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## FROM IRE TO IRONY

By Rosario Ferré

Steel is a form of discourse  
Useful from either end.  
Its point offers death in discord  
Its pommel will guard against.  
—Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz

When we talk of anger, the passage with which Homer began the *Iliad* immediately comes to mind: "Sing, O Muse, the murderous ire of Peleus' son Achilles, the fatal ire, which in fulfillment of the will of Zeus brought to the Achaeans such woes, hurling to the House of Death so many worthy and courageous souls." In female literature anger is often of a different type; it has been purified in the crucible of irony.

Throughout the centuries anger has been an active generator of female discourse. Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, the seventeenth century Mexican nun and the first American woman of letters, brandished the swift stiletto of her pen to fend off the attack of Manuel Fernández de Santa Cruz, Bishop of Puebla. In 1690 the Bishop of Puebla had published a letter (using the pseudonym of Sor Filotea) in which he praised Sor Juana for her wisdom in matters of theology and at the same time reproached her for occupying herself with subjects which were not of her competence—women were not supposed to study literature or write about serious matters, amongst them theology or faith. Sor Juana answered Fernández de Santa Cruz in her now famous *Respuesta a Sor Filotea de la Cruz*, a scathing letter which covertly ridiculed the Bishop and gave Sor Juana a decisive although Pyrrhic victory over her detractor. A number of years later she was forced to renounce her writing, as well as to donate her library to the Church, and died victim of the plague that ravaged Mexico City in what has been considered by many an apparent suicide. Sor Juana's *Respuesta a Sor Filotea*, however, remained as a testimony of her struggle against the repression of feminine speech and is considered today the first American feminist manifesto.

Sor Juana's letter was an irate document, but it was also a filigree of irony, exquisitely moulded in captious terms to escape the Inquisition, as well as the Bishop's repression. Virginia Woolf wrote her famous essay *A Room of One's Own* in the same spirit as Sor Juana. *A Room of One's Own* is built on ire, although exquisitely masked by Victorian feminine "savoir faire." Women who write with anger, Woolf

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protests here, will never be successful writers; anger embitters them and makes them lose their sense of balance and of artistic proportion. But *her* essay is a tour de force of ironic denunciation, in which she vividly complains about masculine hegemony in the world of learning. Sor Juana's and Virginia Woolf's examples remind us that irony in women is the art of disguising ire, and has served them well in tempering the linguistic steel of discourse.

The novels of Anne Radcliffe, Mary Shelley, the Brönte sisters, all had to do with ire as well. Radcliffe and Shelley disguised their frustrations by creating Gothic monsters; the Brönte sisters delved into the deplorable situation of women in the nineteenth century household as dependants with no economic power, and bared their impotence to the world. Emily Dickinson's poem #751 can be read as a feminine commentary steeped in irony on a world dominated by men:

My worthiness is all my Doubt—  
 His Merit—all my fear—  
 Contrasting which, my quality  
 Do lowlier—appear—

*The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* defines two types of irony commonly found in literature: dramatic and literary irony. Literary irony is built upon a play of words—the opposite of what is meant is said. Dramatic irony establishes a secret communion with the reader, that disguises the unveiling of the plot from the characters in the text. Thus Hamlet is ironically in communion with the spectator, as he estranges himself from what is happening around him. He innocently accepts the goblet of poisoned wine from his mother's hand while we sit on the edge of our seats, knowing all the while what will happen to him.

There is, however, a third type of irony not commonly defined in literary manuals. Irony also implies a splitting in two of the creative consciousness, a cleavage in which the writing self breaks into an historical empiric self, as well as into a linguistic self. Paul de Man discusses the advantages of this type of irony in his book, *Blindness and Insight*.<sup>1</sup> It has become increasingly less possible to speak of human experience in historical terms, de Man tells us, and we become progressively more ironic as we realize the impossibility of displaying our historic self. It is curious, he argues, that it's just as we develop a type of language which does not want to say what it says, that we finally can say what we want to say.

De Man's commentary is particularly useful in speaking of women's literature. Women's irate texts have traditionally been true to lived experience; they have written, one may say, with their finger on the sore spot. They have had to struggle to temper the steel of discourse, establishing a historical distance from their themes which would permit them to deal more effectively with them artistically.

*The Youngest Doll*, my first book, was no doubt a very angry book. In it I often sacrificed historical perspective in order to denounce injustices such as the sexual exploitation of women, as well as to break down a series of social and psychological barriers which had inhibited feminine literary expression in Puerto Rico up to that moment. Anger was present in it in many forms: I used foul language openly—it was

the first time a woman writer had ever dared use words like *cunt*, *shit*, *hooker*, in Puerto Rican literature. I described the goings on in a whorehouse in minute detail; I talked about homosexual desire as frankly as if I were talking about heterosexuality. The result was that my book was considered an object of the devil and, since they couldn't burn *me* at the stake, the well-to-do ladies of San Juan purchased it by the dozens and burned it in their back yards. The book soon sold out.

In spite of its abrasive stance, however, *The Youngest Doll* already contained within it that splitting in two of the creative consciousness which de Man talks about in his book. The sleight-of-hand of the writer who hides what she desperately needs to reveal is present in stories like "The Youngest Doll" and "When Women Love Men." The double "I", the writing self that splits into an historical, angry self, as well as into a linguistic one that coldly observes what is being said, is present in "The Youngest Doll," "The Seed Necklace," "When Women Love Men," "Sleeping Beauty," "The Other Side of Paradise," and "Maquinolandera." All six stories have to do with the female double: a girl turns into a doll; a housewife becomes her own maid; a society lady turns into a prostitute; a circus dancer into a suicidal ballerina; a debutante is impersonated by her family's homosexual man servant.

This splitting of the "I" took place unconsciously in the book; in other words, I didn't propose a plan to write about female doubles when I began these stories. But the literary convention of the twin helped me objectify my own psychological wrenching-apart, as I became a participating witness of the historical and social conflicts of the women around me. Thus I often mocked and contradicted what I was saying, in spite of being deadly serious about it.

When I was writing the last part of the book, I realized something curious was happening. With every new story, the anecdotes in which I denounced the injustices committed against women became more and more tenuous and language became more important. I began to write in a baroque style, full of complicated wordplay, which threatened to eclipse what was happening in the stories. I decided not to offer any resistance and abandoned myself to the impetus that the book had taken of its own accord. In "Maquinolandera," the last story in the book, wordplay reigned supreme over an almost non-existent anecdote—and I had distanced myself almost completely from what I was trying to say.

*Siege to Eros*, my first book of feminist essays, was published in 1980, almost six years after *The Youngest Doll*, although it was conceived at the same time as *Fables of the Bled Heron*, my first book of poems—published in 1982. The irate denunciation in *The Youngest Doll* had been toned down in these works. Women—mythical in *Fables* and historical in *Siege*—now found themselves helplessly divided between their need to come to terms with the formulas imposed by society to control them and their need to persist in their search for an ideal love that had as its goal, not the possession of the body of the beloved, but the transcendence and perfection of their own selves. This problem is examined objectively in *Siege to Eros*, which delves into the lives of a number of historical women who struggled to sublimate the dilemma of love and freedom in various ways: Alexandra Kollontai, the Russian feminist and activist; Virginia Woolf; Lillian Hellman; Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz; George Sand; Julia de Burgos; Jean Rhys; Sylvia Plath; and Tina Modotti. I had dedicated the book to my

daughter, who was thirteen years old at the time, and I wanted the lives of these women to serve as a warning against the conflicts she would have to face later on, as well as to offer her a series of possible solutions to life's problems.

In *Fables of the Bled Heron* the themes of *Siege to Eros* became internalized and appeared transformed into symbols. Here the female heroines were all mythical or belonged to the world of fiction: Antigone, Desdemona, Ariadne, Helen of Troy, Daphne, Dorotea, Francesca de Rimini. Ironic allegory was the book's principal strategy; it allowed me to put a greater distance between the conflicts of women and myself. In the poems I would take a story—Ariadne's, for example—and would give it a very different ending than it had in the original. In my poem "Requiem" Ariadne, abandoned by Theseus after he sails off in search of the Minotaur, aborts the Minotaur:

Theseus is finally convinced:  
the Minotaur is his destiny.  
He rises and buckles up his shield.  
As he straps on his sandals  
the bracelets of his arms ring out  
like lightning.  
Legs apart, Cyclopean, he stands over Ariadne  
and resolutely fits the dagger to his waist.  
He whispers in her ear one day he'll return  
with a rich horn of ivory on a damasked cushion  
from across the seas.  
Theseus embraces her for the last time  
and strides off with a swagger  
lighting up the labyrinth with the gleam of his sword.  
Ariadne leans against the wall.  
A reed of icy bones  
has splintered down the length of her back.  
She sits  
on the stamped-down dust  
of nothingness,  
—no bottom there.  
A sudden pain tears at her insides.  
She feels the warm wine  
as it runs down between her legs.  
She's begun to abort the Minotaur.

Antigone was another heroine who appeared in *Fables of the Bled Heron*. I saw her as the eternal female rebel, and wrote several poems about her. One of them, "Opprobrium", reads like this:

My name is Antigone: I was buried alive  
by those who owed obedience to the tyrant,

by those who, threatened with fear,  
 entrust their heavy orchards, laden with golden fruit  
 to his care. With the moon of my menses  
 I wove the shroud in which I burn, unblemished,  
 at the dregs of my death.  
 Centuries have gone by and my blood  
 still betrays me: it pours out of my wounds  
 every time a rebel dares to curse a satrap.

In *Fables of the Bled Heron*, in short, women like Ariadne and Antigone continue to embody women's historical conflicts—the punishment for defying the *patria potestas* of the latter, the abandonment by her lover of the former—but they have also become their opposites: Ariadne secretly avenges herself on Theseus; Antigone's fame after her death prevails over Creon's. In this sense, it is a book that aspires to traverse a path in a new direction. The struggle between the historical and the linguistic "I", which in *The Youngest Doll* had been resolved in favor of the latter, achieved here a greater equilibrium of forces. Ironic allegory proved to be an enormous advantage: it prevented me from escaping from myself, and forced me to elaborate a more temperate poetic language, which brought out even more vividly my heroines' historical testimony.

*Translated by Rosario Ferré and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert*

#### Notes

1. De Man, Paul. *Blindness and Insight* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 112-13.