides a metaphor for Argentina, simultaneously victim and victimizer, logical end product of endless oppression.

Unlike the traditional detective novel, however, none of the questions posed in *Black Novel* is ever answered unequivocally. As the text repeatedly demonstrates, there are no answers to these questions: "What's usually missing is the thing you're looking for: a precise explanation. We'll never know exactly how the mechanism works" (207). Agustín's violent act, like the more wide-spread violence in Argentina, defies logic and rationality. Like the torturers, he killed because . . . , just because, because people do, or can, or might, or because we live in a sociopolitical structure that blurs the distinctions between reality and fantasy, a structure that theatricalizes torture and terror until we no longer know whether we are living or acting, if indeed there is any difference.

What the text does do, however, is prompt us to intuit connections, to link images, to see intersections, if indeed only metaphorically, linguistically. Early, the text seems to articulate its goal: "restore, renew, re-create . . . delve deeper . . . farther into that fathomless depth from which it becomes increasingly hard to emerge and then plunge in again. That's why I say to write with the body, because the poor little head can't make it on its own to the bottomless bottom" (16-17).¹⁹ But, of course, the question becomes, how do we get there? Roberta insists we get to the other side by crossing borders. In this text the attempt to reach the other side, cross borders, is dramatized and metaphorized on several levels and in several arenas: in terms of gender, as Roberta and Agustín assume more androgynous forms; in terms of socioeconomic status, as they take refuge in the homeless shelter; in terms of victim/victimizer, as already discussed; in terms of the erotic chamber, as females readily assume the role of dominance (so much for the myth of the female as inherent victim). In each case one tries to get to the other side of the fourth wall and "see," experience from the other's position. It cannot be irrelevant that Agustín labels Roberta "so very, very close to him, virtually him" (144), nor that she feels that she writes with the body, "incarnating the metonymy, the physical displacement" (213). In so many ways, one is the other.

In the end then we must return to the image of the spider's web and its capacity to entrap us in a circular, no-exit fashion, a circularity that is enacted in the novel's structure. First, the novel seems to move

circularly, in terms of images, from the bubbling cauldron on stage, where Edwina plays the cook and feeds the pot, through Roberta's recognition that a writer should be the opposite of a cook, separating ingredients and distinguishing among them rather than combining them, to the steaming cauldron of the dinner at Lara's loft, which leads to the theatre of death in Edouard's loft. On the other hand, the novel simultaneously seems to move from Hell—Hell's Kitchen into which Agustín ventures, which leads to his murder of Edwina with its psychological Hell—to the metaphoric Heaven of Lara's loft, her "fairylnd" to which one must ascend, her world of reflections, guarded by heavy metal doors. But are the two really so different? Roberta refers to the streets of New York as "those damned streets" (29), the streets of the devil, in Spanish (28), but their ascent to Lara's "Heaven" in the black shaft, is led by a stranger, an "ascending Charon," not unlike the stranger that escorted Agustín to the play, origin of the novel's events—Heaven and Hell. And that ascent in the shaft reminds Agustín of the Mine-Shaft of Argentina, the tortures and Hell there. And, Lara's childlike, yet somewhat perverse setting, her "so-called" winter garden (of Eden?), and her fetishes—her puppet whose skirt she lifts, her Brazilian *figa*/penis, the chorus girl doll's legs that pop out of the tank—are surely not different from or less theatrical than the fetishes and fantasies of "Where You Know."

At the same time, it might be argued that the text moves circularly from death to death (the only clearly defined limit according to Hector), closed door to closed door. It opens with Edwina's murder and the closing door. It passes through Edouard's death and the closed off passage between his loft and Hector's. And, it ends with a metaphoric closing of the door on Argentina's past and the final burying (literarily at least) of the dead. Indeed, on some level the text seems to achieve what its protagonists have sought all along: "Clean slate, new story, turn the page" (193). But, the "new story" Valenzuela proposes here is not one that would completely forget or erase the past. For her, the old story is not ended since stories have no end (except death, which must be incorporated). Nonetheless, the old story and death must be put behind us, because revenge (like that of the woman with the ax) is only the other side of the coin of violence and accomplishes little except to convert victims into victimizers and vice versa. Vengeance cannot end the nightmare, only perpetuate it. Like the spider, the Argentine writer must survive by expelling, secreting the substance within, and shaping that "silk" into works of art: nests, cocoons, and webs. Whether these

“works of art” protect or destroy may depend on which side of the artistic looking glass the future spectator is positioned.

Notes

1. In this novel the female protagonist imagines, first, learning to weave for the male protagonist to unburden him of his past. Then she imagines enveloping him in her web, “like a spider, spinning round and round, till she had him ensnared” (84). This image also evokes writing, suggesting that she might incorporate him into her novel as he fears she already has: “squeezed into a pulp and pressed [literally, trapped] between the covers of one of [her] books” (27). Finally, she wonders about sucking his blood once she has him ensnared, but asks herself, “What for? . . . she was only trying to fathom his secret” (84).

2. I discuss the theatrical elements of *Realidad nacional desde la cama* in “The Spectacle of Reality in Luisa Valenzuela’s *Realidad nacional (vista) desde la cama*.”

3. For a more complete discussion of the trajectory of Valenzuela’s career, see my summary in *Spanish American Women Writers*.

4. In 1993 another volume of short stories appeared, *Simetrías*.

5. Perhaps one of the most notable characteristics of recent Spanish American prose is its capacity to be read on a number of levels and appreciated both by the specialist and the general reading public. In this regard, writers such as Manuel Puig, Gabriel García Márquez, Isabel Allende, and Valenzuela come immediately to mind.

6. Indeed, several forms of theatre are depicted here. We find a Brechtian theatre of alienation when Roberta takes refuge at the center for the homeless, theatre of the absurd à la Ionesco at the party at Lara’s, surrealistic theatre à la Jarry at Edouard’s loft, panic theatre in the erotic torture chamber, experimental theatre in the play Agustín watches. We should note, however, that shortly after Agustín has killed the actress, he sees himself as a character in a trashy novel (10), and before he “confesses” to Roberta, he refers to the crime itself as a trashy novel (38).

7. Artaud’s goal in theatre was to reveal the underlying cruelty of which we are all capable, a goal shared by *Black Novel*: “the essential theater . . . is the revelation, the bringing forth, the exteriorization of a depth of latent cruelty by means of which all the perverse possibilities of the mind, whether of an individual or a people, are localized” (Artaud 30); “the action of theater . . . is beneficial, for, impelling men to see themselves as they are, it causes the

mask to fall, reveals the lie, the slackness, baseness, and hypocrisy of our world" (Artaud 31).

8. Here again Valenzuela plays with language, for in Spanish the words *revelarse* (to reveal oneself) and *rebelarse* (to revolt or rebel) are homonyms. It is also significant that it is precisely this fourth wall that Agustín needs most, "to lean on" (49). Apparently, he needs to assure its tangibility in order to assure his role as spectator rather than actor.

9. Let us recall that one of the aspects Roberta seems to like best about New York City is the fact that one becomes "part of the theater simply by walking around this terrifying, vital city. The separation between actors and spectators was eliminated" (172).

10. Perhaps the most direct analogy here is the revolver that Agustín brought to protect himself from obscurely intuited threats at the isolated house in the mountains; the gun, which should have been an instrument of protection, served instead as an instrument of aggression.

11. "Realistic deceit" is a term that describes the effect of realism by which our awareness of the medium is obscured, and we take the representation to be a reflection of natural reality. As Griselda Pollock has observed, "Realist modes of representation present the world as if total knowledge is possible through empirical observation. Readers and viewers are posed as mere witnesses or observers. Yet it can be shown that specific devices are deployed which sustain this effect, positioning the viewer/reader in a specular relation, as if in a mirror, to what is seemingly revealed by its transparent textual devices. Denying the fact of being a construction, being produced, the realist text offers itself as a mere picture of the world which does not depend for its sense on any other texts, references or information" (171).

12. Although the translation states, "he feels that he has escaped outside threat. But not the other threat" (26), more literally the Spanish says he feels he can escape the external threat (25, in the original).

13. This tumultuous period of Argentine history perhaps began with a 1966 coup led by Onganía that established a military regime. According to Rock that regime, "made an ostentatious parade of its power" (347). According to Skidmore and Smith, during the regime, "There was also a shocking rise in political violence, such as clandestine torture and execution by the military government and kidnapping and assassination by the revolutionary left" (102). The regime was overthrown in 1970 and the former President (considered by some to be a fascist despot), Perón, was re-elected in 1973. As Diana Taylor notes of this period, "Since 1963, [Argentina] has had thirteen heads of state, each promising (though failing) to take charge of the critical situation" (96). She continues, "The rampant political violence of the 1960s developed into the orchestrated terrorism of the 1970s. . . . From 1976 to

1983, when the military dictatorship waged its Dirty War against the civilian population . . . a tragic aura enveloped the country; the tension mounted" (1991, 97). The result of the Dirty War was the torture and "disappearance" of between 12,000 and 20,000 private citizens (the number varies according to the source). One could argue that by suggesting that nothing had happened, that the "disappeared" had never existed or that they deserved what had happened to them, the government's rhetoric effectively "disappeared" them a second time.

14. It is probably not fortuitous that the letters of Agustín's name, *A G T I N*, are also found, in that order, in *ArGenTINa* and that the other two letters inserted in the middle are US.

15. As Kappeler has argued, the victim, male or female, is inevitably feminized: "The cultural metaphor which genderizes oppression has become such a dominant outlook that it makes us view any other form of oppression in its analogy" (154).

16. At the same time, as Hector Bravo proposes, it does not ultimately make any difference if he "killed her or dreamed it. It's all the same. The same impunity and the same guilt" (208).

17. Along similar lines, Jill Dolan has posited, "By canonizing certain texts and their meanings, and mystifying the origins of their authority [which is what we find in the tale within the tale], dominant cultural ideology [in Valenzuela's case, perspective] appears in representation as naturalized and seemingly nonideological" (41).

18. Revealingly, as Roberta walks through the streets of New York the Christmas vendors sell braided leather whips along with toys and decorations, suggesting that even as children we are never far from violence and cruelty (203).

19. What Roberta does write with her body, quite literally, is the erotic story, cloaked in the most eloquent of critical language (or critical gobbledygook), which proffers a spoof on all critical language, all writing that would attempt to know anything but the physical, the body itself. The story suggests that the experience of the body can never be converted into language except in the most artificial manner.

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