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“No es mi madre la tierra” ‘The Earth Is Not My Mother’: Ecology in Gloria Fuertes’s Last Poetry

Abstract

Since the 1930s, Gloria Fuertes’s poetry has attracted listeners and readers to her unique combination of verbal play, witty juxtapositions of erudite and popular sources, and uncanny linguistic virtuosity. Thirteen years after her death in 1998, her popularity continues to grow as new printings of her best-selling books and new editions of her early poetry appear in print. The last book over which she had editorial control, *Mujer de verso en pecho* (1995) ‘Woman with Verse on her Chest,’ is her most provocative, expanding considerably the thematic range to which she applied her unconventional poetic strategies. One previous thematic element which takes a new direction is that of ecological concerns, which her speakers call into question as they link them to other equally urgent ethical concerns such as poverty, hunger and war. These poems create startling and intellectually challenging contradictions for the reader that recall the Spanish Baroque, and yet cast them into wholly accessible language that defies the hermetic, elitist avant-garde and *novísimos* movements of the twentieth century.

Keywords

Gloria Fuertes, No es mi madre la tierra, poetry, poetic strategy, ecology, nontraditional literature

"No es mi madre la tierra" "The Earth Is Not My Mother":
Ecology in Gloria Fuertes's Last Poetry

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Since the 1930s, the poetry of Gloria Fuertes has attracted listeners and readers to her unique combination of verbal play, her witty juxtapositions of erudite and popular sources, her recasting of traditional poetic forms with everyday conventions of language, and her uncanny linguistic virtuosity. Her inclusive reconstruction of voices, speakers, situations and strategies from high and popular culture characterizes a highly sophisticated and innovative way of making poetry (Debicki 117). In the 1980s and 1990s, studies by Nancy Mandlove, Sylvia Sherno, Andrew Debicki, Margaret Persin, José Luis Cano and Peter Browne, among others, described specific features of her trailblazing approach, and newer books by Sherno, Michael Mudrovic and Persin have further expanded our knowledge of how she achieved her effects.

Thirteen years after Fuertes's death in 1998, her popularity continues to grow as new printings of her best-selling books appear, as well as new editions of her earlier poetry. The last book over which she had editorial control, *Mujer de verso en pecho* (1995), 'Woman With Verse on Her Chest' is her most provocative, despite its uneven and sometimes even banal form of expression, expanding considerably the thematic range to which she applied her unconventional poetic strategies. The title is a witty take on the popular expression "hombre con pelo en pecho" (346) 'man with hair on his chest,'¹ as Gonzalo Navajas has noted.

One thematic direction which comes more clearly into focus in this collection but which has received limited critical attention to date is that of global ecological issues, which add complexity and richness to her arsenal of metapoetic and religious concerns as well as social issues such as women's roles in society, the horrors of war and tyranny, and the plight of the marginalized. Sherno notes that

ecological concerns appear throughout Fuertes's work from the very beginning, and devotes a chapter of her book to the ways in which her speakers' nostalgia for a lost "green" world weaves itself into a parallel nostalgia for lost childhood. "Mute but eloquent" flora and fauna bear witness to a natural world that is drying up; they have their counterparts in the mischievous ghostly beings who appear uninvited in her poems, "androgynous and similarly protean characters that signify for Gloria Fuertes the harmonious convergence of male and female," and the animated mechanical objects of the urban world of Madrid (113-41). Persin focuses on "the interconnectedness and value of various life forms, whether human, animal, or otherwise," and notes that her position on ecology is "nuanced, shifting, and at times ambivalent" (*In Her Words* 242, 70). The ecological poems of *Mujer de verso en pecho*, however, call the ethical contradictions of a purely ecological stance more directly into question by weaving them into other equally urgent social issues in more startling and intellectually challenging ways than ever before. Yet her speakers cast them in wholly accessible language.

The first poem is untitled:

La Naturaleza es toda arte.
Es bello ver a un elefante
en la selva haciendo el elefante
y no bailando un vals con tu-tú de organdí en el circo.
Las mariposas nocturnas son más grandes
y las borracheras. (35)

Nature is all art.
It is lovely to see an elephant
in the jungle playing the part of the elephant
and not dancing a waltz in an organdy tutu in the circus.
Nocturnal butterflies [moths] are larger
and drunken binges.¹

Considerable critical attention has addressed the multiple voices and speakers in Fuertes's poems: "her poetry violates the patriarchal construct of the unified subject," which in turn distinguishes her from her contemporaries (Folkart 787). However, her tendency to shift speakers in mid-poem has received less attention. This poem

triggers the shift of speaker in an unusual way. The opening lines resemble speech by a naturalist on safari, if rather overdone in its idealistic zeal. But what are readers to make of Nature as "all art"? Is it to be taken as art-ificial? Is what we see in nature not really real, but perhaps just another show for our entertainment? Line three, in which the elephant plays the role of the elephant ("haciendo el elefante"), does not quite conform to conventional ecological terms either. The initial speaker has revealed a more ambiguous sense of things, first by overstating his or her enthusiasm in the opening lines, and then by undercutting the entire vision by line three.

The fourth line is cast in more colloquial speech. The effect is comic in its incongruity of language, but at the same time the line returns the readers' attention to the initial premise—that the natural world is favored over the artificial one. Line five appears to continue in that vein, and to return to the loftier language of its original speaker, but the absurd comparison between elephants and larger moths ("mariposas nocturnas") has no basis in scientific discourse nor does it continue its argumentation into line six. Fragments from two different sentences are spliced together to create apparent nonsense. At this point the reader may question why moths are larger, and larger exactly than what. The last line triggers a shift of language and perspective that appears to juxtapose another speaker and scenario onto the context, rippling back over the two previous lines to locate the reader in a nocturnal urban world of taverns and larger streetwalkers ("mariposas nocturnas"), where the only reasonable solution is to get drunk. Where, then, does this leave the idealistic ecological stance of the opening lines? Does the poem support it, question it, or attempt to drown an ecological posture in alcohol? Even on re-reading, any clear ideological resolution is difficult to achieve.²

The second poem, on the next page of the collection, is titled "Ecología esencial" 'Essential Ecology':

La tierra no es un regalo de nuestros padres,
 es un préstamo de nuestros hijos.
 Curar la tierra sí—está enferma—
 pero antes, curar la pobreza,
 curar al hombre.

Ecología sí
pero antes el niño que el árbol
el niño antes que el río,
el hombre antes que el mar.
Cometemos falta,
si muere un árbol sin agua.
Cometemos crimen,
si muere un niño sin pan. (37)

The Earth is not a gift from our parents,
it is a loan from our children.
Cure the Earth yes—it is sick—
but before that, cure poverty,
cure Man.

Ecology yes
but the child before the tree
the child before the river,
Man before the sea.
We commit an error
if a tree dies without water.
We commit a crime,
if a child dies without bread.

The poem opens with the recasting of a commonplace of the ecological movement—the fact that our responsibility for the well-being of the planet derives from the potential consequences for our children and grandchildren rather than as an inheritance from our ancestors. It then systematically undercuts that commonplace by inverting the terms of ecological activism, returning them to the basic needs of human beings—another well-intentioned commonplace of the altruistic sensibility. By line three, as in the previous poem, the ecological imperative has degenerated into cliché (“it is sick”), though this time the personification of the earth leads the reader directly into contemplation of another illness—that of poverty. Either of these two stances, taken alone, would be hard to swallow given the simplistic language in which they are expressed. But the sudden philosophical shift lays bare the crux of the problem.

Which illness is more urgent? Is a purely ecological stance ethically justifiable?

The rest of the poem builds upon syntactical parallelism reminiscent of the medieval lyric, or perhaps the post-romantic structures of Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer and Rosalía de Castro, in either case lending some gravity to the reiteration of conventional ideas already expressed in the first strophe. The last four lines continue the antithesis, but in a structure and language that more clearly suggest Baroque *conceptismo* 'conceptism.' By now both ecologies form the two halves of a single concern, a unified perception of the popular bumper-sticker slogan "Think globally, act locally." As is common in Fuertes, the juxtaposition of opposing clichéd languages forces the reader to see through cluttered everyday meanings to the original, literal sense of both sets of words, as Mandlove had already noticed in the early 1980s ("Used Poetry" 301-06). If the final line had arrived earlier in the poem, it would not have nearly the impact that it has, but as a result of the implacable syntactic rhythm and the play of the two clichés and the various voices, it is compelling, resembling the closing *desengaño* 'flash of sudden illumination' of Baroque sonnets. "Essential ecology" has more to do with hunger than global warming. But both receive nearly equal space in the text itself.

The third selection is "El corazón de la tierra" 'The Heart of the Earth':

El corazón de la Tierra
tiene hombres que le desgarran.
La Tierra es muy anciana.
Sufre ataques al corazón
–en sus entrañas–.
Sus volcanes
laten demasiado
por exceso de odio y de lava.

La Tierra no está para muchos trotes
está cansada.
Cuando entierran en ella
niños con metralla

le dan arcadas. (72)

The heart of the Earth
has men who tear at it.
The Earth is very ancient.
It suffers heart attacks
–in its bowels–.
Its volcanoes
beat too fast
due to an excess of hatred and lava.

The Earth is in no condition to go jogging
it is exhausted.
When they bury
children with shrapnel in it
they cause it to vomit.

The personification of the Earth here appears to resemble that of the earlier poem “Essential Ecology” and even mimics a bit of its language: “it is sick”/ “it is exhausted.” But it takes a very different direction. The first strophe develops a vision of the Earth as an aged woman whose “men” tear at her heart, or her entrails, as if they were birds of prey. She is prone to heart/bowel attacks caused by rapid heartbeat and an excess of “hatred and lava” which manifest themselves as frequent volcanic eruptions. By now it has become clear that the ecological focus of the first two lines has moved to a graphic depiction of the effects of human conflict, with geological dyspepsia as the troubling result.

The second strophe adds detail to the Earth’s health problems. In a comic twist on common medical advice, she is too exhausted to do any exercise, which might alleviate some of the symptoms of her heart/bowel condition. And then comes the final jarring note: her volcanic eruptions/vomiting spells are the result of an excess of hatred and lava (bombing) and her maternal imperative to receive children killed by its shrapnel. The ingenious take on traditional personification strategies, the mimicry of medical language and the rather Baroque metaphors of the first strophe and the first two lines of the second have thus served as camouflage, holding the reader in

suspension until the poem reveals its devastating final image. As in the first poem, a comic inversion in the middle diverts the reader's attention to heighten the emotional impact of the culminating metonymic device. The bits and pieces of language in the early part of the poem ("men who tear at it"; "excess of hatred"), of course, had been creating an alternative metonymic chain all along. As in the second poem, the effect is quite similar to that of Baroque *desengaño*.

The destruction of the Earth here, then, expands on the philosophical context developed in the previous poems. It brings the reader again to examine the crux of the matter: which "essential ecology" is the most urgent? The planet, poverty, hunger, war?

The fourth poem is titled "Medio ambiente" 'Environment'

La naturaleza nos alegra o nos entristece,
mientras ella ni siente ni padece.
Bueno,
ahora sí parece que padece.
Ved las playas y los ríos
–muertos peces.
Ved los árboles sin brillo ni simiente.
Ese aire que los ojos enrojece,
que al pulmón ennegrece
y al pálido niño de la ciudad
envejece.
¿Quién ha sido el salvaje
que puso al árbol gris
y sucio el aire?
¿Quién ha sido el salvaje
que mató la belleza del paisaje?
El paisaje ya es paisaje salvaje.
Medio ambiente. (Ni medio siquiera.) (97)

Nature makes us rejoice or regret,
while she neither feels nor suffers.
Well,
now it does seem that she suffers.
Behold the beaches and the rivers

–dead fish.
Behold the trees without luster nor seed.
The air that reddens eyes,
that blackens lungs
and that causes the pallid city child
to age.
Who has been the savage
who turned the tree gray
and the air dirty?
Who has been the savage
who killed the beauty of the countryside?
The countryside is now a savage countryside.
Environment/half an environment. (Not even half.)

The language of the first two lines appears to favor human beings over natural ones, as in the popular perception of Genesis in which we have dominion over all living things. In contrast to American Indian views of the cosmos, the theological stance of Saint Francis of Assisi, and even the vision of Renaissance and Romantic poets, Nature is not animate, not sentient. The reader is again situated in the anti-ecological historical position of indifference to its destruction. In lines three and four, in contrast, the language and the perception are subverted by a phrase from street language that grudgingly characterizes the opposing viewpoint.

The next seven lines, in turn, are composed of a much more traditional type of expression, with the anaphora “Ved” ‘Behold,’ the hyperbaton, the synecdoche, the tight rhyme scheme, and the parallelism more characteristic of medieval poetry. Again, as in the second poem, the reader experiences the double face of ecology, with its consequences for both the natural and human worlds.

The two following rhetorical questions, with their corresponding anaphora, continue to cloak themselves in the conventions of medieval discourse. But here, as mere reiteration of previous ideas, their exaggerated rhetoric begins to cloy. Precisely at this point, the second-to-last line, “The countryside is now a savage countryside,” takes the reader in another direction as it summarizes previous ideas by inverting their terms. What is “savage” now is modern life, not natural flora and fauna. The countryside is immobilized, under the

floors, the parking lots, the commercial centers, or burned, destroyed like the tropical rainforests of the Amazon and Africa, transformed into deserts. Again, as in the second and fourth poems, the closing line offers up a stunning example of Baroque *desengaño*. The play on the words *medio ambiente*, 'environment / half an environment,' reflects the fact that, according to well-documented estimates, fewer than half of the forests that once blanketed the Earth still exist.³ It is a well-known idea, but here it seems new and compelling, set into these different voices and views.

At the same time, a few questions remain. Human beings are at the same time the cause of the "half environment" (the "savages") and its victims (the "pallid city child"). Where then might the reader locate the flora and fauna, conventionally "wild" and "savage" beings? The poem dramatizes in its very structure the philosophical conclusion of its ending line. The *paisaje* 'countryside' as we know it seems to have disappeared.

In these poems we find the quintessential Fuertes, juxtaposing voices and language fragments from different sources to evoke and then call into question our perceptions of a reality fabricated, or "woven," in Sherno's words, of the most diverse linguistic threads.

The last poem creates a more personalized, one-voiced speaker who nevertheless works her way through the contradictions of an ecological perspective in unique fashion:

"No es mi madre la tierra"
 No es mi madre la tierra
 ni mi padre el paisaje
 –seguramente soy huérfana.
 Nací en una ciudad grande,
 tenía que andar mucho
 para encontrar un árbol... (117)

"The Earth is not my Mother"
 The Earth is not my mother
 nor the countryside my father.
 –surely I am an orphan.
 I was born in a large city,
 I had to walk a long way

to find a tree....

The first two lines reject the connection between human beings and nature, at first glance as if they were two distinct, irreconcilable entities. But the third line reveals the deception for the reader. It is not that we are incompatible, but rather that the maternal and paternal link has been broken. The speaker, obviously a long way from the tree-lined boulevards and apartment complexes of middle-class Madrid, is abandoned on sterile urban ground (not even “half” a ground). This third line thus functions as a bridge between the anti-ecological commonplace of the first two lines and the ubiquitous public-service ads which depict urban blight in the last line. We want to believe that we are superior to Nature, but we create our own orphans when we cut our links to the natural world.

Nevertheless, without our ecological consciousness our world would be in even worse shape. It is true that our smokestacks and bulldozers have destroyed much, with tragic results for the Earth as well as for its inhabitants. The relationship between poverty and environmental destruction in developing countries is as well-documented as the contamination produced by industrialized nations. Are the poor to be blamed, then, for cutting down the forests to heat their homes and feed their families? The verbal play of Fuertes leads her readers to bring into the light and then to question their contradictory views on ecology, in our cultural linguistic clichés as well as in the corresponding ideologies they reveal, and to examine anew how we see them.

As Jasmina Arsova noted in 2006, Fuertes’s “poems invite readers to return to them because of their puzzle-like qualities” (38). In the same year, Emilio Ramón suggested that in Fuertes “lo que se crea es un desplazamiento de significado que hace que las palabras pierdan su significado original” (n. pag.) ‘what is created is a displacement of meaning which makes words lose their original meaning.’ These are insightful comments, though they lead to two new issues. First, puzzles tend to have a solution; in Fuertes this is rarely the case. Second, Fuertes does not create schemes in which words lose their original meanings as much as schemes that return readers precisely to those original meanings, but in new contexts that lead to other unexpected developments, which do not cancel out the originals but hold them in suspension while they evoke new

connections. I return again to the seminal early work of Mandlove:

The context is frequently, literally, a *con*-text which is in direct opposition to the text itself. It is up to the reader to create meaning out of this incongruity, to meet and communicate with the poet in the silence produced by the mutual negation of text and context. ... that Gloria Fuertes ... has mysteriously pre-arranged. ("The Letter-Poems" 33, 37)

This strategy contributes to the multiple and seemingly simultaneous facets of perception that her poems create and the vigor with which they refuse to come to resolution. Fuertes's appropriation of the widest possible range of languages and voices creates the medium in which her speakers reject one-issue approaches to basic human concerns at the same time that they incorporate them into their tapestry.

Fuertes pioneered a unique brand of Baroque and yet populist postmodernism that openly defied the hermetic, elitist approach to poetry characteristic of the avant-garde and *novísimos* movements of the twentieth century. As Maria Cooks has pointed out, "Fuertes refuses to enter the 'for poets only' dialogue" (430). This has produced an intriguing outcome. In 1997 John Wilcox (197-98) and Persin (*Getting* 91) commented on the wide popularity of Fuertes's poetry since the mid-twentieth century despite her marginalization by some members of the "official" establishment. Spanish poet María Paz Moreno agrees, noting in 2003 that Fuertes's "enormous" popularity with readers had not waned, calling her "posiblemente la poeta española más leída del siglo XX" (287) 'perhaps the most widely-read Spanish [woman] poet of the twentieth century.' In the last decade Sherno (229-30), Mudrovic (23) and Persin (*In Her Words* 11-14) have traced possible connections to the aesthetics of later poets: "her abiding influence is apparent when one considers how her voice has shaped succeeding generations of Spanish poets and the ubiquity of her verse in contemporary Spanish literature and culture" (Persin *In Her Words* 11). To my knowledge, none of today's poets has taken up Fuertes's approach to poetry wholesale, but structural and stylistic devices similar to hers appear sporadically in many of them, often in new and compelling ways.

Fuertes's recent ecological poems are not in any sense

conventional monolithic apologies for an ecological stance, and yet in their contradictions and shifts of language, voice and speaker they build a compelling new case for a unified ecological and social consciousness in its broadest sense. Their enhanced perspective echoes many recent developments in the field of environmental geography. They also exemplify many of the recent trends pointed out by Cecile West-Settle and Sherno in their introduction to this collection of essays: poetry of experience, metaphysical poetry, poetry of difference, and socially engaged poetry. These trends have always formed the matrix of Fuertes's poetry, and yet in this book they clearly signal new directions. *Mujer de verso en pecho* is thus a fitting bridge between the two centuries.

Notes

- 1 All translations are mine.
- 2 An earlier version of this analysis appeared in West-Settle and Sherno, *Contemporary Spanish Poetry*, 90-92.
- 3 The Earth Policy Institute estimates total forest loss at 40% since agriculture began 11,000 years ago, with most of that loss occurring in the last two centuries and accelerating in the last thirty years. The forests in Europe are almost gone. However, as Greenpeace notes, environmental damage "is also about the degradation of forest to a point at which it is no longer a viable habitat for its plant and animal species." See this and related information at www.earth-policy.org and www.greenpeace.org. Global Forest Watch (www.globalforestwatch.org) also breaks it down by continent and has a useful map, with sources dated about the time Fuertes's book appeared.

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