



## Innocence broken. The use of the grotesque in *Pelea de Gallos* by María Fernanda Ampuero.

Inocencia quebrantada. El uso de lo grotesco en *Pelea de Gallos* de María Fernanda Ampuero.

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### ABSTRACT

Few years ago, María Fernanda Ampuero came suddenly to the literary world, standing out in Latin America and even in the United States with her anthology of stories *Pelea de gallos*. This paper starts with the concept of "*dispositio*": the order of ideas in a rhetorical discourse, which has —also— been used by literary studies to refer to the sequence in narrative, or the specific accommodation that exists in an anthology. In this way, Ampuero's book has a discourse of maturity, violence and aging. In the same way, the grotesque is an element that resonates strongly in these texts, so that, we can know the intensity of the criticisms of: machismo, misogyny and contempt for another human being have through uses of metaphors or descriptions. This work generates links from story to story and ends up developing a social complaint established throughout the book.

**Keywords:** María Fernanda Ampuero. Grotesque. *Dispositio*. Literature written by women.

### RESUMEN

Hace pocos años, María Fernanda Ampuero se abrió al mundo literario destacando en Latinoamérica e incluso en Estados Unidos con su antología de cuentos *Pelea de gallos*. La propuesta que se ofrece en este trabajo tiene que ver con el concepto de "*dispositio*": el orden



de las ideas en un discurso retórico, que se ha usado también por los estudios literarios para referirse a la secuencia que tienen ciertas narraciones, o el acomodo específico que existe en una antología. De esta suerte, el libro tiene un discurso de madurez, de violencia y del paso del tiempo. Del mismo modo, lo grotesco es un elemento que resuena fuerte en los textos, de manera que podemos saber el grado de intensidad que tienen varias críticas al machismo, a la misoginia y al desprecio por otro ser humano por medio de ciertas metáforas o descripciones. La obra genera vínculos de cuento a cuento y termina desarrollando un proceso que acabará en la última pieza como el cierre de todas las quejas sociales establecidas a lo largo del libro.

**Palabras Clave:** María Fernanda Ampuero. Grotesco. *Dispositio*. Literatura escrita por mujeres.

## A dysfunctional relationship

Almost everyone knows the painting of Francisco de Goya *Saturn devouring his son* (1819-1823). The image, somewhat disturbing, shows us a titan gobbling up his own son by a prophecy that dictated that leaving his offspring alive would lead to the destruction of the titans. Surrounded by blacks and with dense shadows, the image highlights the blood and disrupts one of the primordial emotions of the human being. This painting brings into play a theme already studied by Immanuel Kant in the eighteenth century in *The Beautiful and the Sublime* (2017). When faced with the sublime, we are forced not to look away from the object and continue to contemplate what we do not understand, although it also happens with the grotesque in an emotional antipode. This sense of alienation can be perceived throughout María Fernanda Ampuero's book: *Cockfight* (2018).

Ampuero's narratives are as eschatological as they are vivid, because she tells us – usually from the perspective of little girls – the horrible step that is adulthood, a sudden, violent maturity that comes along with misfortunes or horrible moments. For this Ecuadorian writer, the family is a disformed being full of angry emotions, and it is through intimate relationships that we can see the true damage that a person suffers. Something that is very significant if you look at one of the two epigraphs with which he opens his anthology: "Everything that rots forms a family", by Fabián de Casas, Argentine poet who wrote this verse in his poem "Sometimeago":



Some time ago  
we were all the world love movies  
all the trees of hell.  
We traveled on trains that joined our bodies  
at the speed of desire.

As always, rain was falling everywhere.

Today we are on the street.  
She was with her husband and son;  
we were the great anachronism of love,  
the pending part of an absurd montage.  
It looks like a law: everything that rots forms a family. (Casas, s.a.)

The end of this poem will be reflected as a constant in the stories. All the families shown here are rotten, they are in a degrading process that will lead them to disappear or be repudiated. The members of these nuclei will be corrupt beasts. This idea can improve its efficiency if compared to the other heading: "Am I a monster or is this being a person?", from The Hour of the *Star*, by Clarice Lispector (2011).

The arrangement that these two paratexts have is significant since they respond to the idea of the *dispositio*, that is: the order and concatenation that literary texts have in a work and that guide a certain interpretation or effect. It is not fortuitous that he uses a quote from Fabián de Casas and another from Clarice Lispector, hypotexts in *Cockfight* that will help to understand what will happen in the stories, because, quoting Lispector in his novel, the main character: Rodrigo S.M., speaks this way about Macabéa:

Excuse me, but I'm going to keep talking about myself, that I'm my stranger, and in writing I'm a little surprised because I've discovered that I have a destiny. Who has not asked: am I a monster or is this being a person?



First I want to affirm that this girl is not known except through living adrift. If I were dumb enough to ask herself "who am I? ", would be frightened and fall to the same ground. It is that the "who am I?" causes need. And how to meet the need? Who is analyzed is incomplete.

The person I'm going to talk about is so dumb that sometimes he smiles at others on the street. No one responds to her smile because they don't even look at her. (2011, p. 13) .

Throughout the thirteen stories of the anthology – an extremely curious figure taking into account the symbolism that this issue has – we can see how the female characters are developed and matured by forced initiatory rites, as if something broke into their natural development and forced them to become something different, because many of them are no longer women, but a monstrous version of who they were as children.

### ***Dispositio*: Forced adulthood**

Helena Beristáin rescues the *dispositio* of classical rhetoric, pointing out that "[...] corresponds to the development of the syntagmatic structure of discourse. The chosen order must be favorable to the ends of it" (2010, p. 158). In this way, it must be understood that a work has a certain order to generate a certain effect, or guide the reader towards a certain logic. The arrangement of the stories in *Cockfight* is evident from the index: the tales "Christ" and "Passion" in a semantic relationship; as well as "Chorus" and "Chlorine", in a phonetic relationship. However, this is not the only thing that unites the stories, but also the themes treated *in fabula*. It should be borne in mind that the term *dispositio*, although it also applies to a part of the rhetorical discourse, will be considered only as the concatenated order that the stories have.

The anthology opens with "Subasta", a story that tells of a girl who in her childhood lived in the context of cockfights – hence the title. This little girl suffered touching by the chicken coops. One day, she was stained with blood and discovered that no one wanted her like that, moreover, she was considered a monstrea (Ampuero, 2018, p. 12). In accordance with this, the next tale is called "Monsters", where now two twins appear, although the grotesque thing is not them, but the horror



movies that rent and cause nightmares in the weakest of girls. These dreams become more disturbing when at the age of twelve her first menstruation arrives, showing in her nightmares "[...] faceless men who played with their menstrual blood and rubbed it all over their bodies and then monstrous babies appeared everywhere, tiny as rats, to eat it with snacks" (p. 23). The very *dispositio* of the book allows us to understand the change suffered by the protagonist of the following story: "Griselda". In this narrative, an eleven-year-old girl sees the corpse of her neighbor Griselda, an excellent pastry chef who thrilled the children with her folder full of models to make. Interestingly, at the age of twelve – the age at which the twins had their first menstruation in the previous story – she no longer has any interest in celebrating her birthday. What is observed from these three stories is that María Fernanda Ampuero placed her narrative in a thoughtful way, not only to cause a certain degree of interest in the target readers, but to perceive the way in which these girls are growing up, face sexuality and discover what life will be.

The fifth story "Crías" is the story of a woman who comes to the house of a former neighbor to give her oral sex. Although the story uses the analepsis to talk about Vanesa and Valeria, identical twins who are sisters of the aforementioned boy, the protagonist and the subject are the only ones who do not have a name. The title of the story comes from a hamster who devours his newborns, and this motivates the boy to tell the twelve-year-old protagonist to do fellatio, she accepts because she always says yes to men (p. 45). The encounters continue until the woman admits that it has always been very easy to bend her will, and that seeing the shattered body of the offspring excites her.

In the same order, but with some modification, "Persianas" tells the story of Felipe, the only child in the anthology. He in his childhood had a polyamorous relationship with his cousin and cousin, but the maid, discovering that they kissed and played in the pool, told this to the adults and they decided to separate them. Philip knew nothing more about them. The incestuous relationship seemed frowned upon, especially by a grandmother who from the immobility denies her entire family, except for the moment when Felipe imagines her smiling at the moment that he has sex with his own mother, she who gave birth to him, must return inside her, "From here you came out, little son, enter, from



here, come" (p. 57), the mother tells him at the end of the tale, similar to the description of the hamster's offspring, similar to Goya's painting.

The disposition is still found in the next two stories, "Christ" which speaks of the death of a baby, despite having gone to contemplate the image of the Christ of Consolation, but the following story seems to speak of Jesus himself. "Passion", as the tale is called, tells the story of a woman with almost nigromantic gifts, a woman who washed the feet of a wise man who healed people and spoke in parables, someone who revived after her inert body was placed in a cave and sealed. The woman would seem to be Mary Magdalene, who has a stone in her chest that gives her those fantastic gifts. From the *dispositio* it could be said that, although the names are not mentioned, it is Jesus Christ himself. The title of the previous tale, together with this one, would seem to speak of the Passion of Christ.

Similar relationship occurs between "Ali", a tale where a fat woman takes her own life by jumping from the third floor of a shopping mall, and the story "Choir", where all the women speak – as a chorus – about that event: "[...] of the suicide of the chubby of the mall a few months have already passed and there is no news" (p. 98). In fact, similar to another tale not mentioned here – "Nam" – these two **apocope** of the main characters of which the witness narrators speak: Alicia and Natividad Corozo. In addition, the dead of the pool of the story "Choir" is described as a floating lizard, the same image that occurs in "Cloro", a consequent story where a woman pays attention to some men cleaning pools, and, between her mental dalliness, thinks of the lizards that fall into the pool and die.

All that would seem self-referential winks in the stories, is this *dispositio* referred to at the beginning of this section. In the last story, "Another", a woman who has been raped is in line at the supermarket with all the things her husband asks for, but it takes time for her not to be another, to make the decision and, unlike all the previous women in the book, to be the one who faces her situation. For this reason, the *dispositio* is not free. A sequence of characters that suffer one by one. In addition, as the book progresses there are increasingly adult characters, as if Ampuero wanted to show us the natural evolution of a woman: girl, young and already mature, all until they decide to



abandon that life, the expensive purchases that the man asks him to do: "[...] the sardines, the beers, the wadding, the beans, the fucking artichokes, the shitty yogurts, the damn Coffee-Mate, the bade a snot, the *Stadium* magazine with all its *little* players from Barcelona and Emelec, each one more bad than the other" (p. 114). Even at this moment the tension goes in *crescendo*, as if the violence of all the stories explodes in a single moment, as if closing the book was the realization of all these characters by leaving the repression in which they were.

The *dispositio* of the stories, helps to understand better, even in the way in which they are written, because from "Mourning" – a story where a woman is set aside by her brother to be the whore of the whole town. The brother falls ill, and it is then that the sister gives him care full of revenge until his death—, you can notice how the writing is becoming more agglutinated, there are fewer dialogues, the thoughts become more and more important, as if the internalization were more important, as if it were useless to speak, an element that is increasing more and more. So the reading followed by the narratives would connote a rhythm increasingly full of thoughts, triggering everything at the moment of leaving the groceries in the other car and not paying for anything, closing the anthology with a:

"Madam, and that doesn't take you?" —insists the cashier pointing her chin at the cart where the cans of sardines shine.

You shake your head.

The girl calls a boy to return everything to the shelves. You look at him out of the corner of your eye. He looks at you. You tell him with his chin to go. And, smiling, you say a phrase to yourself that no one else can hear. (p. 115).

## Misplaced images. The Grotesque in *Cockfight*

When a reader is confronted with *Cockfighting* he knows that something is out of place, that the characters included in its pages are suffering, that violence is reflected in many ways, but that it is present; however, it is not until the end of the stories that we know why this happens.



We are faced with the grotesque, that which causes us revulsion, but which revalues everything we understand about a subject. Mikhail Bakhtin (1999) talks about this topic in his study of Rabelais' work, and comments that using such topics

[...] illuminates inventive boldness, allows to associate heterogeneous elements, to approximate what is distant, helps to get rid of conventional ideas about the world, and of banal and habitual elements; it allows us to look with new eyes at the universe, to understand to what extent the existing is relative, and, consequently, it allows us to understand the possibility of a different order of the world. (p. 38)

In this way, the grotesque helps us to face events in another way, it serves as a way of approaching that intimate discourse, of understanding the situation suffered by many women and assimilating it through ominous disgust, which we cannot look away from. In his treatise on *The Beautiful and the Sublime*, Immanuel Kant (2007) mentions the characteristics of a sublime object, and that everything grotesque tends to generate a similar vision, the alienating gaze towards the object, thus configuring a space full of uncertainty, where female voices have the word, but that tell uncomfortable events.

Ampuero's narrative shows us what Freud called *das Unheimliche*, the ominous, what is outside its home context (1981, p. 248). Since, despite being stories that are located in intimate spaces, in houses, in the immediate, there is something that is not right. Perhaps that is why the book receives this name, cockfights are always in private spaces, they are frowned upon, there is violence, there is death, and it is a space limited to men. Women do not seem typical of these spaces, so they suffer from being displaced, although their very presence seems to break in a subversive way.

Cixous makes very clear the role of women in this idea in *The Laughter of the Medusa*:

A feminine text cannot be but subversive: if it is written it is upsetting the old real estate crust. It is necessary for the woman to write herself park is the invention of a new writing, insurrectionary which, when the time comes for her liberation, will allow her to carry out the ruptures and transformations indispensable in her history [...] (1995, p. 61).





That is why in *Cockfight* there are so many women narrators —except in "Persianas"—, because it is the women who take the floor to talk about the chicken coop that gave him a candy or a coin to touch, kiss or touch and kiss him (Ampuero, 2018, p. 11), to explain how they discovered what love was by giving oral sex to the brother of the friends (p. 45), a girl's first lesbian kiss (p. 35), or trying to watch the cartoons and not worry about caring for a sick baby (p. 60). Or upon discovering that something was not right, that the father of the twins was having sex with the maid, who was almost the same age as the girls: "There was something alien and own in that silhouette that made us invade a physical feeling of disgust and horror" (p. 24).

All this must be told, because writing is subversive, because it seeks to confess what happens in these closed spaces. They are forced initiation rites, although these rites are usually dedicated to men, here women have to suffer in that wild side that goes hand in hand with the passage of adulthood. The barbarism of society makes them mature early, early, that the menorrea is a sign of preparation, of being ready to endure the horrible of life, unlike hamsters who devour their newborns because "[...] rodents eat their young when they feel the world is going to eat them anyway" (p. 46). Ampuero's approach in the first half of her anthology is aimed at showing how girls suffer from repression, although adults are also imbued with sadness itself.

Is it any use to write? Is it any use to be that other one that appears in the last story? Speaking of art made by women, Cixous says:

To write, an act, which will not only "carry out" the de-censored relationship of women with their sexuality, with their being-women, returning access to their own forces, but will restore their goods, their pleasures, their organs, their immense closed and sealed bodily territories; to free her from the supramosaic structure in which she was always reserved the eternal role of guilty (guilty of everything, whatever she did: guilty of having desires, of not having them; of being frigid, of being "too" hot; of not being both at the same time; of being too mother and not enough; of having children and not having them; of breastfeeding them and not breastfeeding them ...). (1995, p. 61).



All the characters of *Cockfight* are looking for is to reach the end of the book, where they will understand that life is better if they make a decision, where looking back gives them the necessary strength to overcome their problems, such as "Auction", the first story where what they learned as a child, all the disgust that gave men to see a monster bathed in rooster blood, it would serve her not to be sold to the highest bidder to rape her, kidnap her or worse. It's better "[...] hide the smell of vomiting. The smell of pajamas and dirty, loaded, menstruated, pedorheated sheets of when they do not get up in several days" (Ampuero, 2018, p. 85), as the maid who appeared in the story "Ali" says. The women of the second half are more aware of their private lives than they try to hide, although everyone can see it. In "Cloro" this act reappears when a woman looks at herself after tanning: "Sheskip the mirror for a second and covers the reflection of her face with her hand [...] She feels stained, indignant to the world around her [...] The feeling of making a fool of yourself is so intense that it makes you nauseous" (p. 107).

Has this freed them? As stated in the previous section, women can be in the process of understanding, accepting and rejecting what is wrong, *unheimliche* (Freud, 1981, p. 248). That is why it is important that they raise their discomfort, that they look at what is happening in order to reach its outcome. As Ampuero said in an interview after the publication of his book: the phrase he remembers most and knows by heart is: "The pain of loss is an unknown place until we reach it" (*Continuity Of The Books*, 2018).

What seeps into *Cockfight* is that place that is not, the intimate seen with disgust, the woman who admits her dark life, and who can only succumb to the incomprehensible. It is the blood of the chickens, it is life going on, it is a whole becoming to make the decision to leave the past behind and accept what will come.

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