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Women Alone: Solitude, Silence, and Selfhood in Caterina Albert and Sibilla Aleramo
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WOMEN ALONE:
SOLITUDE, SILENCE, AND SELFHOOD IN
CATERINA ALBERT AND SIBILLA ALERAMO

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A few years ago I came across David H. Rosenthal's English translation of *Solitud* by Caterina Albert (Victor Català). One of its virtues was to send me back to the Catalan original which I had not revisited in many years. Coincidentally, I was reading for the first time the novel *Una donna* by Sibilla Aleramo, an Italian woman writer previously unknown to me but quite famous (even infamous) in her native country both for her literary achievements and her unconventional, "liberated" life-style. At first sight, nothing could be more different than these two authors and their texts; yet, from the beginning, I sensed hidden affinities that pushed me to undertake a detailed study in search of some underlying common ground.¹

The focus of analysis turned out to be the relationship between *Solitud* and *Una donna* in terms of the incipient feminist movement that was taking shape at the time of their writing. *Una donna* is generally considered one of the earliest feminist novels in Italy. The same statement is not so easily applicable to *Solitud* and Catalan fiction; yet, Torres-Pou asserts that "la novela constituye uno de los primeros ejemplos de la literatura *feminista* [emphasis mine] catalana del siglo XX" (199). Both texts foreground some of the same woman-centered issues concerning self-awareness, self-sufficiency, and self-determination. And in both, this recovery of selfhood is the result of a long and painful process in which *solitude* and *silence* play a prominent role, evolving from negative to positive factors in the construction of female identity.

Initial stimulus to bring together *Solitud* and *Una donna* came from the simple, unquestionable fact of their almost simultaneous publication (1905 and 1906, respectively). Contextual circumstances became then significant, as Albert and Aleramo lived and wrote within socio-historical frameworks not so unlike each other as to preclude some kind of overall assessment and generalization. In spite of obvious and notable differences, Spain and Italy at the turn of the century

¹ I found further support for this project in several scholarly essays that emphasize the appropriateness and value of comparative approaches to Victor Català's text, such as Aurora Centellas Rodrigo's exploration of possible connections between *Solitud* and other representative examples of "literatura de la época" (*Madame Bovary*, *Anna Karenina*, *Effi Briest*, *Portrait of a Lady*) and Dolores Madrenas Tinoco's "estudi contrastiu" of Valle Inclán's *Sonata de primavera* and *Solitud*.

shared many traits that account for a comparable atmosphere in regard to woman's position and role, an environment that reflected what Drake has called "the peculiarly oppressive character of the cumulative cultural heredity in Mediterranean countries" (X), essentially androcentric and patriarchal. Both Spain and Italy were still primarily agricultural societies lagging behind in the process of industrialization and modernization, economically backward and socially conservative. In Catholic doctrine and secular law there prevailed a total subordination of wife to husband, children, and family. Early Italian feminists such as Teresa Noce and Ana Maria Mozzoni (in 1864) "drew a parallel between the movement for national independence and the emancipation of women" (Chiavola Birnbaum 19) and concluded that "[d]ivine right ... had been defeated in theocracy and monarchy, but it remained in male privilege ... in man's treatment of women and in male assumptions of 'domestic monarchy'" (20), while—according to María Isabel Cabrera Bosch—in Spain "en lo que al movimiento femenino se refiere, ... hay un enorme desfase frente a lo que se produce en las naciones desarrolladas del siglo XIX" (30). Pioneers such as Concepción Arenal and Emilia Pardo Bazán "estaban solas" (49). Moreover, in both countries, emerging feminism and equally burgeoning socialism effected an early alliance that would bear fruit later on and secure rights for women they never had before (during the Spanish Second Republic, for instance).²

Sibilla Aleramo participated fully and passionately in the foundational stage of Italy's feminist renewal and proclaimed the need for woman's emancipation in her writing and in her (scandalous) life through a succession of texts, all of them more or less autobiographical, and a succession of lovers, all of them more or less famous. Caterina Albert, on the other hand, clearly says she is one of those that "en fer novel·la, no gusten ni poc ni molt de fer autobiografia disfressada" (Serrahima 235). She is variously described as "una novel·lista no feminista" (Charlon 41), someone who "es desmarca explícitament de la militància femenina" (Julià 252), who had no part in organizing the women's movement and did not contribute to its journals (McNerney 252). Even the pseudonyms chosen highlight their difference: Sibilla Aleramo (born Rina Faccio in Piedmont) elected to remain a female presence, underlining the prophetic dimension—the sibylline voice—of her writing self; Caterina Albert hid (not for long, however) under a male cover, either afraid to reveal her true gender or desirous to obtain the more authoritative role reserved for male writers—or both.

Yet, one could argue, Aleramo's feminism has perhaps been

² For more information on the early feminist movements in Italy and Spain, see also Anabel González and Franca Pieroni Bortolotti.

overrated while Albert's might be less negligible than it seems. After all, as research has shown, though "feminism provided [Aleramo's] writing with a focal point ... it was ... a feminism reflecting her own personal situation rather than a program for social reform" (Drake vii) and "appeared more radical than it really was" (x). In later years, she expressed strong reservations about the more "shrill" forms of feminism and preferred "to reveal the romantic life of a passionate artist" in her works (Drake xii), an artist (herself) increasingly dependent on her innumerable lovers, financially and psychologically. In theory, Aleramo's belief that "difference ... must be revealed through a gender-marked writing" foreshadows contemporary theories of *écriture féminine* (Jacobs 58), but the fact is that ultimately she became, in life and style, a sort of "female D'Annunzio" (Drake xxix), a pale imitation of the self-centered, decadent, ultimate macho-artist type.

For her part, Caterina Albert/Víctor Català, the dignified "senyoreta" from l'Escala, a model of proper behavior, whose mostly rural stories of downtrodden peasants in harsh environments seemingly have little to do with feminist concerns, had some interesting things to say about women and their lot, especially in the speech delivered at the 1917 Jocs Florals in Barcelona. In it, she refers to "els problemes de la dona i del obrer," she states that "arreu del món la dona aixeca el cap i amb accent més o menys resolut, més o menys temperat diu: 'Aquí estic: escolteu-me, si us plau'" (143). True, she rejects the stridency of the "sufragistes," she asks for reform within the established patterns (marriage, family), she praises the "homes sensats y bons de la nostra terra!" (147), but one can't ignore her strong demand for justice and for defending *everybody's* sacred rights: "el dret a la vida, a la vida completa, així física com conscient, així privada com pública, així individual com col·lectiva" (144). As a writer, Víctor Català's insistence in portraying female characters and their predicament, her "escorcollament del microcosmos femení" (Alvarado, "Motriu-matriu" 29) paints a powerful picture, "[una] imatge ben cruenta de la realitat finisecular femenina" that justifies Janet Pérez's view: "Caterina Albert was not a feminist in the usual sense, nor was she associated with feminist causes ... but the subtext of her fiction is a determined declaration of quality [*sic*-equality?] for women writers" (47). Thus Sibilla Aleramo turns out to be less and Caterina Albert possibly more of a feminist than could be appraised at first glance and both display sufficient complexity and contradictions in their lives and works to justify this attempt at a *rapprochement* between the two that might have been deemed unfounded to begin with.

Understated versus overstated, covert versus overt, subtle versus obvious: these two sets of terms may summarize the distinctive characteristics of Albert's and Aleramo's feminist approach in the two

novels under consideration. *Solitud* shares overall narrative contours with *Una donna*. Their stories are by no means identical, but a rough common narrative bridges their difference, and in this sense they can be said to tell the “same” story, that of women trapped in unsatisfying marriages, victims both of psychological neglect and physical abuse, repressed and resigned, unable to assert themselves through action or through any form of discourse. The presence of a child (Baldiret, for Mila in *Solitud*, her own son for the unnamed protagonist of *Una donna*) temporarily alleviates these women’s loneliness, but fails to fulfill their basic yearnings. What links them, above all, is their state of dependence, fostered by societal expectations of female subordination and submission that result in a negation of individual desire, initiative, and identity. After a difficult, painful process of growth and development, they both break away from a confining past to face an uncertain future on their own uncompromising terms.

Mila begins her “pujada” (ch. I) to the remote hermitage where she will reside with Matias, her lazy, apathetic, unresponsive husband, in a mood of compliance and passivity, of mute acceptance. At some point, impressed by the savage beauty of the surrounding landscape, she feels “desitjosa d’enraonar-ne amb el seu home; mes, ... les paraules se li fongueren en la llengua” (19). As they reach the top of the mountain and their final destination, all Mila can say is: “Quina solitud!” (28), a solitude that will tax her “fins al paroxisme” (Castellanos 80), that will initially submerge her in a state of emotional and verbal deprivation. The following chapters chronicle Mila’s slow awakening and increased response to the outside world, prompted mainly by her contacts with Gaietà, “[el pastor] agradós i servidor” (31) who soothes Mila’s bruised soul and facilitates her self-inspection and eventual transformation in two ways: by making her acquainted with the magnificence of nature and by telling her the stories and legends of the region (“les rondaies”). Mila, sexually attracted to Gaietà and somewhat puzzled by the lack of response on his part, suffers a terrible disappointment on learning his age (64 years old!) and even contemplates suicide. Yet, Gaietà is the enabling factor in Mila’s road to self-discovery. He represents the beneficent aspect of the natural world, a sort of Virgilian guide, an “idealized shepherd figure in the Rousseau tradition” (Pérez 46), the “good” shepherd, a protective and nourishing influence; at the other end of the spectrum, Ànima, monstrous-looking, a cruel *hunter*, always lurking in the shadows, ready to pounce on the unsuspecting prey, embodies all that is dark and ugly, bestial sex, destructive behavior.³

³ “De fet el Pastor i l’Ànima representen dues concepcions de la natura, la del primer és la costumista –amable i convencional–, i la del segon és la modernista–misteriosa i agònica” (Introduction to the 1994 edition of *Solitud*, signed C.A. [8]).

In the final confrontation between good and evil, the latter prevails. Ànima kills Gaietà and rapes Mila in the small chapel presided by a statue of Sant Ponç, malevolent signifier of the patriarchal order. Nevertheless, in-between the hopeful but soon disappointing “pujada” and the last, sad “davallada” (ch. XVIII), a whole range of experiences, including “llargues i reposades hores de conversa” with Gaietà, make Mila feel “lliure i mestressa de si mateixa” (137), so that, after Gaietà’s death and her husband’s practical disappearance, upon realizing that “estava sola al món ... li entrà ... la fortalesa temperada del que ... sap de cert que no li queda res més per perdre” (187). That is not quite true, however; on a fateful night, Ànima inflicts on her the ultimate male-upon-female violence. Though the rape scars Mila forever (as symbolized by the “esquinç” that crosses her face [210]), the text’s final scene strongly declares Mila’s recuperation of agency as she forbids her husband Matias to follow her (“No provis pas de seguir-me ... Te ... mataria! [217]). It is difficult to forget the last image of this woman walking downhill “èrtica i greu, amb el cap dret i els ulls ombrívols” (218) in search of her destiny. Although there is a suggestion of fatalism and bitterness (the adverb “amargament” qualifies the narrator’s final assessment of Mila’s situation), traditional interpretations centering on Mila’s supposed collapse—her “desmoronamiento”—seem to respond less to textual evidence than to a masculine perspective that, in words of Moller-Soler, “no acepta ni admite que una mujer pueda enfrentarse sola en la vida y que dejar el marido pueda significar salir de un estado de sujeción” (“CA o la ‘solitud’” 19). Mila ends up “alone, but liberated” (Pérez 46).⁴

What, if any, elements of Víctor Català’s own life can be detected in Mila’s story? I already quoted the author’s disclaimer as to any autobiographical intent, but modern analytical studies—perhaps one should say *psychoanalytical*—find otherwise: Mila’s solitude is that of “la dona-artista en un monopoli ideològic-cultural masculí” (Alvarado, “Motriu-matriu” 21-32), Víctor Català projects on Mila “les seves personals experiències interiors ... l’autora ha escrit ... una sèrie d’observacions autobiogràfiques de la misteriosa transformació de l’adolescent en dona” (Castellanos 79), Mila acts as “el símbolo de la soledad de una mujer en una sociedad androcéntrica con posibles reminiscencias de la situación de su creadora” (Moller-Soler, “El descenso liberador” 91), and so on. Alvarado is even tempted to see “la fusió andrògina Pastor-Mila com la conjunció Víctor Català-Caterina Albert” (“Somnis” 133). If these are, one and all, debatable readings in

⁴ Cerdà i Surroca’s essay is a good example of an opposite interpretation that stresses the symbolic meaning of Mila’s departure from the hermitage as a descent toward Hades, her “hora apocalíptica.”

relation to *Solitud*, no debate is possible along the same lines for *Una donna*, since everybody agrees that it must be understood as a “lightly fictionalized memoir” (Bucci 200), a “barely disguised autobiography” (Wood 74) centered on a “narcissistic identification of author and character” as conveyed through a first person narrative voice (Bassanese, 132). Perhaps the main difference between Albert and Aleramo is captured in the dichotomy *autobiografial/autobiografismo* “where the latter is more the result of an ‘autobiographical temptation’ [Albert’s case] than the self-conscious object of writing” (Girelli-Carasi 273).

Sibilla Aleramo *consciously* turns her life into art, blurring the boundaries between “the literal and the invented realms” and, therefore, also between generic boundaries, between history and fiction (Luciano 97). The narrator-protagonist of *Una donna* (no name) tells of her happy, free childhood in Northern Italy (Milan) and of her middle class family’s later displacement to the impoverished Marche region, of an increasingly distant, autocratic father (whose favorite child she used to be and from whom she learned to love books and think independently) and an increasingly distraught, ineffective mother who ends up in an insane asylum. The crucial event in the narrator’s early years is her rape, at age fifteen, by one of her father’s employees, a man who then proposes marriage and is accepted, given the victim’s (and society’s) perception that, in some way, now she is his to do as he pleases. Predictably, he becomes a selfish, abusive husband who squashes the young woman’s dreams and aspirations. His coarseness, especially in sexual matters, brings to mind Anima’s equally violent behavior, so that here the woman gets both insensitive husband and brutal rapist in one piece. The narrator repeatedly describes the “*via crucis della sua solitudine*” (Cecchi 227), as her provincial life encloses her in “una gabbia soffocante di solitudine” (Lajolo 60), in a “solitudine presoché claustrale” (Viano 228). Only one other word appears in the text almost as often as “solitudine” and that is “silenzio” (three times, for instance, on p. 42). Together they vividly portray the narrator’s despair, the utter loneliness that leads her to consider suicide (as Mila does, at some point). What saves her is her involvement with the written word. She reads books (as Mila learned to “read” nature). Books, nature, a growing ability to notice and assess their surroundings, provide these characters with a way out of destructive isolation and toward constructive reflexion. Reading, writing, observing the world around more carefully and insightfully, rescue these women and make “*benefica la solitudine*” (*Una donna* 101).

During a brief stay in Rome, the narrator-protagonist of *Una donna* meets “un uomo misterioso” who offers her support, advice, and “[la] dolcezza di essere compresa” (169) as well as the example of

a life devoted to intellectual pursuits and philosophical contemplation. This man, known as "il profeta," plays a role similar to that of Gaietà, "el pastor," and, like him, exerts a strange fascination on the main character. She believes he may also be attracted to her, but he calls her "sorella" and remains apparently untouched or at least able to control any erotic response. "Shepherd" and "prophet" function as facilitators in both women's road to self-realization and self-actualization; in neither case, however, do they fully meet the woman's expectations or provide the final answer to her "existential" predicament. Salvation has to come from within.

For the "woman" of *Una donna*, the husband's tyranny and brutality culminate in what today would be called marital rape. Shortly after being infected with syphilis by a prostitute, he forces himself on his wife: "Dopo una lotta atroce, sola nel buio, invocai una volta ancora la morte" she says (207) and explains how, at that point, she decided to end her marriage. The initial violence perpetrated on a fifteen year old girl is repeated on the twenty five year old woman who now, however, does not quietly submit to it as powerless victim. Encouraged by her contacts with other, productive women, having found a vocation in writing and the possibility of making an independent life for herself in the city, the narrator finally abandons home and husband; she also reluctantly leaves behind her beloved son, since legally she has no recourse against the father who vows to keep the child at his side. Like Mila, the narrator-protagonist goes forward alone, expecting nothing ("non attendo nulla" [219]) but determined to survive and to write for her son the story of her suffering and her awakening, her calvary and her "resurrection." As she declares at the end: "Ed è per questo che scrissi. Le mie parole lo raggiungeranno," the words that are her text, possibly, her testament.

Both *Solitud* and *Una donna* (titles that turn out to be significantly interchangeable) can be seen as examples of the female Bildungsroman which, in tracing the progress of a woman's life, often connects with the novel of awakening or self-discovery.⁵ Mila evolves from "mujer subyugada" to "mujer liberada" (Moller-Soler, "El descenso liberador" 80) and the same can be said of the unnamed narrator of *Una donna*. Their trajectory, in both texts, transcends the limitations of a particular case, highlights the "paradigmatic quality" of their experiences (Bassanese 144), and achieves a "significació simbòlica universal" (Castellanos 80). Though the story of a woman, each can be

⁵This point has been made by –among others– Moller-Soler for *Solitud* ("Es una de las pocas novelas de la literatura mundial que se puede clasificar como un Bildungsroman con protagonista femenina" ["Caterina Albert o la 'solitud' 15] and Jacobs for *Una donna* (she describes it as a "female Bildungsroman" and a "novel of awakening" [56]).

interpreted as "la storia di tutte le donne" (Forti-Lewis 332), a denunciation of "the collective oppression of women" (Jacobs 56). Caterina Albert/Víctor Català and Rina Faccio/Sibilla Aleramo, at the dawn of the Twentieth century, look forward to and anticipate a feminist project that will grow and develop in the years to come and show how, increasingly, *una donna* need not be or struggle in *solitud* to establish a self and a voice in this world.

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