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Before Her Eyes: On Luisa Valenzuela's *Bedside Manners*

Valeria Wagner

Operation Identity is being carried out with great speed, order and decorum. There was initial confusion when the ADC came up with the idea of using burnt cork and promptly sailed off to the officers' mess where he found a good supply. Battle camouflage was the order of the day, but as the day wore on, a touch of vanity entered the proceedings.

The Señora almost expects them to ask her if they can borrow her eyebrow pencil, but no, they don't go that far, although they are looking lovely. They make each other up almost affectionately. One says to his companion: Put a bit more black here to make my nose look thinner; another cries: No, no, wipe that off, I can't abide symmetry. They all crowd and shove each other in front of the large wardrobe mirror, someone says: Hasn't any one got a hand mirror? I want to see how I look from the back. The Señora is enjoying herself. She's considering offering them her eyebrow pencil anyway so that they can draw lines around the black smudges on their faces [...] Fortunately, she's distracted by a voice to her left, that of the television, which is no longer the cooing voice of a few moments ago, but that of an alarmed announcer, intercut with the hiss of interference.

'Military uprising/in regiment eight/of the infantry recen/tly billeted/for security reasons in/the country club Las/Ranas.'

[...]

The Señora tries to get her brain into gear in order to jumpstart the neurons that deal with historical reconstruction or with constitutional law or whatever it is that she needs if she's to see clearly. She closes her eyes tight shut and is possibly on the verge of getting a glimmer of something that might help her

*explain the events she's an involuntary witness to – the cyclical pattern of horror, as she seriously suspects – when the phone rings and shatters her concentration.*¹

Asked in an interview to comment on the relationship between feminism and femininity, Luisa Valenzuela discards their opposition as 'fallacious' and even 'perverse' and their mutual exclusion a 'complex trap' that forces women to choose between two equally constraining positions and to follow, unwittingly, the 'patriarchal mandate'.² In her view, both characterizations 'pigeonhole' women in general and writers in particular, imposing a series of certitudes and views on the world that blind gender issues to more inclusive political issues, and vice versa. Feminism and femininity should, instead, be thought together: the former firmly anchored in the feminine body and in the position it occupies in society and history, and the latter informed by feminist discourse and visions of society. If these intricate relationships are acknowledged today, they are yet to be fully accepted and critically explored: *Bedside Manners* can be read as such an exploration, articulated through the device of an eminently feminine character, whose eminently feminine position provides eminently feminist, and more generally political, insights. As we will see, a Sleeping Beauty type of heroine, functioning as an allegory of her post-dictatorship country, will induce readers to think about the perspective and make-up (construction, masquerade and cosmetics) – of narratives of the nation.

The novel (in Spanish *Realidad Nacional desde la cama* – *National Reality from the Bed*) features a middle-class Argentinean exile who falls prey to an irresistible apathy when she returns to her post-dictatorial country. 'The woman needs rest', observes a discreetly opinionated, but rather well-disposed narrator, '[...] she finds it hard to fit into this new reality which is so alien [...]' She lies in bed and perhaps recomposes her thoughts, relives and reconstructs as best she can' (3). Urged by an acquaintance who finds she looks like a zombie, the woman agrees to 'intern herself' (2) in a 'very private and exclusive' country club (3), where she remains bedridden in a room with curtains drawn, uninterested in her surroundings. This is where we find her at the beginning of the narrative: 'Suspecting nothing of the superimposition of different planes of reality, unaware of the existence of the military camp or the shanty town, a woman has gone to seek refuge in a certain far-flung country club' (1). As the narrator's comments anticipate, however, this multilayered external reality soon filters into the room, and the prostrated protagonist, forced into a position

of involved spectatorship, discovers its 'superimposed' nature as events unfold under, on and around her bed.

This initial situation – woman in bed in a room in a country club – becomes increasingly absurd³ as the narrative advances: soldiers train in the room, jumping over the woman's bed 'like the sheep you count to get to sleep' (96); a fugitive conscript hides first under and then in her bed; hungry hands surge from below to serve themselves to her provisions; the military headquarters of a rebellious military faction are set up in front of it; and the leader-to-be of the resistance slips in and out of it. However incongruent such scenes are, Argentinian readers would recognize in them references to the uprisings (1987–1990) of the *carapintadas* (literally, painted faces – a military faction who opposed the post-dictatorial constitutional governments' trials against the Juntas of 1976–1983), as well as to the personal situation of the author, herself a returned exile when she wrote the book. Valenzuela herself explains that the novel elaborates her return and 'immersion in national reality':

there was hyperinflation; they were raiding the supermarkets; the soldiers in the rebellious regiments had painted their faces; everything was happening at the same time. So that's why I wrote *Bedside Manners*. I really wanted to withdraw to bed and forget about it. But there is no way not to be under a politics, because it hits you everywhere [...].⁴

The novel thus stages a desire to 'withdraw' as well as its impossibility, further suggesting that the acknowledgment of both is a condition for understanding political agency. Valenzuela takes up this point elsewhere: 'Everything that happens sneaks into your private space [...] When one accepts that the horror is also in one's own space, then one can do something to defend oneself or not let oneself be totally manipulated.'⁵

But, what interests us here is the staging of the action around the bedridden woman, and how it questions the make-up of dominant accounts of reality – in particular, as the novel's original title suggests, of 'national' reality. Indeed, as the bedroom becomes, literally, a scene of politics and of military operations, the oppositions often central to narratives of the nation – public and private spheres, military and domestic spaces, active and passive subjects, men and women – are blurred and rearranged according to the explicitly gendered and class-specific standpoint of the 'embedded' woman. This horizontal, female and apparently narrow perspective interestingly inverts that of official versions of events, elaborated from an implicitly male, vertical and panoramic perspective: male, because the universal or neutral standpoint is historically modelled on that of

men (and more specifically, well-to-do, educated men of European descent); vertical, because this standpoint is authoritative, and its narrative hierarchically organized (events are sorted out by their importance, relevance and centrality); and panoramic, because it is addressed to the public at large. In a sense, the woman in bed, who perceives events from the private and intimate space and has no authority over them, mirrors the position of the orator in a pulpit, righteously spreading the word in the public space.

The figure of the woman in bed is thus worth considering in more detail, as it is the subject and frame, to and through which the multilayered complexity of reality will be revealed. She is in fact a complex, heavily connoted figure: her title, *Señora* – as the narrator begins to call her after a maid enters the scene, situates her in the empowered pole of the higher social classes, while the fact that she is a returned exile suggests left-wing political allegiances, and at the very least a disagreement with the previous military dictatorship. As for her prostrated condition, it on the one hand literalizes and elaborates the metaphor of the sick nation for whose recovery the military Junta ‘extirpated’ the subversive elements that consumed it,⁶ and on the other, it epitomizes feminine passivity, alluding as it does to the fairy-tale figure of the sleeping heroine.⁷ In the first case, the Señora’s post-dictatorial malaise suggests that the national body is now sick from democracy and, more specifically, from (and of) the denial of the past that the country’s transition to democracy entailed: like the Señora, who constantly complains of her lack of memory and tries (in vain) to gather her thoughts, the country suffers from amnesia and should be given time to reassemble its past and present parts. The political import of the Señora’s attempts to remember can be measured by the threat she receives right after the fragment on which we will focus: ‘We’re gonna get you [...]’, says a voice on the phone, ‘You’re after memory, but we’re gonna get you first’ (95). In the second case, the woman fails to achieve the degree of unconsciousness and passivity of the heroine in a proper fairy tale, although – and partly because – she willingly endorses one such role – ‘The Señora used to like acting [...], and when she saw the bed she knew at once the role for her: Sleeping Beauty in the forest’ (8).

The Señora’s conscious identification with the Sleeping Beauty type of heroine responds, above all, to her desire to be left alone to sleep, in the hope that she will understand things better when she awakes. It is in defense of this rather innocuous project that she becomes involved in a confrontation with the maid, who is bent on showing her the ‘cheery images on the screen’ (12) and on keeping the French windows shut. It will turn out that the maid is a spy for

the insurgent military faction, and her mission is to make the Señora forget: 'After all, that's why people come to this club, to rest. To forget all their problems. It's the ideal place for forgetting. Exactly what you need, Señora' (8). For once, however, the Señora imposes her will: the TV is shut off, the French windows opened, and reality seeps in as various men enter in orbit around her bed.

In tune with her role, the Señora receives her visitors in bed: some she barely tolerates (the militaries), others she welcomes and even introduces under the sheets. In this sense, it can be said that she acts out the subtext of her bedridden and feminine fairy-tale condition, radicalizing its erotic and social mandates. Thus, she not only accepts, but actively solicits the sexual advances of the 'charming prince' character – who is, alternately, a caring doctor, an attentive psychiatrist, a sexist taxi driver and idealistic revolutionary. Similarly, she is not only willing to play mother to the fugitive conscript who seeks refuge in her bed, but eventually her awakened maternal instincts extend, as we will see, to all of the conscripts that cross her room. Finally, although the Señora does get out of bed to dance with her 'savior' at the end of the book, it is not in anticipation of her wedding, but to celebrate the victory of the poor and righteous over the rebellious military faction: 'Now the club is ours!' says the would-be-prince, 'stamping on the weapons' (121), while people around them applaud. But at this point – end of the book, end of the 'fairy-tale', end of the fiction – the Señora comes to herself, raising the question that the other characters have forgotten – or are unable – to ask: "And the country?" asks she, ever the realist' (121).

Leaving the Señora's 'realism' aside for the moment, the story suggests, so far, that her feminine role not only fails to protect her from 'reality', but turns her instead into a potentially critical witness of events, capable of insights inaccessible to others. Most importantly, the Señora's position and role give her insights into the absurdity of events. This is apparent at the beginning of the fragment under consideration, when the Señora observes the soldiers making 'each other up affectionately'. At this stage, the Señora has considerably changed her attitude to her invading militaries: indeed, whereas at the beginning of the novel she is quite understandably terrified by their presence in the club – 'If there are soldiers around here, I'm going to have to go' (30), she tells Maria when she first finds out their existence – she now observes them fearlessly, increasingly sympathizing with them. In Chapter 15, she already sees in the troops that have invaded her room 'a pack of panting dogs perhaps, begging for a sugar lump', and even finds them 'touching' (89). Still hoping 'her memory will [...] help her understand a little of this whole

incongruous business', the Señora is resigned to being a 'captive audience' and consoles herself with the thought that what she will now view can only be better than actual TV. It is in this state of mind that she watches the soldiers paint their faces with burnt corks, so as to achieve the 'battle camouflage' (93) meant to identify them as a group of 'a new type of soldiers' (91).

The woman's perception of the soldiers' operation of camouflage and group identification is patently a function of her various, feminine, stereotyped roles – the coquette in her assimilates the military operation to a make-up session; her motherly vein identifies their infantile vanity in their efforts to look good; the whole procedure becomes a game, even a show, in her eyes. In this sense, her feminine position provides political insight into the military uprising, revealing it as a masquerade: in terms of the historical situation, a manoeuvre to distract attention from the backstage negotiations to exonerate the members of the Junta; in terms of gender roles, a process of construction of the military – and national – masculinity parallel to that of the nation's prostrated femininity. But the Señora's complacency also blinds her to the ulterior motives of this 'show' until her feminization of the soldiers is complemented with the subsequent reversal of the planes of reality between the television screen and the stage of the bedroom. As the narrator clarifies, she is about to offer her eyebrow pencil to the soldiers – and thus become accomplice to the operation – when she is 'fortunately distracted' by the news on TV, announcing the uprising in the country club. This is in fact the first time that the TV appears to be transmitting something close to the 'real' 'national reality'. Until then, as the initial conflict between the Señora and the maid indicates, the TV screen diverts the gaze from 'reality', which is outside, behind the French windows. Whenever the Señora is forced to watch it, she is taken over by a sense of unreality, and by the suspicion that 'something' is being hidden from her. Hence, when the news finally announces that what she had seen coming in her own room is actually taking place – that her bedroom, in short, *is* the outside, and that what had been hidden from sight previously, *is in* it, the connection between the present and past horror becomes apparent, its 'cyclical pattern' revealed.

The woman is thus propelled, as it were, from the bed to the front of the action, or at least, to a civic mission of 'historical reconstruction [...] or whatever it is that she needs if she's to see clearly' (94). The phone call that subsequently interrupts the incipient process of reconstruction and of re-visioning will confirm the reasonable grounds of this impulse to see even more clearly. The threat uttered earlier ('You're after memory, but we're

gonna get you first' (95)) terrorizes the Señora, but it also reminds her of the necessity of recovering her 'power of speech' (96), which, as her concluding, illuminating question ('And the country?') suggests is intimately linked to that of clear-sightedness. At the end of the novel, the Señora is the only character who seems to be able to question the assimilation of the country to the country club, and to quell the reductive, naïve triumphalism of the combatants. In this sense, her 'realism' is not affirmative; it consists, rather, in questioning and undermining certitudes on the basis of her insights into the various fictionalizations of reality, including those involved in her own role-playing.

It should be stressed at this point that although the novel advances the proposal that a feminine standpoint is necessary to see through national politics and narratives, it also suggests that this perspective is not in itself sufficient to disclose the 'superimposed' nature of reality. Indeed, in spite of her conscious acting-out of the paradigmatic feminine role of the Sleeping Beauty, the Señora almost slips into complicity with the militaries and the patriarchal power they represent. As we saw above, she is saved from such involuntary connivance with the powers from which she had flown in the past by the TV news, which introduces a salutary distance with respect to her in-room reality. But a returned exile, in fact, the woman suffers from a distance from, and double vision of, the 'national reality' from the outset. 'This new city isn't the one I used to know' (80), thinks the Señora, comparing her memories to the images on TV; 'I came back to find *that*, not *this*. I came back to recover my memory and they steal it from me, erase it' (78). The estrangement proper to her situation thus allows her to realize that something is denied or remains unacknowledged in the official versions of reality: informed by the gap between *that* and *this*, she can identify silences, erasures and impostures. In particular, and in spite of her state of confusion, this gap alerts her to the continuation of the dynamics of dictatorship in the midst of democracy, even before the phone call at the end of our fragment: 'now the enemy's no longer there, or at least he says he isn't, but he is' (78).⁸ Holding on to her double vision – of the *that* and (in) the *this* – the protagonist eventually recognizes the need of a series of 'readjustments' of and to reality: 'I thought I was coming to this country club to rest, to readjust. Perhaps there's something else too ...' (83). The Señora's insights into the doublings and gaps of reality only acquire a properly critical dimension with this realization: that is, when she realizes that what needs to be 'readjusted' – and interpreted – is not herself, but the country, the nation, and versions of reality.

At the very beginning of the novel, when the 'woman' is just being introduced, the narrative voice specifies that she was born 'under the sign of the Question' (1). We find out throughout the narrative that she is indeed a questioning character: she questions herself, she questions the various set-ups of reality and she questions the readers. And perhaps we can conclude, now, that the critical force of her questioning stems, not only from the double visions which all questioning to some extent generates, but also, and most importantly, from the interaction between the standpoints of the self-conscious fairy-tale heroine – a gender role which all women are under some social pressure to conform to – and of the returned exile for whom reality is always full of gaps. The interaction between these two standpoints ultimately corresponds to that between feminine stereotypes and those historical moments, or sociopolitical contexts, that take women (and men) out of themselves, either allowing them or forcing them to think about the tensions they experience in relation to normative accounts of reality and of themselves. In the novel, this interaction is figured by the return from exile: a movement whereby the feminine perspective acquires feminist overtones that produce political insights.