

JOSÉ JURADO MORALES (ed.), *La poesía iba en serio. La Escritura de Ana Rossetti*, Madrid, Visor Libros, 2013, 375 págs.

The publication in 1980 of Ana Rossetti's first book of poetry, *Los devaneos de Erato*, heralded the entrance into the Spanish literary arena of a major creative talent. The young writer's poetic debut captured the attention of critics and was awarded that year's Premio Gules. Since that auspicious beginning, Rossetti has written steadily and abundantly: among her volumes of poetry are the titles *Indicios vehementes*, *Devocionario*, granted the Premio Internacional del Rey Juan Carlos I; *Punto umbrío*, and *Llenar tu nombre*, to name only a few. While most widely known for her poetry, she has fruitfully ventured beyond the perimeters of that genre, with the novel *Plumas de España* and the short story collection *Alevosías*, which earned her the Premio la Sonrisa Vertical for erotic fiction. She has made substantial contributions to Spain's thriving children's literature industry, has participated in numerous capacities in the world of Spanish theater, and is an accomplished essayist. Whether collaboratively or independently, she has explored experimental forms such as performance poetry.

It is not surprising, given her prolific production, that Ana Rossetti has become an accepted presence in Spanish letters and is increasingly the subject of critical study and scholarly analysis, both in Spain and internationally. An excellent collection of essays devoted to her work, *P/Herversions. Critical Studies of Ana Rossetti*, edited by Jill Robbins, appeared in 2004. Now, a decade later and almost forty years into her remarkably fertile career, it seems fitting that the University of Cádiz has collaborated in the publication of a second such monograph in honor of this native *gaditana*. Edited by José Jurado Morales, *La poesía iba en serio: La escritura de Ana Rossetti*, is comprised of thirteen essays occasioned by the III Seminario de Literatura Actual dedicated to the poet and coordinated by Professor Jurado Morales at the University of Cádiz in November 2012.

The book opens with two short texts: an introduction by the editor and an expression of gratitude by the poet to inaugurate the seminar in her honor. In his introduction, Jurado Morales traces Rossetti's artistic evolution and contextualizes her work within the specific circumstances of her time and place: namely, the Spanish cultural and sociopolitical climate of the 1970s and 1980s. He also considers her relevance both to individual writers and to so-called

“generations” of poets loosely conjoined by one or another of the numerous divergent writing styles, esthetic tendencies, and ideological orientations that characterize the heterogeneity of Spanish contemporary literature. In concluding his prefatory remarks, Jurado Morales selects a telling analogy, that of mid-century poet Jaime Gil de Biedma, to evoke the *zeitgeist* of the decades that presumably fueled Ana Rossetti’s initial poetic efforts. In “No volveré a ser joven,” Gil de Biedma looks ruefully back at those pleasure-driven days, with the words that (with a slight alteration) give this compilation of essays its title: “La vida iba en serio.” It remains for the central portion of the book to demonstrate the relevance of these words to Ana Rossetti’s ever more reflective and profound creative trajectory.

The contents of the volume are arranged either on the basis of the genre studied or the extension, focus, or theme of the articles. The first two, for example, examine Rossetti’s writings as a whole, and are similar in their expansive scope and objective: namely, to underscore the cohesiveness and unity of Ana Rossetti’s richly variegated art. Both Marina Bianchi and Ana Sofía Pérez-Bustamante Mourier take a comprehensive approach, the better to reveal the arc of the writer’s development from the earliest to the most recent manifestations. Both authors acknowledge that the labels so often employed to contain Rossetti within restrictive categories (postmodern, *novísimo*, *Movida*, etc.) may describe a part, but not the entirety of her *oeuvre*. Bianchi’s and Pérez-Bustamante’s wide-ranging articles rightly precede the others, which generally focus on one book, one aspect, or a specific moment in Rossetti’s body of work. One example is the erotic content of her poetry, which gained immediate attention as well as a certain notoriety. Yet for her, the theme of eroticism is not an end in itself, nor is it intended to stir prurient interests; rather it is meant to provoke, to question, and to challenge the strictures imposed on both sexes by societal expectations and repressive institutional codes of conduct.

Clearly, the issue of eroticism is paramount to Rossetti, since for her, it is inextricably intertwined with questions of identity, self and other, gender stereotypes, and a host of other weighty issues. It continues to occupy the attention of her readers, including several of the authors contributing to the volume we are considering. María Payeras Grau and Blas Sánchez Dueñas consider the poet in light of the tradition of the *jarchas*, Santa Teresa de Jesús, women writers of

the 1950's generation, and other female predecessors, distant and near, who put woman's desire and the experience of sensuality at the center of their writing, thus creating a female discourse that was by definition transgressive and also a direct challenge to the imposition of female silence under patriarchy.

As has already been noted, Ana Rossetti is famously resistant to being branded with predetermining tags, including that of "feminist." She is equally opposed to claims that she has created a new tradition of women's poetry or that she speaks for women or, indeed, for any other group. Nevertheless, that the representation of the sexes in her writing destabilizes the historically entrenched binary definition of the sexes is incontrovertible. One example, according to Antonia Víñez Sánchez, is the medieval myth of Isolda, re-imagined by Ana Rossetti as a reversal of archetypal gender roles that empowers the eponymous protagonist while rendering her lover passive and weak. Jennifer Heacock-Renaud's article convincingly argues that Rossetti's open-ended texts at once invite a multiplicity of interpretations, create a space for women's agency, and in turn leave an aperture through which heterosexuals, gays, as well as any other demographic on the sexual spectrum is allowed to enter and claim a rightful place.

Such inversion, not only of genders but also of genres and other constricting categories and hierarchies, is one of Rossetti's preferred modes of transgression. The present group of essays proffers examples of her subversive parodies of gender roles and of the absolutist ideologies and fear-inducing practices of liturgical Catholicism. Tina Escaja, for example, analyzes key selections from *Devocionario* that exemplify the poet's use of irony and carnivalesque play strategies to invert and interchange Catholic rhetoric and ritual with erotic forms and behaviors.

The remaining essays explore Rossetti's highly eclectic writings from *Punto umbrío* forward. Published in 1995, *Punto umbrío* is a complex, deeply philosophical collection of poetry. In María Teresa Navarrete Navarrete's judgment, it traces the circular journey of the poetic self around the concept of love. As the title suggests, we can interpret this collection as a re-vision of the mystic dark night of the soul, a spiritual search and a path of self-exploration from darkness into light. Similarly, the 2008 *Llenar tu nombre*, in Olga Rendón Infante's appraisal, is another spiritual search, a metapoetic journey to plumb the mysteries inherent in the very act of poetic creation. In Rendón Infante's analysis, the creative process, whether of poetry or

of any other form of artistic expression, is a spiritual exercise and a state of grace, at once an act of self-revelation and of communication.

José Jurado Morales's "La nota disonante de Ana Rossetti: protesta social y conciencia humanitaria en su última escritura," delves into the 1996 *La nota del blues*, whose title the poet herself defines as "un canto a la diferencia y la divergencia" (278). Of course, her affinity for the marginalized and ex-centric is by no means of recent vintage. Rossetti's readers will recall the dubious characters who inhabit her early poems: the voyeurs, incestuous siblings, unabashed seducers of virgins and priests; and Gilles de Rais, the 15th-century French pederast, child-murderer, and sexual outlaw *par excellence*. Jurado Morales recognizes in *La nota del blues* and in the as yet unpublished *Geografía de lágrimas* an evolved poetic persona that no longer speaks in the voice of mythological figures, historical personages, or characters portrayed in literature or in painting. The avatars of "difference" in Rossetti's recent work include those who suffer injustice or abuse, be it domestic violence, political repression, or denial of fundamental human rights. They transcend the printed page because they are a part of the real world. Jurado Morales traces Rossetti's artistic progression from her starting point as saboteur of conventional social mores and moral constraints; to a more intimate, confessional style in keeping with the self-exploration and self-discovery afforded by the processes of poetry; to her current endeavors, that reveal a growing awareness of the ills and perils lying beyond the self. This greater awareness finds expression in poetry, to be sure, but also in a humane, active engagement *vis-à-vis* the fraught world.

Jill Robbins's reading of the 1988 parodic novel *Plumas de España* returns us to issues of identity and gender, but her analysis expands beyond the individual to attain significance at the national and global levels. With an Andalusian transvestite at its center, the narrative is a complex layering of themes relating to identity politics, gender authenticity, the enduring supremacy of the Andalusian male stereotype over the traditionally devalued Andalusian female, and finally, Andalusia itself as a kind of "queer" provincial outpost of Madrid, historic center of Spanish national identity.

Miguel Soler Gallo attests to the problematic genesis of Rossetti's critically overlooked 1994 *Mentiras de papel*: as a commissioned piece it was subject to commercial dictates as well as editorial conditions that resulted in numerous false starts. In its final

incarnation as a *novela rosa*, it was afflicted with the *a priori* stigma that attaches to what is generally dismissed as an inferior, even trivial form – the more so, for its overwhelmingly female audience. *Mentiras de papel* adheres to some of the hallmarks of that genre but deviates from others. Marriage, for instance, is the sole objective in the life of the customary heroines of the *novela rosa*, whereas Rossetti's women are independent, professionally ambitious, and not easily persuaded by guarantees of a happy ending. Soler Gallo concludes that, by exposing her female protagonists to some of the harsher aspects of reality, Rossetti has created an entertainment that nonetheless contains a sobering cautionary message.

The final essay is Blanca Flores Cueto's "Los baúles de Ana Rossetti: su literatura para niños y niñas," which provides further corroboration – if any were needed -- of the breadth and multifarious nature of the author's literary production. Perhaps even more significant is Rossetti's refusal to accord more value to one form or genre than another or, for that matter, to assign a youthful audience any less importance than her adult readership. Flores Cueto's assessment of Rossetti's stories for children echoes a statement made elsewhere in this collection regarding "la voz de carne y hueso que tiene que ver no solo con la poesía sino con la vida misma" (279). In his essay José Jurado Morales comments on Rossetti's active participation in any number of social and political projects and campaigns. These include demonstrations of solidarity with Latin America, espousal of cultural programs abandoned or left unfunded due to Spain's economic crisis, support in 2012 for the formation of a commission to investigate crimes perpetrated under Franco, among other pressing issues. For her part, Flores Cueto asserts that Rossetti's writing for young people conforms with the traditional model for children's literature, which in turn follows the age-old imperative to delight and to teach. Her books and stories for young people are part of her current involvement with Spanish schools and libraries in pedagogical enterprises whose purpose is to increase Spain's literacy index; at the same time these programs reflect her desire to instill an early love of language and a devotion to reading among her younger readers. More important still is the author's resolve to inculcate in Spanish youth values of peaceful, harmonious coexistence in today's diverse world. Such are the signs that vindicate the title of this collection.

“La poesía iba en serio” is an important addition to scholarship devoted to a writer whose stature is steadily growing, both within Spain and beyond Spanish borders. The extensive bibliography that closes the collection provides further evidence of this. Compiled by editor Jurado Morales and Gilda Perretta, it consists of Rossetti’s complete works and an up-to-date listing of the many articles and essays that study them. The more broadly focused initial essays will be an essential resource for readers new to the work of this important author whose range of styles and genres is rich and varied, yet esthetically and thematically unified. For scholars and others who are already well acquainted with Spain’s cultural landscape over the second half of the twentieth century and the early years of the twenty-first, it will also be indispensable reading. There is a wealth of material here to deepen readers’ understanding of the complex, diverse nature of Spanish contemporary letters in general and poetry in particular. Indeed, Ana Rossetti’s artistic trajectory is almost emblematic of the crisscrossing esthetic currents that together make up Spain’s current literary terrain. Significantly too, the passage from one stage to another in her evolution as a writer has not occurred in a vacuum, but rather against the backdrop of transformative moments in Spain’s recent socio-cultural reality: the fading of the dictatorship, the emergence of the democratic state, the euphoria of newfound freedoms during the Transition, the disillusionment brought about by the consequences of hedonism.

A reader might quibble over a slightly distracting number of typos and, as is to be expected in any compilation, the quality of the essays varies, although relatively little. All have been held to a high standard; the volume as a whole represents a considerable critical contribution.

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