Poems to Be Read on a Trolley Car

Oliverio Girondo

With the political democratization of the 1920s came cultural modernization, as well. Public education increased literacy levels and hastened the cultural integration of the children of European immigrants into nationhood. In the process, a new generation of writers and artists who enthusiastically embraced avant-garde aesthetics was born. Irreverent and playful, they opposed the homogenizing effects of modern culture while simultaneously transforming Argentina's local artistic traditions. Most representative was the group associated with the journal Martin Fierro (1924–27), where writers like Jorge Luis Borges, Raúl González Tuñón, Leopoldo Marechal, and Oliverio Girondo (1898–1967) published their texts. Important painters, such as Xul Solar, illustrated its pages. These two poems from Girondo's Twenty Poems to Be Read on a Trolley Car (1924) are written in the experimental and fragmentary style of a poetry that mimics the fast pace of modern life and the cultural fusions of a cosmopolitan society. Through interrupted images, they respectively portray the tunescent desires of working-class girls (“Exvoto” [1920]) and the entangled bodies of couples dancing to the violent rhythm of a milonga, a faster variant of tango, from the dizzying perspective of a passing cubist eye (“Milonga” [1921]).

EXVOTO
To the girls from Flores

The girls from Flores, have sweet eyes, like sugar almonds from “El Molino,” and they wear silk jumpsuits that sip their rumps like fluttering butterflies.

The girls from Flores, walk together arm in arm, broadcasting their trepidation, and if anyone looks them in the eye, they press their legs together, for fear their sex will fall out on the sidewalk.

As darkness falls, they hang their innocent breasts over the iron branches of their balconies and their clothes turn purple, feeling them naked, and at night, towed by their mamas—armored frigates—they go out and promenade on

Note
For complete references and notes, consult the original version of this chapter in David Rock, Politics in Argentina, 1890–1930: The Rise and Fall of Radicalism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 95–124.
the plaza, so that the men can ejaculate words in their ears, and their phosphorescent nipples will light up and fade away like fireflies.

The girls from Flores live with the anxiety that their buttocks will go rotten, like apples that are past their prime, and their desire for men is so suffocating that they would like to be free of it, as from a corset, but they don't have the courage to cut their bodies into pieces and toss them out to all the men who pass them on the sidewalk.

Buenos Aires, October 1920

MILONGA

On the tables, beheaded bottles of "champagne" with white clown sashes, nickel buckets that replicate the skinny arms and backs of "cocottes."

The bandoneón sings with the yawning stretches of a stupid worm, it contradicts the rug's red hair, it magnetizes nipples, the pubes and pointy shoes.

Males whose bodies rupture in a ritual court, their heads sunk low between their shoulders, their lips thick with coarse remarks.

Females with their nervous rumps, bits of foam at their armpits and their eyes looking much too oily.

Soon the sound of shattering glass, the tables rise up, bucking, and end with four feet in the air. An enormous mirror and its pilaster come crashing down with all the people reflected in it; and, amid a breaking wave of arms and backs, a burst of fists and punches, seeming like a Bengali pinwheel.

The violet drapped dawn, together with the lone policeman, enters the scene.

Buenos Aires, October 1921

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