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Carnival: Death and Renewal in the Poetry of Gloria Fuertes



Sylvia Sherno

The word “carnival,” as used by Mikhail Bakhtin, refers to the culture of the marketplace and the forms of folk humor which arose in the Middle Ages and Renaissance. The manifestations of this popular culture included comic festivities and ritual activities, memorialized in the oral and written parodies from which an entire body of recreational literature was born. Among the most salient traits of carnivalesque compositions are licentiousness, irreverence, and an exaggerated fascination with the human body and with its appetites and instincts, both noble and base. The ambivalence inherent in the portrayal of bodily impulses is central to the grotesque realism that Bakhtin attributes to Rabelais in particular and to carnival expression in general. For Bakhtin, the grotesque character of popular parodical literature is perhaps carnival’s greatest triumph, for the very ambivalence of praise and degradation echoes the eternally “unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth, growth and becoming” (Bakhtin, 24). The grotesque, in short, signals the cosmic triumph of regeneration over death.¹

The world of carnival, according to Bakhtin, traditionally stands outside of an “official” culture marked by sobriety and asceticism, intolerance and repression.² These elements conspire to produce

¹ The ideas suggested above are elaborated throughout *Rabelais and His World*.

² Umberto Eco’s view of carnival (p. 6) differs from that of Bakhtin. According to Eco, “Carnival can exist only as an *authorized* transgression . . . [comedy and carnival] represent paramount examples of law enforcement. They remind us of the existence of the rule.”

the solemn tone deemed appropriate to the expression of "the true, the good, and all that [is] essential and meaningful." (Bakhtin, 73). In the Middle Ages, such values were determined and enforced by the dogmatic and stringently absolutist canons of the feudal and theocratic orders. Yet the gray solemnity and "icy petrified seriousness" described by Bakhtin are not exclusive to the official medieval world. In Spain these qualities are as ascribable to the forty years of Franco's dictatorship as to the centuries of Inquisitorial domination. Even a cursory glance at the Spanish architectural landscape, configured by monuments like El Escorial and the Valle de los Caídos, reveals a history of grim authoritarianism and inflexible dogmatism.

Such a history has provided rich and fertile ground for the rebellious inversion of the official order which is the primary activity of the grotesque imagination. Indeed, the grotesque tradition has thrived in Spain, from the ingenuous piety of Berceo to the hyperbolic aggressiveness of Quevedo; from the eccentricities of Gómez de la Serna's "greguerías" to the tragicomedy of Valle Inclán's "esperpentos"; from the satirical wedding of human and animal domains by the eighteenth-century fabulists to the sordid metaphors of Dámaso Alonso.

Among the poets of post-Civil War Spain, Gloria Fuertes is a beneficiary of the Spanish grotesque tradition. Gloria Fuertes shares with the first generation of postwar poets her view of poetry as an instrument for righting the social injustices born of the Civil War and its aftermath. Like those of the second generation, Fuertes has committed herself to the distinctively personal creative vision only made possible by the breakdown of the earlier repressive system (Debicki, 14). Fuertes' poetry, however, diverges from the poetic generations of postwar Spain because of the exultant, celebratory quality that marks her as a direct descendent of the ancient carnival spirit. As in the carnival tradition, laughter and revelry are central to her world view and thus to her conception of poetry as a means to counteract the ills—social, artistic, and sexual—of official society. The clowns, trapeze artists, vendors and street figures who people Fuertes' verses evidence her affinity for popular, "unofficial," culture. So too do the double entendres, colloquialisms, and vulgar expressions with which she spices her language. Her poetry mirrors the ancient dichotomies of reverence and subversion, manifested on the one hand by prayers, litanies, and verses in a contemplative vein; on the other hand, by

diatribes, reprimands, and billingsgate. The co-existence of such contradictory forms is concordant with the carnival spirit, especially in its preference for the grotesque. Allusions to food and drink, to the human body and its natural impulses, abound in her work. Disease and health, both physical and emotional, are of equal poetic import: in Gloria Fuertes' vision, life is an open-ended cycle of death and rebirth, just as poetry itself is the continuing process by which she denounces official culture and reaffirms her faith in popular renewal.

What is more, Gloria Fuertes stands apart from her poetic compatriots by virtue of her gender. For this reason she maintains a unique position in relation to an official culture historically molded by and destined for men. Fuertes unabashedly confesses that her work "en general, es muy autobiográfica, . . . muy 'yoista,' . . . muy 'glorista,'" and it is clear that she insistently employs poetry as a way of creating her own personal and artistic identity.³ Yet her work transcends the private issues of her "autobiografismo irremediable" (OI, 25), for it is by means of her poetry that Fuertes confronts the male-ordained codes by which women have historically been constrained, the male-sanctioned hierarchies from which women have traditionally been excluded. Armed, therefore, with the forms and rhetoric of carnival, Fuertes assumes the "negative function" within the existing official structure that obliges women to "reject everything finite, definite, structured, loaded with meaning. . . . [and which] places women on the side of the explosion of social codes: with revolutionary moments" (Kristeva, 166).

Fuertes has lightheartedly alluded to the "mosqueantes aficiones" to which, as a young Spanish girl of the working class, she was denied access: ". . . en aquellos tiempos, antes de la garra de la guerra, pocas muchachas practicaban hockey, baloncesto y menos, poesía" (OI, 27). Social historians have noted how restrictions im-

³ Gloria Fuertes, *Obras incompletas* (Madrid: Cátedra, 1983), p. 22. I have used two texts for this study, *Obras incompletas* and *Historia de Gloria* (Madrid: Cátedra, 1983), subsequently referred to as OI and HG. OI compiles the following titles: *Isla ignorada* (Madrid: Musa Nueva, 1950); *Aconsejo beber hilo* (Madrid: Arquero, 1954); *Todo asusta* (Caracas: Lirica Hispana, 1958); *Ni tiro, ni veneno, ni navaja* (Barcelona: El Bardo, 1955); *Poeta de guardia* (Barcelona: El Bardo, 1968); *Cómo atar los bigotes al tigre* (Barcelona: El Bardo, 1969); and *Sola en la sala* (Zaragoza: Javalambre, 1973).

On the question of Gloria Fuertes' self-referentiality, I refer the reader to my articles, "Gloria Fuertes and the Poetics of Solitude" and "The Poetry of Gloria Fuertes: Textuality and Sexuality."

posed by patriarchal socialization on the free expression of a woman's individuality and artistic integrity often result in diseases of maladjustment, in madness, and even in death (Gilbert and Gubar, 45-92). These ills find expression in a kind of discourse of impossibility commonly created in women's writings. In the poetry of Gloria Fuertes, for example, negation and silence figure among the stratagems by which she resists the impossible codes and conventions of established culture and language.⁴ Expressions of inversion further demonstrate the poet's sense of marginality: she views herself repeatedly as "al borde" (OI, 42, 228) and describes her soul "desde siempre . . . cabalgando al revés" (OI, 74).⁵ Within the context of popular imagery, negation and inversion represent the carnivalesque displacement and destruction of hierarchies. Rabelais, avers Bakhtin, "intentionally mixed the hierarchical levels in order to discover the core of the object's concrete reality, to free it from its shell and to show its material bodily aspect—the real being outside all hierarchical norms and values" (Bakhtin, 403). In similar fashion, Gloria Fuertes registers her nonconformity with the accepted order and, in so doing, engages in precisely the activity that Julia Kristeva envisions for women in the revolutionary dismantling of official society.

The discourse of impossibility reflected rhetorically by negation and inversion is thematically represented by the innumerable allusions in Fuertes' verses to sickness, madness, and various other physical pathologies and psychic ailments. Pain, for example, is everywhere present and heightens, somehow, her perception of the tenuousness of life: "¡Qué viva estoy porque me duele todo! . . ." (OI, 262). "Todos estáis perdidos," she cautions, "picados por pecados, / los altos y los bajos tenéis algo en la voz. // Inicio cura urgente" (OI, 59). She announces to her lover that "aunque me dueles ya menos cada día, / la enfermedad va peor" (HG, 103). During the war, she remembers, "el hombre y el hambre / me dolían todos los días" (HG, 103). And when she is asked, "¿Dónde te duele, Gloria?", she can only reply: "Ahí me duele, / en la mismísima vida" (HG, 102).

Sicknesses of all kinds, prominent in Fuertes' poetry, not only

⁴ In my unpublished essay, "The Poetry of Gloria Fuertes: Textuality and Sexuality," I study the use of negation and silence as expressions of impotence and as a kind of prelude to creativity.

⁵ Regarding the esthetics of marginality, see Rosette C. Lamont, "The Off-Center Spatiality of Women's Discourse."

exemplify the grotesque fascination with bodily functions but also ally the poet with life's unfortunates. A small bird imprisoned in a balcony "pidiendo a gritos la revolución" (OI, 104) suffers from the same claustrophobia and acrophobia that envelop the poet herself (OI, 155-56). "Yo soy asténica / y anoréxica" (OI, 313), she informs us, and in fact overly thin women and skinny children are haunting reminders of a gnawing hunger (Gilbert and Gubar, 53-59; Michie, 12-29). Like the beggars to whom she extends her compassion and love, she begs, "¡Un poquito de pez, / que tengo hambre. . . !" (OI, 106) and, opening her empty refrigerator, she observes, "Me gustaría estar en la India / pasando un hambre distinta" (OI, 302). Tellingly, she shares with the circus elephants and walruses an arrhythmic heartbeat caused by "la vergüenza de haber llegado a ser mansos domesticados" (OI, 360) (Bakhtin, 229-30). In Fuertes' poetry, people sweat and cough (OI, 298), scratch and are allergic (OI, 272-73); they are visited by such indignities as "múltiples granulosis en su sexo" (OI, 303), "álgidas neuralgias" (HG, 345), and "jaqueca y congoja" (HG, 264). She writes a lullaby to ease her sleeping foot out of its cramp (HG, 122-23) and consults a physician because "Penitis tengo doctora, / —pena inflamada—, / amar y no ser amada" (HG, 312).

The fact that illness so occupies the poet's attention recalls, of course, the prevalence of disease in the writings of many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women writers, if not more contemporary ones. As Gilbert and Gubar explain this phenomenon, women writers of earlier times "struggled in isolation that felt like illness, alienation that felt like madness, obscurity that felt like paralysis to overcome the anxiety of authorship that was endemic to their literary subculture" (51). The emotional and psychological distress that appears as a recurring motif in Gloria Fuertes' poetry serves as a reminder, then, of the debilitating effects of social and political marginality on women's lives and works. Nonetheless, emotional disturbances merit Fuertes' compassion, not her bitterness. Confessing her clandestine activism in the cause of peace, she refuses to believe that people are bad; rather,

¡La gente es enferma!
 El opresor sufre regresión,
 el agresor frustración,
 el terrorista ya no pueda más
 (a su modo se la juega por los demás).
 El ladrón padece cleptomanía,

el criminal sicopatía,
el delincuente infantil,
locura senil.

(HG, 86)

Humankind is afflicted with a collective "náusea psíquica seca / . . . peor que arcada y vomitona" (HG, 89). Gloria Fuertes is herself preoccupied with madness, a condition evidenced by the ghosts, phantasmagoria, and magical events that are attended in her verses by shadows and moonlight. (These phenomena are proper, incidentally, to the "lunacy" and emotionally charged atmosphere of Gothic romances, so cultivated by women writers).⁶ The convalescent poet is aware in herself of a lingering "alma dislocada" (HG, 156) and knows that "la angustia, / el aburrimiento, / la mala leche y la tristeza, / se contagian tanto como la lepra" (HG, 263).

Witness to these spiritual maladies are the myriad references to alcohol and drink. At times the poet's proclaimed fondness for drink is part of her celebratory spirit: "Cuando el sol se apague . . . / ¡Comienza a beber!" (OI, 85). On these occasions she is moved to raise her glass in a toast to peace and joy on the planet; in a humbler tone, she toasts rice and lentils, emblems of a smaller happiness (HG, 98). Such lusty references to drink hearken back to images of victorious abundance, fertility, and liberation which in ancient recreational literature signified defeat of the official world (Bakhtin, 294-302). At other times, however, drink is merely symptomatic of perceived dysfunctions or lacks and hence recalls the female deprivation or hunger that "is inextricably linked to rebellion and rage" (Gilbert and Gubar, 373):

Bebo porque la gente no me gusta,
porque a la gente la quiero demasiado . . .

(OI, 217)

Cuando me aprieta todo
yo bebo, bebo siempre . . .

(OI, 86)

conozco los caminos de la noche,
los caminos del clown que ríe inútilmente,
y los torcidos pasos del que bebe derecho

⁶ Gubar and Gilbert explore the theme of madness, as does Yalom. Regarding the many "magical" metamorphoses that transpire in Fuertes' verses, please see my article, "Weaving the World . . ."

—derecho tiene a su vida beberse—.

(OI, 250)

Drink affords the poet a singular acuity and insight: "Se bebe para olvidar una cosa / y se olvida todo menos esa cosa" (OI, 299). At the same time, it provokes bizarre hallucinatory visions. In "Mariposa muerta en el sofá," she hallucinates her house into a terrifying still-life with herself the dead butterfly of the poem's title. From the distorted perspective of the upended bottle, she does not look at her past; on the contrary, her past looks at her and converts "las niñas de mis ojos" into "las niñas" of her lost girlhood. She glimpses the transformation of drink into tears and of herself into a Kafkaesque insect-lover, "una amante religiosa." "Todo esto," she concludes, "acabo de verlo / en el fondo del fondo / de la botella" (OI, 312).

Similarly disquieting are the numerous references to suicide. Human beings are moved by invisible forces; suicide alone permits the exercise of free choice (OI, 178). Fuertes herself contemplates taking gas or chloroform and allows that "todas las noches me suicido un poco" (OI, 178, 215). "Creo en los suicidas" (HG, 122), confides the poet, and declares that she would be tempted to throw herself out of a window, if only she did not live in a basement (and if only she did not have hope) (OI, 347). Among the wares she advertises in her "Guía comercial" the poet numbers neckties for potential suicides (OI, 116). She warns against excess of all kinds: too much of a good thing can turn sour, just as knowing too much can inspire thoughts of suicide (OI, 162). Trees, vineyards, even raccoons are capable of taking their own lives (OI, 199, 202, 336). Not seeing her lover is tantamount to a death-wish (OI, 318) while "Autoeutanasia sentimental" is another kind of suicide occasioned by an enforced docility, a desire "por no estorbar, / por no gritar / más versos quejumbrosos" (HG, 347)—in short, a wish both to suppress artistic expression and to quell personal identity. The repeated insistence on suicide paradoxically suggests feelings of impotence and imaginatively signals death to what the poet perceives as the conventions of prescribed female behavior. Thus, the duality inherent in the allusions to suicide provides a potent figure for what Adrienne Rich has described as a "counterpull between female self-immolation—the temptation of passive suicide—and the will and courage which are [woman's] survival tools" (103).

Nonetheless, as occurs in the carnival tradition of the grotesque, the presence of death and disease is paradoxically contradicted by and unified with manifestations of vitality. Indeed, in the ambivalence of the carnivalesque conception, death and life are the two faces of Janus, together evidence of what Bakhtin views as "the drama of laughter presenting at the same time the death of the old and the birth of the new world. Each image is subject to the meaning of the whole; each reflects a single concept of a contradictory world of becoming" (149). Gloria Fuertes believes that we are made for a life on earth and, although she questions the notion of life under the earth, the meaning she attaches to existence is ultimately a larger one: "morir pariendo como las olas / para que el mar perdure" (OI, 176). Sometimes the pain of love and solitude renders life another form of death (HG, 77, 157-58); likewise, unquenchable hatred "nos amomia" (OI, 153). Over and over in Fuertes' verses death and birth appear side by side, natural companions in the continuum of human existence.⁷ In a single night, for example, "se puede parir o desnacer" (OI, 253). Her own birth, we read in "Nota biográfica," was so difficult a delivery that her mother "si se descuida muere por vivirme" (OI, 41) (Bakhtin, 151).

Fuertes rejoices in each stage of human existence, accepting old age and infancy with equanimity. The faltering steps of the old man, in her estimation, are merely a wistful reminder of the hesitant steps of the small child (OI, 92). She sees God both "en el viejo que pasa [y] / en la madre que pare" (OI, 43). In this same spirit of equanimity Gloria Fuertes neither denigrates nor glorifies the human body but rather makes unabashed poetry out of all of its natural functions. In "El sacamuelas," for example, the poet offers her young female customers bargain prices on special pills "para los días duros" (OI, 240). Bodily functions not commonly a part of polite discourse (urination, defecation, masturbation) are granted humorous welcome within Fuertes' verses (OI, 222, 270, 272, 293, 346-47, 353; HG, 170) since such functions quite literally embody the cosmic forces of creation and destruction, life and death (Bakhtin, 335).

Not surprisingly, eating is another cause for merriment and the

⁷ The theme of poetry as an analogue of physical birth is treated in "The Poetry of Gloria Fuertes: Textuality and Sexuality." Yalom pursues the issue of maternity as a literary theme in her excellent study.

appearance in her verses of soups, fried eggs, lentils and stews provides convincing evidence of the poet's own "apetito envidiable" (OI, 71). To have a little of everything is her philosophy, as the following lines attest:

Tener de todo un poco—como el pato—
 que nada, vuela y anda y pone huevos,
 tener de tierra y mar de niña y niño
 tener de bien y mal
 eso tenemos.
 No ser tan sólo hombres o mujeres
 no ser tan sólo alma o sólo cuerpo,
 no ser tan criminales como somos,
 no ser tan fantasmal como seremos.
 Tener de todo un poco,
 trigo, avena, y dejar un rincón para el centeno.

(OI, 180)

While for lack of food she might propose, "esta noche cenamos Poesía" (OI, 116), hers is a world of abundance, a "banquet for all the world" (Bakhtin, 19). Eating signals communal solidarity in "the process of labor and struggle . . . against the world":

The popular images of food and drink are active and triumphant, They express the people as a whole because they are based on the inexhaustible, ever-growing abundance of the material principle. They are universal and organically combined with the concept of the free and sober truth, ignoring fear and piousness and therefore linked with wise speech. Finally, they are infused with gay time, moving toward a better future that changes and renews everything in its path (Bakhtin, 302).

With typically carnivalesque glee, Fuertes concocts a "menú de guerra" complete with a donkey's tail, garbanzos and the odd weevil, and serves it as a reminder of the fine line between life and death in times of war and peace alike (HG, 113). Elsewhere, she prepares a witch's brew composed of splinters, a relative's tooth, a mammoth's foot, a rock from an avalanche—an odd confection meant to invite good luck (HG, 271-72). Indeed, Fuertes quite regularly employs the language of recipes to make of woman's experience woman's art and, in so doing, fashions her own definition of poetry in defiance of the expected and the conventional.

Gloria Fuertes possesses a festive spirit which laughingly embraces both poles of human existence. Laughter, one of the primary ingredients of carnival relativity, is for Fuertes the distin-

guishing badge of the human species. "El niño," she says, "es el único cachorro / que ríe" (HG, 286) whereas, before being born into a new life, the dead "se mean de risa" (OI, 347). Laughter accounts for the festive merriment evident in allusions to popular celebrations. New Year's Day, signalling the death of the old and the birth of the new, elicits the poet's solemn promise to open "de par en par sonrisa y puerta" (OI, 164). Fuertes remembers as well Holy Thursday, although the eucharistic rituals of that day are rendered decidedly secular by the poet-lover: "Dame el pan de tu cuerpo en una carta, / bébete mis palabras con el mío" (OI, 325). The fifteenth of May occasions this salty plea for special blessings from Isidro Labrador, farmer and saint: "Toma, planta mi bolígrafo, / a ver qué coño nos sale" (OI, 338). Beneath these inversions of the sacred to the profane is the sound of carnivalesque laughter (Bakhtin, 218).

What is more, laughter permits the freedom of both fearlessness and revelry. That is why Fuertes is so drawn to the circus, the bullring, and sports. All are domains linked to the games, riddles, and other forms of play which Bakhtin views as an integral part of carnivalesque parodies of such cosmic questions as time, destiny and political power (231-39). They represent the enactment of communal spectacles which sustain their own rules while momentarily suspending those of the official social structure. The world of the circus, for example, although honored by popular approval, has traditionally been relegated to the margins of esthetics and its inhabitants, consigned to the outskirts of social legitimacy. Gloria Fuertes expresses affinity for circus performers like the mime, the trapeze artist, and the wild animal tamer (OI, 258, 259; HG, 247). Most especially, she favors the clown, the circus' central player and the one in whom laughter and pathos, delight and defiance are conjoined. The role of the clown is not unlike her own: for her, "todo es cuestión, / de saber sacar / la lengua a la Zorra de la Seriedad" (OI, 238).

The bullfight, analogous to the circus as spectacle and ceremony, presents another arena in which to exercise rebellion. Fuertes evinces a special fondness for the bullfighter, another popular icon of daring and valor. With the bullfighter she shares a taste for adventure and revelry ("la brega" and "la fiesta"), and hence is rewarded by popular acceptance:

Toro a verso verso a toro

—la gente entusiasmada—
 y yo poeta de brega,
 quiero que no noten nada.
 (Tengo cariño a la fiesta.)

(HG, 242)

Barred by her gender from youthful participation in sports and games, Fuertes invades these male preserves by means of her poetry. In the guise of "atleta-poeta," she sets for herself the rigorous challenge to "hacer posible lo inalcanzable" (HG, 157):

Toreo-miedo.
 Boxeo-miedo.
 "Surf"-miedo.
 —Deporte es droga—.
 Toreo-desafiar a un animal.
 Boxeo-desafiar a un ser.
 "Surf"-desafiar al mar.
 (Hay locos que ya no tienen miedo).

(OI, 306-07)

Poetry, like the circus, the bullfights, and sports, provides an arena of conflict and defiance, diversion and triumph. The ability to laugh in the face of danger is, of course, at the heart of all of these activities, just as playfulness and the will to risk constitute Fuertes' fundamental posture as a poet: "Juego con fuego / pero juego" (OI, 133). All of life is an immense game of chance, one to which she commits herself unflinchingly ("si pierdo en la Rifa, / será porque he jugado") (OI, 164) and whose stakes she willingly gambles since, "en este juego a cartas que es la vida / gana el que más sonrisas ponga sobre el tapete" (OI, 170).

Laughter, then, serves as a catalyst for the poet's defiance, and enables her to overturn the structures and dogmas of official culture. In her view, official society is worthy if not of her disdain then most certainly of her ridicule, since the sanctions and prohibitions enforced by that society are hopelessly muddled: "Es obligatorio tener mitos / . . . / Es obligatorio presentarse con buenas ropas, / con buenas obras—no interesa tanto— . . ." (OI, 136). Why, she suggests, forbid eating animals when innocent children are cannibalized by wars? In a consumer society in which dolls are better dressed than children, in which opium can be openly bought and young people sold, lofty sentiments are worth

nothing; “hay que tener arranque y ganas de gritar” (OI, 56-57). The poet’s task is to bear witness to what she sees and to do so heedless of accepted codes and conventions.

Poetry is essentially a subversive art; yet even poetry and language are not immune to the poet’s barbs. Fuertes turns her sights on the language of established poetic canons in poems such as “Carta de la eme,” “Poema a la eñe,” “Todas les efes tenía la novia que yo quería,” and “Poema en ón”:

Manolo mío:

Mi madrileño marchoso,
maduro melocotón maleable,
macedonia mascaré mañana, . . .

(HG, 80)

Todo tiene eñe en España,
¡hasta España!

Eñe de coño o la cigüeña que nos trae,
eñe la cizaña o la guadaña que nos lleva, . . .

(HG, 115)

Fea, fascista y fulana,
formidable era de cuerpo
(frío me dejó en el alma); . . .

(HG, 124)

De este molesto caparazón
la única salida de mi prisión
cuando me encierra tu despreocupación,
es el escape de mi inspiración, . . .

(HG, 125)

The stammering rhythms, wordplays, alliterations, and rhyme schemes are reminiscent both of children’s verses and of the ancient forms of popular comic speech known as *coq-à-l’âne* (Bakhtin, 422-26). Such verbal disruptions display an infantilism akin to the aphasia that Gilbert and Gubar see as a parody of “the sort of intellectual incapacity patriarchal culture has traditionally required of women” (58). Moreover, these distinctive features not only provide the poems their phonetic underpinning and thematic fuel, but reveal as well the disintegration of words into sounds, the collapse of romantic clichés into linguistic absurdities. As in the forms of carnivalesque expression, Fuertes’ use of language in unusual, deliberately absurd ways evinces “victory over linguistic dogmatism”

(Bakhtin, 473) and therefore a sense that “poetry is, among other things, a criticism of language. In setting words together in new configurations, . . . in the relationships between words created through echo, repetition, rhythm, rhyme, it lets us hear and see our words in a new dimension” (Rich, 248).

Fuertes refuses to conform to any a priori expectations about the nature of her art. She modestly questions whether the products of her pen are really poems (“Los poemas (¿son poemas?)”) (HG, 57), yet boldly asserts, “escribo como me da la gana” (OI, 32). In the cause of freedom and fearlessness, Fuertes avails herself of extrapoetic modes of discourse: her verses take the shape of recipes, letters, telegrams, news announcements, hospital registration cards, surveys, and other forms not usually a part of the poetic domain (Debicki, 82). She removes poetry from the academy and the salon (although *Sola en la sala* figures among her titles); the proper venues of poetry are for her popular meeting-grounds like the street and the marketplace. Like Antonio Machado “soñando caminos de la tarde,” Gloria Fuertes “[va] haciendo versos por la calle” (OI, 89). She travels on the Metro, frequents book fairs, and

me meto en las tabernas,
también en los tranvías,
me cuelo en los teatros
y en los saldos me visto.
Hago una vida extraña.

(OI, 73)

In short, Fuertes knows about herself that “Mi sitio es estar en medio del pueblo / y ser un medio del pueblo / para servir sólo al pueblo” (HG, 107).

In her outspoken allegiance to the people, Gloria Fuertes is a modern-day recipient of the carnival legacy. She is almost certainly familiar with the ancient comic tradition, from which she inherits many forms and images. Like many practitioners of medieval recreational literature, Fuertes hides behind a facade of naïveté, using humor and hyperbole to conceal a high degree of erudition as well as an attitude of incredulity and skepticism regarding the myths of official culture.⁸ She advises her readers, for example, “no creer todo lo que os digan, / el lobo no es tan malo como Caperucita”

⁸ Benítez interprets Fuertes' work as that of a primitive or naïf.

(HG, 65). Even as a child, we are assured, she herself never ascribed to oft-told stories like "lo del clero" or "lo de la cigüeña" (HG, 61).

Carnavalesque literature of the Middle Ages, furthermore, contains a wealth of parodical treatments of dialogues, debates, treatises, and grammars. Such comic compositions, representing an unofficial mockery of official thought and ritual, figure importantly in Fuertes' work (Bakhtin, 13-15). "Oraciones gramaticales" imitates the straightforward phraseology and sentence structure proper to a child's grammar lesson:

Yo tengo esperanza.
 El perro tiene hambre.
 El banco del jardín respira mal.
 La niña se peina.
 Le vaca se lame.
 Las cosas me miran,
 es peor si me hablan.
 En el suburbio hay flores maleantes.
 Las macetas son botes,
 los hombres son tigres,
 los niños son viejos,
 los gatos se comen,
 las mondas también.
 Los huérfanos huelen a madre.
 Los pobres a humo.
 Los ricos a brea.

(OI, 61)

The verses reveal the whimsy beneath Fuertes' poetic vision. Objects capable of speech, tiger-men, cats that eat each other (if not themselves), exemplify the magical metamorphoses and inversions that are commonplace in Fuertes' world.⁹ The very simplicity of the verses, however, belies the harshness of social realities like the distinctions between rich and poor.¹⁰ "Examen de preuniversity" combines a parody of bureaucratic language with a similarly mordant black humor:

⁹ Benitez sees the bestiary in Fuertes' poetry as a modern-day counterpart of traditional altarpieces. In "Weaving the World . . .," I study the presence of animals, machines, and other objects.

¹⁰ Rogers is concerned with the relationship between Fuertes' "comic spirit" and her social consciousness. Persin also sees humor as the way Fuertes awakens the readers to deeper levels of meaning.

- 1.^o—¿Hasta cuánto y hasta cuándo puede durar
un sufrimiento?
- 2.^o—¿Qué largura de meses años siglos puede
tener un dolor?
- 3.^o—¿Cuántos grados bajo cero de desamor aguanta un ser
humano?
- 4.^o—¿Si usted es amorlógrafo, explique cómo
reaccionaría ante el desvío de
quien ama.
- 5.^o—El quinto es no matar. ¿Qué haría usted
con usted en la anterior
circunstancia?

(OI, 274)

Parodying the language of official documents or of university examinations, Fuertes creates a feeling of tension in her readers.¹¹ Her demanding tone requires specific answers to precisely-worded questions (“¿Hasta cuánto y hasta cuándo . . . ?”, “¿Cuántos grados bajo cero . . . ?”, etc.) and commands (“explique cómo”). The pompous vocabulary (“preunimentario,” “amorgógrafo”) and peremptory tone are those commonly discerned in “officialese” to reinforce the distinctions between the powerful and the powerless. Yet the seeming rationality of the inquiries, together with an inquisitorial undercurrent, is deflated by absurdity and exaggeration. Suffering, after all, cannot be calculated. Pain can last as little as a month, as long as centuries. The loss of love is surely not measurable by any known barometer. The poet thus challenges us to ponder questions of a very serious nature, but questions that are ultimately unanswerable. This realization leaves us ill at ease, perhaps with a momentary sense of helplessness in the face of an inexplicable human destiny. At the same time, the very futility of the exercise contains a double-edged irony: pain, failed love, even death await the powerful and the powerless alike—those in command of the hierarchy as well as those who are at its mercy. Like the medieval parodist, Gloria Fuertes sees the world in all its relativity, and employs laughter for all its paradoxical but democratic effects, its “gay, triumphant, . . . mocking, deriding” aspects (Bakhtin, 11-12).

“Este libro” is another carnivalesque parody of the kind of official mentality that defines the world according to inflexible criteria

¹¹ Hutcheon provides an illuminating discussion of parody as a modern art form.

and cements its inhabitants into rigid categories. In this poem, the second piece in *Sola en la sala*, Fuertes adopts both the tone and the hyperbolic language of medieval street cries:

Este libro
es el más serio
más alegre
más triste
más acertado
más despiste
más raro
más normal
más directo
más indirecto
más clásico
más futurista
más oscuro
más realista
más cuerdo
más demente
más libro
más conveniente
de todo el siglo XX

(OI, 294)

Hyperbole and enumeration are tools for poking fun at absolutist ways of thinking. The contradictory nature of the list suggests the impossibility of formulating satisfactory definitions of Fuertes' book and, by extension, the fruitlessness of encapsulating reality within restrictive labels. The reality embodied in Fuertes' book is not static; rather, it is continually changing and growing, because the world it represents is the carnival world of becoming (Bakhtin, 181-82).

In her role of street hawker, Gloria Fuertes is faithful to the popular-festive tradition of uniting the dualities of praise and abuse (Bakhtin, 160-66). Her book, she boasts, is an exemplar of virtues, a compendium of imperfections. Offering her book as a saleable commodity reduces poetry to the level of the base and the crass; paradoxically, though, the superlatives glorify and raise poetry to the status of Platonic ideal: "Este libro / es el . . . / más libro / . . de todo el siglo XX" (Debicki, 83).

The popular dichotomies of reverence and subversion, apparent in "Este libro," occur repeatedly throughout Fuertes' work.

Prayers represent the poet's reverence for and trust in God, "Poderoso Quienseas" (OI, 266), "Torero nuestro de cada día" (OI, 210). Hers is a distinctly human God who doubts, is lonely, and suffers; unlike Unamuno's, however, Fuertes's God "no es problema" (OI, 220). She cannot help but question the elusiveness of her God: "La Alegría estudié por entenderte / e inventas otro idioma / de repente" (OI, 209), but never His (or Her) wisdom: "Porque El lo sabe todo de antemano, / El o ELLA, quien sea, se lo sabe" (OI, 207). In her own delightful turn on the Lord's Prayer (Debicki, 84-5), Fuertes contemplates the presence of God in even the humblest of quarters:

Que estás en la tierra Padre nuestro,
 que te siento en la púa del pino,
 en el torso azul del obrero,
 en la niña que borda curvada
 la espalda mezclando el hilo en el dedo.
 Padre nuestro que estás en la tierra,
 en el surco,
 en el huerto,
 en la mina,
 en el puerto,
 en el cine,
 en el vino,
 en la casa del médico.

...

Padre nuestro que sí que te vemos,
 los que luego te hemos de ver,
 donde sea, o ahí en el cielo.

(OI, 47-48)

Poetry itself is, for Gloria Fuertes, a form of prayer; alternately, prayers inspire Fuertes to poetry. Among her prayers are numbered hymns of praise: "¡Bendito tú, / ser luciente, / . . . / ¡Bendecido sea quien deja lo que ama por iluminar" (OI, 183-84). She praises the name of God for bestowing upon her "tantos zarpazos como besos" (HG, 94). Even her "Brindis cotidiano" becomes a kind of laud not only to universal peace and joy but to rice and lentils on the tables of all human beings (HG, 98). "Angelus" represents a secularized renewal of the midday prayer in which the poet recites "medio rosario / de poesía y pavor" to be delivered from the weariness of the workaday world (HG, 358). In "Oración para altas horas de la madrugada," Fuertes adopts a typically Fran-

ciscan tone of humility to express oneness with lowly objects but also harmony with the divine. She implores her broom, "Fray Escoba," to sweep away the bad and leave her with the good and at the same time recognizes Christ as a fellow poet: "junta nuestras manos / así como tú y yo / juntamos nuestros versos" (HG, 142-43). "Letanía de los montes de la vida," Gloria Fuertes' version of the Sermon on the Mount, celebrates the paradoxical richness of life and beatifies all those to whom she would extend her ample embrace:

Dichosos los blancos,
 porque ellos son reyes de la sonrisa.
 Dichosos los negros,
 porque ellos tocarán la concertina.
 Dichosos los niños,
 semillas inocentes.
 Dichosos los locos,
 porque ellos beben hilo.

(OI, 73)

Letters, a medium historically favored by women writers, afford the poet a way to approach familiarly her heavenly intercessors. Parodying the formulas that are part of the language of letters, she writes this message:

Muy Señor mío:

. . .

Deseo que al recibo de estas líneas
 se encuentre bien en compañía de su Sagrada Familia
 y demás Santos de la Corte Celestial.
 Servidora está bien,
 como Usted bien sabe . . .

(OI, 287-8)

Fuertes employs the prosaic conventions of commercial correspondence in an ironic way, in order to transform empty language into newly meaningful expression (Mandlove, 12-13). In like fashion, another missive posted to "Querido Juanito" echoes the poetry of San Juan de la Cruz, but confers upon the language of mysticism unequivocally earthly dimensions:

Y si salgo de vuelo
 o me voy por las ramas,
 sólo es para dar a la Caza caza,

me remonto y bajo rauda,
 porque aún es la tierra mi sitio,
 mientras que me quede un ala.

(OI, 221)

The Virgin Mary, "Neustra señora de la mayor soledad," is the object of Fuertes' most profound compassion because "vuestro Hijo / me caía bien" (OI, 361). She impatiently (and irreverently) invokes the names of lesser-known saints (Santa Paulina, San Filemón, San Florilipo) to beg deliverance from the promises and hopes of an elusive tomorrow—"Mañana mañana / —ipor algo se escribe con eñe de coño!" (OI, 234). Typically, her prayerful wish is enlivened by the language of irreverence.

In echo of the carnivalesque tradition, Fuertes counterposes these prayers, litanies, and other contemplative verses against poems written in a subversive mode. Indeed, it is when her voice is most vehemently abusive that her laughing presence is most striking because it is then that she is at her most liberated. Poems like "A la muerte" and "Bomba," diatribes reminiscent of popular parodical forms, summon all the recourses of the ancient grotesque esthetic:

Muerte: idioma inédito,
 absurdo, intraducible,
 palo en la cresta
 diplodocus, graja,
 quitameriendas,
 turmis,
 chupa sangre,
 come colores,
 lava.
 Ubre de palidez,
 leche de cara,
 solapada sin sol,
 ihipocritilla!
 —sabes lo de después
 y no lo dices—,
 haces más daño al vivo que al que matas,
 llevándote los vivos de los muertos. . . .

(OI, 143)

Bomba,
 estertor,
 vergüenza;

monstruo de medusa cruzada con sabio,
 parida de un hombre
 sin pecho, anormal.
 Fotógrafa fofa,
 la Muerte en cadena "retrata" al minuto,
 de cuerpo presente
 saca el primer plano.

...

Coliflor venenosa
 calcinado de cólera,
 flatulenta de cal,
 garrafa del diablo,
 corcho, de una fétida
 botella de champán.
 Pareces un cerebro
 con una sola idea
 que radia desde arriba.
 "ODIAR ODIAR ODIAR"
 Nuevo agujón que flota
 y clava desde el aire.

...

¡Maldita sí maldita bomba de nuevo tipo
 y por siempre maldita tu raza y tu historial!

(OI, 268-69)

Both poems revive the medieval tradition of oaths and curses, in a hyperventilated tone based on exaggeration, exclamation, and enumeration. The poet's voice resonates with venom against the horrors inflicted by Death and the bomb. Still, the poems are not devoid of humor, humor that stems from the deliberately offensive nature of some of the images and from the anachronistic collision of dinosaurs and the so-called advances of the nuclear age. Both poems borrow from the medieval arsenal: death is envisioned as an allegorical personage; plant and animal kingdoms are invaded to ground the poems in the natural world and thus to remind us of nature's cycle of death and regeneration.

Gloria Fuertes is drawn to expressions of abuse and subversion, is partial to the language of irreverence and impropriety outlawed by poetic canons. In one short poem, for example, she recounts the misadventures of a blind goat, encumbered by grotesquely-proportioned udders, that eats paper and "veía con el ojo del ano" (HG, 95). Elsewhere, she admits to an allergic reaction to prudes with delicate handwriting "como dos gadadas de mosca en el 'te

amo' " (OI, 272). She laments that her verses "hayan salido a su puta madre" (OI, 293). And a sense of futility and defeat informs this shock of recognition: "Es una mierda / volver a tener luz y ver tan claro, / que soy un nombre más, / en el amado" (HG, 158). This is the way she justifies her indecorous language:

... Si a veces hablo mal,
 es porque me dejan
 como un mueble,
 como una mesa cojitranca me dejan,
 sin equilibrio
 me tambaleo,
 y me tengo que calzar con un taco
 ¡Coño!
 Aunque se horroricen los eruditos
 ¡Leche!

(HG, 147-8)

Such "unpoetic" language is meant to shock, most certainly; it also captures the colors of popular speech so prized by the poet. Like a child tasting forbidden pleasures, Gloria Fuertes delights in forbidden language as a way both of transgressing the barriers imposed on women's discourse and of vaulting the limits of poetic reality. Again, as in medieval and Renaissance grotesque literature, vulgarisms and profanities enable the poet to undermine conventional thinking, to liberate language from the strictures of dogma, and to do so in a laughing spirit (Bakhtin, 27-8).

Finally, Gloria Fuertes avails herself of the curative aspects of laughter and poetry to mediate between the forces of life and death. Poetry, after all, "es un milagro . . . es un misterio" (OI, 53) that heals souls wounded by the pain of lovelessness and staves off the inevitable approach of death. "Y canto y canto y me canto / . . . / Y ya no tenéis congoja, / y ya no tenéis jaqueca" (HG, 264). The poet's task is to "vendar corazones y escribir el poema / que a todos nos contagie" (OI, 45). To the emotional scrapes incurred in the name of love, she tenderly applies "la pomada necesaria o inútil / de mi poema" (HG, 362). She has spent half a lifetime, she notes, "destristeando a este hospital de locos" and not without signs of contagion (HG, 263). Her poetry beckons us to relieve our hunger: "toma el pecho, / el mío, que te doy para que vivas" (OI, 325). In "Penúltima canción de Don Simón," a play of words revolving around the meanings of "coma" juxtaposes physical suffering and the tools of the writer's trade. The poet thus not only

draws attention to the notion of illness as an inspiration for woman's art but plies her readers with the nutritive qualities of poetry:

Ahora que estoy a punto
antes de entrar en coma,
coma
estos boquerones que he frito,
entre dolor y dolor,
lea estos papeles que he escrito,
entre dolor y dolor.
Ahora que estoy a punto
antes de entrar en coma,
diga que me perdona
(como perdono yo
a toda la persona
que a mí me apaleó).
Ahora que estoy a punto
antes de estar en coma.

(HG, 251)

Above all, Gloria Fuertes aspires to be “una aspirina inmensa / —que quien me cate se cure—” (OI, 270). She perceives of her chosen profession as one of the healing arts and, in fact, its restorative qualities endow poetry with a singular grace:

Mi verso tiene vocación de curandero,
ponle donde te duela,
si te mejora,
será poesía de verdad.

(HG, 228)

The ancient carnival tradition is Gloria Fuertes' happy inheritance. As such, her work bears the joyous stamp of much of popular recreational literature, which she reinvents with her own womanly imagination. Laden with disease, loneliness, and other forms of human suffering, her verses are also rich with celebratory rituals and festive activities. Poetry is, for her, a way of marking each phase in the cycle of life and death. She enters the merriment with a laughing heart to free her verses from fear and constraint, to restore her world from pain and death.¹²

¹² The idea for a study of Gloria Fuertes' poetry in light of the work of Mikhail Bakhtin was suggested by Professor Mary Lee Bretz of Rutgers University. I gratefully acknowledge that suggestion.

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