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## Ceferino Suárez: A Village Versifier

*James W. Fernandez*

Muttering his wayward fancies he would rove.

—Thomas Gray, *Elegy Written in a  
Country Churchyard*

At a time when anthropologists seek to capture some of the more subtle and emotional aspects of fieldwork in verse of their own, it may be illuminating to evoke the “creative persona” of Ceferino Suárez, a country versifier of the Cantabrian Mountains of Northern Spain. Ceferino was a man of various talents, a sculptor in stone and wood, and something of a musician as well as a poet. His poetry, I discovered, was largely confined to a thick handwritten notebook—a notebook that was misplaced or thrown away at the time of his death. Though I was able to copy out most of Ceferino’s verse, I often wondered how many other notebooks were lost in those mountains, for Ceferino was not the only versifier my wife and I heard of, though he may have been one of the most prolific and talented. Thomas Gray in his *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* set for us in respect to such unknown talents the pen-

This paper is one product of an ongoing ethnographic project conducted by Renate Lellep and myself on sociocultural change in the Cantabrian Mountains of northern Spain supported over the years by the National Science Foundation and the Spanish American Joint Committee. I am grateful for that support as well as for the very helpful commentary provided for this paper not only by Renate Lellep but by Ruth Behar, Julia Holloway, and Edmund King.

sive thought: “Full many a Gem of purest Ray serene, / The dark unfathom’d Caves of Ocean bear: / Full many a flower is born to blush unseen, / And waste its sweetness on the desert Air.” But this elegiac mood is quite different from the ironic playfulness of Ceferino Suárez himself. And though romantic sentiments animate our anthropology, to be sure, yet our method moves us beyond them to the actual voices of countrymen and women such as Ceferino.

In this essay, then, consulting only several of his more notable poems from a much larger corpus, I will try to evoke the spirit of Ceferino—this village versifier now passed on—such as I came to understand it first in the many hours I spent with him in the early 1970s, taking down his life history on the bench—the *mentidero* or “yarning bench” as it is called—that stood beside his portal. By “evoking the spirit” I mean to indicate trying to recapture Ceferino’s particular voice and trying to place it among the village voices and the voices from beyond the village that he heard and to which he had to relate in his time. I use the term “spirit” to denote some essential play of mind of the man that transcends the materials out of which it arises and from which it is made. Probably what we mean by spirit is the lively search for identity—his own identity preoccupied him—but, as pursued in his own work, an identity more adequate to his persona than what can be discovered in the usual categories applied to a man of Ceferino’s place and position in life: peasant, countryman, villager. In the several poems out of a larger corpus selected for comment here we see our poet animated by the problem of what we would call individual and generic identity. For Ceferino this was one of the central problems of his life in community, and he addressed it with verve, insight, and poetic resource.

### What His Life History Tells Us: “El Habanero”

The life history, it ought to be said, was not Ceferino’s particular genre—at least at the time he was asked to recount it—for his telling of it was not a virtuoso performance, an unburdening or release of long withheld memories and treasured experiences. He told it with hesitation and some reiteration, too much influenced by two hec-toring elderly women—distant relatives living with him—who loomed over his words in many sessions. As at the time he was plagued by the infirmities of old age, his life history was rather more reminiscent

of his misfortunes and frustrations than might have been the case in earlier years. Nevertheless, from it we can learn several important things having to do with his sense of the contrast between the limited possibilities of village life and the “world” opened up by his fifteen years in Cuba in the teens and twenties and by the books he read. For Ceferino was surely one of the villagers who had *mundo* (“world” or “worldliness”) as the Spanish say. It was one among other reasons that the villagers called him *el habanero*, the man from Havana.

The phases in Ceferino’s life are three. His first thirty years, 1883–1913, were spent in the village, where he was mostly involved in herding and agriculture on family lands. The next fifteen years, 1913–1928, he spent in Cuba. There his *mundo* and its possibilities opened up to him. In the final phase of his life, 1928–1975, he returned to his mountain village, where he took up once again the care of family lands, either those passed directly on to him or those he administered for collateral relatives and particularly nephews, sons of his older siblings, who had gone into the professions. These lands barely provided enough for a modest living.

It is the Cuban period that he remembered most vividly and talked about most animatedly—even though he had been obliged to return to the Asturian Mountains because of a persistent tropical infection of the throat and lungs, even though his attempts like many emigrants’ to make his fortune had come to nothing, and even though while in Cuba he confessed that he had thought every day about Asturias and had dreamed frequently about his mother. (His determined bachelorhood, his attachment to his mother, and his timid, symbolic, mostly poetic courtship of women are aspects of his identity I will not comment upon.)

No doubt the frequency with which Ceferino talked about Cuba to his fellow villagers was partly what caused them to nickname *him* the *habanero*, although other villagers had spent years in Cuba and could have claimed the title as well. Perhaps there was something insouciant, breezy, “tropical” in Ceferino as well—something resistant to the severities and sobrieties of village life. When he returned, Ceferino, like many *indianos* (the Spanish word for the emigrant returned from the New World), took a judgmental, usually amused if not ironic, view of that life; it was a view loquacious, even voluble, in expression. Because the vehicle of that judgment was rhyme, verse, and other expressive media, Ceferino became something of a rare bird by village standards. In his life history he recognizes that his mannerisms were a “little strange” (*extraños*) by

those standards, and he ascribes this to two facets of his character: a desire to know (*deseo de saber*) as much as possible about things of the world and a complete disregard for the long-standing enmities between village families and village factions. Though Ceferino was very adept, even formidable, at *andando cantares*, inventing verses to put up or put down himself or his fellows in the jocularly competitive give-and-take of village life, upon his return he came to regard himself as above all that. Ceferino thus saw in his own character a curious mix of restlessness with respect to knowing the world, *inquietudes*, as the Spanish call it, and tranquility about the challenges of social life. These aspects of his character were reinforced by his years in Cuba, which animated his desire to know and offered him some of the tools to fulfill that desire as they removed him from the day in and day out experience of familial enmities. Ceferino recognized very clearly that his emigration had enabled him to transcend many of the limitations of village life though not, in the end, the nostalgic hold of the village upon him.

Of the first thirty years of his life Ceferino remembered little more than a bad school, a series of nondescript uninterested teachers disgruntled at their rural assignment, and no books except an *abecedario*, a counting book, and a book on Christian doctrine. He learned rapidly, but there was no encouragement. He left the school at the age of twelve to take up the usual tasks of herding, haying, and subsistence agriculture, and in carrying out these tasks, he became like any other villager. He also began gradually, as the youngest child, to take on more and more responsibilities for the care of his parents as his older brothers and sisters married. (I will not comment on the influence on his character of his role as the last and favorite son.) A much older brother, married in Cuba, persuaded him to emigrate in 1913 after the death of his father.

Then began the phase in Ceferino's life that he recalls as his time of opportunity, even though materially speaking and by reference to that yardstick by which the *indiano* is usually measured, it was eventually a bitter failure. He lost all his hard-earned savings in a poor investment in railroad stocks and in a bank failure at the end of the 1920s. But at the same time, there was something lyrical as he evoked his years in Cuba. He found himself transported from the confinements of the village in both a physical and a psychological sense. The possibilities of the world were opened up to him. It was a world, he tells us, about which he wanted to know everything.

The free public libraries of Havana—and he spent long hours there every weekend—offered him the chance to learn about astronomy, meteorology, music, and the ancients. He took up the violin. It was there that Ceferino began to compose spontaneous verse in honor, one by one, of the various girls working with him in the factory or of his fellow tenants in a rooming house. The tradition of spontaneous *coplas* was certainly part of his own village culture, but it took the transport of his years in Cuba to activate it. And he tried longer poems based on the fables of Samaniego, the nineteenth-century Spanish fabulist.<sup>1</sup> At the same time his roots in Asturias did not cease clutching at him in his dreams. And, as his throat and respiratory problems persisted, he became convinced that he could only become well by leaving the tropics and returning to Asturias—and of necessity to his village, for having no money he had no other alternative.

But Ceferino was a different man when he returned, and psychologically at least he had a hard time accepting the constrictions of village life. In the 1930s and 1940s he composed much verse on that life. In gestures of symbolic courtship, of solidarity or affection, he composed rhymes on spoons or other domestic utensils for favored women or young girls of the village. His *inquietud* was still with him. He embarked on a plan to climb all the mountains in the vicinity, and tried to keep up his astronomical and meteorological studies and his violin. But, as he repeated, there was no appreciation, no stimulation for his “Cuban” ideas and ambitions. Gradually over the decades the *habanero*, Ceferino, relinquished his ambitions in the midst of an ambiance, in his view, so unsuitable and so unsympathetic to them as eventually to dampen them entirely. He fell back slowly into the village round of life, making of his own house by his skills of wood and stone carving a kind of microcosm, which he rarely left. By his final decade he had become a strange bird indeed, seen occasionally muttering to himself, walking the village streets or heard practicing, increasingly ineptly, on an old Havana violin.

### The Multitude of Marias and the Abundance of Juans

Ceferino’s verse was appreciated more than he knew, particularly a pair of long poems, one celebrating all those named Maria in his

village and the other, all those named Juan in the next village over the mountains. In the latter poem, *Juan de Juanes*, a native of Ceferino's valley, an Allerano, goes over the mountain to pay for a cow sent him by a certain Juan whose other names he has forgotten. (These other names in this province would not be family names, which are also very common, but locality names or names or nicknames of spouses, parents, or grandparents.) The poem records in 463 lines and with considerable inventiveness the travail of this visitor's attempt to find the right Juan in a village that seems to be made up of nothing but Juans—fifty of them, a veritable “downpour” of Juans. He finally encounters his man, the fifty-first Juan, who happens to be called Juan de Juana de la Cuadra, at the very top of the village. The poet then renames the town, formerly Caliao, Juanes (or Johnstown).

What is most interesting about this poem is that it is not made up; the Juans who figure in it were actual residents of the village of Caliao at the time. What is inventive is that Ceferino effectively builds for us the visitor's frustration and at the same time gives us a good picture of the appearance and architecture of the town. He also offers us humorous capsule commentary on the characters and notable histories of some of the Juanes who pass in review, for example, Juan de Durán, a heroic soldier who, on sentinel duty, it is told, shot a mule, mistaking it for an enemy infiltrator.

The *Marias of Felechosa*, Ceferino's own village, is a poem of 570 lines that proceeds in the same way to make mention of all the Marias, ninety-six in number, that inhabit the town. The poet organized his poem as a parade of Marias:

Silencio: suenan campanas  
que pasa? Que algo mucho va a  
pasar,

que van a pasar las Marías,  
que hay en este lugar.  
Niñas, mozas, ancianas,  
sin una sola quedar.

Verán una multitudine de Marías  
las que van a presenciar,

Silence: bells sound  
What's coming to pass?  
something considerable is  
coming to pass.

The Marias are going to pass by,  
All of those in this town.  
Girls, young ladies, old women  
None will be ignored.

You will see a multitude of  
Marias,  
Those who will present  
themselves,

y de todos los matices,  
hay de Marías la mar.  
Hay Marías Magdalenas,  
y de cuerpo virginal,  
las hay blancas y morenas,  
  
guapas y feas, como la arena  
las hay malas, las hay buenas:  
  
altas, medianas, pequeñas,  
de todas formas las hay.

And of all varieties.  
There is a sea of Marias here.  
There are Maria Magdalenes,  
And of virginal body,  
There are white ones and dark  
ones,  
Pretty ones and ugly, like sand  
There are good ones and bad  
ones:  
Tall, medium, and small,  
They come in every form.

As Ceferino knows his fellow villagers, their family lives and foibles, much better than he knows the villagers of Caliao, the anecdotal detail that accompanies the naming of many of the Marias is much richer. Most of these Marias are mentioned in one laudatory way or another, but others are just mentioned and, for some, sharp comments are reserved. Here are some examples:

Sin mover la vista nada  
pueden ver a otra señora,  
que sus plácemes merace,

Without shifting your view,  
One can see another señora,  
That merits all your  
compliments,

María la de Isidora,  
que an aumentar nuestra  
especie,  
ha sido muy productora,  
También es merecedora,  
de algo bueno y no vió nada

Maria she of Isidora,  
Who in augmenting our  
species,  
Has been very productive,  
Also meritorious,  
Of recompense but unrequited,

María la de Gervasio,  
que va la pobre olvidada,  
  
hasta de los muchos pobres,  
que les dió feliz posada.

Maria she of Gervasio.  
Poor one she now goes  
forgotten,  
Even by the many poor,  
To whom she gave joyful shelter.

Y María la mocona,  
esta mujer achatada,  
va conforme con su chato,  
y a nadie le importa nada.

And Maria the snotty one,  
This flat-nosed woman,  
Accepts her flat nose  
And is of no bother to anyone.

María del José del Cuadro  
Ahí veréis también,  
que en los mares de amor,

Maria of José of the Square.  
There you'll see her also,  
Who in love's seas,

James W. Fernandez

ha sufrido su vaivén,  
si lo sufrió por su gusto,

nadie importa, hizo bien;  
ella misma se lo quiso,  
ella misma se lo ten.

Sigue María de Flora  
la pobre ya deflorada.  
y luego otras Marías,  
muchas bien aventuradas  
que en amores e ilusiones  
ni sufren ni piensan nada.  
Una es María del Pesquero  
que va sin hablar palabra.  
y María la papuina,  
Va con ella acompañada.

Has suffered her ups and downs.  
If she suffered from her own  
desire,

None blames her, she did right;  
She herself desired it,  
And she had what she desired.

Now follows Maria of Flora,  
The unfortunate deflowered one.  
And then come other Marias,  
Many of innocent felicity,  
That as far as love's illusions  
Neither suffer nor aspire.  
One is Maria of the fisher,  
That goes about without a word.  
And Maria of the little goiter,  
Who always accompanies her.

As the poem progresses there are so many Marias, such a progression of village women, that the poet despairs of his powers to provide a poetic vehicle for each of them. He also despairs about the “thousand plagues and quarrels” that he may be laying up for himself with these women because he lacks the “clarity of expression” to treat the fair sex with the proper delicacy. But

voy seguir a la que salga

o yo acabo con ellas  
o ellas conmigo acaban.

I will continue with each as she  
appears.

Either I will finish with them  
Or they will finish me off.

Periodically during the poem the poet plays upon the identification, more or less intended in village naming practices, between the Virgin and all those who are her village namesakes. Ceferino is sufficiently inventive to end the poem with a playful evocation of the Virgin in a prayer (*oración*) and a *salve* which turns out to be addressed much more to the Marias than to María. I emphasize the term “play” and “playfulness” because this prayer and salutation exploit with tongue in cheek not only the ambiguity existing between the name and the namesake but also the ambiguity between ultimate and immediate blessings—the ultimate blessing that only the Virgin can provide and the immediate domestic and corporeal blessings that only village women can provide to village menfolk. Indeed, as I say, the Blessed

Virgin is much less present in these final “religious invocations” than the real, physically present village women named after her.

*Evocación*

He nacido en mala hora,  
de tanta María que hay,  
no hay una que exhale un ay,  
por el mi bien a deshora.  
Ya no es merecedora,  
la mi suerte de este bien,  
de gozar del bello edén,  
que una María atesora.  
Aunque mi alma la llora,

ya con santa devoción,  
para las Marías todas  
me encomiendo esta oración.

*Oración*

Oh! Marías del amor,  
que a vuestras divinas plantas,  
me postro, porque me encantan,

y les pide por favor.  
Si me veréis con dolor,  
y de vos necesitado,  
dadme vuestra protección,  
dulce consuelo y amparo.  
En nada pongáis reparo,  
dulces prendas de mi vida,  
en darme lo que vos pida,  
de aquello que bien tenéis,  
y si vosotras queréis,  
hacer algo por my suerte,  
no temáis por la mi muerte,  
si cayera desmayado,  
y mi cuerpo abandonado,  
por natural accidente;  
ya me veréis de repente,  
glorioso y glorificado.

*Salve*

Salve, Marías de gracia,  
y de mil encantos llenar,

*Invocation*

I was born in a bad time,  
When there are so many Marias,  
Yet not one who will exclaim, Ay!  
For my good at a bad moment.  
Perhaps it does not merit  
My fortune such a boon,  
As to enjoy that lovely Eden  
That any Maria can treasure up.  
Although my heart cries out to  
her

Now with holy devotion,  
To all the Marias  
I dedicate this prayer.

*Prayer*

Oh! beloved Marias,  
At whose divine feet  
I am prostrate because they  
enchant me  
Beseeching your favor.  
If you see me suffering,  
And in need of you,  
Give me your protection,  
Sweet consolation and comfort.  
Let nothing prevent you,  
Sweet treasures of my life,  
In granting what I request,  
Of that you so surely possess,  
And if you should so wish,  
To influence my fate,  
Do not fear for my death,  
If I should faint away,  
And my body be abandoned,  
By some natural accident;  
You will see that I quickly  
Pass to glory glorified.

*Salutation*

Hail, Marias full of grace,  
You of a thousand enchantments,

James W. Fernandez

Salve bellas azucenas,  
y vuestra piedad me salve.  
  
en vuestro pecho se guarde,  
  
el perdón de mis agravios,  
no me miréis con resabio,  
amorosas criaturas;  
y dadme vuestras dulzuras,  
que mis dolores se acaben.  
Por esta bendita salve,  
les espero el santo bien,  
me lleváis a vuestra gloria,  
por siempre jamás, Amen!

Hail beautiful lilies,  
May your mercy be my  
salvation.  
Within your breast may you  
keep  
A pardon for my offenses,  
Do not regard me with distaste,  
Loving creatures;  
And grant me your sweet favors  
That my sufferings may end.  
Through this blessed hymn,  
I await a sainted well-being.  
Carry me to your glory,  
For ever and ever. Amen!

Beyond giving the anthropologist some idea of what was public knowledge and grist for gossip in the village, these two poems deal with various themes of anthropological interest. One of the themes is that of poetry as symbolic courtship, which is discussed below; Ceferino's employment of this theme derives both from his readings in the literature of courtly love, or even Platonic love, and from franker country traditions of the relation between the sexes. What is, however, most interesting in these two poems and what is at play, it seems to me, is the tension between generic or communal identity and individual identity. For although a given name is, as opposed to a family name, a gesture toward individual identity, the irony that Ceferino observed and played upon is that these individual names are so common that they are no longer individualizing. Since family names are also so very common in these villages (more than half of the villagers may carry the family name of González or Fernández or Rodríguez or García), individuality is given by reference to location, Juan of the Stable; or by reference to peculiarities, Juan the Curly-headed One; or by reference to the names or particularities of spouses or parents, Juan of Juana, Juan of the Lame One, Juan of the One-eyed One, Juan of the Watchmaker.

Such naming practices have been well studied in the literature, but this poem is revelatory in its exploration of the communal identity-individual identity dynamic. Ceferino explored this dynamic in other poems as well, as, for example, in *The Marriage of the Villages* (*Los casamientos de los pueblos*) in which he assigns male and female char-

acters to pairs of villages and marries them off. Such a poem follows the logic of *Juan de Juanes* or *Las Marías* in which a village is assigned an identity ("Juanes," for example) by reference to the name and sex most widely represented.

Atención noble auditorio!  
si podéis estar atentos:  
este vuestro servidor  
que orgulloso está de serlo,  
se encuentra en comisión,  
desde países muy lejos  
con gran autorización,  
y sagrado documento,

para emparejar los pueblos  
por medio del casamiento.

Ahora voy a empezar,  
en cumplir con mi destino,  
en casar a Felechosa  
con el lugarín del Pino.

Attention, noble audience!  
If you can be attentive:  
This your servant  
And proud to be so,  
Finds himself charged  
From very distant lands  
With the highest authorization,  
And by the most sacred  
document,

To pair up the villages  
By means of marriage.

Now I am going to begin,  
In fulfilling my charge  
By marrying Felechosa  
With the little town of Pino.

Ceferino not only assigns a sex but also a distinct character to each village, mostly according to popular views prevalent in the countryside at the time and by reference to popular metaphors. Of course these views express the sociocentrism characteristic of village life.

Y siguiendo mi carrera,  
Tengo que darme a casar,  
la chancla de Casomera,  
  
con el chiribitil de Villar.

And following my course,  
I must attend to marrying  
The old worn-out shoe of  
Casomera  
With hole-in-the-wall Villar.

The poem continues with rhymes to his own village:

Felechosa es buena moza,  
tiene ganas de comer,  
bebe, usa tabaquero,  
y café sabe moler.

Felechosa is a handsome girl,  
And she wants to eat;  
She can drink and roll cigars,  
And she knows how to grind  
coffee.

Aunque su futuro esposo,  
es mas pequeño y ruín,

Although her future husband  
Is smaller and less prosperous,

James W. Fernandez

es un joven provechoso,  
pues que se vayan al fin.

He's a worthwhile match,  
So let them go all the way and  
marry.

What this poem does, of course, is project individual identity upon another level, the level of the village. It is a logical outcome, as noted above, of the earlier poems about the Juans and the Marias in which identities at the individual level are aggregated at the community level. Anthropologically it is an instructive poem; in showing the diversity of character among the various villagers, it cautions against our reductionist tendency to generalize about peasant character or provincial character or national character when, in fact, the municipality, the valley, and the province from the local point of view are made up of congeries of individual Marias and Juans.

This tension between generic and individual identity and the ambiguity about what level of conceptualization identity processes are at work on are wonderfully captured in this set of poems—captured in a richer way than could any formal statement of the logic of it. We know that Ceferino felt this tension and this ambiguity very strongly. For, in a sense, his entire life was an attempt to assert his own individual identity and his own talent, his desire to know and to express himself in music and poetry and sculpture in the face of community disinterest, community constriction, and community unwillingness to recognize or encourage the expression of that individuality. So these poems work out in a playfully ironic way the creative Ceferino's own "literati" frustration with the constricting folk culture of his surroundings.

It is, perhaps, a bit more complicated than that. For by subsuming all the individual Juans of Caliao or Marias of Felechosa into one Maria or one Juan, or into a male or female partner apt for marriage, into one collective representation as it were, Ceferino is also expressing his own presumption to possess the generic voice, to speak for the entire community and to moralize in the fabulist's mode. He presumes, as many returned emigrants—*indianos* or *habaneros*—before and after him have presumed, that because of the distancing and the transcendence their emigration gave them, they had the wherewithal to speak for or pass judgment upon the Asturian community. Doubtless that distancing in part gave to Ceferino powers of expression denied to his fellow villagers. But it was also precisely that claim to the generic

voice, to the right to the collective representation, that his fellow villagers in their insistent egalitarianism, and despite how much they enjoyed some of his poems, denied to this *indiano*, this *habanero*, among them.

### Poetry as Symbolic Courtship

I have intended Ceferino's verse to stand at the center and to be the vehicle of the argument here. For he entitles my argument just as he entitles this essay. He gives it its *raison d'être*. This man and his verse are the *sine qua non* of what I have written about him. In discussing his life history, for example, I have avoided a psychological analysis that would have displaced, and possibly diminished, him into one or another psychological category or made him a dependent of theories and theorizers of interest to us professionally, but unknown and irrelevant to him. One aspect of Ceferino's psychological life, however, does bear commenting upon in the light of the particular verses presented here. And that is the fact that he never married—a fact that provided, as frustration or impediment, the impulse toward much of his poetry.

I remember, and he remembered well, that in his Havana days the first short verses he composed were in honor of young female co-workers or acquaintances. He remembered, for example, that on the top floor of the building where he lived, in the attic, was an apartment occupied by a beautiful young mulatto woman, Carmen Julia, and her mother. There was a shopkeeper on the street who was something of a womanizer, and one day he pointed out Carmen Julia on her balcony and promised Ceferino a drink if he would recite a verse to her on the spot. "So I asked her permission and on the spur of the moment I recited":

Cuando Usted mira hacia abajo	When you are looking down
E yo mirando hacia lo alto	And I am looking upward
Veo el reflejo de sus ojos	I see the reflection of your eyes
Como dos brillantes astros!	Like two brilliant celestial orbs!

And Ceferino remembered a beautiful young girl who worked in the factory with him and was being courted by a wolf (*lobo*), a formerly married man. He sent her this poem:

James W. Fernandez

Tú que más parece una niña  
Llena de gracia y hermosura  
No vas, cielito santo,

Echar por el suelo  
Todos tus encantos  
Por una cierta basura?

You who appear so much a girl  
Full of grace and beauty  
You are not going, divine  
heaven,  
To throw down to the ground  
All your enchantments  
For a certain piece of garbage?

In Cuba Ceferino became a great inventor of rhymed street compliments to the female sex (*piropos*). In his life history, after discussing this phase of his life, he asked rhetorically: "What is the good of such beauty in women if not to be looked upon and praised?" Whatever transpired between him and the women he came across in Cuba, when he returned to Felechosa it appeared that he did not consummate any relationship, and he continued to look upon women from a distance and praise them in poetic courtship. The variety of this verse was considerable. Into the handles of the various domestic utensils he carved, wooden spoons, for example, he would work such verses as:

Soy la cuchara la más feliz  
a servir la boquita

de una Huri

Soy la cuchara la más hermosa  
a servir la boquita  
de una rosa.

I am the happiest of spoons  
To be able to serve the little  
mouth  
Of a Houri.

I am the most beautiful of  
spoons  
For I can serve the little mouth  
Of a rose.

Ceferino continued to address throw-away verses, *alabanzas* he called them, to village women, married and unmarried alike. The first two that follow are to married women, and the third is to a girl whom Ceferino considered to be of rather promiscuous character. We note that he carefully maintains third-person reference when referring to married women. The more promiscuous girl he addresses in the second person.

Quisiera ser huracán,  
y elevarla hasta los cielos,  
para que digan los sabios,

de que hay un astro nuevo.

I would be a hurricane  
To lift her up to the heavens,  
In order that the learned may  
say  
That there is a new star.

Perdóneme Usted señora,  
del respeto que le debo,  
su hermosura me dió el tema,  
Y a veces callar no puedo.

Dulce Amada del amor,  
tierna viola del Abril,  
que dichoso es el barón  
que la vela en su dormir.

Para escribirte mi cielo,  
dame tu tintero gloria,  
que mi pluma de modelo,  
hará letra en tu memoria.

Pardon me, señora,  
Of the respect I owe you,  
Your beauty gave me my theme,  
And at times I cannot be quiet.

Sweet Amada of love,  
Sweet April violet,  
How fortunate is the man  
That watches over her in her  
sleep.

To write of you, my heaven,  
Give me your glorious inkwell,  
That my barrel pen  
Will write verses in your  
memory.

When, after the nationalist victory in 1937, a detachment of Civil Guards was stationed in the village to patrol against Republicans who had taken refuge in the hills, Ceferino wrote a poem addressing the courtship relation between the village beauties and these men. (I note only in passing the subliminal sexual imagery that often enough appeared in these efforts.)

Alto! una advertencia!  
doy al público sensato,  
del peligro y la influencia,

de las flores de este patio,  
que asaltan la guardia civil  
y aprisionan la de asalto;

tienen armas tan terribles,  
y un calibre de los diablos,  
que domenan y fascinan  
al más soberbio y más bravo,  
y unas espinas tan finas,  
que no se le va ni el gato.

Pero no hay que asustarse,  
Porque estos guardias cautos,  
en un momento propicio  
ya saben ponerse a salvo

Halt! A warning!  
I give to the prudent public  
(Notice) of the dangerous  
influence

Of the flowers of this patio,  
That assault the Civil Guard  
And imprison these assault  
troops;

They have such terrible arms,  
And of such a devilish caliber,  
That they tame and fascinate  
The proudest and the bravest,  
And with thorns so fine,  
Not even a cat could escape  
them.

But there is no reason for alarm,  
Because these wary guards  
In a propitious moment  
Will know how to save  
themselves

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disparando sus fusiles,  
contra esos bellos encantos,  
  
haciendo blancos al punto,  
y al punto dejan en blanco.

Discharging their rifles,  
Against these beauteous  
    enchantments,  
Finding their target instantly,  
And instantly rendering them  
    insignificant.

Ceferino's interest in the opposite sex and his symbolic courtship of women expressed itself in different poetic forms from throw-away verses to long romantic poems, such as the *Vixen's Child*, which is an account of an abandoned orphan girl saved by a fox. The poem is largely devoted to her courtship by a young nobleman.

While there are many poems of courtship in Ceferino's work, there are also poems devoted to the dangers presented by love for the opposite sex. Below is one from a series of short verses which Ceferino called *Refranes con filosofia barata* ("Proverbs offering a cheap philosophy"). Following this poem in his notebook was another which evoked the relationship of all women to the mother figure. This relation seems to have animated Ceferino's symbolic courtship and, perhaps, at the same time, prevented its normal fruition in marriage.

En los mares del amor,  
todos se quieren bañar  
sin pensar en el temor  
de lo que pueda pasar,  
ese mar es un traidor  
no sirve saber nadar.

In the seas of love,  
All wish to bathe themselves  
Thoughtless of the fearfulness  
Of that which could occur,  
That sea is treacherous  
It is of no use knowing how to  
    swim.

No hables mal de las mujeres,  
ni hacia el diablo las compares,  
debe de pensar si quieres,  
  
que una mujer fue tu madre.

Do not speak badly of women,  
Nor compare them to the devil,  
You should be willing to  
    recognize  
That your mother was a woman.

As suggested, a number of themes thread through Ceferino's poetry. But the two major themes, those problems that animate the poet toward poetic solutions, are that of individual and generic identity and that of courtship or the relation between the sexes. A close relationship exists between these two themes. For courtship and marriage are directed toward and effect the creation of a supra-individual or generic identity through the emergence of a married couple—the smallest

corporate unit of community. Though Ceferino did not, for whatever reason, bring this about in his own life (if he had, he might not have written so much poetry about it), nevertheless, he courted effectively and effusively in his poetry and brought about many marriages—even marriages between villages. Essentially a lonely, transported individual, Ceferino nevertheless maintained perceptive, if playful, relationships with his fellow villagers and their characters, well captured in his poetry. And ironically, he achieved for them what he could not achieve for himself: a generic (and fully gendered) identity as well as an identification with community.

### Conclusion: “Ripeness Is All”—A Poetics for Anthropology

In the late 1960s when I was teaching at Dartmouth College, the college, using a much earlier generation of computers than we have now, was developing the Basic language. A group of us experimented with generating computer verse—randomly recombining, within a constant framework of functors, a large set of subjects and objects, and qualifications and predications upon them. This verse did not rhyme, unlike Ceferino’s, but it *was* rather suggestive. I once sent an example of it to the late Victor Turner. He wrote back, with his usual perceptiveness and wit, that he was impressed with how much “poetry” the computer could write and how fast it could write it. But he did not think it could write, “Ripeness is all.” Turner, of course, was referring to Shakespeare’s “Men must endure / Their going hence, even as their coming hither: / Ripeness is all” (*King Lear* 5.2.9–11). I think he meant the computer could not write in real time.

It seems to me that this observation can be taken to stand for, to express, a feeling that lies behind much of the “poetics” movement in the social sciences and anthropology, whether we mean those studies derived from hermeneutics and semiotics or the anthropologist’s own poetry. It is a feeling that so many of our analyses, or systematic formalizations of our field experience, are not being written in real time. They do not contain that complex and often ambiguous interplay of forces coming into being and forces passing away—of men and women “going hence” and “coming hither”—that makes up the human experience of ripeness.

The computer could suggest, but it could not write like Ceferino in real time. He was a man, in my “real time” with him, far past his

“ripe” time, though he could remember it and its frustration, which he had expressed in his poetry. He was a man, after all, whose great experiences in life were a “going hence” and a “coming hither” again—struggling to find his voice and his identity between individual and generic identities. He was a man who had long searched for a frustrated and then a lost “ripeness,” although in the end his realization of such experience was mainly poetic. In this poetry was a struggle—the poetic struggle and the poetic challenge—to meld the contraries of his career, contraries, perhaps, of the human condition itself. I say “challenge” because Ceferino was clearly aware of the challenges of his life to which he did not or could not respond. In counterpart, in his poetry he did meet these challenges, for the most part with wry irony. And he thus in this register preserved for later memory the ripest, the fullest and the most fleeting, moments of his life.

Somewhere in the middle of his poetic career in the 1930s (the two verses bear no date), Ceferino had enough awareness of the fleetingness of that career to compose his own epitaph.

Yace Ceferino Suárez,  
en este sitio enterrado  
que vivió en este mundo,  
ni envidioso ni envidiado.

Si no consigo panteón,  
para señalar mi tierra;  
que me pongan un moyón,  
como los que hay en la vega.

Ceferino Suárez lies,  
Interred in this place  
Who lived in this world,  
Neither envious nor envied.

If I achieve no pantheon  
To mark my piece of earth  
Let them put up a fieldstone,  
Like those that divide fields in  
the valley.

The field marker seems an appropriate metaphor for one (we remember Victor Turner’s phrase) so “betwixt and between” childhood and adulthood, “betwixt and between” bachelorhood and marriage, “betwixt and between” the covetousness and envy of his fellow villagers and the disinterestedness of a “transported” personality, “betwixt and between” his barely literate community and the bookishness of the Spanish literary tradition.

When I knew Ceferino and took his life history, he was in his very old age. The bloom was long gone from his cheeks. He might be thinking, but he could not write “ripeness is all.” He was living not in real time but in recalled time. But it is our fortune that he preserved and we could retrieve the notebook of his scribbled verse—verse

*Ceferino Suárez*

written in his ripe time when his transported intelligence was shot through with the desire to express his feelings about himself, his fellow villagers, and his villages. I can hardly imagine a more authentic document upon which to base an anthropological poetics.

*Notes*

1. Félix María Samaniego, *Fábulas* (Buenos Aires: Espasa Calpe Argentina, S.A., 1946).