

Modern Women

Alfonsina Storni

Although the steady pace of modernization opened careers such as teaching and journalism to women, Yrigoyen's move toward political democratization did not grant women equal rights. Alfonsina Storni (1892–1938), a writer and journalist with feminist convictions, fought actively for women's political and civil rights—particularly for sexual freedom and the right to vote. Her commitment to a feminist agenda permeates her writing. In "An Old Story," an essay appearing in La Nota on 25 April 1919 as a response to a cynical article by Carlos Gutiérrez Larreta on women's committees, Alfonsina condemns the marginal status of feminism in Argentine society and the resistance that it encountered even among the educated men whom Alfonsina befriended. Alfonsina was an unwed mother and an off-center poet who belonged neither to modernism nor to the experimental avant-garde. Always an outsider, she committed suicide in 1938. Her place in Argentine cultural history remains ambiguous. Her memory, crafted after the myth of the rebellious woman, has been celebrated on television and in popular music, but her contributions as a serious thinker with a feminist agenda, and as a writer whose aesthetics were at odds with dominant literary trends, have not been sufficiently acknowledged.

AN OLD STORY

There was a time when I had no intention of writing a serious word about feminism. It seemed to me that to talk about an accomplished fact was a waste of time.

But then I came across an article by Carlos Gutiérrez Larreta entitled "Women's Committees," which appeared in the previous issue of this journal. It has snapped me out of my torpor and is inducing me to commit the millionth foolish act of my life.

I believe that my kind friend has written the article just the way he usually recites his certainly magnificent madrigals and sonnets.

He has smoked two or three Turkish cigarettes, read his favorite poets, and

then taken a few brightly colored billiard balls and caromed them around with a gold pen.

These caroms are his article.

But in life the brilliant little billiard balls the writer plays with are weighty worlds, and the billiard cue that moves them is subject to formidable laws. As we contemplate the implications of these laws our whole being trembles; our faces fall, our tears flow, and we are suddenly saddened and confused by this inescapable, inexplicable thing.

Only by making a carefree game cunning can one speak of feminism in terms of chivalrous pardon for feminine mischievousness.

I believe that feminism deserves much more than flippant gallantry because it is as important as a complete collective transformation.

I would even dare to assert that so-called feminism is nothing more than man's managerial failure to achieve by legal means the necessary equilibrium of human happiness.

If every chief of state and every head of the family were capable of knowing, and then satisfying, all the needs of the people under them, there would be an end to all modern problems, including the now-famous problem of feminism.

But life is not an equation perceivable by the eyes of man. However much one looks ahead, one will never see the intimate spiritual depths of each individual whose longings, unsatisfied, become the very struggle required for evolution.

Of this permanent discontent, of this thirst, of this expectation, of this endless movement eternity is made.

To say man is superior to woman, woman is equal to man, etc. seems to me no more than words, words, words.

To speak of feminism and to separate it from everything like an isolated entity, with no relationship and merely as an arbitrary expression of feminine caprice, seems utter nonsense to me.

To think that "woman wants this despite the fact that we are advising her otherwise" is not to think at all.

What does woman want?

Are thoughts and collective aspirations like mushrooms that sprout up whenever or wherever they feel like it?

Did men dictate that nails would emerge on their fingers?

To poke fun at feminism, for example, seems to me as curious as to poke fun at a finger because it ends in a nail. To arrive at what we call *feminism*, humanity has followed a process as exact as the one that an embryo follows to become a fruit or that a fruit follows to transform its elements from an embryo, each in their successive steps.

There is as much truth in the embryo as in the stem, in the stem as in the leaves, in the leaves as in the flower or any other stage of its development.

Clearly we have the right to express an opinion about which moment of that transformation appears to us to be more harmonious, more complete.

The writer we mentioned finds that the [ancient] Greeks, such exalted beings, had no feminism.

But this does not have to be the reason for the sublimity of Greece. By following such criteria we would come to believe that it was enough for a population not to have feminism for it to demonstrate its equilibrium.

I could point out to him that the Middle Ages, which did not have feminism, is an example of a barbarous period characterized by its humiliation of feminine dignity under the pretext of a stupid chastity and a religion that was as depressing as it was avaricious.

But in truth we have nothing in the past that can enlighten us about a movement like the present one, the fruit of our own days.

If the time in which we live is compared to some luminous periods of the past, such as [ancient] Greece, for example, it is seen as a setback, and we cannot attribute this setback to feminism.

On the contrary, feminism stems from this setback by seeking for "its" support, "its" ray of light, in troubled waters where nothing is visible. And, for that seeking, women want to use their own eyes.

Let me make myself clear: Catholic dogma is bankrupt; civilization is bankrupt; everything that has been built up in the last twenty centuries is crashing down with a deafening roar, its balance destroyed, its center of gravity out of kilter.

Men, after repeating the same old things for a long time, are bored with themselves and are demanding new actions, new words, new life.

This is as old as the sun.

We go now from unity to the parts.

Power is distributed, knowledge is distributed, responsibility is distributed. Man does not know what awaits him when he loses his protectorate, but he wants to free himself from it. Today every human cell wants to feel responsibility.

To disperse, to separate, to divide.

This is what things say.

Nonexistent or ineffectual dogma, a hard economic life, imperfect justice— for whom is woman now waiting? What holy word or perception of human justice leads her to accept the idea that she always comes out the loser, without daring to say, "I want to try doing this for myself"?

I understand perfect submission when the hand directing one's life is per-

fect, when that hand has taken care of and foreseen everything, for then obedience is sweet, slavery a pleasure.

But, while everything is changing and an infinity of laws and customs from earlier times are being modified, a group of women, protected by neither state nor man, are taking up the struggle against the new laws and customs.

These are the women who have had to earn their own living, those who are in a position to talk about the bunches of flowers that masculine piety tosses at their feet lest their delicate soles get hurt.

In the struggle for existence there is no truce, no sex, no pity, no flowers. Oh, poet! It's every man for himself. The first one gets the prize, and often the one arriving second, if he's stronger, snatches it away.

At least that's the pattern I personally experienced in my hard apprenticeship.

It is in great part this ruthless aspect of life that has broken woman's submission and that now tries her will, tries her ideas, tries her personality.

She doesn't part company with man, but she has stopped believing in the divine mission that dogma assigned him.

She doesn't turn against man, for, as she struggles, she thinks about her son, a man. But she distrusts the state's protection, she distrusts man's justice, and she tends, as I said before, to exercise her responsibility.

It is true that this way of living separates her somewhat from her instincts, but who says that instinct is an end and not simply a means?

Isn't it perhaps true that choice is one of the capabilities that characterizes humankind?

Only the egotism of the species can lead man to believe that he is the one uniquely qualified to make choices. I firmly believe that feminism today is a question of justice.

This way of thinking to which woman aspires, in fact, goes hand in hand with the condition of being born free that belongs to both woman and man—the right to exercise free will.

Naturally, in the course of developing her general abilities, woman will do as many foolish things as man has done, and goes right on doing, despite his long experience in directing affairs.

I believe also that perfection is unattainable and that woman and man, as they try to reach it, will both make the same kind of mistakes that have already been made.

But in the feminine exercise of this aspiration to responsibility there is no other justification than the unknown law that governs us, the law that has provided man with all his downfalls and consequently with all the changes through which he manages to survive.

None of us knows where this movement we call *feminism* is heading, but nothing will detain it.

Meanwhile, before long, women will obtain the suppression of the laws and concepts that have a shameful impact on feminine dignity, laws that a number of stalwart women have already rendered null. To transform words like *shame*, *pardon*, and *error* into *right of the woman*, *right of the mother*, and *right of the human being* will be one of the inevitable and invaluable triumphs of feminism.

As for the rest, woman's increased development implies a refinement of her femininity, a greater spiritual grace, a harmony that is restored only by controlled instincts.

This may seem a contradiction to my earlier paragraph, but it is not.

Instinct controlled by clear, conscious reasoning is a very different thing from instinct harshly suffocated because of dogma. Putting instincts in proper balance will be another of feminism's victories.

And if Christ, according to my kind friend Gutiérrez Larreta, had woman mapped out for a different direction, he will see, once again, that neither women nor men now succeed—nor ever will succeed—in comprehending that direction. For, although it may be opportune to present myths in articles and essays, these myths are ultimately indigestible for humankind because humankind is so weak, so trusting in an infinite divine goodness that, despite all the gospels, allows mankind to kill, rob, or commit “rosy, silky little sins,” in the words of Rubén Darío, who, without Christ's permission, must have been quite a feminist. . . .

Translated by Patricia Owen Steiner

X-Ray of the Pampa

Ezequiel Martínez Estrada

In 1933, Ezequiel Martínez Estrada published X-Ray of the Pampa, a long, melancholic essay on Argentine identity. In the chapter entitled “The Spider’s Web,” he analyzes the layout of the train system and its influence on Argentina’s social and economic organization. The railroads were built with British capital during the final decades of the nineteenth century. A symbol of progress, they were also evidence of economic dependency on foreign investment. Centered in Buenos Aires—a city that felt closer to Europe than to the Argentine hinterlands—the tracks radiated like the strands of a spider’s web to most of the provinces without making any links between the provinces themselves. Like a ravenous spider, prosperous Buenos Aires slowly devoured the rest of the country, which was left to languish in its isolation. Almost one hundred years after the publication of Sarmiento’s Facundo, in X-Ray of the Pampa Martínez Estrada reexamined the persistent schism between Buenos Aires and the Interior.

The railroad extended the national territory and then fractured it, leaving it reduced to a lineal sketch of its lines of track. The embankments of the railroad created a frontier: Europe was the railroad track; America was the rest. That which is not at the very foot of the embankment is at an unmeasurable distance, economically beyond the world of commerce. The railroad makes possible the exploitation of mines and forests; metals and lumber cannot reach the factories without substantially diminishing in value in transit. Whole forests and mines are not worth the transportation charges. The steam transportation cartel also makes impossible the existence of dirt or asphalt roads; it is interested that there be none and, if there must be some, that they be exclusively for tourism, for the simple reason that their trains are providing tourist services along two-thirds of the routes. The ruinous competition that trucks and buses are giving the railroads in North America, England, and France will never exist here because the roads are ours but the rail lines belong to others. In order to have thirty-eight thousand kilometers of iron ways, we have had to renounce hundreds of thousands of kilometers of paved roads. The extent of

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