

Breaking the Rules: Transgression and Carnival in *Ultimas tardes con Teresa*

Rituals and celebrations emerge as a central structuring device in the love story that forms the center of *Ultimas tardes con Teresa*, Juan Marsé's prize-winning novel of 1965. The narrative begins with a couple, Manolo and Teresa, strolling through the center of Barcelona during Fiesta Mayor, one of the end-of-summer rites. As if engaged in a ritual re-enactment, they repeat the experience of Manolo's brother a decade earlier: he, too, found romance at the same festival. St. John's Eve figures prominently in the second episode, and other seasonal rituals regularly punctuate later moments in the text. These popular festivities provide both a setting for romance and, further, a pattern of oppositions and inversions throughout the novel, the phenomena that Mikhail Bakhtin calls "carnivalization." Moreover, as the events of the story defy established social norms, so do the narrative strategies of the text challenge traditional literary conventions.

In this essay I argue that reading *Ultimas tardes con Teresa* in line with Bakhtin's concept of carnival and his proposal for studying the multiple voices in a text offers important insights into the novel. Viewed from more traditional perspectives, *Ultimas tardes con Teresa* has been categorized as a picaresque narrative (González) or as a work of social realism (Nichols; Peñuelas; Vargas Llosa). According to these readings, the narrative reaffirms conventional social hierarchies: Teresa is coerced into ending the affair and Manolo is reduced to being a victim of the upper class. I contend, however, that the text underscores opposition to authority rather than stability and the polyphonic nature of the self rather than a monological entity.

In his studies on narrative, Bakhtin stresses the anti-hierarchical character of carnival and similar seasonal celebrations. He points out that

festival periods offer islands of time in which "the laws, prohibitions and restrictions" of ordinary life are suspended (*Problems* 143-44). Excess, laughter and desire permeate the rites, destroying every form of authority and permitting, for the moment, a more democratic society. At such periods of instability, exaggeration predominates in images of the body (*Rabelais* 303-04). For Bakhtin, excessiveness distinguishes this "grotesque" body, in which protuberances and orifices are accentuated.

In addition, one encounters a disruptive linguistic dimension during carnival times, one that subverts official discourse. Bakhtin emphasizes, in connection with this alternative view of society, the multiple voices of a text and the polyphonic character of the self, rejecting a totalized, centered and monological being. The novel, he asserts, "can be defined as a diversity of social speech types and a diversity of individual voices" (*Dialogic* 242). Different generations, professional groups and political circles, to name only a few of the many possibilities, employ their own distinct kinds of utterances, the whole of which constitutes the verbal life of a state or community. Following this theory, literary criticism examines a narrative's varied languages and styles by concerning itself with the cultural life of discourse outside the text. This the critic accomplishes by deconstructing the monologic or unitary narrative voice and hearing instead the many social or ideological voices not merely in the dialogue but also in the narrator's speech (Henrickson 784). Within this world of voices, the language of carnival offers its own unsettling point of view.

According to Bakhtin, the challenge to authority forms a crucial element in Rabelais's narrative. In line with this interpretation, then, transgression stands out as a chief feature of the

carnavalesque. Studies of the oppositions and interpenetrations of “high” and “low” in culture and in literature show how hierarchy inversion functions “as a ritual strategy on the part of subordinate groups” (Stallybrass and White 4-5). While the socio-economic elite generally designates what is to be taken as **super-** and **sub-**in society, those marginalized by the high discourses of state, church and institutions of learning, among others, may not accept their subordination. Indeed, from another perspective, they exercise an influence far beyond their expected economic and political means. Such power results from the lower strata and the underground being both rejected and desired by the groups in authority. Benjamin recalls how, when he was young, the noise of maids’ activities obsessed him and became fixed “more indelibly in the child’s memory than the voice of the beloved in that of the man” (44). Paradoxically, the proletariat exist for the upper class as a locus of hostility as well as fascination. In the *Quijote* the Duchess mocks Sancho while at the same time showing great curiosity about his life and that of his wife. Although the top may wish to excise the bottom, it remains tied to the low symbolically, for the latter embodies a “primary eroticized constituent of its own fantasy life” (Stallybrass and White 5).

Turning to transgression in a literary sense, we find that in current critical theory it has become a positive, even desirable, term. Robert R. Wilson ties this shift at least in part to the French novelist and theorist Alain Robbe-Grillet, who in *Pour un nouveau roman* argues that the contemporary novel makes its own laws and then destroys them (11, 114). Discussing the *nouveaunouveauroman*, Christine Brooke-Rose reports “explosions of almost every notion traditionally associated with narrative” (338). David Lodge, following another path, proposes that “rule-breaking” activities define modern and post-modern literature (15). Thus, we now view transgression as advantageous because “it breaks, frees, opens, makes possible fictional construction and reconstruction, and guarantees authentic literariness” (Wilson 75).

By examining *Ultimas tardes con Teresa* from the perspective of transgression, one discovers its narrative strategies that play against rather than with literary convention. Marsé, like Cervantes and Borges, challenges our readerly expectations concerning plot, characterization and the reliability of narrators. Such a reading also shows that the text foregrounds the unstable

relations between “low” and “high,” desire and repression, the marginal and the privileged. It reveals that the novel stresses the openly erotic moves of those at the periphery which both threaten and attract those at the center. Finally, this reading suggests that categorizing *Ultimas tardes con Teresa* as a novel of social realism is too confining.

1. Carnival and Masquerade

Bakhtin has shown how the lower body parts are endowed with a positive character in carnivalesque texts such as *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel* (310-13). In one instance Friar John refers to the sexual adventures of the monks by observing that even the shadow of a monastery’s belfry, with its phallic shape, can cause a woman to conceive. For Bakhtin, the grotesque body, the one that characterizes festival periods, is both a figurative and a literal concept. Literally, it is composed of protuberances, openings and gaps; figuratively, it is characterized by excess and movement and continually interpenetrates with the world (302, 315-16).

In a similar vein, Manolo’s nickname of Pijoaparte refers to his phallus and reflects “una manera de vivir” (13) given over to excessive erotic activity. A poor emigrant from Murcia, Manolo has only sex and theft as means of survival in Monte Carmelo, a shabby *barrio* above Barcelona. “Esa feroz coquetería” (14) underscores this style of existence, constant movement and interpenetration with his surroundings. Pijoaparte’s world, we see, daily encompasses the carnivalesque upending of bourgeois social conventions. He steals motorcycles for the local fence (el Cardenal), flirts with the old man’s niece (Hortensia) and searches continually for some profitable “romance.” Even so, while Manolo gives himself over to the practical aspects of seduction, he always dreams of love and escape from Grub Street.

In the first chapter he celebrates Midsummer’s Night by putting on a shiny suit and seeking a party where he can make a conquest. After locating a gathering in an elegant neighborhood, Manolo joins the other guests and invents a name that, to him, sounds dignified. To be sure, what he chooses, Ricardo de Salvarrosa (“los amigos me llaman Richard”), is no more elegant than Pijoaparte’s garb. Notwithstanding these gaffes, Manolo makes his way at the *verbena* and gains an opportunity when he meets Maruja, maid to the wealthy Serrats. Pijoaparte begins an affair

with Maruja and through her eventually meets and falls in love with Teresa, the Serrat daughter. The ensuing romance of course violates elite decorum as does the rest of Manolo's life. Ironically, though, it is this world of apparent stability that Manolo (as *pícaro*) disrupts, because he longs to join it. Manolo's fantasies, to Teresa's amusement, picture his public self dressed in a respectable suit and carrying a briefcase.

Bakhtin considers the "lower bodily stratum" basic to popular rituals, viewing its activities as one way of asserting life over mortality, an important aspect of festivals. In this vein, Manolo gives himself a telling ultimatum, after noticing Maruja sitting alone at the party: "Si antes de contar a diez no me he plantado delante de esa chica, me la corto y la tiro a los perros" (15). "Use it or lose it," he urges himself, unconsciously following the rationale behind ancient ritual celebrations. In fact, this easy confidence with sexuality attracts Teresa to Manolo. The image of Maruja and Manolo making love enrages the spoiled aristocrat. She remarks sarcastically: "¡Simples, felices, vulgares novios de vulgares criadas, el mundo es vuestro!" (107) Her own companion, the student leader Luis Trías de Giral, tries to make love and cannot; he has inherited the frigidity of the upper class. As Teresa takes his measure, she longs for Pijoaparte: "Es más hombre que tú" (105). So we find in both Manolo and Teresa a reversal of expectations and an obsession with the essence of the other's life.

Disguise and the freedoms it permits give a different character to the St. John's party and to the seasonal festivals in general, one distinct from that of a normal diversion. Here Manolo takes advantage of such an atmosphere to assume another identity, Maruja allows him to think that she shares the status of the other guests, the hostess expects untoward events on this night ("conocía a la hija de los Serrat, aquella liosa y descarada, y sabía que era muy capaz de presentarse con un gitano" [22]). The *verbena*, in fact, presents the same characteristics as the masquerade in eighteenth-century English narrative. On the one hand, it was a symbol of luxury, wealth and distinction; yet, on another, it promoted what some considered a dangerous sense of social equality, permitting the "lower orders" to mix with their betters (Castle 904). This they could do by employing a disguise (as happens here with both Manolo and Maruja). Even worse, according to commentators on manners, the masked festivities provided an excellent oppor-

tunity for sexual transgression: women could assume the same freedom as men; licentious acts took place; taboos were broken. In sum, the event "became a cultural sign of libertinage itself." At the *verbena* guests dance provocatively, Teresa disappears unexpectedly and the hostess worries about appearances. Consequently, the masquerade itself masquerades pretending to be a respectable gathering while actually introducing instability into the would-be orderly world of social relations.

Many of the activities in *Ultimas tardes con Teresa* take on facets of carnivalization. Most obviously, of course, the opening Midsummer's Night fete provides the plot-engendering encounters that give rise to the rest of the story, the liberating escape from the status quo that enables a small-time thief to consort with the privileged. In addition, the cyclical rhythm of the seasons punctuates all of the events of the text: excursions to the coast, swimming in the sea, trips to a beach house, nights at an outdoor cafe [what Marsé calls "las enloquecidas noches del verano" (74)], with all their sensual warm-weather attractions. Nonetheless, summer delights notwithstanding, from the first the text warns us of the cold breeze of winter and the end of the affair:

en la calle queda la desolación que sucede a las verbenas celebradas en garajes o en terrados: otro quehacer, otros tráfigos cotidianos y puntuales, el miserable trato de las manos con el hierro y la madera reaparece y acecha en portales y ventanas, agazapado en espera del amanecer...es el primer viento del otoño, la bofetada lluviosa que anuncia el fin del verano" (9-10).

Thus, a Manolo can participate in the "destabilization of the ordinary" that masquerade allows (to apply Tzvetan Todorov's term for fiction to the carnivalesque), but such license occurs only on a temporary basis. The anti-hierarchic thrust of festivals and rituals wanes with the dawn of the next day.

The narrative again inverts the order of things after Maruja is injured in a boating accident. Maid and mistress now reverse roles: Teresa waits by the unconscious girl's bedside and replaces her as Manolo's companion. For all that, she does not manage to usurp Maruja's place as Manolo's lover, to Teresa's own disgust. Thrust into a bourgeois milieu, Pijoaparte adopts its more restrictive codes and turns to protecting female virginity: Teresa's. Then Manolo's good fortune fades along with summer after he angers Hortensia. She reports his latest theft to the police, who catch him riding the stolen motorbike to visit Teresa, the same journey that he had

so often made to meet Maruja. After a few months of seclusion, Teresa returns to her own group. While she is said to laugh as she recounts the affair—"igual que si se tratara de un chiste viejo y casi olvidado pero sumamente gracioso" (333)—, one feels the irony in that description. Manolo serves his two years in prison and then returns to the familiar struggle in Monte Carmelo, once again to defend himself "a fuerza de embustes y a golpes de chulería" (334).

Nevertheless, earlier during the period when Manolo relinquishes sexual activity to adopt the codes of the bourgeoisie, he embodies for that moment the victory of authority over carnival. For the stability of society, from the point of view of the elite, depends on a distancing and suppression of the body. These attitudes of rejection characterize the world of *Ultimas tardes con Teresa*, where Luís Trías cannot perform sexually and any openly erotic moves are viewed as threats by the upper class. Manolo's *apodo*, "Pijoaparte," and the general ease with physical expression in Monte Carmelo locate him and his *barrio* at the other end of the political, class and sexual spectrum. An early encounter between Señora Serrat and a group from Carmelo underscores the chasm that separates them. As they picnic on the Serrat property, Teresa's mother begins to scream insults at Manolo, Bernardo and their half-nude female companions: "Se instalan donde quieren, comen como cerdos, lo ensucian todo y rompen la valla y encima hacen sus marranadas con estas chicas..." (36). The elite attack those who engage openly in festive celebration, especially when it involves a display of the body.

As the St. John's Eve party gets underway, Manolo arouses "un ligero malestar" (13) on the part of the other guests. After dancing seductively with Maruja, he receives a warning from three of the men: "Aquí no queremos escándalo" (19). The hostess asks who he is, i.e., what his station in life is, and Manolo, using all his charm, pretends to have been invited by Teresa. His response satisfies the *anfritriona* even though she suspects its untruthfulness, yet only further alarms the male guests: "La madre que parió a esa gente" (21). Acting out the opposition of bourgeois "morality" to carnival rejoicing, they show the elite desire for surveillance, repression, control.

Such modes of restraint blend into the practices of surveillance that Michel Foucault discusses in the final section of *Discipline and Punish*. For Foucault, these attempts reveal a principal feature of modern life:

What is your station? This question is the simplest expression of the established order in society;... one should have a master, be caught up and situated within a hierarchy; one exists only when fixed in definite relations of domination (291).

Even Teresa challenges Manolo the first time that she meets him and Maruja together, advising the maid to go inside quickly since guests are expected and the cook needs assistance. Teresa's stated reason is a pretext; the physical intimacy between Manolo and Maruja upsets her, the contact that Teresa herself both rejects and desires.

After Maruja's hospitalization, Teresa searches for Manolo supposedly to inform him of the injury; but, in fact, she is responding unconsciously to the attraction of the low-Other's body. She easily subverts her class codes by creating a disguise for Manolo, a carnivalesque inversion that permits transgression. Seizing on a vague description offered by Maruja, Teresa authors her own masquerade, one that will permit her to break social and sexual taboos. Manolo, she suggests to herself, does not live in Monte Carmelo due to poverty; on the contrary, he resides there in order to hide his true occupation: clandestine political activist. He is a revolutionary, not a worker: "Manolo Sartre o Jean Paul Pijoaparte, como se prefiera" (129). Mulling this over in her thoughts, she begins to caress her body: "Cerró los ojos, quiso retener con las manos el calorillo de los senos, y sus puntas,... asomaron entre sus dedos" (130). The fantasy arouses her sexually and provides a new identity as well: she will be Simone (de Beauvoir) to his Jean Paul. The marginal and the "lower bodily stratum," albeit politicized and idealized, here exercise their attraction on the dominant culture.

2. Disruptive Voices

Ultimas tardes con Teresa, conforming to Bakhtin's concept of the novel, offers diverse social speech types that weave the fabric of the narrative by mingling "points of view on the world" (*Dialogic* 262, 293). Bakhtin calls this dialogism and praises Dostoevsky as a paragon of dialogic practice, who "brought together ideas and worldviews, which in real life were absolutely estranged and deaf to one another and forced them to quarrel" (*Problems* 91). In line with this view, we as literary critics can engage in dialogics by "striving both to recognize the mutual bearings of diverse voices and to answer them from our own perspectives" (Bialostosky 789).

Expressions of particular interest for this study are those that represent transgressiveness. We hear in Teresa, as she identifies herself with the French intelligentsia, the rhetoric of international political liberalism:

Proletario o intelectual—decía Simone—está radicalmente alejado de la realidad: su conciencia sufre pasivamente las ideas, imágenes, estados afectivos que en ella se inscriben por azar (128).

Similar phrases of opposition appear in the utterances of her companions, making clear their university group's challenge to the institutions of power: "Es como desear ver a la sufrida clase media convertida en lumpen para que se produzca la revolución cuanto antes" (242). Although the upper-class students express themselves in terms of community and commonality, their language differs from that of the true proletariat in Monte Carmelo and from that of the older power figures (los Señores Serrat, the party hostess). Nevertheless, since Marsé "hears the mutual bearings of ideas that do not yet hear one another," as Bialostosky says of Dostoevsky (789), the Spanish writer presses the characters who embody those concepts to further articulation that alters the conversation between the members of the group and between their group and others.

Teresa traces for Manolo the clandestine life that she fantasizes as his *métier*: "la vida de un *pecé*... ha de ser estupenda e incluso divertida en tu barrio, las noches del verano, con los compañeros, las discusiones en el café..." (160). Manolo at first listens in bewilderment, understanding "peces de colores" instead of *pecé* because he does not know the term for a Communist Party member. There is no glamorous, entertaining life in his neighborhood, he thinks to himself, only "aburrimiento y miseria." Later in the narrative, though, he hears their discourse of idealized social relations with more awareness and some sympathy, although still finding their description of his class a romanticized notion of displacement and marginality.

Less strident attitudes in opposition to the status quo appear in the speech of Maruja. While she must serve the Serrat family household, she does not accept restrictions on her sexuality:

Si era domingo, ... había ido con la señora muy de mañana a Blanes, en su coche, para oír misa juntas, y entonces era peor, porque tenerte en mi cama, sentirte junto a mí mientras duermes es lo único verdadero y hermoso que hay en mi vida (279).

In fact, she envisions for herself a future with some of the same attractions as that proposed for Teresa: "Yo también viviré algún día en Barcelona como tú, Teresa" (123). A dream sequence—perhaps from the time when she lies unconscious in the clinic, shortly before her death—, presents an independent person who survives as a maid by hiding her emotions. Yet at the *verbena* she dances with Manolo in a publicly sexual manner, to the unhappiness of the aristocratic guests, displaying openly erotic feelings that they strive to conceal. The others criticize her for flouting social standards, while at the same time envying her.

Throughout the narrative, the speech of El Carmelo interrupts the other discourses. Subversive and carnivalistic, it questions established values and offers in their place mocking alternatives. Maruja recalls her impressions of Manolo's *barrio* "eran tan frescales, tan cínicos, tan descaradamente chulos algunos aspectos de su historia con la gente del Carmelo" (282).

A friend calls a greeting to Pijoaparte "qué chavalas me trajines, carota" before refusing to lend him money "chúpaselo al viejo, que es lo tuyo" (214). The old man is el Cardenal, the fence, who now lives with his perversions submerged in alcohol, in contrast with the casual expressions of desire common in the rest of El Carmelo. The text foregrounds the zone's sex, dirt and decay as a constant challenge to middle-class propriety.

The voice of the omniscient narrator, inscribing the students' rhetoric of protest, assesses their promise with cynicism rather than objectivity: "Con el tiempo, unos quedarían como farsantes y otros como víctimas, la mayoría como imbéciles o como niños, alguno como sensato, ninguno como inteligente" (236). Such harshness has provoked an unfavorable response to *Últimas tardes con Teresa* in a number of critics. Mario Vargas Llosa in an early review stresses the novel's "agresividad tan hiriente y corrosiva" (1). He sees this quality principally in the narrator and views Marsé as heir to the traditions of Baroja and Céline. Others have also commented on the cruelty and sarcasm in the narrative (González 13, Nichols 163-65, Peñuelas 294).

Nonetheless, I would suggest that these readers have not given enough attention to the diverse voices in the text and to Marsé's practice of dialogics. For the author remains concerned throughout with characters articulating their ideas in response to one another while discovering their mutual affinities and oppositions. This

produces a play of voices exchanging divergent views, an interchange in which the narrator engages along with the characters.

To this end, a harsh tone informs much of the narration; even so, it is counterbalanced and muted at significant moments in the narrative. The characters argue, the narrator describes them more or less negatively, and they all change somewhat as a result of hearing the others' voices. Manolo listens to Teresa, Luis Trías and their circle with increasing understanding as the text progresses. Teresa, in turn, finally hears Manolo's alienation, his worries and his desire for material security despite the idealized role that she has created for him: "Resultaba hasta curioso: ella nunca hubiese pensado que esto fuera así, nunca había conocido a nadie como él, viviendo solo y en lucha constante como él, ella jamás habría imaginado que su indignancia fuese su fuerza" (277).

3. Literary Transgressions

We first notice a break with fictional tradition in the novel's epigraphs. When used frequently, as in *Ultimas tardes con Teresa*, epigraphs are envisioned as "little bases of interpretive safety amid the text's playing field" (Siegle, 186). We consider them not only as links to the implied author, to his/her education, interests and beliefs, for instance, but also as guides to reading the chapters that they preface. We expect them to set a tone, accent a character or event, give some cultural or literary information.

In this text, however, we find that the epigraphs have a mixed, and sometimes ambiguous, relation to the chapters that they introduce. Preceding the St. John's Day episode, we have a quatrain from Espronceda's *El diablo mundo*:

¿Y en qué parte del mundo, entre qué gente
No alcanza estimación, manda y domina
Un joven de alma enérgica y valiente,
Clara razón y fuerza diamantina?

The lines lead us to believe that Manolo, as in his dreams, can rise in the world through clever use of energy and intelligence. Indeed, the first-time reader misses entirely, for the moment, the irony of the verses and the significance of their discourse of power, "manda y domina." Only later does the disjunction between poem and narration become evident. By then the reader understands that Manolo's moves against the hierarchy are restricted to a seasonal framework, that according to this text any inversions of the pow-

er structure are acted out in brief periods, just as carnival celebrations are limited in duration.

Baudelaire's "L'Albatros" appears as preface to the whole of *Ultimas tardes con Teresa*. The second work in *Les Fleurs de Mal*, "L'Albatros" laments the purgatorial isolation of the artist, echoing the Romantics. It further underscores fragmentation and separation. Thus, we see that the alienation that elite speech first produces in Manolo is already inscribed for us at the beginning of the text. Again, though, the reader cannot appreciate the relationship of the poem to Manolo until late in the novel. On the other hand, a second epigraph from Baudelaire (283) relates straightforwardly to the section that it introduces, alerting us to questions worth asking about the chapter. Similarly, the other epigraphs in the text oscillate between thwarting and fulfilling the functions that they are expected to carry out.

Phrases from the daily stock market report precede one of the episodes: "Poco antes del final, después de algunas reacciones esporádicas, el mucho saliente provocó desánimo...y reinó la depresión hasta el cierre" (121). The epigraph's relation to its chapter remains confusing even after we have read the section, since we can associate "la depresión" with either Maruja or Teresa or with both. Moreover, the language of finance brought to bear upon matters of the heart introduces a sarcastic perspective upon the episode, distancing us from the characters. The narration's radical time-shifts represent another category of literary transgression. While writers have always changed the narrative order of the events they recount, the transitions of the past have been clearly marked by adverbial shifters or by tense, if not by authorial comment (Brooke-Rose 313). In *Ultimas tardes con Teresa*, as in many other contemporary texts, the reader must work with the pieces of the puzzle to form a chronology of events. The opening scene, Teresa and Manolo's St. John's Eve stroll, comes chronologically late in the sequence of events, a fact that we do not know until late in the work. From the first episode we jump back to Midsummer's Night fifteen months before, then forward two months, then backward over many years to Manolo's childhood, and so on throughout the narrative.

To intensify the sense of displacement, the text sometimes gives us passages without indicating clearly who is being described:

...mientras se dejaba caer muy despacio a los pies del elegante desconocido, doblando las rodillas poquito a poquito tanteando un apoyo en el vacío, mientras cae silenciosamente en medio

del calor sofocante del taller, vencido por el sueño y la fatiga (277-78).

The section continues for five pages, exploring first Maruja's and then Manolo's feelings and actions, without clearly identifying either.

Foregrounding the opposition between desire and repression, travesties and prohibitions, the carnivalesque narrative offers us duality and continuity. Accordingly, the final chapter does not effect a closure; on the contrary, Manolo seems to be setting out on a new journey, like Pablos at the end of *El Buscón*. In a bar he runs into Luís Trías—also down on his luck—, who assures Manolo that stealing a motorcycle is no worse than capitalist venality: “moralmente es lo mismo atracar un banco que fundarlo” (332). Thus, the disruptive code of El Carmelo, with the practice of dialogics, extends far beyond its original borders. The phrase also suggests Bakhtin's view that the carnivalesque with all its indecencies “affirms the people's immortal, indestructible character” (*Rabelais* 256).

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