FROM TABOOS TO TRANSGRESSIONS: TEXTUAL STRATEGIES IN WOMAN-AUTHORED SPANISH EROTIC FICTION

The two decades following the end of the Franco régime, marked by the transition to democracy, have seen astonishing social, legal, political, and moral upheavals in Spanish society. It is no exaggeration to say that in the space of a single generation, Spain has progressed from a Catholic, parochial, politically and sexually repressive culture to one that is largely secular, European, and politically and sexually tolerant. Given the Francoist concern with specially policing the conduct of women in order to ensure conformity with the ideals of wifely duty or spinsterly chastity, it is not surprising that the impact of these changes on women should be particularly pronounced as women's participation in political and cultural institutions increased significantly.[1] The field of literature was not exempt from the sudden influx of women, to such an extent that a boom in women's writing in the 1980s has been noted by at least one critic (Brooksbank Jones, p. 170).

A second manifestation of Spain's transition to democracy was the immediate burgeoning of another type of literature that explicitly calls itself erotic. The 'desmadre sexual' of the late 1970s and early 1980s inundated the Spanish market with explicit sexual images, either imported or, increasingly, home-grown, and these visual images quickly found their reflection in print. Interestingly, however, and presumably owing to its association with the post-Franco project of modernization and secularization, this literature has enjoyed a relatively high degree of respectability in Spain: proponents include prestigious authors (for example, Camilo José Cela), reputable publishing-houses (the Barcelona-based Tusquets, which publishes the 'Sonrisa vertical' series, and Madrid's Temas de hoy, which has a special Biblioteca erótica series), and even the Instituto de la Mujer (which, in conjunction with the publishers Castalia, published the collection of short stories edited by Carmen Estévez discussed below).

Inevitably, perhaps, these two growing bodies of literature written by women and erotic literature converged, between the mid-1980s and the early 1990s, with the publication of a small corpus of works of erotic fiction written by women.[2] The initial critical perception underlined their grounding in (and contribution to) Spain's liberalization. For example, in her introduction to *Relatos eróticos*, Carmen Estévez cites as reasons for the relative lack of erotic literature in Spain 'el tradicional papel que España ha representado como salvaguardadora de la moral católica' and the 'peso específico de la Iglesia' (p. 10), and proposes that the fact that erotic literature is now so visible in Spain 'puede ser buen[o] para la sociedad, [ya que] indica que

[1] See Anny Brooksbank Jones, *Women in Contemporary Spain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), for an excellent account of these changes.

[2] These include three novels and five collections of short stories (many of which include the same short stories). The novels, all published in the Sonrisa vertical 'erotic collection' series, ed. by Luis G. Berlanga, are: Susana Constante, *La educación sentimental de la señorita Sonia* (Barcelona: Tusquets, 1979); Almudena Grandes, *Las edades de Lulú* (Barcelona: Tusquets, 1989); Isabel Franc, *Entre todas las mujeres* (Barcelona: Tusquets, 1992). The anthologies include Mercedes Abad, *Ligeros libertinajes sabáticos* (Barcelona: Tusquets, 1986); *Cuentos eróticos españoles, con una introducción de Laura Freixas* (Barcelona: Grijalbo Mondadori, 1988; republished 1996 as *Cuentos eróticos*); *Relatos eróticos*, ed. by Carmen Estévez (Madrid: Castalia/Instituto de la Mujer, 1990); Ana Rossetti, *Alevosías* (Barcelona: Tusquets, 1991); *Verte desnudo*, ed. by Lourdes Ortiz (Madrid: Temas de hoy, 1992).

la tolerancia y el grado de libertad son más altos' (p. 11). Likewise, Concha Alborg is able to give a feminist interpretation to several of the short stories in *Alevosías*.[3] Nevertheless, this critical strain, which largely celebrates woman-authored erotica, also notes in passing its darker side, specifically its potential to disturb and its participation in the commercialization and commodification of sex (not least in terms of publishing practices). Two recent studies have focused on this darker side, and find it so predominant that it overwhelms any claim to moral or political virtue. James Mandrell has examined in detail Mercedes Abad's 1986 collection, *Ligeros libertinajes sabáticos* and concluded somewhat regretfully that 'despite being written by a woman, the volume supports and reinforces traditional male fantasies about women, and nothing with respect to the linguistic and narrative female subjectivity in the individual stories indicates otherwise'.[4] Judith Drinkwater ranges more widely in her examination of the Abad, Rossetti, Estévez, and Ortiz collections of short stories, yet comes to the same pessimistic conclusion:

> There is [. . .] no attempt to convey through these stories any explicit stance on the position of women in Spain or in general, and there is certainly no attempt to draw out the real social implications of the child abuse, violence against women (and men), exhibitionism, and so forth, which is the subject matter of some of these tales.[5]

All these attempts to place woman-authored erotic fiction in its socio-political and ethico-moral contexts are valid and have provided sound approaches to the works in question. However, I should like to propose that the real interest that this corpus of works holds is rather different, in that it represents an almost textbook opportunity to examine those psychological and practical difficulties women encounter when they attempt to take up the pen, obstacles that have been explored exhaustively in second-wave feminist literary criticism. This is true because the erotic can be seen to represent the ultimate frontier for women authors, and as such will not only exemplify but exaggerate the obstacles that women writers have had to overcome. Thus, as a taboo literature in itself, it both encodes and exaggerates the prohibition against women taking up the pen in the first place. Whereas Western literature in general has depended on a male subjectivity and a female objectivity, this becomes an integral function of eroticism and pornography.[6] Moreover, if women have found it difficult to find a language appropriate to their experience, one devoid of what is commonly referred to as phallogocentrism, how much more difficult must it be to write in a genre that depicts activities that, traditionally at least, no decent woman should know about, let alone be able to name? Finally, the strongly taboo nature of the subject-matter has resulted not only in a singular lack of a tradition of women as writers of erotica but also in a parallel lack of woman as readers of erotica: if, as a woman, you do manage to take up the pen, whom are you writing erotica for? Although it is satisfying, if somewhat facile, to speculate on the ways in which the corpus exemplifies the psychological difficulties identified by feminist critics (for example, the effects of the literal and figurative death of the patriarch

[3] Concha Alborg, 'Ana Rossetti y el relato erótico', *Hispanic Journal*, 15 (1994), 369–80.

[4] James Mandrell, 'Mercedes Abad and *La Sonrisa Vertical:* Erotica and Pornography in Post-Franco Spain', *Letras peninsulares*, 6 (1993–94), 277–301 (p. 292).

[5] Judith Drinkwater, '"Esta cárcel de amor": Erotic Fiction by Women in Spain in the 1980s and 1990s', *Letras femeninas*, 21 (1995), 97–111 (p. 103).

[6] See Mandrell, p. 281, who quotes Susan Gubar: 'It is a gender-specific genre produced primarily by men and for men but focused obsessively on the female body.'

and patriarchal discourse), I intend to concentrate on two strategies women writers have employed to overcome the textual problems outlined above. Specifically, I shall concentrate on metaphor and irony, and look at their function in the introductory short story in two of the collections mentioned above, *Alevosías* and *Relatos eróticos*. These two short stories, 'Del diablo y sus hazañas' and 'Ligeros libertinajes sabáticos', have been chosen because their position at the beginning of their collections gives them particular importance, in that they are given the task of breaking through the taboos associated with woman-authored erotica, presumably in a way that creates a sympathetic readership where none has previously existed.

The use of these two textual strategies is hardly surprising, given that even on the most superficial level both metaphor and irony seem to undermine the transparency of literal meaning and thus can be read as subversive and transgressive strategies: a woman wishing to write about a taboo subject may well find subversion necessary and unavoidable.[7] Moreover, the function of metaphor in poetry has traditionally been to name the unnamable, which will obviously be a useful technique for a woman writing about body parts and physical processes that are usually named by empty euphemism, if at all. Irony, on the other hand, is understood by most people to have some sort of criticizing function,[8] which will obviously prove to be a useful tool for a woman trying to reclaim her body and sexuality from the male gaze. However, metaphor and irony have more subtle points in common that equally point to their centrality as textual strategies in woman-authored erotic fiction. The first of these is that their very non-literalness (or para-literalness) spotlights the receptor as well as the author. In other words, since neither metaphoric nor ironic utterances can be successfully decoded as simple, transparent reflections of reality, the reader is called upon to take a more active role in the assignation of meaning. In so far as woman-authored erotic fiction coincides with feminism, the political import of this relinquishing of authorial control cannot be overlooked.[9] Secondly, successful ironic and metaphoric utterances must be both idiosyncratic and universal. They must be the former in order to retain the vitality, novelty, and creativity that distinguish them from 'dead' metaphors, clichés, puns, and other similar tropes, yet they must have an element of universality to be understood. In other words, irony and metaphor must negotiate the space between the personal and creative level of discourse and the public and conventional level. Again, in so far as women writing erotic fiction participate in a feminist agenda, this necessary marriage of the personal or private and the public is politically and aesthetically significant.

A third point of contact is that both metaphor and irony inherently and necessarily destabilize meaning by depending for their success on the holding together of at least two contexts or two voices. Although this will be discussed more fully below, essentially our ability to understand these tropes depends on our recognizing and appreciating an additional context or voice beyond that presented at the superficial level of the text. For women writing in a patriarchal system that

[7] See, for example, Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik, *Landscapes of Desire: Metaphors in Modern Women's Fiction* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), for an exploration of metaphor in this sense.

[8] Or 'edge', in Linda Hutcheon's terminology (*Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (London: Routledge, 1994)).

[9] The political nature of woman-authored erotic fiction is generally controversial, although the feminism of both authors to be discussed here is not disputed. See particularly Carmen Estévez's introduction to *Relatos eróticos*, which clearly places the short stories in a liberal, broadly feminist social context.

has traditionally decreed that only the male voice should be heard and only the male-relevant meanings construed, metaphor and irony not only create textual space but question the philosophical basis of patriarchal univocality.

Fourthly, metaphor and irony are both dependent on the receptor being an initiate or a member of the in-group. In fact, this requirement is so strong that non-initiates (people who fail to 'understand' the poetry or who do not perceive the irony) often feel their self-worth undermined or find themselves ostracized from a group. The importance of this factor will be explored in more detail below, although here it suffices to say that this sense of belonging to a group may well overcome the embarrassment factor for both writer and reader. Related to this feature, however, is the fact that both irony and metaphor are echoic and hence refer to previous experience. Thus, an author can use her text to create first a shared textual experience, then to establish ironic and metaphoric associations with that experience, and from there to create her group of initiates. Any tradition of women writing and reading erotica, especially in Spain, is very scanty, so this ability of metaphor and irony to 'create' an audience becomes highly significant. Finally, it seems that metaphor and irony are both processed in a similar, Gestalt way. In other words, and especially on first reading, the impact of irony and metaphor are perceived rather than reasoned, the associations and connotations merged rather than disaggregated, and the trope is understood as a whole that is more than merely the sum of its parts.[10] It may be that the intuitive rather than rational skills required to process metaphor and irony are either politically more attractive to women authors or, as Babuts argues, physiologically more suited to both women authors and readers.[11]

Having proposed, albeit briefly, the theoretical parameters that suggest that metaphor and irony might be particularly suited to woman-authored erotic fiction, I proceed to an examination of how these tropes are employed in practice, beginning with metaphor. The definitions and descriptions of metaphor vary according to the commentator, and it is beyond the scope of this article to review the extensive literature on the subject.[12] However, it is possible to arrive at a working understanding of metaphor by considering it as both a conceptual process through which we grasp abstract or complex semantic domains by conceiving of them in terms of simpler, concrete ones, and as a poetic process in which terms or references appropriate to one context are employed intentionally in an alien or unexpected one. In both senses, the process of decoding the metaphor (and hence of creating meaning) encourages us to look for the salient features that the two concepts/contexts have in common. To use an example from Lakoff and Johnson, if we

[10] In the words of Nicolae Babuts, *The Dynamics of the Metaphoric Field: A Cognitive View of Literature* (Newark, NJ: University of Delaware Press, 1992), 'the whole proves inherent and immanent in the parts' (p. 108).

[11] Babuts argues that the involuntary recall process so fundamental to understanding metaphor is centred in the right half of the brain (p. 62).

[12] The classic twentieth-century commentators are I. A. Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (London: Oxford University Press, 1936); Max Black, *Models and Metaphors* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1962); Max Black, *Perplexities* (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 1990); Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, trans. by Robert Czerny (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978); George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); George Lakoff and Mark Turner, *More than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989). Good summaries of approaches to poetic metaphor can be found in Alan Singer, *A Metaphorics of Fiction: Discontinuity and Discourse in the Modern Novel* (Tallahassee: University Presses of Florida, 1983), and Roger M. White, *The Structure of Metaphor: The Way the Language of Metaphor Works* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

conceive of work as a commodity or substance (which can be measured, sold, bought, withheld, and so on), we arrive at an understanding of work that is very different from one that would be expressed by thinking of work as food (something to be enjoyed, used up, and that nourishes). Likewise in poetry: if Joan's teeth are described as pearls, we shall think of them as white and opalescent, but also as luxurious, jewel-like, and probably evenly shaped and close together. If they are described as gravestones, the salient features of colour and opalescence are still there, but others such as crooked, chipped, and perhaps death and decay replace the more positive features associated with pearls.

This understanding of metaphor as process rather than stasis and as a more-or-less fluid interplay of contextually embedded salient features is particularly relevant for an analysis of the first story in Ana Rossetti's *Alevosías*, 'Del diablo y sus hazañas'. The story, which narrates the sexual awakenings of a young boy, Bubi, begins with his literal awakening as his train pulls into the station, and with his recollection of an episode in which he crept into his nanny's bed at siesta-time in order to suck her breast. As a result of this shocking indiscretion in a young boy, Bubi is being sent with his nanny, Nela, to live with his aunt Alicia, her husband, and their son, Fred. Bubi's second sexual adventure is when Fred dresses him up in Nela's still-unfinished wedding dress, whose bodice he fills out with a cushion. Fred compliments Bubi on his 'buenas tetas', and threatens 'te las voy a comer' (Rossetti, p. 20). When Fred leaves the room, Bubi imagines himself as Nela, and imagines Fred sucking his nipples. He then begins to fondle his own nipples, imagining that it is Fred who is fondling him, and this arouses him further and he touches his penis. At this point his uncle interrupts him. Later at dinner, he watches his aunt Alicia eating strawberries, in an extended erotic sequence narrated by Bubi. When he is put to bed, a sweet pea blossom falls onto his bed and he uses it to fondle his nipples, imagining this time that it is Aunt Alicia. As the sweet pea sucks his nipples, he inserts his finger into his anus, and then, with the other hand, takes his penis. In the middle of this masturbation he hears someone approaching and ejaculates into a basin of holy water. The final erotic scene takes place on the night after Nela's wedding in the garden. Bubi finds Fred asleep in the gazebo. In the light of a flashlight he sees Fred's mouth (like a sweet pea, red as a strawberry), but then the flashlight moves lower to discover Fred's penis. In order to force the devil out of Fred, Bubi takes hold of Fred's penis and tries to rub the devil out. When this does not work, Bubi decides to suck the devil out and Fred eventually ejaculates into Bubi's mouth. Afterwards, Fred kisses Bubi, mingling semen and saliva, and Bubi realizes that Fred loves him.

Bubi's discovery not only of his own sexual desires and pleasures but of the world as an erotic place is mirrored by a similar awakening on the part of the reader, who is inducted into Rossetti's world of eroticism through this first story in the collection. Bubi explores the mystery, first of another's body (Nela's), and then of his own. Like a genuine explorer, he uses the known to identify and name the unknown. Thus, the first thing he sees as he struggles to open his eyes on the train are 'dos budines de gelatina tambaleándose' (p. 11). But this identification is rejected immediately: 'Pero no eran budines: eran dos medusas gigantes . . . o dos globos llenos de agua.' The three metaphors focus on shared attributes of shape (dome or sphere), colour (pale, translucent), and consistency (quivering, non-solid), and it is through these shared attributes that Bubi finally arrives at the correct identification: what he sees

are 'los pechos de Nela saltando con el traqueteo del tren' (p. 22). In these first words of the story Rossetti neatly solves one of the central dilemmas of the erotic genre: the lack of a non-derogatory, non-medical, unembarrassing, and non-mocking vocabulary for describing female erogenous zones. By the time the reader (and Bubi) reach the word 'pechos', it has become gently and specifically sensualized through associations with food and toys, and by focusing of the reader's attention on certain attributes. This task of re-eroticizing a limited vocabulary continues with Bubi's innocent, child-like confusion between Nela's 'culo de delante' and her 'culo de detrás' (p. 22), in which the similarities of shape, colour, and consistency permit an identification of breast and buttocks. The conceptualizing of one erogenous zone in terms of the other is heightened by Bubi's naively logical observation that both have a 'raja' (p. 15), and it is his own 'raja' with its 'agujero' (p. 26) that Bubi's hand finds as his other hand caresses his nipples with a sweet-pea. When his masturbation in this scene leads him to take hold of his penis, he sees that it is 'partido por la mitad, con un boquete en medio de la raja'. The focusing on salient attributes thus encourages a conceptualization of breast in terms of buttocks and of penis in terms of buttocks. This has the effect of reconstructing these erogenous zones in terms of their similarities rather than in terms of their differences. But this is not a mere conceptual game: crucially, the ownership and gender identity of breast and buttocks varies between Nela and Bubi, and hence the dividing lines between assigned 'male' and 'female' erogenous zones are blurred.

The function of metaphor in creating an erotic vocabulary extends beyond the 'renaming of parts'. As has been pointed out with regard to her poetry, Rossetti commands a rich vocabulary of eroticism owing much to traditions such as Siglo de Oro poetry and Christian imagery.[13] However, although this richness can be considered, in Linda Gould Levine's terms, a 'sumptuous feast of erotic dishes', it can also be denigrated as a typical female attempt to write about sex, especially in its emphasis on flower and food metaphors.[14] Yet in this short story there is an important glimpse of what might be termed a metaphor strategy: a planned accumulation of certain types of metaphors in the service of an aesthetic, artistic, and pragmatic programme. This is most elegantly demonstrated in the contiguous scenes in which Bubi watches his aunt eat strawberries and then masturbates in bed with a sweet-pea blossom. The erotic nature of the first of these scenes is evident in the deliberately slow pace of the narrative as Bubi watches Aunt Alicia eat a strawberry, and in the choice of vocabulary with sexual meanings or connotations ('adentraba', 'agujero', 'vaselina'):

> Los labios se apretaron a su forma puntiaguda [de la fresa] conforme se le adentraba, primero muy poquito, sin dejarle cabida siquiera, pero después el agujero de su boca se abrió, resbalándose por todo alrededor como si fuesen de vaselina, y se cerró de golpe

[13] See, for example, Sharon Keefe Ugalde, 'Erotismo y revisionismo en la poesía de Ana Rossetti', *Siglo XX/20th Century*, 7 (1989–90), 24–28; Carmela Ferradáns, 'La (re)velación del significante: erótica textual y retórica barroca en "Calvin Klein, Underdrawers" de Ana Rossetti', *Monographic Review/Revista Monográfica*, 6 (1990), 183–91; Mirella Servodidio, 'Ana Rossetti's Double-Voiced Discourse of Desire', *Revista Hispánica Moderna*, 45 (1992), 318–22; Tina Escaja, 'Transgresión poética. Transgresión erótica. Sobre los ángeles terrenales en el *Devocionario* de Ana Rossetti', *Anales de Literature Española Contemporánea*, 20 (1995), 85–100.

[14] 'Resorting at times to a more traditional imagery — "la metáfora fruto-floral" that Almudena Grandes decries as monotonously characteristic of female erotic writing and that Wittig compares to a "litany" — Rossetti offers the reader a sumptuous feast of erotic dishes' (Linda Gould Levine, 'The Female Body as Palimpsest in the Works of Carmen Gómez-Ojea, Paloma Díaz-Mas, and Ana Rossetti', *Indiana Journal of Hispanic Literature*, 2 (1993), 181–203 (p. 195)).

cortándole el paso a los ricitos alrededor que guiaba con los dedos. Y los labios se juntaron sobre la carne de la fresa como se juntan los bordes de un hoyo en las arenas movedizas. (p. 23)

However, the eroticism of this core scene is more powerful still because the reader comes to it sensitized to certain elements through a reading of the story thus far. The process of sensitization takes place through a series of earlier scenes in which the key element is colour: specifically, red and white. The reader has first encountered the interplay of red and white in the very first paragraph, in which the whiteness (or at least paleness) of Nela's breast is alluded to metaphorically through the 'budines' and 'medusas', and, five lines later, in Bubi's observation: 'Y ya podía ver claramente los pechos de Nela y la carne roja de su escote y el empiece de la raja honda en medio' (p. 11). The association is repeated when Bubi bares the sleeping Nela's breasts and discovers that 'la carne ya no era roja sino blanca' (p. 15). Red/white imagery is repeated when Bubi meets his aunt and 'el templete rosa de su pamela', and strengthened immediately afterwards in this description of her bending over to put him down: 'Tía Alicia ya había replegado la rueda de fresa sobre el merengue de la enagua' (p. 17). In this image, the features red and white are implicitly identified as salient features of food as well as flesh as the reader's sensitivity is deepened. The next depiction of red and white, however, shocks through contrast: in a brief intercalated memory scene, Bubi recalls Nela's anger at finding him in her bed: 'Nela me estuvo pegando hasta que mi nariz le salpicó el camisón con lunares de sangre y yo me desplomé. Porque la sangre, al limpiarme del olor asfixiante de su carne dormida, cortó los hilos de la tentación' (p. 18). Here, the red/white contrast is portrayed in a context familiar to all women: the flecks of red blood against (white) inner garments. The implicit association with menstruation is heightened by the reference to the cleansing power of blood, echoing the folk belief (at least amongst women) that menstruation in some way has this function. This powerful image of red against white, with its connotations of femaleness, is suspended in the reader's mind as the story proceeds to Bubi's dressing up in Nela's (white) wedding dress, but is taken up again when the arrival of dessert is described:

Así que llegaron los postres y todo se llenó de un olor muy dulce, entonces miré y eran fresas. La mesa tenía el mantel blanco con las servilletas iguales; los platos eran blancos, de loza; los cubiertos con los mangos blancos de hueso y los servilleteros de hueso también; el azucarero, la jarra, las tazas para el café, la fuente de arroz con leche y el frutero, de porcelana blanca. Sólo que, en la delgada bandeja del frutero, se erizaban, igual que en las tapias los cristales, los picos encarnados de las fresas. (p. 23)

The sense of the visual shock of red against white is echoed by the syntax, which positions the key word 'fresas' at the end of the first sentence; immediately afterwards, the narrative veers sharply away into a meticulous description of whiteness as if shying away from the violent intrusion of the red strawberries. Indeed, when the narrative returns to the strawberries, it is the erectile ('se erizaban') shape of their 'picos encarnados' that it fixes upon.

By this point, then, the stage has been set in the reader's mind for the slow erotic description, quoted above, of Alicia eating a strawberry. Red and white have gradually become eroticized through their identification as salient features of the domains of flesh (especially female flesh in the person of Nela) and of food (strawberries). The femaleness of red/white, established not only through the identification of these colours with Nela and Alicia but also through the connection

with blood, is now expanded to include maleness, as the shape of the strawberries is focused upon. The threat posed by maleness felt by women living in patriarchy is thus acknowledged yet neutralized by the connotations of femaleness held in the same image. These images with their erotic charges come together in a metaphoric description in which the sexual act is described in terms of eating. The textual strategies outlined above have not only prepared the reader to decode this metaphoric scene correctly (erotically) but also created a textual space in which the reader can acknowledge and then suspend patriarchally induced fears of maleness, of penetration, of rape in order to savour the sensuousness of sex. Rossetti then immediately moves the reader on, through a masterful sentence which simultaneously ties the food/sex metaphor to the other connotations established with the salient features red/white (the 'charco escarlata' and 'gotas rosas' echoing blood imagery), underlines the reassurance that maleness is not to be feared (Bubi ceases to be afraid of his uncle in order to concentrate on sensuousness), and shifts the erotic focus from observer to participant as Bubi describes his aroused nipples as 'fresas' and imagines his aunt licking them:

> Y yo dejé de temer al marido de tía Alicia para pensar en las fresas del frutero y en su charco escarlata y en las gotas rosas que cubrieron al azúcar de confetis y en las fresas que me habían salido y en que, si me las mojaba para que el azúcar les pegase, a lo mejor tía Alicia me las chuparía como si fuesen pastillas de goma. (p. 23)

The metaphoric process sketched above increases in poetic sophistication in the next scene, in which a sweet pea flower serves as the catalyst for masturbation:

> Pero en eso que me rodó hasta la boca algo blando y abultado haciendo así, como otra boca, y yo me destapé y vi que era un guisante de olor que se le había caído a Nela del florero. Lo estiré con los dedos y separó sus labios para que yo llegara con la punta de la lengua a tocar su fondo. La fresa en la boca de tía Alicia. Pero era la fresa la que chupaba la boca de la flor, hasta que la empapó toda. Mi lengua era una fresa brillante y fresas eran también las puntas que se me levantaron debajo del pijama. (p. 25)

The salient feature of colour, so meticulously linked with food, flesh, blood, and hence, metaphorically, female eroticism, is here not even mentioned. Rather, the text assumes that the reader will supply, from her knowledge of the world and the previous signposts in the texts, the information that sweet peas, at least in the wild, are usually varying shades of pink or red. The text is thus free to concentrate on the salient feature of shape, and hence to establish the metaphor of the sweet pea as a mouth. The mouth/sweet pea opens to accept Bubi's tongue, in a re-enactment of the strawberry-eating scene. But the reader's experience of that scene allows for the further metaphorical identification of Bubi's tongue with the strawberry that Alicia ate. As a result, Bubi's tongue, which starts the scene as the penetrator of the sweet pea, becomes instead the eaten, the consumed. The complex metaphoric associations of strawberry/sweet pea/sexual act thus lead to a rereading of sex that is far from the usual male erotic fantasies of penetration, aggression, and dominance.

The metaphors of sweet pea/mouth and tongue/strawberry are extended later in the scene. First, Bubi's finger penetrating his anus is described as 'y mi dedo empujó en el agujero como la fresa en los labios cerrados de tía Alicia' (p. 26). This evokes the slow, deliberate description of the strawberry-eating scene and as the two scenes, anal masturbation and eating strawberries, are held together in the reader's mind, the careful descriptions of the latter scene are transferred to the former. Metaphoric transference is thus used to overcome the inherent problems of the

genre alluded to earlier: the lack of an adequate naming tradition and women's consequent potential embarrassment by or resistance to an overt description of intimate erotic acts.

Finally, Bubi's anal masturbation leads to an erection. Interestingly, this is the first encounter with what would traditionally be considered the *sine qua non* of an erotic story: an erect penis. Its appearance this late in the story (about two-thirds of the way through) is due less to a desire to tease and delay gratification than to re-eroticize this key player from a female perspective. Once again, Rossetti uses metaphor to accomplish this. First, the phallus and phallocentric urges are consistently associated with the devil throughout the text, and the metaphors used to describe them are the reptile/insect metaphors of the Christian tradition.[15] Thus, Bubi's sexual urges are accompanied by the screeching of crickets and the buzzing of flies, his hands as they approach Nela's breasts are 'sapos' (p. 15), his penis is a 'serpiente' or a 'culebra' (p. 22). Through these metaphors, the association of the penis with the desirable is disrupted. Although the repulsive metaphors continue throughout the text, Rossetti introduces through the sweet pea metaphor in this scene a more positive reading of the phallus:

> Pero sentí la serpiente en mi mano y mi mano en la serpiente porque, la serpiente, era yo: el demonio se me había metido en la colita. Y mi colita estaba grande, roja y tiesa como un palo y me apuntaba. Yo miré el capirote colorado, partido por la mitad, con un boquete en medio de la raja y pensé que, si por ahí se me había metido el demonio, por ese mismo sitio se me iba a tener que salir. (p. 26)

The 'capirote colorado' clearly echoes the 'caperuzas' used to describe the sweet pea earlier in the same scene, and the 'boquete' recalls the sweet pea/mouth metaphor. A further association, reinforced by the child-like diminutive 'colita' and the previous highlighting of the colour red is, of course, with 'Caperucita roja'. These metaphoric associations together redefine the penis in terms of the stereotypically female domain of flowers and of the innocent childhood world of fairy tales, and thus rob it of its aggressive and dominating characteristics. The finishing touch is provided by the metaphoric connection between the 'culo' with its 'raja' and its 'agujero' and the penis that has the same attributes. The penis, quintessentially 'foreign' and unknowable to women (a foreignness associated in Freudian theory with deprivation) is thus described in terms of the known: it is a sweet pea, it is a 'culo', and, through the previously established metaphor of 'culo'/'pecho', it is a breast.

Metaphor, then, is a powerful strategy for overcoming the difficulties women have when both writing about and reading erotica. It provides a way of naming the inadequately named and of describing the inadequately describable. A careful accumulation of metaphors (especially taken from stereotypically female domains) and the controlled interplay of shared salient features create an 'initiated' readership who become sensitized to a particular erotic and aesthetic vocabulary (it is no coincidence that one of the characters in the following story in the collection is called Rosa). Finally, the interplay of metaphors helps a feminist project, since it

[15] Escaja notes that in Rossetti's poetry, 'la presencia del diablo supone tanto la iniciación en el erotismo como el cuestionamiento de la identidad sexual' (p. 91). In this story, as in the poetry, although the devil is clearly connected with sexual awakening and virility, the figure lacks the lyrical 'belleza' with which it is endowed in *Devocionario*.

removes the currency of erotica (breasts, the penis, the anus) from the dominating conventions of phallocentrism by allowing an alternative, gynocentric reading.

If metaphor lends itself to woman-authored erotic fiction, irony has been seen by some commentators as an essentially feminist and/or female textual strategy.[16] Irony is simplistically understood as 'saying one thing and meaning another'. Thus it is assumed that women, who exist on the margins of patriarchally controlled society and have been denied the use of their own voice, find the dual voice of irony both necessary and attractive. However, this understanding of irony as essentially dyadic is misleading in that it misses the fundamental point that irony conveys attitude. A more complete conceptualization of irony uses a triadic model in which, roughly, what is said, what is meant, and what is commented upon are held in a single trope. The decoding of irony is likewise triadic, since successful irony depends on an intention, an interpretation, and a target. The first two of these elements are usually attributed to speaker and hearer respectively, whereas the third is often personalized as 'victim'. This, of course, betrays the common assumption that the attitude conveyed by irony is most often critical. However, Hutcheon refines this notion into a scale of nine ironic functions ranging from maximal to minimal affective charge (Hutcheon, p. 47). Thus, assailing and oppositional functions offer maximal affective charge, whereas 'milder' ironic functions include distancing, ludic and reinforcing. According to this scale, the attitudes irony can convey vary from the bitingly critical to the gently mocking. The successful interpretation of irony, including the attitude conveyed, is dependent primarily on two factors. First, the hearer must recognize and decode ironic triggers, or hints in the discourse that the speaker is speaking ironically. Second, the hearer must be willing, either through prior inclination or through textual 'persuading' to adopt the attitude of the speaker: to occupy the same power relationship to the target as does the speaker. In this way, irony closes the distance between speaker and hearer (or between writer and reader) while simultaneously opening the space between these and the target. This creation of an evaluative textual space, in which the reader is distanced from and able to comment on the target, is one of the key aids that irony offers to women writing erotic fiction, as I now proceed to show.

'Ligeros libertinajes sabáticos' was first published in Mercedes Abad's 1986 collection of short stories of the same name, where, despite lending its title to the volume, it was not the first but the fifth story. James Mandrell has observed that, although the story itself is 'innocent enough', its position mid-way through the collection causes it to 'partake of and further the darker aspects of the volume as a whole' (p. 287). The decision to place the story at the beginning of *Relatos eróticos* (1990), although quite likely designed to capitalize on the reader's familiarity with Abad's earlier volume, also strips it of any associations with the frankly disturbing and frequently misogynist stories of that collection. Instead, as will be seen, its ironic humour and innocent tone create an initiated and complicit readership.

The story, which constitutes a brief description of the dinner parties given by the Johnson's each Saturday (parties that are the scene of sexual as well as culinary delights), is predicated on the tension between the pretence of ignorance or innocence and underlying knowingness. Thus, Mrs Johnson knows what her

[16] See Hutcheon, pp. 31–35, for a concise review of the importance of irony for women, exemplified by the singer Madonna.

enemies say about her parties and does not care; 'todos saben' that the Johnson children are up to sexual antics in their room but cover up the cries of pleasure by chewing more loudly, 'todos saben' that Mr Robertson awaits them in the billiard room (pp. 32–33), and so on. This dissembling, based on the discretion and tact to be found in polite society, is not in itself ironic. Rather, the irony comes with the textual clues that indicate the narrator's attitude towards this dissembling. The first of these is found in the repetition of the phrase 'deliciosas fiestas', which is introduced in the first line of the story with the adjective in postnominal position, indicating a classifying or distinguishing function ('fiesta deliciosa' (p. 31)). However, the adjective is immediately moved to prenominal position, where it denotes a characteristic believed to be inherent to the noun.[17] The prenominal position is also felt to convey a more subjective viewpoint than the postnominal, which is described by Franch and Blecua as having a 'carácter objetivo' (pp. 509–10). Thus, the narrator uses syntax to signal that 'deliciosa' will have a subjective function, especially in conjunction with 'fiesta'. As the story unfolds, 'deliciosa' is revealed to have an erotic meaning, for the parties are delightful not only in the conventional sense but also in the lascivious one. The erotic charge of the adjective coupled with the repetition of 'deliciosas fiestas' (which occurs over ten times) creates the impression of a multiplicity of voices as the narrative voice seemingly quotes an unspecified source for the description of the parties (do the guests or the hosts describe them, or is it common wisdom?). The end result for the reader is to become an initiate into a textual world in which 'deliciosa' has a sexual sense, but in which this sense is conveyed, as it were, in inverted commas as the narrative voice distances itself from its possible source.

Repetition as an ironic trigger appears in two other ways. First, on the level of syntax there is an astonishing lack of pronominal anaphora, or the substitution of a pronoun for a noun. This is even more marked, given that the rules of Spanish permit the pronoun to be deleted in most contexts. The result is a preponderance of noun phrases:

> Todos los sábados *la señora Johnson* organizaba una fiesta deliciosa.
> Los amigos *del señor y la señora Johnson* acudían gustosos a las deliciosas fiestas *que la señora Johnson* organizaba todos los sábados.
> Entre los enemigos *del señor y la señora Johnson* se rumoreaba que las fiestas *que la señora Johnson* organizaba todos los sábados eran un tanto libertinas.
> *La señora Johnson* lo sabía y sonreía divertida. (p. 31; my underlining and italics)

Normal Spanish would either entirely omit the underlined and italicized phrases or introduce anaphoric references: for example, 'Todos los sábados la señora Johnson organizaba una fiesta deliciosa [a la que] acudían gustosos todos [sus] amigos.' The accumulation of noun phrases, aided and abetted by the accumulation of clauses introduced by 'que', provides the text with a childlike narrative voice, almost like a Spanish version of 'This is the house that Jack built'. Such a voice carries strong expectations of innocence and appropriateness (certain things are appropriate for children to say, others are not), yet these expectations are undermined by the sexually explicit nature of the scenes narrated: a child stating matter-of-factly that 'La señora Adams se sacaba un canario del interior de su vulva' (p. 36) does not

[17] See Juan Alcina Franch and José Manuel Blecua, *Gramática española* (Barcelona: Ariel, 1975), who term the postnominal position 'especificativo' and the prenominal position 'explicativo'.

correspond with our view of the world. This tension between what is said and how it is said is obviously humorous, but it also allows the text to suggest a mocking attitude towards the discreet and carefully contrived 'despreocupación' of the dinner guests, as if calling the bluff of their feigned ignorance.

Repetition also serves as an ironic trigger in the almost exclusive use of the imperfect tense, which here is used in its iterative rather than its durative aspect. In other words, the erotic scenes told in such explicit detail in the story are in fact, by virtue of the frequency and predictability with which they occur, rather mundane. Again, the narrative voice is two-edged as it recounts every salacious detail while stressing the fact that these scenes occur in exactly the same way each and every Saturday night. The shock value of the sexually explicit is undermined by the stifled yawn of the narrating voice, who has seen it all before.

Thus far, the textual clues that might induce a reader to interpret the text ironically, or that at least seem to indicate a duality of voice, have been studied. Yet that other necessary ingredient, a target for the irony, has still to be identified. In the introduction to the collection Carmen Estévez seems to point to the societal virtues of discretion, elegance, and politeness as possible candidates, and according to her reading, the text is 'amable, encantador, suavemente sugeridor' (pp. 23–24). There is certainly an element of mockery of 'good taste' and social mores, for example, in the description of the widow Peterson's faithfulness to her canary:

> El hecho de que la viuda Peterson acudiera a las deliciosas fiestas de la señora Johnson en compañía de su canario se interpretaba como una señal de duelo y de respeto hacia el difunto señor Peterson.
>
> Se sabía que la viuda Peterson se había jurado no sustituir nunca al canario por ningún otro pájaro. Este era el definitivo.
>
> Todos admiraban la abnegada fidelidad de la viuda Peterson. Desde que su esposo había muerto, no había cambiado ni una sola vez de canario. (p. 32)

This transference of conventional expectations of widowhood (undying faithfulness, respect, and loyalty) to a canary is obviously meant as a gentle comment upon the vacuousness of these conventions. Clearly the social context of the story, with its English surnames, gardens, and billiard rooms, is designed to evoke in the reader a complicitous wink as these pan-European symbols of correct behaviour, discretion, and reserve, if not downright prudishness, are portrayed as concealing a mass of sexual writhing. Yet in my view (and perhaps as an indicator of the unpredictability of irony), the story has a harder edge than this. The sexual writhing itself, although embracing a liberal mixture of sexual orientations, is frustrating rather than titillating, melancholic rather than joyful. Mr Smith spends exactly five minutes fondling Mrs Ferguson's right breast, but is deeply resentful that he is never allowed even to look at her left one. Mrs Ferguson hopes to make her husband jealous but is herself riddled with guilt while he sleeps through her indiscretion with Mr Smith. Mrs Robertson eats her dessert from Mrs Smith's vagina, a process that, rarely in this story, seems to please them both. But her lesbianism is a torture to her husband, who anyway prefers to use his fourteen-centimetre penis as a billiard cue. Mr Robertson's impressive member serves as a source of shame to little Mr Adams, who cries disconsolately at the comparison. Mrs Adams, whose expectations have perhaps been lowered, finds her sexual release by putting Mrs Peterson's canary into her vagina, thereby demonstrating that whereas Mrs Peterson may well be faithful to the bird, the bird is not faithful to her. Finally, even the hosts are

frustrated: Mr Johnson is permanently impotent and the ambiguous ending hints strongly at Mrs Johnson's incestuous relationship with her children. The adventurous sex, then, does not lead to rapturous climaxes (except, perhaps, for Mrs Robertson and Mrs Smith). It does not lead to a joyful exploration of another's body or to an exciting encounter with flora and fauna (again, Mrs Robertson and Mrs Smith are the exceptions). In fact, the sexual scenes are instead portrayed as a series of mechanically enacted tableaux which by and large do not provide excitement, pleasure, or even release. They are explicit but predictable; they flaunt social conventions but only in the same, tried-and-true ways; they are, in the words of the Johnson children, boring. It would seem, then, that the target of the story's irony is not merely social mores or the pretences of polite society but eroticism itself. As Carmen Estévez points out, of the entire collection 'Ligeros libertinajes sabáticos' is the story 'en el que las palabras aluden más crudamente al sexo', in which the literal meaning of the text is most transparently erotic (p. 124). Yet there is another voice that undermines this by insisting on repetition and predictability. This other voice, far from feeling the hot breath of desire, stands at a distance from it and describes the sexual tableaux with the innocence of a child. Textual space and innocence combine to enable the reader to stand back from the forbidden fruit of eroticism and to wonder what all the fuss is about.

The importance of irony in this story is that it provides a space in which the reader can experience explicit erotic language and depictions of unconventional sex, but one that also demystifies the erotic. The reader is allowed to assume a mantle of innocence as eroticism is reconsidered, not as something compelling, powerful, overwhelming or even fetishistic but as something routine, a little comic and a little sad. The veneer of social pretence, of discretion, and probably of speculating about what really goes on behind closed doors is removed to reveal that, sexual activity, however outlandish can still be imagined and described. In this first story in the collection, the reader listens to the voice that gently debunks eroticism and turns it into something human and manageable.

I have tried to show how metaphor and irony operate, albeit in different ways, to enable both writer and reader to overcome linguistic and social difficulties inherent in erotic fiction by and for women. In focusing on two short stories, both of which occur at the beginning of a collection of woman-authored erotica, I have provided some clues as to how exactly both author and reader make use of these strategies. It may well be, as various critics have suggested, that Spanish women have yet to forge a genuine, woman-centred, joyous language capable of expressing and perhaps even celebrating women's erotic experiences. But perhaps the expectation that this might have been achieved in such a relatively short period of time and against such a strong legacy of patriarchal repression is in itself unrealistic: after all, thanks to a distinguished body of feminist criticism ranging from Virginia Woolf to Hélène Cixous, we are quite prepared to accept the theoretical difficulties involved in articulating the circumstances of women's lives in areas far less subject to taboo than sexuality and sexual activity. What I have proposed here is the possibility of reading this corpus of texts as indicative of a process through which writers and readers establish the basis for a common language, rather than as the product of the process.

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