



The Poetry of Ana Rossetti: A Retrospective View

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Abstract: After 32 years of prominence on the Spanish literary scene, Ana Rossetti has continued to develop her original and arresting poetic voice. Her early poetry explores, with verbal artistry, daring, and playfulness, issues of gender and sexuality. A retrospective examination of her poetry over the last three decades, alongside her narrative works and books for children, reveals continued inventiveness and creativity. A picture emerges of two different phases in Rossetti's work — the early stage when aesthetics and eroticism predominate, and the later stage when self-realization, introspection, and generativity assume a larger role. As Rossetti matures, she moves toward a poetry of increasing self-revelation and emotional depth, as in such works as *Punto umbrío* and *Llenar tu nombre* (2008). Although known primarily for daringly destabilizing gender and genre, she increasingly demonstrates as well her belief in self-realization, fidelity to oneself, and the courage to act. Her work as a whole rests on an ethos of questioning, openness, and action.

Keywords: twentieth- and twenty-first century Spanish poetry, post-Franco era, Ana Rossetti, gender categories, generativity.

Resumo: Depois de 32 anos de proeminência na cena literária espanhola, Ana Rossetti continua a desenvolver sua dicção poética original e surpreendente. Sua poesia primeira explora, com talento verbal, ousadia e jocosidade, questões de gênero e de sexualidade. Um exame retrospectivo de sua poesia nas últimas três décadas, levando em conta também as obras narrativas e livros infantis, revela criatividade e engenho. Um padrão emerge de duas diferentes fases no trabalho de Rossetti — um primeiro estágio quando predominam estética e erotismo e um posterior quando a autorrealização, a introspecção e a geratividade (noção usada por Erik Erikson, psicanalista americano, que denota a capacidade de influenciar gerações mais jovens) assumem papel mais relevante. Ao amadurecer, Rossetti avança para uma poesia de crescente autorrevelação e profundidade emocional, como se vê em obras como *Punto umbrío* e *Llenar tu nombre* (2008). Embora reconhecida por desestabilizar com ousadia gêneros sexuais e literários, ela demonstra cada vez mais sua

crença na autorrealização, na fidelidade a si mesma, e na coragem de agir.

Sua obra se apoia num ethos de questionamento, abertura e ação.

Palavras-chave: poesia espanhola dos séculos 20 e 21, era pós-franquista, Ana Rossetti, categorias de gênero, geratividade.

Since her remarkable voice burst on the Spanish cultural scene in the 1980s, Ana Rossetti has ceaselessly explored her creative talents through poetry, novels, stories, children's books, opera librettos, and plays.¹ Her poetry, in particular, has generated an excitement that few poets arouse in their public. My own sense of discovery on first encountering her work over two decades ago has been echoed by my students' reactions on reading her poems for the first time. In Spain, she has won significant prizes, and in the United States her work has attracted attention from a long list of accomplished scholars. Some 25 substantial articles on her work appeared in US scholarly journals in the 1990s alone. Rossetti also figures prominently in books on Spanish women poets in particular and on contemporary Spanish poetry in general.² In 2004, a volume of essays edited by Jill Robbins significantly expanded the critical literature on Rossetti. The penetrating essays in that volume included discussion of some of her lesser known works— her novels, her children's literature, her collaborations with visual artists, and even her catalog copy for the fashion industry. Cristina Moreiras-Menor characterized Robbins's volume as "una reflexión cuidadosa, informativa y crítica sobre la enorme variedad genérica y temática del trabajo de la autora, . . . un magnífico trabajo introductorio a la obra de Rossetti" (400). The broad approaches taken in the essays in Robbins's book affirm Rossetti's ceaseless creativity, exploration, and openness to new challenges. As a whole, critical literature on Rossetti suggests an underlying aesthetic and ethical consistency that persists in her work across genres and decades, despite the diversity of her production.

Rossetti's work has clearly stimulated a rich dialogue of sometimes divergent opinions that generally define her as a transformative figure in the history of 20th and 21st century Spanish culture. Paradoxes and complexities, however, mark her poetic trajectory: she plays with revealing and concealing, creates ambiguity through double meanings, and rejects manichaeistic judgments while simultaneously exhibiting a desire to edify. In addition to the erotic vein that began with her early works, several texts from the mid-1990s

explore the creation of the self over time, the development of agency through fortitude, the paradoxical surrender of the self to a kind of life force. Such facets of her work valorize elements that can seem contradictory: submission and rebellion at once, receptivity and initiative, active self-realization and the acceptance of destiny. Though her early work is not devoid of political intent and her later work continues to embody aesthetic refinement, her work has with time expanded its humanistic import. In the observations that follow, I will take a retrospective look at what I consider two different phases in Rossetti's work—the early stage when aesthetics and eroticism dominate, and the later stage when self-realization, introspection, and generativity assume a larger role.

First, a look at her early, best known works. Brad Epps has observed that prose today tends to attract more critical attention than verse, but with Rossetti her poetry has proven the greater draw. Critics have stressed the shock value and transgression within her poetry and their relevance to sexual politics, but compelling as they are, these concerns should not be allowed to overshadow her sheer verbal artistry: the inner rhyme of lines such as “sedosos trozos, tersos y densos,” the use of rich, evocative vocabulary and striking metaphors, entirely fresh in more than one sense of the word. Who else could evoke the voice of the seductress so imaginatively with metaphorical references to her body—“el oscuro embudo de mi escote” and “la pendiente durísima del prieto seno” with its “tiesos pináculos” (“Diotima a su muy aplicado discípulo,” *Indicios vehementes* 40)? Rossetti's poetry rivets readers, not only through themes that are dealt with in a transgressive way but also through her verbal imagination and the visual sensitivity that is one of her supreme gifts.³ Her instinctive understanding of sexual semiotics and of distinct spheres of discourse (such as the religious and scientific realms) allow her to evoke a visceral response in her readers, to “poner el dedo en la llaga” very effectively.

Key to the riveting intensity of Rossetti's early poetry is her attention to crucial, defining moments, which she defamiliarizes, dissecting them or dilating them to slow motion, highlighting a particular cusp or moment of intensity before climax and sometimes a moment of release. She often magnifies impact by combining literal or figurative death with sexual release. In “Homenaje a Lindsay Kemp y a su tocado de plumas amarillas” (*Indicios vehementes* 47) death and sexual release are simultaneously enacted as Rossetti portrays Kemp's representation of Salomé's gruesome, erotic reception of John the Baptist's head. “Inconfesiones de Gilles de Rais,” a first-person account of the sexual abuse

and murder of a child, almost conflates the “pequeña muerte” of ejaculation and physical death: the poem ends with the words “es imposible / no irlo matando mientras eyacula” (*Indicios vehementes* 32). “Chico Wrangler” evokes the imminence of sexual union: “corazón asaltado” “porque unas piernas . . . frente a mí se separan” (*Indicios vehementes* 99). Clearly, Rossetti pulls us into the moment with her vivisections of desire. Visual and verbal allusions intensify the reading experience: her reference to Priapus in “Cierta secta feminista” gains force from representational history, which depicts that god with an oversized, perennially erect penis. The image, at the same time, signals the role of mediation in the economy of desire.

The so-called shock value of poems such as “Chico Wrangler” or “Lindsay Kemp” has often been attributed to the female appropriation of the gaze, but as Epps rightly points out, in such poems as “Chico Wrangler,” Rossetti does not actually specify the gender embodied in the poetic voice. Similarly, in “Lindsay Kemp,” she creates layers of sexual ambiguity through portraying a transvestite enactment of Salomé’s dance (and perhaps as well by the resonance of Wilde’s portrayal of John the Baptist as almost asexual). Rather than stressing the recuperation of the female gaze in these poems, it is more accurate to say, as does Ugalde, that Rossetti “calls into question the fixity of inherited identities,” including gender categories, sometimes putting what Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel has termed “the figure of perversion” at the service of this destabilization. As Ugalde explains, Rossetti thus uses perversion as an “aesthetic choice,” as “a figure rather than a clinical disease” (“Theater and Performance” 76, 82).

The particular intensity Rossetti achieves in her early poems, where she challenges limits and makes fleeting moments of sexual desire explicit, may paradoxically be enabled by her avoidance of anything straightforwardly confessional. Her early poems *a clé*, as she has described them, her layers of ekphrasis, her intertextual references, her irony and outrageousness, her blurring of distinctions between so-called “reality” and imagination,⁴ her displacements to a fictional past all combine with her sometimes coy and theatrical self-presentation to unmask characters but to veil the flesh and blood Ana Rossetti. Jill Robbins refers to the “different versions of herself” (14) that she has projected and aptly refers to her as “a trope going by the name of Ana Rossetti” (31). Apart from the aesthetic play with the internal versus the external that theatricality presupposes, her own real-life role-playing may serve not only as a natural extension to her own behavior of the dramatic elements

that pervade her works but also as a means of carving out personal space and privacy. Like Lorca, she creates poems whose theatrical and lyrical elements often avoid the confessional, despite the intimacy of moments portrayed. When in 1995 she publishes *Punto umbrío*, a volume of poetry which critics say does reflect her deeply felt personal experience, she is much less anecdotal and more opaque than in earlier poems, possibly suggesting her reluctance to expose her own experiences and interior life without reserve, despite the daring and revealing exposés of her early work.

Rossetti's early poetry, as some critics have pointed out, must of course be understood in the historic context of the immediate post-Franco "destape." The shock value and fascinating intensity of these poems can be seen as an exuberant release that followed the repression of the Franco era, which ended when Rossetti was a young adult: Rossetti's voluptuous delectation flies in the face of the Franco regime's cult of austerity and false, hypocritical sexism and classism reduced to such binary oppositions as pure/impure, male/female, nobility/baseness. Her sensuality flouts regime attitudes, such as the notion that the sex act should, for women, be an "asco" to be endured, linked to procreation, not enjoyment. Some three decades later, the poems reflecting the *destape* period retain much of their freshness despite finding themselves in a new, 21st century context in which pushing the envelope against various social boundaries is hardly an unusual phenomenon.

One should also keep in mind that Rossetti began her career as a writer by wading into a genre—poetry—that was distinctly male dominated at the time. An anthology published in 1988, Pedro Provencio's *Poéticas españolas contemporáneas: La generación del 70*, includes 22 poets, all male. (A year earlier, Mari Pepa Palomero had "generously" included 3 females among her 28 *Poetas de los 70*.)⁵ In this context, Rossetti refuses the role of "poetisa," emphasizing in her poetry (and various other works⁶) aspects of sexuality that Franco had silenced, gravitating toward taboo subjects and eschewing the self-abnegation and concern with motherhood and that historically has often figured prominently in the work of female poets.⁷

Like many of her poetic cohorts, Rossetti distanced herself not only from some of the traditional purviews of the "poetisa" but also from the mid-century poet's role as the voice of the opposition and of social engagement. But much as she has moved toward a poetry of increasing self-revelation and emotional depth in *Punto umbrío*, she has also increasingly revealed a concern for others' development that has at times been identified as

more typical of females. That is to say, as she has matured, she has exhibited generativity, in the sense of the term that was developed by the well-known developmental psychologist Erik Erikson. Her concerns now transcend purely aesthetic considerations to reveal an idealistic interest in individuals—especially women and children—and their right to self-realization. Though more pronounced in her mid-life work, this attitude is foreshadowed in her early poetry. In “Cierta secta feminista se da consejos prematrimoniales” (*Indicios vehementes* 36), for example, behind the speaker’s embrace of subversive homoerotic love lies the indictment of a society’s treatment of young women as marriageable merchandise.⁸

Just as Rossetti’s early, erotic poetry has a large dose of exuberant humor and sly parody, her later generative, didactic works are also playful in conveying their message. In many of these texts, sexual politics, gender, and what Sherno has termed “the exercise of power” (205) continue to figure prominently in Rossetti’s imaginary. Her incursions into children’s literature, which are substantial in number, combine entertainment with a desire to guide and inspire.⁹ In the children’s story “El club de las chicas Robinson” (1999) she casts the girl protagonists as valiant, strong adventurers, and humorously takes a swipe at the role of the “generic” use of the masculine gender by turning the tables; a boy who wants to be included in their club must be willing to be denominated by the feminine term “chicas.” Another children’s work, *Una mano de santos*, as Sherno points out, is marked by a thread of didacticism and exemplariness.¹⁰ Here, allegories of rereading and rewriting provide, in Sherno’s words, “models of inner fortitude and spiritual transcendence” (207). Santa Casilda “creates her world,” offering, as Rossetti’s text declares, “una mirada distinta” (Sherno 215-7). The young saint’s viewpoint is that of the “Other,” often invoked by the trope of martyrdom: of being oneself unto death by those who want to suppress difference.

Also from the 1990s, Rossetti’s romance novel *Mentiras de papel* (largely ignored by critics), might be characterized as an exemplary tale for young women, one that raises issues of class and gender. Like some of the children’s works Sherno discusses, the novel has roots in fairy tale and allegory. A rewriting of “Cinderella,” the story depicts a young high-fashion model as a pawn in the hands of the fashion industry. She plays the role of the quintessential object of the gaze, whose personal agency is supplanted by the modeling agency that handles her. Like Cinderella, she is rescued by a powerful male, becoming a secondary character in someone else’s narrative and an unequal partner in a relationship with a man. Sabotaged by a sister-in-law who brings Cinderella’s “ugly stepsisters” to mind,

her marriage falls apart. Left to fend for herself, she assumes responsibility for writing her own life script and develops her own creativity, ultimately finding success as the maker of a well-received film. No longer the object of the gaze, she has now commandeered its authority. Her new-found self-direction, the novel suggests, even paves the way for a fresh start and a new, more equal relationship with her ex, who notes, with new respect, that she has traded “el exhibirse por el manifestarse” (217).

Rossetti’s generative message advocating persevering in the face of failure, embracing one’s fate, assuming consequences, in a word living with a kind of existential “integrity”¹¹ that fosters agency has perhaps been overshadowed by other, more spectacular or novel aspects of her work. But this constellation of values surfaces prominently in the mid-nineties not only in *Una mano de santos* and *Mentiras de papel*, which might be considered examples of “ancillary” genres—children’s literature and the romance novel—but also in the noteworthy volume of poetry titled *Punto umbrío* (1995). In my reading of this latter work, the protagonist’s heart is broken but ultimately heals, like scattered mercury fragments that re-coalesce into a whole. Instead of withering away, this individual (whose gender remains unspecified throughout the poem) picks him/herself up and forges ahead. By the end of the book, s/he opens up to a creative new beginning, embracing annunciation, insemination, and/or martyrdom. In her earlier novel *Plumas de España* (1988), Rossetti had already introduced the notion of failure and perseverance—the narrator in the end burns the manuscript of the book we have been reading with the intention of re-writing it and of this time winning the Planeta Prize.

Through her varied production as a writer, Rossetti has not only made it her business to destabilize gender and sexual categories, undermining distinctions such as celibate/non-celibate, virgin/non-virgin, and homoerotic/heteroerotic but she has also undermined genre and other distinctions related to writing: commerce vs. aesthetics, “deleite” vs. “enseñanza,” the escapism of romance vs. the guidance of didacticism, pornography vs. art. In addition, though, she has demonstrated her belief in self-realization, fidelity to oneself, and the courage to act. Thus her work as a whole rests on an ethos of questioning, openness, and action. Rossetti’s arresting early poems will never lose their freshness, even if they responded to the specific mood of the *destape*, but the ethos of later works will also endure in a 21st century full of existential challenges that require courage and near sainthood from all of us.

Notes

¹ For a bibliography of Rossetti's work to 2004, see *P/Herversions*. For her complete poetry through 2004, see . See also her more recent works, especially *Llenar tu nombre*, a volume of poems published in 2008.

² See books by Persin, Mayhew, Wilcox, and Mudrovic, and the volumes edited by Johnson and by West-Settle and Sherno. See also Zaldivar's comparative examination of the erotic visions of Rossetti and the Chilean poet Gonzalo Millán, published in Chile in 1998.

³ At the same time, she views herself as primarily a spectator in life: "[A]nte todo y sobre todo soy espectadora. Todo lo miro desde el palco" (Ugalde, "Conversaciones" 154).

⁴ As in "Chico Wrangler," where it is not clear whether the speaker is seeing an actual lover through the mediating lens of advertising posters, or whether she is describing the poster itself. A similar example occurs in "Uno," from the section of *Indicios Vehementes* titled "Dioscuros," where the word "esperma," in a childhood experience of sexual awakening, could mean either "sperm" or "candle wax." "Dioscuros" was first published, as Rossetti's second book of poems, in 1982.

⁵ A decade later, *Ellas tienen la palabra*, an anthology edited by Munárriz and Benegas, signaled the tectonic shift toward recognition of women poets. Yet relevant to Ana Rossetti's abiding interest in gender issues is the contrast between the use of the unmarked masculine gender in Provencio's book and the ghettoization of women that *Ellas tienen la palabra* presupposed and perpetuated, continuing in the vein of Ramón Buenaventura's *Las diosas blancas* (1985).

⁶ For example, Rossetti's volume on different kinds of underwear, *Prendas íntimas: El tejido de la seducción*, and her book *Alevosías*, which in 1991 won the La Sonrisa Vertical prize for erotic literature.

⁷ Rossetti is in fact, the mother of two children, now adults.

⁸ In Jesús Fernández Palacio's "entrevista-prólogo" to *Indicios vehementes*, the volume in which this poem appears, Rossetti is explicitly quoted as decrying forced early marriages for women in ancient Greece. Thus the poem, while possessing a lesbian theme,

also responds to the exploitation of young women, the violence done to their own liberty, and their desire for autonomy and self-expression.

⁹ Sherno points out these two elements in her discussion of *Una mano de santos*.

¹⁰ Rossetti read stories of martyrs (a type of didactic literature) as a child but at the time she considered such works to be underground, transgressive reading (Ugalde, *Conversaciones*).

¹¹ Sherno notes the premium placed on this kind of integrity in her discussion of the portrayal of Saint Barbara in *Una mano de santos*.

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