A PASSIONATE PILGRIMAGE: ON POET ALFONSINA STORNI

An Essay by Dianna Henning

As dedicated, and often as inspiring, a poet as Russia's Anna Akhmatova or this country's Louise Bogan, is Argentina's Alfonsina Storni (May 29, 1892 - October 25, 1938). Storni has been largely overlooked by English-speaking translators and critics.

As with Akhmatova and Bogan, the dynamics of traditional male/female tensions are keenly evident in Storni's poems. Both Akhmatova and Bogan were contemporaries of Storni but it remains questionable as to whether these writers are direct influences on Storni. Storni had a friendship with Chilean poet Gabriela Mistral (upon Storni's death, Mistral called her a woman of a great city "who has passed, touching all and incorporating all."), and was intimately familiar with the French Symbolist poets, Charles Baudelaire and Paul Verlaine. Her work resembles Verlaine's in that it is often a poetry of the heart, and driven by strong sentiment.

Another of Storni's contemporaries, Vincente Huidobro, believed that the true poet must return to the moment in which creation becomes the act of naming where one must place one's self at the threshold of intuition; a place which precedes all language — the place of inspiration. This is the originating point from which Rachel Phillips, author of *Alfonsiana Storni: From Poetess To Poet*, believes Storni drew her inspiration for the poems in her last and best book, a work that reveals restraint over powerful emotions: *Mascarilla y trébol (Mask and Clover)*.

The spirit Storni possessed, and the difficulties she surmounted, can best be relayed by quoting Sonia Jones's "Final Appraisal" in her book entitled *Alfonsina Storni:*

"After a careful reading of the entire corpus of Alfonsina Storni's work — her seven volumes of poetry and miscellaneous poems, her dozens of plays and short stories, and her scores of essays and articles — one is left with the feeling that this prodigious output is perfect testimony to the incredible courage and stubborn determination she had to possess in order to get around the many obstacles that would have prevented lesser women from ever becoming writers at all. This she accomplished by making many painful sacrifices. She was forced to adopt a defiant attitude toward those who held traditional opinions about women and their so-called roles, thus inviting much unneeded and undeserved criticism. She was forced to accept outrageously low wages for long hours of tedious work, during which time me she left her son in the care of others. She fought hard and long before she was taken seriously by the male artists and intellectuals of her day."

Storni was never able to satisfy all her readers. On the one hand she was too emotionally charged for some readers, yet when she toned down her writing she was accused of being obscure and lacking lyricism. Rachel Phillips says, "The poet… told Manuel Ugarte (a critic) that her last book, 1934's *Mundo de Siete Pozos* (*World of Seven Wells*), was the best thing she had done in her life. Ugarte's reaction to the book had been less than favorable — he describes his *reservas cordials* and Alfonsina accused him of being both hidebound and old-fashioned."

Keenly aware of both her public's and her critics' taste, Storni had anticipated adverse reactions to this latest book; she knew she had broken with the strong emotionality that had driven her earlier work. Though the book is still emotionally charged, her restraint was evident. Phillips continues, "Her comments on her last poems are a plea that their so-called hermeticism be seen as no more than the resistance of the medium, which everyone who shares in the creative experience, poet or reader, artist or audience, can justifiably be expected to overcome."

It is curious, and it perhaps has to do with survival of one's voice, that so many poets of Storni's time were writing emotionally charged poems: Akhmatova, Bogan, H.D., Gabriela Mistral, Elinor Wylie and Edna St. Vincent Millay, to name a few.

Were they the early spokespersons for a feminist sensibility, forerunners of the women's movement? With these questions in mind let us take a look at this poem by Storni:

Ancestral Weight

You said to me: My father didn't cry;
You said to me: My grandfather didn't cry;
The men of my race have never cried.
They were men of steel.

While you were speaking, a tear sprouted on your cheek
And fell into my mouth… I have never drunk
So much venom from so small a glass.

Weak woman that I am, poor woman,
Woman who understands,
I knew the pain of centuries when I tasted it;
This soul of mine cannot stand up
Under all that weight.
(1)

In *Writing and Sexual Difference*, edited by Elizabeth Abel, Judith Kegan Gardiner says in her essay, "On Female Identity and Writing By Women": "In a male-dominated society, being a man means not being like a woman. As a result, the behavior considered appropriate to each gender become severely restricted and polarized." A sense of polarization can be found in the previously quoted poem and in "I Wrung My Hands" by Anna Akhmatova:

I wrung my hands under my dark veil…
"Why are you pale, what makes you reckless?"
— Because I have made my loved one drunk
with an astringent sadness.

I'll never forget. He went out reeling;
his mouth was twisted, desolate.
I ran downstairs, not touching the banisters,
and followed him as far as the gate.

And shouted, choking: "I meant it all
in fun. Don't leave me, or I'll die of pain."
He smiled at me — oh so calmly, terribly —
and said: "Why don't you get out of the rain?"
(2)

Akhmatova attempts to communicate with the protagonist here, but he denies what she feels. He remains distant and aloof, and smiles under her anguish. With the fortitude of cool detachment he offhandedly suggests that she get out of the rain, as though looking on from a great distance. There's a sense of emotional immediacy in Akhmatova's poem, as though it were driven not by intellect alone, but rather by the body's language.

Like Akhmatova's example, many of Storni's poems are packed with similar traditional gender tensions, but the speaker of her more mature work looks on with a sense of objectivity. Depicting a similar predicament Storni says in her sonnet "Forgetfulness":

Lydia Rosa: today is Tuesday and it's cold.
In your gray stone house, you sleep at the edge
Of the city. Do you still hang onto your lovesick heart
Now that you have died of love? I'll tell you what's happening:

The man you adored, the man with the cruel gray eyes,
He's smoking his cigarette in the autumn afternoon.
From behind the windowpanes, he watches the yellow sky
And the street in which faded papers swirl.

He takes a book, draws near to the heater,
And sitting down, he turns it on.
Only the noise of clawed paper can be heard.

Five o'clock. You fell into his arms at that hour,
And maybe he remembers you… But his soft bed
Now holds the warm hollow of another rosy body.
(3)

Here, and in the previous poem by Akhmatova, the use of ellipses indicates what cannot be said, a silence lingering in the readers' ears. As in Akhmatova's poem there is a sense of cool removal. "From behind the window panes, he watches the yellow sky." Both speakers in these poems seem to be talking to someone who doesn't listen, to someone who does not understand them.

Storni called her sonnets "anti-sonnets," and wrote them, for the most part, in blank verse. Storni writes in the "Breve Explication," her prologue to *Mascarilla y trébol,* "these anti-sonnets of literary posture" are the results of moments of near loss of consciousness… the relative looseness of their form is attributed by Storni herself as the irresistible force with which the inspiration for each poem came to her; obviously she wanted to exercise control over her subject matter in these poems of intense inspiration. The fact that Storni called them *antisonetos* does not lesson their essential sonnet-ness except to emphasize rhythm and meter in the absence of rhyme.

Being influenced by the symbolist movement, Storni moved throughout her writing career between the constraints of form and the desire for freedom. This struggle between the two forces is evidenced in a quote by Charles Chadwick in his book *Symbolism*: "It is because of this desire to attain fluidity of music that Symbolist poetry so often refused to conform to the rigid conventions as regards versification which, despite the earlier revolutionary efforts of the Romantic poets, still held sway in France."

Five years later on another continent, Louise Bogan wrote with equal intensity that she too be heard:

The Daemon

Must I tell again
In the words I know
For the ears of men
The flesh, the blow?

Must I show outright
The bruise in the side,
The halt in the night,
And how death cried?

Must I speak to the lot
Who little bore?
It said why not?
It said Once more.
(4)

Using rhyme and compression, Bogan makes a terse three stanza poem that through its tightness creates power. The use of "must" here reveals a heightened sense of urgency. Bogan told May Sarton: "The Daemon was given one afternoon almost between one curb of a street and another."

This poem speaks of the fury of creation, of the driving force that compels an artist. There is also an underlying subtext which wonders if the speaker will be heard. Much in the same way Storni and Akhmatova create a tone of quiet desperation, so too does Bogan. This is not the poetry of contrivance. It comes off the heels of intensity. Sam Hamill says in his essay "Only One Sky": "… yet so very much recent North American poetry has been the articulation of cultured melancholy, of the elegant ennui of an unnamable sadness of the middle class."

These writers did not create poems of "cultured melancholy."

In her essay, "Husband-Right and Father-Right," from her book *On Lies, Secrets, and Silences/Selected Prose, 1966-1978*, Adrienne Rich writes, "In every life there are experiences, painful and at first disorienting, which by their very intensity throw a sudden floodlight on the ways we have been living, the forces that control our lives, the harsh but liberating facts we have been enjoined from recognizing. Some people allow such illumination only the brevity of a flash of sheet-lightening that throws a whole landscape into sharp relief, after which the darkness of denial closes again."

Does Storni's writing prompt the reader to enter the dangerous territory of the human heart? Phillips opines, "It is not until the posthumous last volume, *Mascarilla y trébol*, with its anti-sonnets, that the liberated poet and woman can blend together in one voice. Almost every one of these poems carries its own explosive charge, made more powerful by the rigidity of the fourteen lined form. This formal restriction, combined with great inner tension, propels the reader into the wider fields of universals, to which successful art provides a rite of passage. These poems, like the late poems of Sylvia Plath, show that intensity within the poet's psyche can sometimes work its magic on the commonplace. On the other hand, one regrets that this moment of greatest promise was not the springboard for later poetry, which might have been truly memorable."

In looking at her anti-sonnet "To Eros," that explosive charge to which Phillips refers is clear. Here, Storni uses nature as a symbolic interpretation of mood. Phillips says of this poem: "The fiction which this poem creates is that of emotions completely dominated. The speaker is as indifferent to pain inflicted as to danger averted. Victory comes easily—but the price is high, for the killing of Eros has meant the demythification of love itself."

To Eros

I caught you by the neck:
on the shore of the sea, while you shot
arrows from your quiver to wound me
and on the ground I saw your flowered crown.

I disemboweled your stomach like a doll's
and examined your deceitful wheels,
and deeply hidden in your golden pulleys
I found a trapdoor that said: sex.

On the beach I held you, now a sad heap,
up to the sun, accomplice to your deeds,
before a chorus of frightened sirens.

Your deceitful godmother, the moon
was climbing through the crest of dawn,
and I threw you in the mouth of waves.
(5)

Unlike other sonnets of her time, Storni uses blank verse and no deliberate rhyme pattern. Since blank verse employs iambic pentameter, there is a sense of spoken language in some of her poems. In "To Eros," she is vehemently disillusioned with the god of love — she disembowels him, (for many cultures the bowels are the seat of feeling) because he attempted to wound her with his arrows. By making him mechanical, she reduces Eros to a plaything; he becomes her doll. Only when she has disarmed him can she again hold him as a concept, thereby creating a sense of distance. Since the deceitful godmother is approaching with the "crest of dawn" she throws him into the ocean to prevent further treachery.

Sonia Jones says, "She started out by worshiping the god of love only to discover, finally, that passion was based on illusions and on repetitious situations which always led to the same dead end. When she realized that she had been mocked by the god who was actually no more than a mechanical toy, she struggled to rid herself of his unwelcomed and yet attractive hold. But it was not until the last year of her life that she found a replacement for her idol, and she knelt before Poetry just as she had bowed to Passion."

The cancer that had plagued her in 1935, resulting in a mastectomy, returned again in 1938. Faced with that, Storni chose to end her life by throwing herself into the sea. The same place she had thrown Eros.

The conclusion of the following poem, her final, is filled with irony. And again, failed communication dominates Storni's preoccupations:

I'm Going To Sleep

Teeth of flowers, coif of dew,
hands of herbs, you, fine nurse,
prepare for me the sheets of earth
and the quilt of brushed moss.

I'm going to sleep, my nurse; put me to bed.
Place a lamp beside my bed —
a constellation, whichever you like;
they're all fine; turn it down a little.

Leave me alone. You can hear the shoots burst forth…
A heavenly foot rocks your cradle from above
and a bird draws you measurements

so that you may forget… Thank you. Oh, one request:
if he phones again,
tell him not to insist, that I have gone out…
(6)

In this poem there's no pathos, no sentimentality. There is a sense of control, as though it were a matter of fact, a walk from one room into another.

The way Storni ended her life was as radical as how she lived it. Known as an unconventional woman, and sometimes an outcast in the Catholic world of Argentina, which was controlled by the patriarchy, Storni chose to throw herself into the sea. She would not undergo surgery for breast cancer again.

Religion was not an option for her — it would offer an atheist no comfort. Storni says in "To My Lady Of Poetry": "With a promise to mend my ways through your/divine grace, I humbly place on your/ hem a little green branch,/for I could not have possibly lived/cut off from your shadow, since you blinded me/at birth with your fierce branding iron."

The poem becomes the only form of religion Storni could belong to. "The little green branch" finally becomes a sacrament.

Hers was a bold life lived with intensity. What she managed to accomplish with her last book was to leave definitive evidence of that. Like Akhmatova and Bogan, Storni turned strong feelings into poems, but unlike them, many of her poems today remain like Eros, cast into the sea.

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Endnotes:
(1) Translation by Marion Freeman, Mary Crow, *Alforsina Storni Selected Poems*, White Pine Press, 1987
(2) Translation by Stanley Kunitz, Selected poems of Anna Ahlmatova, Broadaxe Books, 1989
(3) Translation by Marion Freeman, Mary Crow, *Alforsina Storni Selected Poems*, White Pine Press, 1987
(4) from *The Blue Estuaries: Poems: 1923-1968*, FS&G, 1995
(5) Translation by Kay Short, *Alforsina Storni Selected Poems*, White Pine Press, 1987
(6) Unidentified translator

(Editor's note: This essay was adapted from the author's Conference Paper, 20th Century Literature Conference, University of Louisville, 1990. The specific translators of the Storni & Ahkmatova poems used here are cited where known.)