

Review · *Mary Janell Metzger*

THE NARRATIVE of human brutality, and the complicity it demands as the price of survival, does not lend itself to familiar forms nor resolve itself neatly. This may explain why a collection of short stories which paints this reality in all its gruesome yet insistently human colors has been, until recently, virtually ignored by critics. First published in English just over two years ago, Luisa Valenzuela's *Other Weapons* (*Cambio de Armas*) has received small notice in Spanish language and literature journals and has remained uncelebrated by North American fiction writers and critics. As that situation begins to change, due mostly to the efforts of Latin American women writers and critics in the United States, the works of Valenzuela are gaining the attention which has been reserved for those of her male compatriots, Jorge Luis Borges and Julio Cortazar. And, without a doubt, such attention is long overdue.

In an interview about her novel *La Cola Lagartija*, a novel based upon José Lopez Rega, a principal power in the government of Isabel Perón and founder of one of Argentina's most infamous death squads, Valenzuela explains the motive which drove her work: "I wrote *La Cola Lagartija* with only one purpose—to try to understand." The same motive clearly applies to *Other Weapons*, a collection of stories which vividly explores the nature of human violence, both violence perpetrated and violence submitted to. And, as one disapproving reviewer lamented, what we come to see is hardly "felicitous." Yet what this Argentinian writer offers could hardly be more compelling: physical desire set against a backdrop of horror, Argentina's Reign of Terror* and the Darwinian existence of our own inner cities. It is the simultaneous division and union of the personal and public realms which makes Valenzuela's stories so tangible, which impels the reader into a darkness so discomfiting in its familiarity.

* The "Reign of Terror" refers to the state-sponsored violence which followed the military coup of March, 1976. According to Amnesty International and other human rights organizations, in but the first two years of military rule approximately twenty thousand people had been detained or disappeared.

Other Weapons, Luisa Valenzuela. Hanover, N.H.: Ediciones del Norte, 1985. Original title, *Cambio de Armas*.

“Fourth Version,” the opening story in the collection of five, serves to instruct us in this fusion of the personal and the political, and thus could be said, as well, to serve as a preface to the entire book. Left with the fragmented diary of Bella—an actress whose affair with the American ambassador to Argentina during the Reign of Terror serves simultaneously as a conduit for refugees fleeing political violence and as the avenue to her own death—the narrator/writer struggles to puzzle out the narrative of Bella’s destruction. Sifting through Bella’s papers “in a desperate attempt to clarify the situation,” writing one version after another (thus the title of her story), the writer is frustrated by the repression of information in the actress’s diary—a repression which privileges the romantic as a mask for the political. “The papers tell her story of love,” the writer complains, “not her story of death.”

As the writer’s self-reflective struggle to reveal “what isn’t being told” and the third person descriptions of Bella’s descent into love and death merge and separate, often abruptly (the narrator’s voice sharply defined by italics), we are forced to try to piece together the two narratives. Like the writer of “Fourth Version,” we are compelled to read between the lines, to piece fragments together in order “to clarify the situation.” Discontinuity and continuity merge as in the following excerpt, which moves suggestively between Bella’s fragments and the writer/narrator’s attempt to make sense of them:

There are some of Bella’s papers that someone (Bella herself?) tried to pare down or do away with. Crumpled-up pieces of paper, notes written on stained paper napkins, scraps of information that in some cases seem worth rescuing such as this one

The subjects of skins

What skin do you put on when you find someone who manages to excite you? the skin of attraction, always alert, avid pores and vibrating fibres. There you are, sleeping, and someone comes along and gets your imagination going, waking it up even in its darkest corner where it crouches *and the page is torn there and we’ll never know what was crouching, what awakens in the darkest corners of Bella. This seems to be a story about what is left unsaid.*

Meaning lies, Valenzuela teaches us in the dialectical narrative of “Fourth Version,” between separate and often seemingly disparate elements: sensuality and brutality, love and hate, speech and silence, political structures and the most intimate of personal relationships, the desire to know the truth and the darkness in which it is enmeshed. The ideals of love and romance, of unambiguous truths, vanish as we attempt to make meaning out of the pieces of such stories as Bella’s offer: for this actress, mediating between her role as lover to the ambassador and her death-defying role as political intermediary for those seeking refuge, ideal truths about love or justice are not in the script. We are left with only desire and the context in which it finds itself, living. And so Bella tells us, “My role is to be alive.”

Given such contexts, these stories force us to ask, what do our desires represent? In the fourth story of the collection, “I’m Your Horse in the Night,” the answer is everything. This first person narrative of a woman who remains nameless (suggesting her universality), describes the illusive midnight visit of her underground lover, after a long and unexplained absence. The narrator’s attempts to talk with her lover upon his arrival, to rediscover him, are silenced by him only to reemerge in their physical union. (What cannot be spoken is cloaked yet again and again in these stories in physical desire, in the silent messages of bodies.)

After sleep overcomes them she is woken by the phone. A vaguely familiar voice relates news of her lover’s execution—a form of execution commonly used by Argentina’s military: thrown live from helicopters at fatal heights into rivers where the weighted body will sink, often never to be discovered. Half asleep, she insists it can’t be him. The voice shifts eerily, replying “You think so?” before the line goes dead. “Ten, fifteen minutes?” she wonders, “How long must I have stayed there staring at the phone like an idiot before the police arrived?”

They search her apartment, interrogate, torture and imprison her. For a dream? “My only real possession,” she insists, “was a dream and they can’t deprive me of my dreams just like that.” Yet the final lines of the story and the insistent voice of the narrator leave the question open. Was it really a dream? And, if we ask, does it matter? It is desire which is criminal, which escapes control.

If Valenzuela undermines the distinction between the real and the imaginary in these stories it is only to better explore the dialectic of human desire which creates them both. Thus in “The Word ‘Killer,’” the second story of the collection, the narrator explores her desire for a man who readily admits “I’ve killed enough men to last me a lifetime.” A Black veteran of New York’s ghettos and Vietnam, such contexts are everything and nothing—at once. Reasons which describe why, without telling us how. “Does beauty change when beauty has gone around destroying the perfection of others?” she asks. The story explores the ambivalence of her feelings for such a man, a “killer.” “She loves the killer,” she discovers, “and what’s worse, now she may also love him *because* he’s a killer. She who loves life keeps on asking herself how she could have been caught in such a fascination?”

Desire, these stories repeatedly show, involves us in our world in ways which do not lend themselves to ideal truths, or pure states of innocence and guilt. It is naming one’s experiences, taking responsibility for one’s own desire and the complicity it demands of us that, in the end, these stories ask of us. As Valenzuela’s lack of reviewers might suggest, such work is not easy. “We tend to think that to fight shadows,” the narrator of “Fourth Version” tells us, “we need more light, but the brighter the light, the darker the shadows. Only darkness kills shadows and that’s (what is so) intolerable.”

Reading these stories, one can’t help being reminded of Genet. Like Genet’s poetic descriptions of perversion, Valenzuela’s language moves easily and hauntingly between sensuality and brutality—most horrifyingly perhaps in the final (and title) story of the collection, “Other Weapons,” the narrative of Laura, an amnesiacal woman who feels herself most alive when aroused by the colonel who keeps her locked up in an apartment for his own abusive sexual uses. And again, like Genet, Valenzuela uses our horror at Laura’s desire, her pleasure and her fear, to reveal the delusions of idealism. Using the narrative of this one mad woman, and the poetic associations which her words and phrases have created throughout the book, Valenzuela breaks down our sense of the ideal narrative, of beginnings and endings and conventions we can rely upon. As the following example from the final scene of “Other Weapons” indicates, these echoes, or traces, make the reader aware of the associative nature of language, and the

deceptive nature of our desire for stable (and happy) meanings.

Because of political movements beyond the realm of their single apartment, the colonel decides to abandon his game of torture and possession. His means: to reawaken the memory of his victim by filling in the blank page of her memory. He tells her of his having saved her from the bloody fate of her “accomplice,” her accomplice in the attempt to murder her captor, his very self, the colonel.

His voice starts hammering and it hammers, I did it to save you, bitch, everything I did, I did to save you . . . I didn't let them lay a hand on you, all alone, there with you, hurting you, tearing you up, beating you to break you, *just like a horse* . . .
(emphasis mine)

His reference to a horse returns us to “I’m Your Horse in the Night,” and the romantic allusion to a song by Gal Costa from which it gains its title. But there is more. We remember that the narrator of “I’m Your Horse in the Night” had translated the song for her lover from its original Portuguese and tried to explain it to him as a means of engaging him in dialogue. “It’s a saint’s song,” she says, “like in the macumba. Someone who’s in a trance says she’s the horse of the spirit who’s riding her, she’s his mount.” But he isn’t interested in her talk or her interpretation. “Chiquita, you’re always getting carried away with esoteric meanings and witchcraft,” he tells her. “You know perfectly well that she isn’t talking about spirits. If you’re my horse in the night it’s because I ride you, like this, see? . . . Like this . . . That’s all.”

But that’s not all and that is what is so haunting. The silencing of both women, one so romantically (“It was so long, so deep and so insistent, so charged with affection that we ended up exhausted . . .”) and one so brutally, become entangled in the allusion. The reading of each story becomes enmeshed in that of the other. Once again sensuality and brutality create the knife’s edge upon which desire is written.

The comparison with Genet is instructive in yet another sense. For like the readers of Genet, those of Valenzuela are seduced and repelled, forced to confront the presence of the Other, the criminal and victim, in ourselves. And so as Sartre wrote of Genet, it must be said of Valenzuela,

“You will be delivered of the horror with which [this writer] inspires you, on the condition that you use it properly.” Refusing to recognize ourselves in the Others who fill these stories leaves us safely beyond this world of oppression and terror.

Valenzuela, finally, does not allow us such comforts. And that is her gift to us. Her synthesis of body and mind, dream and reality, silence and speech, past and present — all the notions which help us distinguish truth from fiction, real from imaginary — is so artful that doubleness becomes not the product of verbal illusion but the nature of experience. Not that of the Other, but our very own.