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Morris, C. Brian

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Strategies of Self-Effacement in Three Poems by Gloria Fuertes

Although poems about poetry are not peculiar to the twentieth century, its poets have brought to the theme an anxiety and an insecurity exemplified by T. S. Eliot's mordant yet eloquent definition of language in *Four Quartets* as "shabby equipment always deteriorating / In the general mess of imprecision of feeling" (128). "Shall I say . . . ?" asked Eliot through the persona of J. Alfred Prufrock in an early poem that, as he draws attention to the dilemma of finding the right words, questions the purpose and the texture of a poem in the act of penning it. In poems from *Espadas como labios* and *Un río, un amor*, Aleixandre and Cernuda share Eliot's malaise as they target the word *palabras* for contemptuous repetition. Yet, however unsatisfactory the language they are obliged to use, the compulsion to use it is—has to be—constantly advertised, so that the product we are reading—the poem—is often a commentary on the person who produced it, on the means by which it was produced, and even offers in its title a classification that helps us to understand it. In the same way as Eliot wonders "Shall I say . . . ?" before going on to say it, Gloria Fuertes asks "¿Antipoema?" (273) before writing a poem whose status as a poem she has already questioned. Other titles categorize her poems as "Nota biográfica" (41–42), "Escrito" (77), "Ejercicio" (359), "Oraciones gramaticales" (61), and as a "Carta explicatoria de Gloria" (293–94). "Voy haciendo versos por la calle" (89), she announces in another title, and in others defines herself as a "Poeta de guardia" (167), confesses "Nací para poeta o para muerto" (160), and counsels sagely "Sale caro ser poeta" (168–69). Another title—"Telegramas de urgencia escribo" (141)—stresses through inversion the verb that documents a fundamental activity recorded in such lines as "Escribo por las noches / y voy al campo mucho" ("Nota biográfica," 41–42), "Escribo en las paredes y lloro en los armarios" ("Escrito," 77), and commemorated—in "Carta ex-

plicatoria de Gloria”—in a litany that transforms poetic vocation into an obsession, or an incurable disease:

Me pagan y escribo,
 me pegan y escribo,
 me dejan de mirar y escribo,
 veo a la persona que más quiero con otra y escribo,
 sola en la sala, llevo siglos, y escribo,
 hago reír y escribo.
 De pronto me quiere alguien y escribo.
 Me viene la indiferencia y escribo.
 Lo mismo me da todo y escribo.
 No me escriben y escribo.
 Parece que me voy a morir y escribo (293–94).

The rhyme in “explicatoria/Gloria,” the minimal variations in “Me pagan . . . me pegan,” the alliteration of “sola en la sala”: these are simple but effective signs that her tenacity in writing does not suppress the pleasure she feels in manipulating words, in transposing vowels and consonants. Her declarations “Nací para puta o payaso” (160), “Caí caí Caín” (161), “Remata la mata” (359), and “Pobres probetas si no podéis más que los poetas” (332) are part of her defense against ordinariness, are one feature of her individuality, which she advertises in a series of poems whose titles are explicitly autobiographic: “Nota biográfica,” in which she shifts quickly from “Gloria Fuertes” to “Yo”; “Nací en una buhardilla” (58–59), “Autobiografía” (71), “Carta explicatoria de Gloria,” “Nací para poeta o para muerto” (160), and one that I shall soon turn to, “Yo.” If we are familiar with the self-portraits that artists and other poets have executed, we should use caution in reading those of Fuertes, whose purpose may be to intrigue as much as to inform, to confuse as much as to communicate. There are, of course, many self-portraits that demand to be taken seriously, on their own terms. Velázquez reminds us in *Las meninas* that, were he not doing what he is doing in the painting, were he not an artist in control of his medium, there would be no painting and we would be staring at a blank canvas, in the same way as we would be staring at a series of blank pages were it not for the poets who filled them. Yet are other self-portraits less self-portraits for including elements that contribute nothing to the depiction but a great deal to its interpretation? Why, for example, did Edvard Munch paint his *Self-Portrait with Skeleton Arm* (1895)? Does the arm answer Velázquez’s confident grasp of his brush? Does it remind Munch—and us—of his own mortality in contrast to the painting that will outlive him? Was Lovis Corinth motivated by the same reason to paint his *Self-Portrait with Skeleton*? Clearly, the self-portrait

is a much more subtle and resourceful genre than it may at first promise, and we may fruitfully repeat Pascal Bonafoux's questions: "What is self-portrayal? Is the self-portrait the portrait of a mirror? Which mirror is it that poses for the portrait?" (8)

The act of writing to which Gloria Fuertes so compulsively alludes is the mirror-image of her destiny, whose difficulty—self-expression—is compounded by her sex. Her conviction—"Nací para poeta o para muerto" (160)—is threatened by those pressures that lead her to declare in "Hago versos, señores"—a poem she addresses ironically to men—that "no me gusta que me llamen poetisa" and to state in "No dejan escribir":

Sé escribir, pero en mi pueblo,
no dejan escribir a las mujeres (72).

What the poems of Fuertes demonstrate time and time again is that what she does is inseparable from what she is. The need to express herself is the need to affirm herself, yet the pressures she documents enter into her poetry in such a way that the reader has to decide whether her self-projection is self-effacement or whether her self-effacement is self-projection. Patently, the poet who is bold enough to entitle a poem "Poemo" does not bow down her head before conformity, and her statement "Soy sólo una mujer y ya es bastante" (256), which is an apparent avowal of submission, recoils on those who have defined and enforced her function and destiny as a woman.

Fuertes retaliates in the way she was born to do: through poetry; and the shorter her poems, the more trenchant and pithy are her comments on her life and on those who shape it, especially when she imposes on her poems the structural disciplines of parallelism, declension, definition, or record card. I know of few twentieth-century poets who can use tight, taut structures so productively; even Louis Aragon, that most sardonic and laconic of the French Surrealists, needed more space than Fuertes to spin his comments on language and friendship and love. Within a few lines Fuertes can take us back in time to show us woman through the ages and can lead us into the minds of men to show us how little that heritage means to them. With a few words she can underline the narrow line between life and death and the loneliness of being a woman. The title "En pocas palabras"—from *Cómo atar los bigotes del tigre* (1969)—announces the need to summarize, to encapsulate experience; the definitions that comprise it exemplify the need to order it:

DEPORTE : un hombre
 una tabla
 una ola.

MUERTE : un hombre
 unas tablas
 una ola.
 AMOR : un nombre
 una cama
 y una
 —sola—(279).

While the words that are being defined—"deporte," "muerte," "amor"—are very different, the definitions force them into line, induce a similarity that blurs the distinctions between "tabla" and "tablas," "hombre" and "nombre," "ola" and "sola." The typographical space that "sola" occupies as the last word, barricaded or quarantined by dashes specifying a pause as in a musical score, postulates loneliness as the only consequence—phonic as well as personal—of living; the sequence "ola—ola—sola" is the truth of her experience, which denies and reverses the festive, zestful message explicit in the popular song sung on the beaches of Spain in the 1960s when the singer supposedly turned to the sea and intoned: "Ola, ola, ola, no vengas sola . . ." Sport and death, life and death, are so close that the letter "s" can transform the vision of a surfboard riding a wave to the boards—the "fine white boards" echoing in Synge's *Riders to the Sea*—out of which will be fashioned a coffin that will be carried away on the sea of death.

The "cama" that belongs to Fuertes's definition of love offers no more hope or warmth than the "tablas": if the latter signifies the death of the body, the former represents the coldness of human relationships, which in the poem permits no phonic distinction between life, death, and love, all of which are represented by "un hombre." In forcing "un hombre" and "un nombre" into homophonous compliance, Fuertes desexes the male, who becomes one more name in a diary, the sign of a casual liaison that causes more solitude than it remedies. If man is the lead factor in each definition, the fate that he represents is shared by woman, and it is this woman's sensibility that records man's insensitivity and this woman poet's skill that translates communication into codification.

Articulation through formulation is seen at its most pithy and concise in the poem "Yo"—from *Poeta de guardia* (1968)—whose title promises a display of subjectivity that necessarily puts us in mind of the forceful egos of Romantic writing:

YO
 Yo,
 remera de barcas
 ramera de hombres

romera de almas
 rimera de versos,
 Ramona,
 pa' servirles (223).

Although this is clearly a poem about herself, it is not egocentric, for the woman has no center to control, no individuality, no independence; the repetition of "Yo," rather than affirming independence, denies and impedes it as the image of a wooden ball being jerked on a string—a yoyo—represents her destiny and announces the pattern and pacing of the poem. "Remera," "ramera," "romera," "rimera" create a web, trap Fuertes between two consonants; the variations of vowel allow no escape but merely designate one more role in a series of roles, two of which—"ramera" and "romera"—document and perpetuate the old Christian duality between good and bad discussed by Willi Moll, who outlines the distinctions between woman as the gate to heaven (as perceived by the Provençal poets) and woman as the gate to hell (as represented by Tertulian), the great whore of the twelfth chapter of the Apocalypse (41).

The roles that Fuertes knows have been assigned to woman and that she now assigns to herself are compacted into layers, forced into sameness by words that both rhyme and alliterate not at the end of the lines but at the beginning. As these echoing and self-supporting words eliminate differences, they also banish time. Simultaneity replaces sequence; the lack of punctuation and conjunctions from lines 2 through 5 gives Fuertes no time or space to adjust to one role or another. Asyndeton can generate a litany; the suppression of commas in these lines makes asyndeton into a rhetorical strategy that accelerates the recital of each role and narrows the difference between them, thus creating a reprise without reprieve, variations without variety. There is an intriguing similarity between this poem and the six words chosen by August Strindberg in 1896 to interpret Edvard Munch's painting *Woman in Three Stages* (1894); under the title "Trimurti de la femme," Strindberg places at the vertices of one triangle the words "Hommesse," "Maitresse," "Pecheresse"; at the vertices of another he puts "Peinte," "Sainte," "Enceinte." Detached from their triangles, these words generate the simultaneity that marks Fuertes's poem; artistic convention has conditioned us to expect chronological progression in the topic of the ages of man, who is invariably woman, seen, for example, in the painting by Hans Baldung that hangs in the Museo del Prado. Not even in the twentieth century can woman escape the gruesome responsibility of bearing witness to the ravages of time. A cartoon by Xaudaró published in *Blanco y Negro* in 1929 may use a bright new title popularized by women's magazines, "El arte de sonreír," but his pattern is traditional and his target is familiar as he matches cruel images with no less cruel captions:

1. A los quince años, la duquesita sonreía mostrando su espléndida dentadura.
2. A los veinticinco, las perlas de sus dientes iluminaban su dulce sonrisa.
3. A los cuarenta, aún prestaban sus dientes indecibles encantos a su sonrisa.
4. Hoy, cuando la duquesa quiere sonreír, se acerca a su “secretaire,” lo abre . . .
5. Saca una cajita de plata delicadamente cincelada, obra de artífices venecianos . . .
6. Y muestra todos sus dientes, como en los buenos tiempos de sus quince años.

At this point Xaudaró could have added as a *moraleja* Quevedo’s conclusion to his sonnet to the “vieja desdentada”:

no llames sacamuelas: ve buscando,
si le puedes hallar, un sacaabuelas (571).

Munch modified this topic by substituting coincidence for chronology, by replacing development with a multiplicity of roles symbolized by the sphinx. In another painting entitled simply *Woman* (1895), we can look from left to right; in *Three Stages of Woman (The Sphinx)*, painted in 1899, we can look from right to left and receive the same message: that woman, according to Munch’s own words quoted by Sarah G. Epstein, “suddenly becomes saint, whore, and an unhappy self-sacrificing victim” (11). It is irrelevant where Munch derived the idea of three women standing side by side; it could owe as much to paintings of the Three Graces as to those of the Judgment of Paris, postulated by Reinhold Heller (78). What is more important is that he tried to configurate and dramatize the complexity of woman’s roles, to depart from a simple pattern imposed by linear time and a single, exclusive interpretation to a series of simultaneous images, all of which are valid.

Munch’s paintings show woman through the eyes of a man; Fuertes’s poem is a woman’s recreation of how men perceive her, an interpretation that evinces an enforced subservience, which she makes recoil on those who expect it in her display of servility: “Ramona, pa’ servirles.” Even the identity designated by Ramona is suspect, ambivalent; at one extreme, it conjures up associations of the saccharine story still commemorated in Hemet, California by the Ramona Pageant and of the sentimental song that was written to exploit the second silent film version in 1927; at the other extreme, it could put us in mind of the resourceful if immoral Doña Ramona Bragado, “una vieja teñida pero muy chistosa,” according to Cela in *La colmena*, who presides over her *lechería* in the Calle de Fuen-carral, which she had bought with money left to her by her longtime lover,

the Marqués de Casa Peña Zurana. Whatever associations it permits beyond the poem, within the poem the name of Ramona is constricted by its phonic proximity to “ramera,” so that the only part of the word that is repeated—“ram”—assigns a particular meaning to service. One woman, who has to play four roles and discharge four functions, is at the service of unnumbered, unidentified men. Yet that service is not rendered without a fight; the simulated humility of her formula—reminiscent of Micawber’s “Your ’umble servant”—is given the hard edge of a retaliatory blow with the apocopation of *para* to *pa*, which, to quote Werner Beinbauer’s comment on the expression “¡Toma, pa que te enteres!,” is like “una manifestación tajante en forma de bofetada” (56). Other grammarians—John Butt and Carmen Benjamin—rule that “The form *pa* is substandard for *para* and should be avoided” (363). This stricture has never inhibited those anonymous Andalusian poets who use the form frequently and defiantly, as in this *solear* collected by Fernández Bañuls and Pérez Orozco (188):

Quisiera ser como el aire
 “pa” yo tenerte a mi vera
 sin que lo notara naide.

Fuertes’s consciousness of the diverse roles of women and her ability to articulate that diversity stand out against the silence and the implied insensitivity of men, who are classified and herded into the anonymous pronoun with which she ends the poem; with “servirles” she demonstrates the unequal battle between the dominant and unthinking group and the individual, victimized, yet analytical woman.

Men as an unthinking group are given a decisive role in the last line of “Los pájaros anidan”—from *Antología. Poemas del suburbio* (1954)—which denies the poem a triumphant climax as male arrogance nullifies the heritage of centuries, dismantles the poem, crushes with “no soy nada” every exultant first-person statement or proud first-person pronoun:

LOS PAJAROS ANIDAN

Los pájaros anidan en mis brazos,
 en mis hombros, detrás de mis rodillas,
 entre los senos tengo codornices,
 los pájaros se creen que soy un árbol.
 Una fuente se creen que soy los cisnes,
 bajan y beben todos cuando hablo.
 Las ovejas me pisan cuando pasan
 y comen en mis dedos los gorriones,
 se creen que yo soy tierra las hormigas
 y los hombres se creen que no soy nada (49).

When we highlight the first-person statements—"entre los senos tengo codornices," "soy un árbol," "Una fuente . . . soy," and "yo soy tierra"—Fuentes emerges before us, if we put our trust in the natural homing instincts of birds, swans, and ants, as the Earth, the goddess who as Gaea was revered by early Greeks as the universal mother whose soil nourishes all living things, nurtures the flowers and fruit that Arcimboldo used to construct his image of *Spring*. Frida Kahlo's *Self-Portrait* (1940) derives from the same tradition, even though some of its elements—such as a bird hanging by wire from tendrils meshed around her neck—are dissonant and speak to us in different ways. The same awareness of a traditional pose informs Kahlo's *Roots* (1943), where the recumbent nude duplicates the pose of the reclining water nymph painted so often by Lucas Cranach but underscores the latter's harmony with nature by making her grow out of it. To find in Whitney Chadwick's book *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement* (1985) a chapter entitled "The Female Earth: Nature and the Imagination" is to find more corroboration of a fundamental—and highly creative—paradox in Surrealist writers and artists: that a movement that strove to break new ground trod old ground time and time again. In one of his drawings, André Masson exploited the shock-tactics essential to Surrealism in order to change the posture of the reclining nude: in a raw display of frankness, he opened her legs and entitled his drawing, which is automatic in name only, *The Earth*.

Essential to Fuentes's depiction of herself in "Los pájaros anidan" are the traditional and complementary views of woman as nourishment and habitat. The quail nestling between her breasts, the swans that drink from her as if she were a fountain, identify Fuentes as a descendant of the *virgo lactans*, whom Lucas Cranach designated as *Charity*. Seated under a fruit tree with birds feeding from the ground, Cranach's *Charity* is as close to nature as the reclining water nymph, who also has trees behind her. The Surrealists closed the gap between woman and tree, fusing them so closely that, in order to take a woman in his arms, Vicente Aleixandre has to embrace vegetation as well, according to *La destrucción o el amor*, where, in the poem "Triunfo del amor," he intones:

¡Ah maravilla lúcida de estrechar en los brazos
un desnudo fragante, ceñido de los bosques! (386)

Elsewhere I have used these lines as a caption to Masson's drawing *La Forêt*, in which the woman's body is intertwined with the natural world. In the light of this artistic tradition, it is perfectly natural for Fuentes to affirm in this poem "Los pájaros anidan en mis brazos" and "los pájaros se creen que soy un árbol," and for her to declare in another "En el árbol de mi pecho / hay un pájaro encarnado" (95). If nature is the broad setting for the poem and the justification of her existence, naturalness

marks her narration of it. Each line of this poem, which nods in the direction of the traditional *décima*, makes a statement with an unhurried ease and with a candor that is reinforced by the repetition of "se creen." The alliterations of "bajan y beben" and "me pisan cuando pasan" and the repetition of "se creen que soy" record a world of order and harmony in which woman's value is recognized and utilized by creatures—but not by man.

Man's dismissal of woman as "nada" assigns to "se creen" a special function: the birds "se creen que soy un árbol," the swans "Una fuente se creen que soy," the ants "se creen que yo soy tierra" because they have no mind and therefore no prejudices or inhibitions: they have instincts to guide them. When men "se creen que no soy nada," they respond in the same way as animals—only to conclude that she is nothing; while mindlessness is understandable in an animal, it is unforgivable in men, who dominate the end of the poem, powerful but ignorant. One line, phrased in a way that is damagingly familiar, brings down the cumulative evidence of the preceding nine lines as if they were a house of cards. The relaxed tempo, the terraced structure, were an illusion, for man's power is out of all proportion to his sensitivity and to his knowledge.

In the three poems I have considered men are essential protagonists: they cause solitude, demand service and servitude, and devalue woman. If Gloria Fuertes effaces and demeans herself in her poems, she does so in a way that underlines her own resilience, her own sensitivity, and her verbal power, for poetry in her hands is not a retreat but a retaliation. Self-effacement, therefore, is not the acceptance of defeat but a strategy that demonstrates subtly yet convincingly that, if she is small in the minds of men, it is because men are small-minded.

C. Brian Morris
University of California, Los Angeles

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