

MEDICAL METAPHORS AND NATIONAL ALLEGORY IN SOY PACIENTE (1980) BY ANA MARIA SHUA, REALIDAD NACIONAL DESDE LA CAMA (1990) BY LUISA VALENZUELA AND EN ESTADO DE MEMORIA (1990) BY TUNUNA MERCADO

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Abstract: The current paper suggests a comparative reading of “Soy paciente” by Ana María Shua, “Realidad nacional desde la cama” by Luisa Valenzuela and “En estado de memoria” by Tununa Mercado in order to examine the relationship between the medical imagery and the discourse on the national that informs the three books mentioned. It highlights the pervasiveness of the medical metaphors in the three books, and interprets it as a desire to denounce the understanding of the national defined by authoritarian criteria. In accordance with this logic, the paper argues that the books mentioned are symptomatic of a literary practice of opening up a space of questioning that manages to surpass the mechanistic logic of dichotomic thinking.

Keywords: Soy paciente; Realidad nacional desde la cama; En estado de memoria; literature and nationalism; literature written by women.

Introductory Remarks

More than three decades after the publication of Anderson’s (1983) groundbreaking book on imagined communities, the criteria by which the concept of “nation” should be defined are, far from being settled, even more problematic in times of the transnational. The relationship between gender and nation with regard to Latin America has been examined by a number of theorists, in various academic circles (Chow, 1993; Pratt, 1992). Among them, Francine Masiello focuses on the women writers in order to provide a convincing study on the “changing representations of women in the field of lettered culture”. The current paper draws on Masiello’s claim that women writers undermined the binary logic of “civilization vs. barbarianism” embedded in the Argentine intellectual tradition of defining the national, in order to argue, along with Masiello’s line of interpretation, that women writers tested the dominant expressions of power through speech, and that their debate about the national language became a way of redefining the dynamic between speech and nation. In order to prove this, the paper considers works of three well-known Argentine authors: *Soy paciente* (1980) by Ana María Shua, *Realidad nacional desde la cama* (1990) by Luisa Valenzuela and *En estado de memoria* (1990) by Tununa Mercado. Thus, the article illustrates that in spite of being published in a temporal segment which is not encompassed in Masiello’s study, the three works analyzed reinforce her acknowledgment of the women’s contribution to the dissolution of a concept of nation defined by standards beyond false dichotomies such as the European vs. the indigenous, the elite vs. the popular, or the public vs. the private.

The Medical Metaphors and the Social Body. The Questioning through Speech

One of the recurrent metaphors associated with the reference to the social body during the *Proceso* is that of the operation ward, in which a body has to be operated, in order for it to become cured. Fernando Reati was among the first theorists to write a comprehensive study on the use of this imagery in relation to the violence induced in the lapse of time between 1976 and 1983. Thus, according to Reati:

A partir del golpe militar de 1976 [...] la obsesiva metáfora militar del cuerpo social que debe ser curado y desinfectado del “virus” subversivo se traslada a los códigos lingüísticos empleados, que abundan en términos relacionados con la medicina y con la higiene: si el país está “infectado”, es necesaria una guerra “sucía”; “limpiar” a alguien significa matar en la jerga de los grupos operativos; y las salas de tortura son conocidas en muchos centros de detención como “el quirófano” o “la sala de terapia intensiva” (1992: 45). (Beginning with the military coup in 1976 [...] the obsessive military metaphor of the social body that has to be cured and disinfected of the subversive “virus” passes to the linguistic codes used, which are replete with terms related to medicine and hygiene: if the country is “infected”, a “dirty” war is necessary; “to clean” somebody means, in the jargon of the operative groups, to kill; and the torture rooms are known in many detention centers as the “ward” or “the intensive therapy” room¹).

The three works approach the question of return, and the perception of “the national” upon return, from three different time moments: Shua’s book, from the times of repression, Valenzuela’s, from the days following the repression, anticipatory of the “carapintadas” unrest, in which the difficulty of the return from exile is seen in a larger context of a criticism of what occurred in the aftermath of the repressive times, with a transition from an enemy that is known to one that is diffused in the body of the entire society, while Mercado’s book is more densely autobiographic, written in times of freedom, a couple of years after the end of the repression.

It is important to underscore that the current approach, while interested in the opinions of the writers in question on the matter, distances itself from the views of the writers themselves, such as, for instance, Luisa Valenzuela’s plea for the existence of a typically Latin American female voice:

I have found a special form of language that expresses this idea in many Latin American women writers. I have not yet found it in any woman writer in the United States. I do not know what is to blame: puritanical tradition or the way I respond only to my roots. This feminine language, if we call it such, this obscure discourse coming from the depths of the guts, can be defined as a fascination with the disgusting: in Spanish, “un regodeo en el asco” (Valenzuela quoted by Corbatta, 1999: 23).

The association of these three Argentine women writers does not derive from an unquestioned belief in the specificity of a “literature written by women”, a slippery terrain, still under fierce and unsolved dispute. Nor does it claim that the medical imagery is a feature to be encountered exclusively in literary works written by women. Beyond embarking upon the dead-end path of rather reductionist interpretative schemes, the rationale of the current reading in parallel Shua, Valenzuela and Mercado is to point to similarities in understanding the experience of the return from exile, argue for the connectedness between the medical reference and the discourse on the national, and reinforce, along with Masiello’s demonstration, that a renewed concept of verbal expression and writing can be traced in the writings that combine the medical with the national. Moreover, given the fact that the works analyzed were published in the ’80s and ’90s, a principle at stake in this reading pattern is that the works mentioned are worth considering in a context which looks into the dynamic

¹ All the translations in the paper are mine.

between the local and the global, as they provide an *avant la lettre* version of what was to be known later as experience of deterritorialization.

Questioning the Monolithic Definition of the National

The title of Shua's novel, *Soy paciente*, plays with the two meanings of the word "paciente"—"patient", in its sense as an adjective, and that as a noun. The latter anticipates the medical environment in which the novel is set, as a male character narrates, using the "I" person, his experience of being hospitalized and operated due to a possible misunderstanding, and the medical staff's lack of willingness to listen to him. When he is finally allowed to leave the hospital, he realizes that he is so used to it that he has to return. The absurd situation in which the "I" narrator finds himself made several literary critics see in Shua's novel an allegory of a repressive situation, an interpretation which Shua has denied as coinciding with the authorial intention.

Once rejected the interpretation of the book in an allegorical key, the novel is to be dissociated from works such as those by Valenzuela and Mercado, literary discourses on the national, articulated upon return from exile. However, Shua shares with the other authors mentioned an interest in the metaphorical potential of the hospital imagery, as a place of authoritarianism, of lack of questioning, as a setting of proliferation of the cliché and the stereotyped behavior. From this point of view, the novel cherishes, and so do *Realidad nacional desde la cama* and *En estado de memoria*, the power of the artistic expression to give account of, and articulate the self. In contrast to the other two novels, in Shua's work the narrator adopts a male identity, which is seen as an opportunity to refer to gender-related stereotypes, and treat them ironically. Contrary to *Realidad nacional desde la cama*, the violence in Shua's novel is a physically induced one, as in Valenzuela's work, but it rather stems from a mistreatment of the word, in a process of communication suffused by clichés and prescriptive interpretations, if one is to give credit to the allegorical reading.

Regarding Valenzuela's book, the author has provided a valuable metatextual insight into the origin of her work, in "The Five Days that Changed My Paper" :

Y cundo llegué a Buenos Aires en abril del año '89 sentía que no podía escribir una obra de teatro ni nada, porque quedé en shock. Entonces el resultado final fue este labor, porque no hay manera de aislarte de nada, así la idea es que aunque te metas en la cama y quieras taparte la cabeza y no ver nada, la realidad nacional te alcanza y te supera hasta en la cama (Valenzuela in a dialog with Cordones Cook, 1991). (And when I arrived to Buenos Aires, the April of '89, I felt that I couldn't write a play, or anything like that, because I was in a shock. Then the result was this work, because there is no way you can isolate yourself from anything, thus the idea is that although you might want to get to bed and cover your head, and do not see anything, the national reality reaches you even in bed). This constant movement between the voice in the 3rd person, singular ("una mujer ha ido a buscar refugio en un cierto alejado club de campo") (8) (a woman went to seek refuge in a certain club far away in the countryside) and that in 1st person singular ("nacé bajo el signo de la Pregunta") (8) (I was born under the sign of the Question) (8), which articulates the novel, reinforces the idea of double condition, of doubt, and situates the narration in the space of the in-between and, often, of the unsaid (Policsek, 2013).

The narrator provides from the very beginning details concerning the circumstance of narration, by mentioning the fact that the perspective is that of a person recently returned to her home country: “Y este lugar es mi propio país—retorné a mi país” (8) (And this place is my own country—I have returned to my country). This instance in the 1st person singular is immediately followed by one in the 3rd: “Se internó—otra no es la palabra—en este club de campo”(8) (She put herself—there is no other word for this—in this club in the countryside). This shift between the focalization of the experience from the inner perspective and that from an outer one is to nurture the entire literary piece, which is shaped itself, in generic terms, in a hybrid space of indetermination, at the crossroads between the narrative and the dramatic. The lack of consistency between the narrative perspectives grants a more convincing legitimation to the semantic play with the word order. Thus, the above-mentioned transition from the 1st person narrative to the 3rd occasions a metareflection on the narrative strategy, which is expressed by means of an estranged order, as compared to the syntactic rules of grammatically correct Spanish: “y de nuevo estoy divagando, inventando, yéndome por las ramas, en lugar de” (8) (and once again I am rambling, inventing, beating about the bush, instead of).

The adoption of the medical imagery is transparent from the very beginning, when the narrator, by making use of a 3rd form singular voice, this time, asserts that her room resembles a hospital, perceived by the character as a safe shelter, which the narrator contrasts to the typically Romantic *loci* of refuge, such as the woods, the sea or the dream. In a striking opposition to the realm of the idyllic, the refuge as a hospital is, by excellence, a territory of the bodily, the violent, the painful. Once more, a syntactic displacement is occurs with regard to this reference, in a desire to articulate a writing that is obedient of a *sui generis* speech logic: “Se internó como en un hospital, no en un bosque o en el mar o en el sueño o” (8) (She got like into a hospital, not a forest or the sea or the dream or).

The difficulty to apprehend the real that the narrator experiences is captured in a confession that brings to mind the adventure of Rip van Winkle, Washington Irving’s character who, upon returning home, finds the surroundings, once familiar, as unrecognizably changed. The same way, the reality that the narrator encounters after the years of absence does not coincide with her previous mental representations, and she renders this in a mode that sheds a compassionate light on the act of mourning: “La mujer necesita descanso. Ha vuelto a su país a cabo de una larga ausencia y le cuesta reintegrarse a esta realidad tan otra, tan distinta de la que dejó atrás en otra época. Yace en la cama y tal vez recompone el pensamiento, tal vez revive y reconstruye como puede” (9) (The woman needs rest. She returned to her country after a long absence and she has a hard time getting readjusted to this reality so other, so different from the one she left behind in other times. She lies in bed and maybe she puts her thoughts together, maybe she revives and reconstructs as she can). The estrangement provoked by the lack of coincidence between the world left behind and the one encountered increases as the character rejects any initiative to adjust to the new reality, while playing “the ostrich”(14). Maria, the person assisting the “I” character in the club, declares her “sick”, based on the latter’s return from New York. The violence in Argentina that the narrator finds upon return is approached by means of a contrast to that in New York. Thus, while New York is considered to be the violent city, by excellence, due to the mediatic influence which shapes the representations of the city, Buenos Aires is perceived to be, under

the same mediatic impact, “orderly”, in what seems to be a denouncement of the *effet du réel* bearing the imprint of a Bourdieu-like type of thinking: “Usted vino a vivir a este país. Mi país. Nuestro país. Me dijeron que antes vivía en Nueva York: usted debe de estar enferma. Gran ciudad, Nueva York, dicen. A mí no me interesa porque es muy violenta. Siempre lo muestran en la tele. En cambio acá las cosas son distintas, ordenadas. Mire nomás qué bonitas imágenes” (18) (You came to live in this country. My country. Our country. They told me that you used to live in New York: you must be sick. Big city, New York, they say. I’m not interested, because it is very violent. They always show it on TV. Here, however, things are different, orderly. Only look, what beautiful images).

When addressing the negotiation of the concept of “nation”, Valenzuela also makes use of an asylum imagery (19), which gains substance due to the ubiquitous presence of the media, the general state of violence and mystification, as well as the impossible dialog with Maria, one which seems to be governed by the rules of the theater of the absurd. The diagnostic that the narrator herself identifies as being relevant for her case is of a moral nature, and the inability to move is seen as a moral immobility (48). Doctor Alfredi, in his turn, associates the invoked immobility with a collective syndrome, and diagnoses the patient as suffering from “‘mal de sauce’ tan típico de nuestras riberas” (‘mal de sauce’, so typical of our banks) which manifests itself by a lack of the will to move, and an excessive desire to contemplate, to remember, to put things together (49). The parallel between the person incapable of forgetting the past and the medical disease is further elaborated, as the character establishes a relationship with doctor Alfredi, and ironically states, in a remark meant to create a special complicity with the reader, that “los males de la memoria no suelen ser detectados con ecografías ni curados con pocimas” (51) (the illnesses of memory are not usually detected by ecographies nor are they cured with medicine).

The dual, split character of the narration (past vs. present self, Argentina vs. the United States, the real vs. the televised) is embodied in the figure of Alfredi, who works as a doctor at night, and as a taxi driver that “likes action more than words”, during the day. This pattern highlights the questioning of the binary structure which is at the core of this text, illustrated by the tension between the artist and the military, or the contemplative being and *homo faber*. Valenzuela’s work, with its playful revision of the syntactic order, as part of a larger poetic scheme of “writing with the body” (“escribir con el cuerpo”), is an implicit plea for the power of the artistic approach in times of authoritarianism, a duality which also becomes manifest at the level of the use of “I” vs. “them”. While Maria acknowledges the difference between “my” and “our” in her reference to “My country. Our country”, the military obliterate this fractured identity, and make use of a self-assured “us” (“nostros”), in their will to save the country from its enemies (64, 95). The contrast between the two colliding views is captured in the dialog at the end of the book, where the military exclaim “¡ El club es ya nuestro !”, to which the narrator retorts, in an ironic mode that plays with the notions of “reality” and “realistic”, which are questioned in the very title, “¿Y el país ? pregunta ella, la muy realista” (106) (“¿ And the country ? asked her, the very realistic”).

Tununa Mercado’s book *En estado de memoria*, published the same year as Valenzuela’s, explores, in its turn, the topic of return, with the lapse of absence mentioned being of ten years as well. The impact of the return is equally strong, and expressed through a bodily metaphor of immobility and jeopardy of the vital functions: “En efecto, diez años

después de esta intuición imprecisa, en mi primer viaje a Buenos Aires, en un solo segundo, se me agolparon todos los años y el embotellamiento fue tan brutal que me quedé sin respiración” (77) (Indeed, ten year after this imprecise intuition, in my first trip to Buenos Aires, in just one second, all the years stroke me, and the rush was so sudden that I lost my respiration). The book has been called both an autobiography and a novel--by navigating between different literary genres, the book defies, in a way similar to Valenzuela's *Realidad nacional desde la cama*, any encapsulation in a specific generic category, as a result of a poetic creed meant to confuse anyone that would approach the texts with the reassuring desire to assign them to a *tierra firme* of a generic code. By using to this strategy, the two books reduplicate, at the formal level, the very volatile nature of the question of memory.

In a slightly different treatment of the medical metaphors, *En estado de memoria* establishes a dialog with the well-known Argentine psychoanalytic tradition. The game of duplication is largely present in this writing as well, and it manifests itself after a meeting with the psychoanalyst: “quería decir *yo* y decía *ella* y rogaba que volvieran a unirme, que me restituyeran al casillero del que provenía y en el que había estado hasta ese momento con tanta despreocupación como inconsciencia” (21) (I wanted to say *I*, and I was saying *her* and I was asking that they would put myself together again, that they would send me back to the card index to which I belonged and where I so carelessly and unconsociusly had lived until that moment). It is an approach that brings to mind the indeterminacy of an identity that is constantly articulated by different *personae*, which in *Realidad nacional de la cama* is manifest in the focal shift between “I” and “she”, as an interplay that gives account of the condition of the one returned from the exile.

In “El frío que no llega”, the confession is made is from the perspective of a collective identity, of a “nosotros” which represents the condition of the Argentine exiled community continuing to live attached to the reality of the country left behind (“El apego al país que habíamos dejado condicionó la vida de todos nosotros”) (38) (The attachment to the country that we had left behind conditioned the life of all of us). The tone adopted is self-ironic, as it underscores the misunderstandings that occur in the Argentine-Mexican communication, in spite of the use of a common language. The remarks in this sense illustrate, very much similar to the travel and ethnographic literature observant of the Other, a humoristic, though affectionate understanding of the Mexican otherness, and a rendering of the Argentine identity that is replete with tongue-in-cheek remarks. Thus, while the Argentineans are presented as being garrulous and exuberant, the Mexicans are captured in their introvert features, where from the profound difference between the two attitudes: “Frente a una jactancia de argentino, el mexicano mira con ojos vacíos, oye con oídos cancelados y sella la boca, provocando en quien lo interpela una impotencia total. Años puede llevarle a un argentino aprender ese distanciamiento ante las desmesuras o vanidades de uno de sus semejantes” (37) (To the self-praise of the Argentine, the Mexican look with void eyes, hears with absent ears, and keeps his mouth shut, causing in the one that approaches him a total helplessness. It might take years for an Argentine to learn this distancing himself from the exaggeration and vanity of one of his fellows).

The resistance to being semantically “decoded” by the Other is mirrored in the case in a skeptical attitude with regard to the possibility of a genuine understanding of cultural difference and of initiating a genuine dialog, scenarios which are both deemed impossible,

where from the silence. In contrast to this type of approach, the retrospective look upon the time spent in exile occasions in Mercado's book a sketch of both the Argentine and the Mexican ethos, the angle adopted being that of an *argenmex*, as the narrator calls herself. The consideration of otherness is not rooted, in this case, in the perception of pure, national eyes, defined by essentialist standards, but, on the contrary, in that of an identity of a transcultured. If the "clash of civilizations" does not occur, it is because the narrator belongs to the space of an in-between, which allows her to refer both to the Argentine and the Mexican culture in a humoristic tone of compassion, as opposed to the knowledgeable objectiveness of "an expert". From this point of view, if in Valenzuela's work, there is a desire of the narrator to distinguish herself, in her attitude, from the unflinching belief and attitude of the military who reject the doubt, in the name of an "absolute", universal truth and benefit, in Mercado's novel, there is a rejection of "the expertise", as claim of being in possession of, and identifying oneself with a stable position. Both in *Realidad nacional desde la cama* and in *En estado de memoria* the narrator experiences the difficulty of the return due to a mismatch between a previous mental representation and the reality encountered. This is due both to a change of the environment, but even more so, to that of the identity of the narrator, which is the split, defragmented identity of someone who belongs to the space of the in-between, rather than a single nation. And it is this fact that grants the legitimacy of relating to otherness, and writing about it, in a humoristic, yet affectionate way.

Conclusions

With regard to the recognition the importance of the female voices in the process of identity negotiation, Argentina is a relevant case in point, given that the feminine engagements with the Argentine culture, which go back to 1830, are "the most forceful in Latin America" (Masiello, 1992). The Argentine "nation and narration" dynamic reveals itself as being extremely interesting upon a close consideration of the way in which the female voices have been framing it for the last decades. Once embarked upon the postmodernist poetic rollercoaster of defragmentation and embrace of relativism, the Latin American narrative, which epitomized in the 19th century "the national romance", in a scheme in which nation was associated to a great extent to idyllic love that celebrated the family values (Sommer, 1991), the national allegory literary discourse articulated in the 20th century is of a more versatile and difficult-to-capture nature. Thus, works such as *Realidad nacional desde la cama* by Luisa Valenzuela have been interpreted within the logic of "national allegory", much under the powerful impact of Fredric Jameson's article "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism" (1986) (Mouat, 1996), which implied that that there was no other possible paradigm to be embraced by the Latin American literature than that of the "nation allegory". Ever since the publication of Jameson's influential article, different readings of Latin American literature have tried to demonstrate its fallacious character. The current consideration in parallel of the three books aims to emphasize, along with those that established a dialog with Jameson's article, the diverse nature of the allegorical discourse with regard to Latin America, and point to the new theoretical territories that arise with approaches such as the ones suggested by Shua, Valenzuela and Mercado, who revisit, by making use of a rich medical imagery, the understanding and representation of the national, in books of return from the exile that give voice to the female perspectives.

Mercado's *En estado de memoria* provides a relevant insight into the treatment of the literary tradition shaped by women in relation to the national by means of a scene in which a female character contemplates herself in a mirror, which occasions the acknowledgement of the difficulty of breaking away with commonplaces of the literature written by women. The narrator denounces this imagery as being one of the clichés of the literature written by women, and uses it, nevertheless, in a gesture of both assuming this tradition, and breaking away from it. The recurrence to the image of the mirror is justified in this case by a reflection on the condition of the exiled, who realizes that time has had a different imprint on her, as opposed to the one it had on others. Here from the parallel between the condition of the exiled and the Sleeping Beauty, in which the return plays the role of the prince's kiss (79). It is also in *Estado de memoria* that the narrator reveals, in an act of realization that can lead to cure, according to the psychotherapeutic logic, that her deepest desire was to write. It is, in the three cases mentioned, a writing as a means of coming to terms with the national, a challenge of the medical, prescriptive and authoritarian appropriations of the national rooted in a hybrid, fertile poetic and an epistemological space of the in-between that surpasses dichotomist thinking.

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