that he was aware of himself, intractable, and even paranoid, it made no difference whether he reacted as a Harlequin (Mars) or a Pierrot (Sebastian). He craved an adequate focus for his anxieties, a way to say them over and over again forcefully, artfully, aiming at an unachievable catharsis. Céline, like all the artists in the Janus-faced class I have been describing, must draw his satisfaction not only from the power and efficiency of his verbal action, but also from the *pains* he takes and receive's with/from expression, the barriers he himself has erected to completion, to the end-stopping period of his prose/poetry. In this sense, the act of writing itself becomes the obstacle-in-progress. It is of this complex dynamic that Céline is a sublime and troubling illustration.

Notes

1. Very early on, he feared the consequences of the attacks he made on French society in *Voyage au bout de la nuit.* Witness his use of a pseudonym and the preface he added to the postwar edition.
2. *Bagatelles pour un massacre,* (Paris: Denoël, Paris, 1937), 38–39.
3. In the second draft of *Féerie pour une autre fois* (see *Maudits soupirs pour une autre fois: Une version primitive de* Féerie pour une autre fois, ed. Henry Godard [Paris: Gallimard, 1985]), the anguish and violence, the verbal rhythms, the Paris setting, and the major actors have been mobilized, but the focus is radically different. Before he finished revising, Céline reversed his procedures, altering in the process the structure, tone, and hence the impact while deleting a huge amount of background material, including the details of the Paris setting. His most brilliant and telling decision was to turn a rational narrative development on its head, filling fully two-thirds of the first volume with the hectic monologue of Destouches as the underground man. Hence Destouches is bounded on one side by the visit of a predatory friend and on the other by the semi-allegorical antics of an unconscionable clown.
4. To appreciate the revolutionary nature of this procedure, one has only to compare the *Féerie* monologue with the next necessary step: the voice of Samuel Beckett's Unnamable in *Texts for Nothing,* another great breakthrough novel in the Sebastian mode.
5. Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Féerie pour une autre fois* (Paris: Gallimard, 1952), 11–12. My translation. Note the care Céline takes with timing, gesture (both physical and verbal), and punctuation. Typical also is that this comic but ominous passage should be followed by an equally comic description of Clémence's son.
6. On this topic, see Philippe Alméras's fine biographical study, which cuts through much of the confusion created by Céline's fabri-fictions. *(Céline: entre haines et passions* [Paris: Robert Laffont, 1994], 42.)

Writing to Overcome (Escribir superar): Luisa Valenzuela

DEBRA A. CASTILLO

THE FINAL STORY IN LUISA VALENZUELA'S 1975 COLLECTION, *AQUÍ pasan cosas raras (Strange Things Happen Here),* is a chilling autobiographical fantasy about the role of writing, and of the writer, in a police state. The story, "El lugar de su puietud" ("The Place of Its Quietude"), is one of a series of stories written by Valenzuela upon her relatively brief return to Argentina just before the crackdown that led to the "dirty war" (1976–1983) begun under Jorge Rafael Videla's regime and waged against Argentina's citizens by its military. Presciently, the weight of the coming period of oppression already saturates these stories. The collection as a whole points to the terror perpetuated by the government and at the same time to the complacency of Argentine citizenry that allowed all the worst human rights violations to continue unabated for years. Such an environment compels the writer to speak out. Says Valenzuela in an interview, "Politics has forced itself on us . . . the time comes when you can't detach yourself from it, the horror was so great that it is worse to keep quiet" (García Pinto 232).

"Horror," "detachment," and "quietude" are all key words in this literary-political enterprise, for if Valenzuela cannot separate herself from the ongoing state terror, in her narrative practice her protagonists are often strangely detached from the horrors around them. Thus, for example, "The Place of Its Quietude" offers an ironic and apparently contemplative commentary both on the thin veneer of organized calm overlying massive violence as well as on the inevitable outcome of that violence: the quietude of death. At the very end of her book *Powers of Horror,* Julia Kristeva asks herself a question highly pertinent to Valenzuela's work: "Is it the quiet shore of contemplation that I set aside for myself, as I lay bare, under the cunning, orderly surface of civilizations, the nurturing horror that they attend to pushing aside by purifying, systematizing, thinking; the horror that they seize on in order to build themselves

up and function?" She answers her question: "I rather conceive it as a work of disappointment, of frustration, and hollowing—probably the only counterweight to abjection. While everything else—its archeology and its exhaustion—is only literature . . ." (210). Valenzuela too knows of the work of disappointment, the fury and frustration of hollowing out an as-yet-undefined space for difference. But "only" literature? For a woman living in a context of daily horrors that operate on a far more literal level than those suggested in *Powers of Horror*, Valenzuela likely would find Kristeva's echo of Verlaine's famous line almost unbearably precious and conventionally intertextual. I suspect that Valenzuela would say, rather, that everything—the horrifying surface of civilization and its counterpart, abjection—is itself countered by the force of literature. Despite her stories' highly ironic surface tranquility, Valenzuela reminds us that her work derives not from a quiet shore, but rather from the experience of trying to process and understand horror when it is itself laid bare, rather than masked under an orderly, civilized veneer: "I went back . . . in 1975, upon returning to my city after a long absence to find it wasn't mine any longer. Buenos Aires belonged then to violence and to state terrorism" *(Open Door* viii). Her project in this book is apparently contemplative, ultimately contestatory.

Yet, as is typical of all Valenzuela's work, such calls to arms are issued diffidently and ambiguously. "The Place of Its Quietude" operates as if it were written from an impossible "quiet shore of contemplation" and concludes with a writer's meditation on the role of writing in a police state: "If they [the people in the interior] go on writing they may someday reach the present and overcome it, in all meanings of the verb *to overcome:* leave it behind them, modify it, and with a little luck even improve it." ("Escribiendo sin descanso puede que [los del interior] algún día alcancen el presente y lo superen, en todos los sentidos del verbo superar: que lo degen atrás, lo modifiquen y hasta con un poco de suerte lo mejoren" 139, 134).[1] The charge of this story hinges upon the minuscule gap between writing "to overcome" (a literary project) and writing to overcome oppression (a political effort). At the same time, the story encodes two different types of such writing; one, by the unnamed Luisa Valenzuela–like narrator, is a private project, a phosphorescent, forbidden writing in the dark intended for no audience but the author herself with the intention of narrativizing her experience and so to comprehend her personal fear. The other writing to overcome, that theorized in the hypothetical existence of a writing authored by "them" from the interior, is imagined as a public rehistoricization that will redirect the nation's understanding of itself.

At the same time, the effect of this story's performance of its own literariness operates in the exchange between these two writers and two audiences, as well as two meaning structures captured in the conjunction of "to write" and "to overcome" and, with the Spanish text at least, in the ubiquity of subjunctive verb constructions that implicitly cast both the act of writing and that of overcoming into a hypothetical and contingent mode. The subjective mood traditionally recalls a history of such relational states—linguistic and social—ordered and arranged according to a well-defined institutional hierarchy: of the sentence, of the society. ("Subjunctive: Mood of the verb that indicates an action is conceived as subordinate to another, as doubtful, possible, or desired" [*Larousse*]. "Subjunctive: That which is subjoined or dependent; designating a mood the forms of which are employed to denote an action or state as conceived [and not as fact] and therefore used to express a wish, a command, exhortation, or a contingent, hypothetical, or prospective event" *(The Oxford English Dictionary)*. The subjunctive, then, has no independent existence in standard grammar; it is other-directed in the modes of request, subordinated in complex structures as a reaction or as a secondary action existing only in relation to some other act.

Such a tight coupling reminds us that the narrative exchange never opens itself to simplistic politics nor to recuperation in the service of any national allegorical construction, however defined. This is particularly true in countries like Argentina, where tight censorship along implicit knowledge of state abuses have put extreme pressure on such formulations. Marta Morello-Frosch has pointed out that the ritual exercise of rhetorical appeals to national solidarity not only furthers the political agenda of the repressive state apparatus in maintaining the status quo, but also paradoxically helps cover over the gaps and resistances "where practical control is lacking but deemed necessary" (691). While "The Place of Its Quietude" points ineluctably to the operation of the militaristic state apparatus, it also reminds us of the subtle perversities of national allegorical constructions that legitimize extraordinary violence against its own citizens as an inalienable right: what Valenzuela describes in the story as the "Gobierno" (government with a capitol "g"), the shadowy presence authorizing "the usual shootings, police raids, customary patrols" ("los consabidos tiroteos, alguna que otra razzia policial, los patrullajes de siempre" 130, 123). Valenzuela's marking of the "usual" and the "ordinary" in this quote rubs against a formulation that is anything but, and reminds us how the Government manipulates certain kinds of ritual discourse in an at-

tempt to tranquilize the general population and forward its own political purposes.

In this story, the shadowy response to a shadowed violence comes in the form of another ritual response: the city fills gradually with the sounds of indigenous flutes and the smell of burning incense issuing from unidentifiable sources. As the ubiquity of both the police sirens and of the counterritual flutes impinges ever more forcefully on people's daily lives, the effort to maintain neutrality also wears thin, and the veneer of detachment reveals itself as an inadequate mask: "Nothing to fear. The escalation of violence only touches those who are looking for it, not us humble citizens who don't allow ourselves so much as a wry face or the least sign of discontent." ("Nada hay que temer. La escalada de violencia sólo alcanza a los que la buscan, no a nosotros humildes ciudadanos que no nos permitimos ni una mueca de discontento ni la menor señal de descontento" 133, 127.) Here the closed system of official discourse ("nothing to fear") serves as a shield or mask for the citizens, who cower under its inadequate protection in the hope that the (officially nonexistent) violence will pass them by.

Inelectuably then, both state discourse and rebellious response are tightly imbricated in analogous ritual actions. Insofar as they appeal to ritual, both discourses stand only outside the historical implications of the inscription by those from the interior who are writing in this threshold moment but also against it, to overturn the state's official discourse. All the while, they are taking care that this overcoming is not just another renegotiation of tired concepts but also a strategic operation to usher in a reconceptualization as well as a reinscription of the national project. The narrator's appeal to these others, and to another writing, suggests as well that at some point in this process the individual narrative becomes a collective understanding and that her tardily admitted fear has an objective form. Writing, then, points toward another kind of action rather than a ritual by which fear can be comprehended.

Inevitably, the individual's inability to admit to a fear that might isolate her from the rest of the citizenry and so place her life in danger gives way to a collective recognition of a shared societal nightmare: We might speak of sensorial or ideological infiltration, if in some remote corner of our national being we didn't feel that it's for our own good—a form of redemption. And this vague sensation restores to us the luxury of being afraid." ("Podríamos hablar de penetración sensorial e ideológica si en algún remoto rincón de nuestro ser nacional no sintiéramos que es para nuestro bien, que alguna forma de redención nos ha de llegar de ellos. Y esta vaguísima esperanza nos devuele el lujo de tener miedo" 134, 128.) In this recognition, the citizenry at large rejects the official discourse of a peaceful state where well-meaning citizens have nothing to fear. Instead, Valenzuela projects a fragile, newly consolidated sense of a national being excluding the official Government and defined by a fear of its actions. Paradoxically, people are experiencing that fear as a form of redemption, even though their fear is never expressed openly but remains "behind closed doors, silent, barren, with a low vibration that emerges in fits of temper on the streets or conjugal violence at home" ("un miedo a puertas cerradas, silencioso, estéril, de vibración muy baja que se traduce en iras callejeras o en arranques de violencia conyugal" (134, 128).

Ironically, fear itself serves as the occasion for salvation, for recuperation of a sense of self. The narrator speaks of the ubiquity of disappearances and torture, of the individual bad dream becoming a collective nightmare, of the familiar yet alien rituals of flute and copal incense, only to conclude: "None of that can save us. Perhaps only fear, a little fear that makes us see our urban selves clearly." ("Nada de todo esto podrá salvarnos. Quizá tan sólo el miedo, un poco de miedo que nos haga ver claro a nosotros los hombres de la ciudad" 135, 129.) Interestingly enough, fear and hope are reborn together out of the disjunction between Government rhetoric evoking the sacred truths of national culture and the sensed reality of Government actions, out of the reappearance of indigenous ritual as an oppositional force, even if its pertinence for national life, and especially urban life in the capital city, remains unresolved. The return of fear motivates the hope that some redemption can derive from the new sense of national self constituted in and by the impact of state terror. This is precisely the import of Fernanco Ainsa's observation that "the power, the courage to rise up against fear emerges from the knowledge and the recovery of memory. . . . What can one do, however, so that memory does not disappear with life itself? How can one make it 'stick' and last, so that it becomes a testimony that is transmitted and remembered years later? There is only one answer, and it seems clear: in order to last, memories must be fixed in the written word" (689). Out of the anguish produced by ambiguity about the signs of fear come the resurgence of hope and a fragile new sense of a national project that can speak and write, if only in a tentative manner, of overcoming and modifying the present by rewriting it from the inside out; if not now, then soon; if not here, then someplace nearby. Ainsa concludes: "Thus, if literature requires fear, this is because it is not possible to write without fear, or because

all memory is forever made up of those fragments that will not succumb to definitive silence" (690).

It is, of course, as the last sentence of the story reminds us, a "question of language" ("Es cuestión de lenguaje" 139, 134). This too suggests a reconstitution, a recuperation or reinvention of what Valenzuela has described under the general term of myth. "I write myths," says Valenzuela in an interview, "in order to reinvent myths" (Ordóñez 518). In this story, too, a problematized and remotivated myth serves as the crucial figure for change. In meditating on the monumental task before the hypothetical writers from the interior, the narrator of this story reminds herself that she must have patience, for "they have to go a long way back in time to arrive at the origin of the myth, dust the cobwebs off it, and demythicize it (in order to restore to the truth its essence . . .)" ("van a tener que remontarse tan profundamente en el tiempo para llegar hasta la base del mito y quitarles las telarañas y demitificarlo [para devolverle a esa verdad su esencis . . .]" 138, 132). Writing to overcome is a tedious and painstaking process, one both outside the workings of state power and located deeply within it—inhabiting its interior, its collective heart, and the byways of its blood. From the place of horror derives the space of quietude; "they" are "us," and "we" becomes "I." Once the sirens and the flutes have fallen silent, the tear gas and the copal incense blown away, then and only then will the writers from the interior come into their own; their writing can only overcome the future once it has already overcome the past.

The narrator of "The Place of Its Quietude" has a secretive compulsion to leave her own record of these events on the phosphorescent board she has created so as to scribble down her fragmentary tales late at night, in the dark. Her stories, "The Best Shod," "The Gift of Words," and so on, are all titles of stories included in this volume by Luisa Valenzuela, *Strange Things Happen Here*, the same collection in which "The Place of Its Quietude" is the final story. Ostensibly, this Luisa Valenzuela–like narrator leaves the task of writing for the future to those other writers, the posited people in the interior, who are compiling more complete histories of current events, and through whose efforts present horrors may be modified or overcome. The character in this story can only hypothesize the existence of these other writers; her project, like that of Valenzuela's book as a whole, is located *in medias res*. The narrator, writing secretly in the dark, calls her work a "modest contribution and I hope it never gets into the hands of readers" ("un aporte muy modesto y además espero que nunca llegue a manos de lector alguno" 139, 133). She writes in silence and against silence, in the dark and in phosphorescent colors, writing through and of her own fear, and in fear of the potential audience of readers comprising agents of the police state who could well make her disappear for the transgressive nature of her writings. Yet, of course, the words written against the fear of the enemy reader are those very tales we have nearly finished perusing; the narrator's personal writing to understand and to overcome her own fear collapses with the more general political intent of those verbs.

Thus, the narrator's reasons for undertaking this solitary and silent task echo Luisa Valenzuela's commentary in a 1994 interview with Gwendolyn Díaz: "I had to confront the horror because it was the only way I had of not continuing to be terrified. Now I believe I do the same in writing. It is a recognition of fear and a confrontation with it so as to see what it is about and of what it is made." ("Iba a enfrentar el horror porque era la única manera que tenía yo de no seguir aterrada. Ahora creo que hago lo mismo escribiendo. Es un reconociemiento del miedo y un enfrentamiento con él para ver de qué se trata y de que está hecho" 45.) In "The Place of Its Quietude," the narrator notes: "Though I'm quiet these days, I go on jotting it all down in bold strokes (and at great risk) because it's the only form of freedom left us." ("Yo, cada vez más calladita, sigo anotando todo esto aún a grandes rasgos [¡grandes riesgos!] porque es la única forma de libertad que nos queda" 138, 133.) We have writing about writing here, and about writing this story in particular, but we also have the displacement back and forth from plural "we" to the singular "I." Notable narrative stumblings can be seen in this respect, from the "we" who fear, to the "I" who serves as fear's particular expression: "It's true that we are—I am—afraid." ("Cierto que tenemos—tengo—miedo" 137, 132.) This narrative "I" materializes the memory of that fear in the individual's secret storywriting, and does so as an expression of a more generalized sense of "our" possibilities for a mediated sense of freedom.

Strangely enough, writing in the dark allows the narrator to throw off other narrative disguises, including—eventually—that of gender as well as point of view: "I have no fear of playing their game or giving them ideas. I can even do away with the subterfuge of referring to myself in the plural or the masculine. I can be myself" ("no temo estar haciéndoles el juego ni dándoles ideas. Hasta puedo dejar el subterfugio de hablar de mí en plural o en masculino. Puedo ser yo" 137, 132). The shift from "we" to "I" implies a specifically feminine take on these questions, positing that in these narrative exchanges between "we" and "they," between the capital and the interior, between the police state and the countervaling indige-

nous rituals the first-person female narrator appropriates—to borrow a term from Ruth Salvaggio—her pivot point. Salvaggio writes: "There is not a subject continually reaching for an object, not the one eternally in quest of the other. Instead, women write the unhinging of this dangerous pivot. Subject meets subject not at a closed door, but at the frame where the door opens" (160). In an analogous use of the same metaphor of the door, Anne McLeod describes the effects of feminism for women as a process of unhinging, of imagining "antithetical relations between the arts in such a way that the ontological framework within which they have been thought comes unhinged" (59). To the degree that the feminine "I" serves as the story's pivot, and is, by the semi-autobiographical quality of the tale also revealed as the secret narrative pivot of the other stories as well, the project of writing to overcome is already encoded in these apparently preliminary hinge texts of an incipient dirty war.

At the same time, Valenzuela is less certain, or perhaps less optimistic, than Salvaggio and McLeod; for her, to dislocate narrative frames may offer new vistas; it also risks unhinging in the second, colloquial sense of madness. It is no coincidence that she has chosen *Open Door* as the title for the U.S. reissue of these stories in English; as she reminds us in the prologue to the volume, "Open Door" is literally "the name of the most traditional, least threatening lunatic asylum in Argentina" (viii).[2] At the same time, if "Open Door" evokes a nonthreatening lunacy, it also reminds us of the ritual of asylum in the other sense, as a place of refuge from unlawful terror. The actual Argentine asylum is located outside Luján, near the capital city of Buenos Aires but already at the threshold of the interior; it too is a hinge site framing the social body and projecting a ritual of retirement and return.

It is wholly to be expected in such a context that the hinging, or unhinging, of narrative in "The Place of Its Quietude" rests on the act of writing itself. At the same time, in contrast with another of Valenzuela's hermetic tales from this volume, "Camino al ministerio" ("On the Way to the Ministry"), in which "the protagonist's itinerary figures the motion of the text and the only story that such a writing can tell, is the story of its own materialization and displacements" (Guitiérrez Mouat 715); in this story the literalization of the act of writing offers two models: in one the peculiar intertextuality consumes itself in its foregrounding of the writing process; in another Valenzuela points to the heuristic potential of the nonallegorical writing about writing as a personal and political effort to overcome the limitations encoded in the rituals of government and

the formal rigors of grammatical narrative structure. Gutiérrez Mouat writes perceptively: "much of Valenzuela's writing is generated by the literal interpretation of tropes, a strategy that exploits the gap between the proper and the figurative meaning of words and that implies the subversion of representation" (709). I would add that Valenzuela's practice not only exploits gaps/thresholds of various sorts, including that of literalizing tropes, but also valorizes the strategic displacement/unhinging of a propensity to organize discourse around seemingly incontestable structures.

It is above all to assert the *différance* in her words, differing from and deferring to the language of patriarchy as she defers her definition of it. Margo Glantz asks whether such subtle games of appropriation, literalization, and censorship might not at some level mask textually the idea of failure (25). I prefer to figure her practice in Valenzuela's own self-effacing circuitous terms: "I believe in the existence of a feminine language, even though it may not yet have been completely defined, and even though the boundary between it and the other language . . . may be too subtle and ambiguous to be delineated" ("Word" 96). This feminine language is ambiguously marked in the collection of short stories, *Strange Things Happen Here;* only in "The Place of Its Quietude," and only as a by-product of a writerly fantasy, does the final text in the volume force a reevaluation of the narrative stance in the rest of the stories. Valenzuela's narrator in this story—gendered female and author of numerous well-known Valenzuela fictions—becomes the only source of information about the shadowy "los del interior" who write in splendid isolation from the horrors (of the horrors) in the capital city, and whose texts are eternally unavailable to the reader of this book.

Fellow Argentine novelist Julio Cortázar once said of Valenzuela: "To read her is to enter our reality fully" (quoted Magnarelli 157)—perhaps (given Cortázar's well-known gender bias) more fully than he imagined, and with a more expansive understanding of the word "our." Valenzuela's literary practice challenges readers to rethink the category of the woman as discursive subject/object outside the essentialist frame into which she has so traditionally been cast, as she also forces us to return to a question relative to the field of literary study at large—that of the struggle with and against the power of words. In putting pressure on the doubled verbs—"escribir superar," writing to overcome—Valenzuela suggests not only a model for revitalizing national myth, but also a method for dislocating the hinge between linguistic and extralinguistic binaries such as the one that has exercised us over the last few pages. These insights are not the least of her contributions to international literary studies.

Notes

1. Page numbers within the text cite first the English translation, then the Spanish edition.

2. Mariano Plotkin reminds us that in the Argentine context the use of this metaphor is particularly resonant because of the deep penetration of psychoanalysis into the national culture. Argentina is a well-known international center of psychoanalysis, so much so that political speeches are frequently laden with psychoanalytically derived terms. For example, in his speech of April 25, 1995, apologizing for the military's role in the dirty war, General Martín Balza spoke of "the collective unconscious" and the need to "work through mourning" (271).

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Ethnicity and Authenticity: Wilson Harris and Other "Black" Writing

MARK WILLIAMS

WILSON HARRIS'S FICTION IS GENERALLY ENCOUNTERED IN COURSES IN post-colonial literature; sometimes he is taught as a Caribbean writer. In the United States, where the term "African American" is sometimes considered to include black Caribbean writing, he is honored by a special issue of the journal *Callaloo.* As a long-time British resident, he might be regarded as a black British or an expatriate Guyanese writer. These problems with the definition of the author are compounded by those associated with the writing, which is even more resistant to categorization. Is his fiction modernist or post-modernist? None of these competing terms seems entirely satisfactory, although each explains some aspect of his work. My purpose here is not to resolve this problem by arguing for any single category, but to point to the limitations of consigning a writer as curious and as distinctive as Harris to *any* category and to relate the elusiveness of his writing to the situation of the novel in the post-colonial world.

I do not mean that we should pretend that Harris is *sui generis* as a writer, and that questions of influence, tradition, and antecedents are merely irrelevant. Nor do I mean to imply that nothing is to be achieved by acknowledging that Harris's thought and writing arise from and have been shaped by the historical and social conditions he shares with other writers from the Caribbean region. To deny that something useful in literary and literary-historical terms is achieved by locating writers within racial, national, or religious categories would be foolish. Great caution, however, must be exercised in the process. Our categories should be open, flexible, nuanced, and subject to continual revision. This is particularly the case with Harris, whose thought, "like the linguistic fabric of his prose," as Hena Maes-Jelinek has argued, "defies categorization."[1]

The difficulties involved in associating Harris as a writer with terms such as modern, post-colonial, or, most problematically,