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Between two worlds: books and literary figures among the Swiss abroad

By Charles Linsmayer

Born in Ticino, she wrote love poetry in Argentina that is still causing a stir 100 years on – Alfonsina Storni

The Chilean Nobel Prize winner Gabriela Mistral called her Argentinean peer Alfonsina Storni a “bee-wasp who danced a frantic swirl around her own body before bleeding to death in a seemingly playful pirouette”. She was describing not just the difficult life but also the solitary death of this extraordinary woman who was born in the village of Sala Capriasca in Ticino in 1892 and was regarded as one of Latin America’s great poets by the time of her death in 1938.

“The frantic swirl which she danced around her own body” refers to the circumstances in which Alfonsina Storni’s poetry was produced. She arrived in Argentina in 1896, aged four, with her father who went on a downward spiral – from being a brewer he ended up the drunken landlord of the “Café Suizo” in San Juan, which soon went to the wall – and with her mother who provided the necessities as a seamstress and teacher. At the age of 13 she was working in a hat factory, and at 15 she went on tour with a theatre company. In 1909, aged 17, she entered the teacher training college in Coronda, from which she was almost expelled when it became known in which establishments she was earning her tuition fees as a dancer! She had begun writing poetry at the age of 12 – much to the annoyance of her mother, who clipped her around the ear for it – and did not relinquish her passion even after a bad experience of love. In 1911, the 19-year-old, now a teacher in Rosario, was having a secret affair with a well-known politician and fled to the anonymity of Buenos Aires to avoid scandal when she became pregnant. She gave birth to the “love child” in this city, where she also worked as a saleswoman and later as a secretary. In 1916, she published her first work “La inquietud del rosal” at her own expense. “May God protect you from the impatience of the rose

bush,” she declared to friends, “but I wrote to stay alive”. In 1925, in her remorselessly audacious work “Ocre”, she declared to her unfaithful lover: “It is not you who betrays me. It is my dreams alone.”

She had long been famous when she visited her birthplace in Ticino for the last time in 1930. García Lorca also admired her and described her forsaken dreams in the lines: “Oh you beast, you perfidious soul, have you hidden yourself away and built a nest in your longings.” These forsaken dreams are there for all to see in the “Poemas de amor”, published in 1926, in which she again evokes the love

affair of 1911 but now completely withdraws into the dream where the lover is only tangible as a “fantasma aeriforme”, an “illusion of air”. Death was a major theme not just here but in her entire opus. In “Ocre”, she mockingly contrives an epitaph for her grave: “The woman who sleeps beneath the earth/ and ridicules life with the epitaph on her grave,/ wrote, because she was a woman, on her grave/ another lie – I have had enough.”

But what about the “playful pirouette” from which she bled to death, according to Gabriela Mistral? “No puedo más” (“I can’t take any more”), wrote Alfonsina Storni on a sheet of paper in a hotel room in Mar del Plata before, suffering from terminal cancer, she sought her death in the sea on 25 October 1938. Her final poem “Voy a dormir” (“I am going to sleep”) appeared in the “La Nación” newspaper on the day of her death. The verses sing the praises of death like a lullaby but contain a hint of sarcasm as though they are rebuffing a final lover: “One more thing;/ if he calls again,/ tell him his efforts are in vain because I’ve gone.”



Quotation

“It is midnight. The city separates me from you – a crowded black mass, rows of houses, forests of lost yet lingering words, invisible clouds of microscopically small bodies. But I unfold my soul beyond myself, I reach you, I touch you. You are awake, you quiver when you hear me. My soul is so close to you, how it quivers together with you.”

(From “Poemas de amor”, Buenos Aires 1926)

BIBLIOGRAPHY: Alfonsina Storni’s “Poemas de amor” are available from Limmat-Verlag, Zurich in German and Spanish, translated into German by Reinhard Streit. Available in Italian and Spanish from Casagrande, Bellinzona, translated into Italian by Augusta López-Bernasocchi.

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