## GENEROUS PARDON, TENDER AFFECTION; THREE POEMS BY GERTRUDIS GOMEZ DE AVELLANADA

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#### INTRODUCTION

If woman, in spite of these and other brilliant indicators of her scientific capacity, still continues to be proscribed from the templeof profound knowledge, one would neither believe that her acceptance into the literary and artisticfields will happen for many centuries: ah! no! for her this terrain has been disputed palm over palm by male exclusivism, and even today she is seen there as an intruder and a usurper, treating her, in consequence, with a certain ill will and mistrust, that one can see in the distance in whichshe is maintained from the bearded academies-You pass this adjective, dear readers, because it has come naturally to the pen upon mentioning these illustrious corporations of people of letters, whose first and most important title is that o having beards.

This sardonic comment by Cuban Romantic poet Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda, in her 1860 essay: "Woman," aptly characterized the Spanish literary climate of her day.

Avellaneda, or "Tula," as she was affectionately known, innovated new metrical forms in spanish poetry. She wrote plays performed for the Spanish court and published an antislavery novel, Sab, ten years before the printing of <u>Uncle Toms's Cabin</u>.

Crowned as an honorary poet in Cuba, Avellaneda heard her male literary contemporaries praise her achievement, while expressing doubt that anyone with her talent could be a woman.

In 1853, she was nomited for a seat on the prestigious Real Academy of the Spanish Language. She lost the honor to a colorless political personage

"by right of pertaining to" the "loevely sex".2

It was an embittered Avellaneda who then condemned literary renown, likening it to facial hair; the exclusive property and privilege of males. As she wrote;

Unfortunately the greatest intellectual potential does not reach to sprout forth on the lower part of the human face in this animal exuberance which requires the blade of the knife.<sup>3</sup>

In spite of her resentment, Avellaneda had endured the tumult of her own life by a capacity for "generous pardon, tender affection", for her triumphs were as illustrious as her losses were tragic.

Born to well-to-do parents in Cuba, Avellaneda said farewell to her beloved island twice in her lifetime. Married and widowed twice, she never won the affection of the man she truly loved.

She suffered greatly when her only daughter, born out of wedlock, died soon after birth. She received high honors, for the king and queen of Spain were **padrinos**, the best man and maid of honor, at her second wedding in 1855.

Throughout the many honors and the painful lossesx, Avellaneda maintained a continous outpouring of literary energy; her work infused with love for others, love for God and enthusiasm for her professed art of poetry.<sup>4</sup>

Though she was a passionate lover, Avellaneda was not one to harbor grudges, and she maintained amicable

Her bountiful spirit and enduring love for writing motivated one of Avellaneda's last gifts. As part of her will, written in 1864, she left her life's work to the same Academy that had once rejected her. She specified:

All my literary works, said, I donate them to the Real Academy of the Language. Displaying that I desire that they pardon me the

tactlessness I may have incurred, when I remembered, some years ago, their not admitting to their bosom any individual of my sex.<sup>5</sup>

#### **BIOGRAPHY**

María Gertrudis de los Dolores was the baptismal name of a girl born to Manuel Gómez de Avellaneda and Francisca de Arteaga y Betancourt in the Puerto Príncipe section of Camaguey on March 23, 1814. Since early childhood, Gertrudis showed a passion for writing verse and novels. As a young woman, she displayed the impulsiveness seen in her character throughout her life, unexpectedly ending two engagements before her first marriage.

Avellaneda moved to Spain with her family at twenty-two. She began publishing poetry in Sevilla under the pseudonym: "La Peregrina" (The Pilgrim), and began what was to become a lifetime of tempestuous love affairs. Mendez Vigo's love for Avellaneda left him at the brink of suicide, but the young woman poet preferred the gloomy melancholy of Ignacio Cepeda. His moody temperament, called "ennui" or "melancholy" in the Romantic era, was Avellaneda's downfall?

In June 1840 her play **Leoncia** premiered in the theater of Sevilla. Her anti-slavery novel **Sab**, filled with images of her homeland, was published in 1841, and Avellaneda resolved to live out her destiny as a poet.<sup>8</sup>

While her poetry readings triumphed in Madrid, Cepeda spurned her. Avellaneda soon became enamored of poet Gabriel García Tassara in 1844, and she gave birth to his daughter out of wedlock in April of 1845. In spite of her letters, which alternated pleading with threats, Tassara never came to see his baby girl. When she died at seven months, his paternity was acknowledged in the child's death act.<sup>9</sup>

Avellaneda's theater works Alfonso Munio and el Príncipe de Viana were performed and she published the novel Espatolino before May 1846, when she married her ardent admirer, Pedro Sabater.

When he became ill and died eighty days after the wedding, Avellaneda was moved to write a series of elegies in the convent of Burdeos.

She returned to Madrid, and resumed her affair with Ignacio Cepeda until another final split in 1847.

At the height of her literary success, Avellaneda married Colonel Domingo Verdugo in 1855, with the King and Queen of Spain as best man and maid of honor. Her popular comedy, Los Oráculos de Talia was followed by Tres Amores, and this second work prompted an unusual mishap.

When one of the characters uttered the line: "There's a cat locked up, Sirs..." in the final scene of this play, a high-spirited theater patron named Antonio Ribera hurled a live cat onstage. The indignant Verdugo fought with Ribera in defense of his wife's honor, and the ensuing disorder caused the play to end abruptly, despite the presence of the Spanish royalty. <sup>10</sup>

After the triumphant premier of Avellaneda's **Baltasar** the following month, Ribera and Verdugo engaged in another skirmish, and resulting injuries weakened Verdugo's failing health.

When Verdugo was offered a post as Lietenant Governer of Cuba, the couple returned there in 1852. Avellaneda was lauded as the island's poet and crowned in the Teatro Tacon. On the twenty-seventh of January, 1860, she was crowned again in the **Liceo** of Havana.

Verdugo fell ill with yellow fever in 1860, and died in 1863 of a malarial fever. Avellaneda returned to Spain, where she dedicated herself to editing her life's work. She died on the first of February, 1873.

While critics agree on the genius of her writing, they do not give al her work evaluations of equal merit. According to critic Max Henríquez Ureña, Avellaneda's narrative fiction "does not reach... the same elevation and brilliance of the dramatic work or her lyric verse."

## AL PARTIR

"Upon Leaving"

Avellaneda first left Santiago de Cuba with her family on April 9, 1836, aboarded the frigate **Bellochan.** As the boat left Santiago, she wrote this well-known sonnet: "Upon Leaving". According to Carmen Bravo-Villasante, the inspired young poet then stood on the deck during the voyage, reciting the poetry of Cuban José María de Heredia.<sup>12</sup>

"Upon Leaving" is a prophetic sonnet, concludes Max Ureña. While Avellaneda was to live the greater part of her life in Spain and achieve great triumphst here, she continued to evoke her native land as she does in this sonnnet, throughout her writing career. <sup>13</sup>

The variety and richness of Avellaneda's poetic meter is also explaned by Ureña. Her poetic

innovations include the thirteen-syllable verse, a new type of alejandrino verse, a verse composed of five rhythmic clauses of three syllables and a verse composed of sixteen syllables. Her domination of poetic form is marked by what Carmen Villasante called "virtuosity of rhyme." 15

#### **AL PARTIR**

¡Perla del mar! ¡Estrella de Occidente! ¡Hermosa Cuba! Tu brillante cielo la noche cubre con su opaco velo como cubre el dolor mi triste frente ¡Voy a partir! La chusma diligente, para arrancarme del nativo suelo las velas iza, y pronta a su desvelo la brisa acude de tu zona ardiente ¡Adiós, patria feliz, edén querido! ¡Doquier el hado en su furor me impela tu dulce nombre halagará mi oido! ¡Adiós! ¡... Ya cruje la turgente vela... el ancla se alza... el buque estremecido, las olas corta y silencioso vuela! 16

#### **UPON LEAVING**

Pearl of the sea! Star of the West!
Beautiful Cuba! Your brillliant sky
is covered by night with an opaque veil
as pain covers my sad forehead
I will depart! The toiling crew
(to uproot me from the native soil)
hoists the sails, and promptly at this unveiling
the breeze responds to your torrid zone
Goodby, happy country, beloved Eden!
Wherever destiny in its furor impels me
your sweet name will flatter my ear!
Goodby... The sails are crushed by wind
the anchor lifts... the trembling vessel
cuts the waves and silently flies!

#### LA VENGANZA

These verses, entitled "Vengeance: Invocation to Spirits of the Night", are a fragment of what is called "a small poem", in a footnote of Volume I of Avellaneda's complete works.<sup>17</sup>

Avellaneda wrote the poem in 1842, and then tore it to pieces some time later. Impressed by the "novelty and harmony t hey attributed to the meter", friends of the poet salvaged this fragment.<sup>18</sup>

Modern readers can suggest a variety of

reasons why Avellaneda destroyed her work, and why she composed so violent and tormented a series of verses.

Before she knew of Romanticism, Avellaneda was a romantic. As she remembered her childhood; "Since girlhood I wrote verses and novels that had for protagonists giants and vampires". <sup>19</sup> She also recalled:

With no tragedies to read, I began to create them. I would improvise with my friends tremendous scenes of passion, of death, and more than once I became posessed so much, that after those poetic outbursts, I would fall in bed with fever..<sup>20</sup>

This fervid spirit blossomed in Avellaneda's later work, for her personality and temperament matched those of her era; the Romantic style of Ropusseau, William Blake and Byron. She lived and wrote with the conviction of Helvetius, who said: "We become stupid when we cease to become impassioned". The beliefs and values of Romanticism encouraged Avellaneda's style, especially so in the elegant horror of the night spirits of "Vengeance".

In this disturbing, tortured remnant of Avellaneda's longer poem, she invokes all the horrible powers of evil she can name o assist her in and unquenchable thirst for vengeance. Calling on them to leave off their other dark pursuits, she promises them a "more dignified end" in stanza eight: the sordid task of avenging her fevered anger.

While literary historians have not established the extent of Avellaneda's literary preparation, it is possible that she read the classics. The rhythmic intonation of her repeated cries: "Come!" Listen!" "Fly" echo those of the anquished Dido in Virgil's Aenead. Deserted by Aeneas, Dido vents her raw, desolate fury by invoking the gods of vengeance:

Furies, avengers, and, oh, gods of themoribund Elisa, listen tol these words, attendtomy supplications and bring ovedr these evil ones our avenging spirit! 22

Go, fly, come flames, put up the sails, hands to the oars... What shall I say? Where am I?

What delusion blinds me? Unhappy Dido, now proclaim his wrongs, it would have been better if you had proclaimed them when you gave him your scepter.<sup>23</sup>

As much as Avellaneda's work echoes the Greek classics in content and style, her writing is always motivated by genuine feeling. Occasions of tragedy darkened her life, beginning with her frustrated love for Cepeda. Literary success alternated with the deaths of her daughter and her two husbands, drawing from the poet works of profound religious yearning.

Critic Marcelino Menéndez y Pelayo concluded:

What makes her inmortal, not only in Spanish lyric poetry, but in any other place and time, is the tame and resigned, at tmes ardent and impetuous and mystic and profound, of all the yearnings, sadnesses, passions, disenchantments, torments and shipwrecks of the feminine soul. <sup>24</sup>

Her literary triumphs were an honor and a burden for a woman in her time. Despite literary acclaim, Avellaneda won sometimes grudging praise in a man's literary world. It was with sincerity that respected critic Ferrer del Río announced: "Avellaneda is not a poetess, but a [male] poet," implying that talent of her caliber could only be found in male writers. A contemporary of Avellaneda, Carolina Coronado, wrote that Avellaneda became so fascinated by this opinion that she used a male pseudonym to win a literary contest.<sup>25</sup>

On one level, the fragment: "Vengeance: Invocation to the Spirits of the Night", reads like a scene from one of Avellaneda's childhood stories of giants and vampires. After a second reading, though, the tumult of Avellaneda's adult life, the depth of her personal suffering and the extent of her artistic sensibility make the shocking horror of the images more understandable. The series of verse are the innermost cry of a woman unhappy in love, yearning for a distant homeland and struggling for acclaim in the masculine world of Spanish letters.

#### LA VENGANZA

Invocación a los Espíritus de la Noche ¡Callados hijos de la noche lóbrega espíritus amantes del pavor que la venganza alimentais recóndita y esfuerzo dais al criminal amor!

Númenes mudos de asechanzas pérfidas protectores del odio y la traición

que disipais vacilaciones tétricas de flojo miedo y necia compasión ilos q ue en las selvas solitarias, lúgubres dais al bandido el rápido puñal y los gemidos sofocais inútiles de él que a su golpe sucumbió mortal! ¡Ministros del error, del crimen súbditos! ¡Atender! ¡Atender; ¡Volad; ¡Volad! Que ya la hora sonó de ansiado júbilo y sus puertas abrió la eternidad Dejad los antros de la inmunda crápula, do prodigais mezquina inspiración y el blando sueño de la virgen cándida no perturbeis con lóbrega visión, ni atormenteis vigilias del ascético ni adustos con la esposa criminal la hagais soñar que se convierte en piélago de hirviente sangre el tálkamo nupcial ni a inicuos jueces las inultas víctimas reproduzcais en lúgubre escuadrón; ni al vil logrero la indigencia lívida. lanzando en él terrible maldición,. ¡Más digno fin, placeres mas insólitos hoy os preparo, espíritus sin luz! Momentos son a vuestras ansias prósperos los que esta noche envuelve en su capuz Su trono se alza esplendoroso de ébano v los vientos se duermen a sus pies y su honda paz, como la paz del féretro profunda, fría y sin sonido es Ved las estrellas de su imperio prófugas Ved cual cubre la luna su dosel y el manto azul de la celeste bóveda negro se vuelve, en protegeros fiel El eco duerme en sus asilos cóncavos duerme en la sombra el céfiro fugaz Mi odio tan solo vela, y mira atónito la para él desconocida paz Ningún rumor en el silencio fúnebre el negro arcano revelar podrá ¡Sólo a vosotros, del misterio númenes, la muda voz os felicita ya! ¡Venid! ¡Venid!, que de rencores grávida siento esta frente que mirais arder y un lauro pide que refresquen lágrimas para templar su acerbo padecer! ¡Venid! ¡Venid! ¡espíritus indómitos! ¡De horror y duelo este recinto henchid! ¡Venid, las alas sacudiendo próvidos a enardecer mi corazón, venid! ¡Venid! ¡Venid! Del enemigo bárbaro beber anhelo la abundante hiel

¡No más insomnes velarán mis párpados si a él se los cierra mi furor cruel! ¡Dadle a mis labios, que se agitan ávidos sangre humeante sin cesar, corred! Trague, devore sus raudales rápidos jamás saciada mi ferviente sed ¡Hagan mis dientes con crújidos ásperos pedazos mil su corazón infiel y dormiré, cual en suntuoso tálamo su caliente, ensangrentada piel! Al retratar, tan plácidas imágenes siento de gozo el corazón latir... ¡Espíritus de horror, no pusilánimes dejeis mi sangre inútilmente hervir! Si en estos campos solitarios, áridos, quereis tener magnífico festín dadme sus miembros, dádmelos escuálidos, y en ellos mi hambre se apaciente al fin ¡Ministros del error, del crimen súbditos! ¡Atended! ¡Atended! ¡Volad! ¡Volad! Que ya la hora sonó de ansiado júbilo, y sus puertas abrió la eternidad!

#### **VENGEANCE**

(Invocation to the Spirits of the Night)

Silent sons of the gloomy night

Spirits-lovers of dread You feed concealed vengeance, and you encourage criminal love! Mute deities of treacherous snares protectors of hatred and betrayal that dissipate melancholy indecision of foolish fear and ignorant compassion the ones who in the solitary, gloomy jungles give to the bandit the rapid dagger and suffocate the useless moans of the one who at your mortal blow succumbed! Ministers of error, subjects of crime Listen! Listen! Fly! Fly! For already the hour of anxious jubilation sounded and eternity opened its doors. Leave the den of filthy debauchery where you lavish miserly inspiration and the sensual dream of the innocent virgin do not perturb with your gloomy vision nor torment the vigils of the aescetic nor act sternly with the criminal wife make her dream that converted into an ocean of boiling blood is the bridal chamber.

nor for wicked judges the unpunished victims do you reproduce in gloomy squadron nor to the vile userer to livid begging thrown into terrible damnation. More dignified end, pleasures most peculiar Today I prepare you, spirits without light! Moments are at your prosperous eagerness those wrapped in its robe by the night. His throne rises, resplendant with ebony and the winds sleep at his feet and his deep peace, like the peace of the coffin iks profound, cold and noiseless. See the fugitive stars from their empire, See those covered by the canopy of the moon And the blue robe of the celestial vault becomes black, in faithful shelter. The echo sleeps in this concave asylums, sleeps in the shadow of the fleeting breeze. My hate alone watches, and looks, astonished at the for-him unknown peace. No rumor in te funeral silence the black mystery will be able to reveal Only to you, deities of mysteries the mute voice congratulates you already! Come, Come, fora grave resentments I feel this forehead tat you see burn and ask for laurel to refresh tears to easy its bitter suffering. Come! Come! Indoitablwe spirits! Sewell this forehead with hrror and pain! Come, the careful, flapping wings to sting my heart, Come! Come! Come! Of the barbarous enemy Drink yearning, the abundant bitterness No more shall my sleepless eyelids watch if my cruel fury closes this! Give to my lips, that tremble greedily, moist blood, without ceasing, run! Drink, devour its rapid torrents never satiated is my fervent thirst. My teeth make with bitter crusing into a million pieces our unfaithful heart and I will sleep, in a sumptuous bridal bed on your hot, bloody skin! Upon portraying such placid images I feel my heart beat with pleasure Spirits of horror, not pusillanimous leave my blood to boil uselessly! If in these solitary, arid fields you want to have a magnificent banquet give me his parts, give me them, squalid and in tem my hunger shall finally feed.

Ministers of error, subjects of crime
Listen! Listen! Fly! Fly!
For already the hour sounded of anxious
jubilation
and eternity opened its doors.

# A EL "To him"

After the death of Pedro Sabater, Avellaneda resumed her romance with Ignacio Cepeda in 1847, but the two split for the last time at the end of the same year.

Avellaneda's poem entitled "To him", the second bearing this title, commemorates the end of their romantic love. Her assurance of "generous pardon, tender affection" at the end of the poem is heartfelt. She maintained friendly correspondence with Cepeda until 1854, when he married Maria Córdova y Govantes.

At her own expense, Cepeda's widow published his correspondence with Avellaneda, after his death in 1906.<sup>27</sup>

#### A EL

No existe lazo ya: todo está roto. plúgole al cielo así. ¡Bendito sea! Amargo caliz con placer agoto; mi alma reposa al fin: nada desea. ¡Te amé, no te amo ya; piénsolo al menos: nunca, si fuere error, la verdad mire! Que tantos años de amargura llenos trague el olvido, el corazón respire! Lo has destrozado sin piedad, mi orgullo una vez y otra vez pisaste insano... más nunca el labio exhalará un murmullo para acusar tu proceder tirano De graves faltas vengador terrible docil llenaste tu misión: ¿lo ignoras? No era tuyo el poder que irresistible postró ante mis fuerzas vencedoras Quísolo Dios y fue; gloria a su nombre todo se terminó; recobró aliento ¡Angel de las venganzas! ya eres hombre ni amor ni miedo al contemplarte siento

Cayó tu cetro, se embotó tu espada...
¡Más hay! ¡Cuan triste libertad respiro!
Hice un munde de ti, que hoy se anonada
y en honda y vasta soledad me miro.
¡Vive dichosa tú! Si en algún día
ves este adiós que t e dirijo eterno
sabe que aún tienes en el alma mía
generoso perdón, cariño tierno.

#### To Him

The knot no longer exists; everything is broken Heaven wanted it that way. May it be blessed!

Bitter chalice I drain with pleasure Finally, my soul rests, desiring nothing I loved you, I don't love you any more; I think so, at least

If it was en error, I never faced the truth
I hope forgetfulness swallows so many years filled
with

bitterness, that the heart breathes!
You have shattered it without pity, my pride
one time and again you trampled insanely
but the lip will never exhale a murmur
to accuse your tyrannical conduct
Of grave faults, terrible avenger
calmly you filled your mission, do you ignore it?
It wasn't yours, the power that irresistably
collapsed my conquering forces before you
God wanted it and it was; glory to his name
everything ended; one recovered breath
Angel of vengeance! Now you're only a man
neither love nor fear do I feel as I contemplate
you

Your scepter fell, your sword blunted When, ay, what sad liberty I breathe! I made a world of you, that today is annihilated

and I see myself in vast and deep solitude.
Live happily! If someday
you see this goodbye that I address to you
eternally

you know, that you still have in my soul generous pardon, tender affection

#### **NOTES**

- \*La traducción de los tres poemas de la poeta cubana Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda estuvo inspirada por la Dra. María Vega de Febles y con la ayuda de sus libros de poesías de la Avellaneda. Además, la Dra. Vega de Febles colaboró en la traducción de los mismos,
- 1. Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda, "La Mujer", [The Woman], Vol. 5: Colección Completa Obras Literarias de la Señora Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda. [Complete Collection. Literary Works of Mrs. Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda] (Madrid: Rivadeneyra, 1871), p. 303. (This essay was also published in La Discusión [The Discussion], August 5, 1857, and May 29, 1858.
- 2. Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda, "Apuntes Biográficos", Vol. 1: Colección Completa. Obras Literarias de la Señora Doña Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda. [Complete Collection. Literary Works of Mrs. Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda] (Madrid: Rivadeneyra, 1869\_, p. 31.
- 3. Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda, "La Mujer," Obras Literarias, T omo 5, p. 303.
- 4. Marcelino Menéndez y Pelayo from Antología de Poetas Hispanoamericanos, [Anthology of Hispanoamerican Poets] quoted in Amanecer de un Centenario [Dawn of a Centennial], Dra. María A. Crespi, ed., (Miami: February 1, 1973), p. 15.
  - 5. Amanecer de un Centenario, Ibid., p. 14.
- 6. Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda, **SAB: Edición**, **Prólogo y Notas**, edit. by Carmen Bravo-Villasante, (Salamanca: Ediciones Anaya, S.A., 1970), p. 8.
- 7. Max Henríquez Ureña, Vol. 1, Panorama Histórico de la Literatura Cubana, [Historical Panorama of Cuban Literature] (Puerto Rico: Ediciones Mirador, 1963), p. 201.
  - 8. Carmen Bravo-Villasante, p. 10.
  - 9. Max Henríquez Ureña, p. 203.
  - 10. Ibid., p. 204.
  - 11. Ibid., p. 225.
  - 12. Carmen Bravo-Villasante, p. 8.
  - 13. Max Henríquez Ureña, p. 197,.
  - 14. Ibid., p. 207.
  - 15. Carmen Bravo-Villasante, p. 13.
- 16. Julio Caillet Bois, Antología de la Poesía Hispanoamericana. (Madrid: Aguilar, 1965), p. 332
- 17. Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda, Vol. I, Obras Literarias, p. 134.
  - 18. Ibid.
  - 19. Carmen Bravo-Villasante, p. 7.
  - 20. Ibid., p. 8.
  - 21. Ibid.

- 22. Agustín Millares Carlo, estudio preliminar y notas, Virgilio y Horacio: Obras Poéticas, Traducciones de Eugenio de Ochoa y German Salinas, Clásicos Jackson, Volumen IV, (México, Buenos Aires, Santiago de Chile: W. M. Jackson, Editores), p. 169.
  - 23. Ibid.
- 24. Marcelino Menéndez y Pelayo, Antología de Poetas Hispanoamericanos, en Amanecer de Un Centenario, p. 15.
- 25 Carolina Coronado, "Galería de Poetisas Contemporáneas," Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda, Vol. 1, Obras Literarias, p. 389.
  - 26. Caillet Bois, p. 328.
  - 27. Max Henríquez Ureña, p. 204.
  - 28. Caillet Bois, p. 239.

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