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**Translated by Susan Stewart: Love Lessons:  
Selected Poems of Alda Merini**

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## TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

I tenderly loved some very sweet lovers  
without them knowing anything about it.  
And I wove spiderwebs from this  
and I always fell prey to my own creation.  
In me there was the soul of the prostitute  
of the saint of the one who lusts for blood and of the hypocrite.  
Many people gave a label to my way of life  
and all that while I was only an hysteric.

—“ALDA MERINI”

Alda Merini's front door stands at the top of several flights of stairs in a nineteenth-century building along the canal in the Naviglio district of Milano. Posted there, a card displays a sad poetic tribute to her publisher Vanni Scheiwiller: *Un uomo che volò alto / talmente alto / che molti indeboliti spiriti / l'atterrarono* (*A man who flew high / so high / that many weaker spirits / brought him down*). Inside, dusky sunlight pours in from the shuttered windows of the three rooms that make up her small apartment—kitchen, bath, and bedroom strung along a hallway. Within this warren, Merini has assembled, on every available surface, a chaotic, indecipherable archive of her existence: pages and objects and remnants stacked, dropped, leaning, falling, rising toward the ceiling, spilling over the floors and across tables, into her bed, across bureaus and shelves. Tottering boxes, books, reams of paper and loose sheets, magazines, parts of magazines, cast-off clothing, discarded bouquets and bills, jars and bottles—implements, so many imaginable, unimaginable things. Visitors

enter, stepping where they can, steadying themselves, sitting a while to talk, the phone ringing, the CD player on pause, the door open to the hallway where, eventually, after conversation and perhaps an improvised poem or two, they will go out again—Merini’s privacy an ongoing open secret.

Across the ochre palimpsest of peeling paint above her bed, in lurid lines of lipsticks and faint pencil traces, she has scrawled a vast map of phone numbers, aphorisms, fragments of poems coming to life or fading from memory; it’s hard to tell. She roams, a small stooped figure, through her realm of objects, dropping cigarette ash everywhere she goes. If you do not believe in guardian angels, the sight of Alda Merini orbiting through this flammable maze, day after day, night after night, shedding sparks, might make you change your mind.

Is this space, organized so that everything is ready to hand as material for art, with nothing left to insignificance or mere appearance, the house of a madwoman? Is it not bourgeois life, with its discrete material categories of things and persons, that indicates an obstinate insanity? Who, after all, would complain about the housekeeping of the Cumaean Sibyl? As Merini writes in “When the Anguish”:

And, up against me, the inanimate things  
that I created earlier  
come to die again within the breast  
of my intelligence  
eager for my shelter and my fruits,  
begging again for riches from a beggar.

Such conscientious care for debris, such obliviousness toward any existing system of value, gives evidence of the daily poetic needs of choosing, making, and judging anew from the manifold of phenomena that surround us. There

is no alienation in Merini's environment—only memory, imagination, and an innovative, unending hospitality toward poetry and persons, a state of vigilant reception. Meanwhile, the life and work are not in hiding; they wait in plain sight.

The biography of Alda Merini is well known to Italian readers through her many interviews and the introductions to her books. Yet there is as yet no full scholarly biography, and what we know of her life comes largely from her own words. Born in Milano on the first day of Spring, 1931, she was one of four children, three of whom survived into adulthood. Her mother, a housewife, was the daughter of a schoolteacher from Lodi, but the mother nevertheless discouraged Alda's desire for a classical education. In contrast, her father, a clerk for a national insurance company—the *Assicurazioni Generali* of Venezia—encouraged her literary aspirations from an early age, giving her spelling lessons and books. She frequently recounts how she read a book of art history and Dante's *Commedia* at the age of eight, and memorized many of Dante's passages. A sickly child, she often didn't go to school, but her father continued to give her exercises in reading and writing, and a teacher came regularly to give her piano lessons.

As she approached adolescence, Merini had an intense desire to become a nun, but her mother objected to this plan, too, contending the girl was better suited to having a family. This period of disappointment for the young Merini intersected with the height of Italy's involvement in World War II. Merini has recorded that her father was not a member of the fascist party, and during the 1942 bombardment of Milan the family fled to the nearby town of Trecate in search of food and safety. There Merini had no piano to play, but she remembered this time as one of solidarity with other refugees. When the family returned to Milano at the end of the

war, they found their house severely damaged. They broke it up into apartments to be let out to strangers, for the father had no source of income, and Merini herself was sent to a vocational school where she studied stenography in preparation for finding work in an office.

Her father had published a little pamphlet of her poems when she was ten. At fifteen she was dedicating herself to writing poems and, at the same time, suffering from severe anorexia, a condition exacerbated by memories of wartime deprivation. She was sent to stay with an uncle in Torino while she was treated by a well-known neurologist there. When she returned to Milano, she did find a post as a stenographer and held it for a brief time. Meanwhile, by the age of sixteen, she was writing more mature poems. In 1947 some of these poems came to the attention of Silvana Rovelli, a cousin of the well-known poet Ada Negri. Rovelli mentioned Merini's poems to the writer Angelo Romanò, who in turn showed them to the influential critic and anthologist Giacinto Spagnoletti.

Rovelli's intervention made a dramatic difference in the life of the young Merini. Later in that year, she started to go often to Spagnoletti's house, where she found a remarkable salon attended by many of the period's most prominent poets and critics—Giorgio Manganelli, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Maria Corti, and Luciano Erba, among others. The teenaged girl became a kind of mascot for the group and at sixteen she began a love affair with Manganelli, who, at twenty-seven, already had a wife and children. In 1947, too, her first symptoms of serious mental illness began and she spent a month at the Villa Turro clinic in Milano. The affair with Manganelli lasted until 1949, when he left both Merini and his family for Rome.

In 1950 Spagnoletti published two of the nineteen-year-

old Merini's poems, works she had written several years before, in his anthology *Poesia italiana contemporanea 1909–1949*. The next year a group of her lyrics was published, at the suggestion of Eugenio Montale, in another important anthology, Vanni Scheiwiller's edition of women poets, *Poetesse del Novocento*. Even in these earliest lyrics, we find Merini's enduring emphases upon chiaroscuro lighting, eroticism, and mysticism. Between 1950 and 1953 she became romantically involved with another member of the Spagnolletti group, Salvatore Quasimodo, who was thirty years her senior.

When this affair ended in 1953, she married Ettore Carniti, the owner of a chain of bakery-pastry shops in Milano—a man with no particular background in literature and culture. Even so, Merini's career as a poet continued to grow. Her first book, *La presenza di Orfeo*, was published in that year. In a 1954 essay in the important cultural journal *Paragone*, Pier Paolo Pasolini wrote of her as a “young Milanese girl” who already was showing the influence of Campana, Rilke, George, and Trakl—he intuitively grasped the importance her often troubled psychology would have in her work. At the same time, he marveled at how a young poet could have absorbed such intense and monumental influences. Scheiwiller also continued to champion Merini's poems, publishing in 1955 a collection titled *Paura di Dio* that included all her poems from 1947 to 1953. And 1955 saw the publication of her *Nozze romane* by the publishing house Schwarz—in this book, reflecting on her early married life, she continues to be influenced strongly by Rilke's imagery and voice, a textual encounter she often cites in interviews as her entry into a visionary poetry.

Merini's first daughter, Emanuela (Manuela), was also born in 1955. The baby was cared for by a young Sicilian

pediatrician, Pietro di Pasquale, and he became an unrequited love interest—sadly, the first of many—for Merini. She named her next book *Tu sei Pietro*, dedicating the poem “Genesi” to the doctor while also exploring the religious imagery associated with the disciple Peter. Scheiwiller published this book in 1961, though most of the poems were written in 1955.

And then, between 1955 and 1975—with her second daughter, Flavia, born in 1958—Merini fell silent. For much of this time, she was kept in mental institutions where she suffered frequent isolation, the imposition of physical restraints, and more than thirty-seven electrical shock treatments. Initially committed by her husband, Carniti, she entered the Paolo Pini asylum in Milano in 1965 and remained there until 1972. During relatively brief periods with her family during these years, she gave birth to two more daughters, Barbara and Simona, though she was not well enough to raise them. The periods of madness continued until she began writing again in the mid-1970s.

Ettore Carniti died in 1981 and that year, at the age of fifty, Merini began a correspondence with the poet and doctor Michele Pierrì, who was then eighty-two years old. By 1983 she had married him and moved to his home in Taranto, in the southern region of Puglia, but she became seriously mentally ill once more and went into an oppressive Tarantese mental institution. The poems of *La Terra Santa*, an account of her illness during this period, were first published in 1982 in journals. She couldn’t find a publisher, but then Vanni Scheiwiller again supported her, bringing out the book in 1984. In 1993 *La Terra Santa* received the prestigious national Montale Prize, thus symbolically completing the circle of Montale’s own support for her early work.

Leaving Taranto, Merini returned to Milano in 1986,

where she was treated by the psychiatrist Marcella Rizzo and finally was able to live outside of mental institutions in her own apartment, that space I have earlier described. Since her return to the Naviglio, Merini has published a book of poems or prose almost annually. Her autobiographical writings—*L'altra verità: diario d'una diversa* of 1987, *Delirio amoroso* of 1989, and *Reato di vita* of 1994 recount her years of incarceration in asylums, always in an intensely phenomenological and aphoristic style. With the death of Manganelli, her early love and mentor, in 1991, she published, between 1992 and 1996, a virtual explosion of new poems: *Ipotenusa d'amore*; *La Palude di Manganelli, o il monarca del re*; and *Un'anima indocile*. Her *Titano amori interno* of 1993 introduced a new, more colloquial, and open style, one that continued in her two books of 1995: *La pazzia della porta accanto* and *Ballate non pagate*. Merini's work up until this point won her the prestigious Premio Viareggio in 1996 and simultaneously she was nominated by the French Academy for the Nobel Prize.

The critic Maria Corti—who had known Merini from her earliest teenaged visits to Spagnoletti's salon and had provided crucial help as she emerged from her illness to write *La Terra Santa* more than a decade earlier—assembled in 1997 the most important selection of her work, *Fiore di poesia*. The collection won the 1997 Premio Procida-Elsa Morante and, in 1999, the Italian government's Premio della Presidenza del consiglio dei Ministri, settore Poesia. In this period Merini also brought out two new books, *Aforismi e magie* and *Vuoto d'amore*. A collection of brief lyrics, *Superba è la Notte*, appeared in 2000. In 2001 the Italian PEN Club made her their candidate for the Nobel Prize. New poems, *Alla tua salute, amore mio: poesie, aforismi*, and a memoir, *Clinica Dell'Abbandono*, were published in 2003,

and in 2005 she produced another pair of memoirs and poems: *Uomini miei* and *Sono nata il ventuno a primavera: Diario e nuove poesie*.

Reading Merini reveals that her lyrics and meditative poems are characterized by a number of distinctive techniques. Much of their immediacy arises from her use of what might be called “then / now” structures that resemble the dynamic between confession and prayer. In poems like “[As for me, I used to be a bird]” and “[There was a fountain that offered dawns],” as well as the more directly imploring “Antique Lyric” and her apostrophe to her daughter “[Stay steady burning olive tree],” she creates a strong sense of presence that arises from the request made by the speaking voice. Beggars, outstretched palms, and the saints who help them are frequent figures in her work. Merini’s narratives, often broken by the unsaid via the use of ellipses, similarly confront the reader with the urgency of a demand—the “when / then / now” dynamic of these poems effects a turning in time that comes hurtling out of the past toward the present moment of encounter.

In other work, especially in her early poems, her use of the future tense or her setting out of hypothetical cases invites the reader, in contrast, to enter into a reflective process of judgment. There is a vatic tone in the poems, only underlined by her practice of writing aphorisms and her unusual use of dramatic monologue in her poem on the Cumaean Sibyl herself.

If these are some dominant aspects of Merini’s use of time and personal history, the space of her work is a space of bodily memory placed within the larger sphere of the city of Milano. Parts of the body recur here so frequently as poetic subjects that they have some of the disembodied power of sacred relics: hands, faces, mouths, wombs, loins, teeth, the

pupils of the eye, lips, breasts, throats, eyelashes, voices, big toes, fingernails, testicles, feet, napes, hair, skin. The body is revealed as a place of suffering and joy, a shelter for the reason and the emotions at once. In the poems of *Superba è la Notte*, especially the long meditations entitled “The Raven” and “Cry of Death,” somatic experience anchors the surrealist play of metaphysical topics.

Merini’s syntax is something like a nervous system in itself. Whatever regularity stems from her reliance on a basic five-beat line is countered by her use of enjambment, seemingly arbitrary punctuation, and surprising, complex, phrase and sentence structures. From the inverted syntax—with prepositions and verbs preceding their subjects—in the early “Mary of Egypt” to the winding clauses of the late long poems, Merini often torques the syntax and “lands” on either a clear, and separate, final couplet or on passages that return the ear to earlier language. For example, “[Naviglio that succors my flesh]” ends with a kind of fireworks display of recurring sounds :

. . . Incorniciata  
la fronte di frescure inusitate  
batto i denti nel freddo meridiano  
dove adagio si stendono le suore.

The unusual end rhymes of “Othello,” with its one strong unrhymed line, can be compared to the juxtaposition in “[What unbearable chiaroscuro]” of *aaaa* end-rhyming in the first stanza and no end-rhymes in the second stanza. At the same time, the insistent initial end-rhymes find their counterpart in the flat repetition of the second stanza’s *perché / perché / perché*, each beginning one of the stanza’s three sentences.

This resonant repetition of “Why?” speaks to two incom-

patible, yet also strangely resonant, myths that have, since the beginning, animated much of Merini's work. The first is the ancient Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, the story of the bereaved husband / poet who went to Hades to plea for the return of his dead wife and could succeed only on the condition that he not turn around to look at her as they ascended back to the daylit world—a condition Orpheus could not meet. The second is the Christian myth of Peter, the apostle and founder of the Church who pledged his fidelity to his Lord at the time of the Crucifixion, but, as Christ predicted, denied that fidelity three times before the cock crowed at the dawn of the next day. These myths tell the same story: as Merini puts it in her poem "Sappho," they result in "the most dismaying dazzling / of an unfairly denied love." Such love, risked and fulfilled, is betrayed. And that betrayal, which is simultaneously an abandonment, leads on to the fulfillment of a true vocation: in the first case, the vocation of the poet, in the second, that of the patriarch.

Hearing the account of Eurydice's two deaths—that insistent, more-than-traumatic repetition—we can surmise it was not out of mere carelessness that Orpheus turned to doom her. Master poet and yet husband of insufficient commitment, Orpheus is, for Merini, a figure of "unbearable chiaroscuro," an irresolvable ambivalence. As we say, though it goes without saying, the woman poet cannot "identify" with him.

If such a minimal condition of recognition cannot be met, the loss nevertheless is not great, for ideas of identification are, in the end, banal. Nor is it necessary for the woman poet, neglected by Orpheus, to identify with his twice-sacrificed lover. It is true that Merini's poems are replete with examples of the turned gaze, where a slighting attention brings destruction, where mere curiosity freezes person to thing—and she, Alda Merini, the living poet, is the object of

that gaze. That, however, is the beginning, not the end, of such predicaments, for Merini emerges speaking, and she emerges speaking with a body, as she proclaims in the closing of her early poem “The Presence of Orpheus”:

So, within your shaping arms  
I pour myself, small and immense,  
serene given, restless given,  
unending developing motion.

Here Eurydice neither disappears nor “remains.” She finds she can sing, and Orpheus is not her only subject. Let’s substitute a better, more truthful banality: as soon as one is no longer a testifying victim, one begins to be a speaking person. Love, like war and poetry, is made by declaration; despite their incommensurable means, they each can only commence in speech and speech is, too, their aftermath.

It is the foundational continuity of voice that also is both source and outcome of Merini’s own Orphism, an aesthetic she was determined to develop out of a hermetic tradition that continually and paradoxically both underscored and overlooked the sacrifice of Eurydice. Initially conforming to these “measures,” pouring herself literally, most often erotically, into the mold of those male poets who were her mentors and then abandoned her, she discovers, in the course of her long career, a range of thinking and creating that makes out of the aphoristic and discursive, the occasional and the eternal, one continuous work.

When we take up the story of the disciple Peter, we find another account of love’s recognition and betrayal, one told with slight variations throughout the four Gospels. At Matthew 17:18–20, Christ blesses Simon Bar-jona, the fisherman, under his new identity as the disciple Peter, telling him “thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church,”

thereby declaring to him the meaning of his name as rock. At the same time, Christ delivers the following interdiction to Peter and all the disciples: “They should tell no man that he was Jesus the Christ.” As the moment of the Crucifixion approaches, Christ tells Peter, despite his protestations, “before the cock crows, thou shalt deny me thrice.” Once Christ is taken, all the disciples flee except Peter, who remains in the high priest’s palace; when Christ then is condemned to death, two young women come toward Peter and accuse him of being a follower of Jesus. At the first accusation, Peter says “I know not what thou sayest” (Matthew 26:18). At the second, he says, with an oath, “I do not know the man” (26:72). And then, as other bystanders say he has, by his dialect as a Galilean (Mark 14:70), betrayed his status as a follower of Jesus of Nazareth, Peter curses and swears in response, saying “I know not the man.” (Matthew 26:74) or “I know not this man of whom ye speak” (Mark 15:71). At that, the cock crows, and Peter, recognizing Christ’s prediction has come to pass, weeps bitterly.

Naming, speaking, denying, prophesying, incomprehension, familiarity, dialect, referentiality—the story of Peter is a strange amalgam of failed and successful, intended and unconscious, speech acts determining affiliation. The story presents a classic case of the kind of double-binding interdiction that produces schizophrenia: do this and don’t do this—speak my name as a rock that cannot speak. It also is a classic case of a gnomic prediction—you will deny me (and hence obey this prophecy). For Merini, Peter’s betrayal becomes emblematic of all relations where one figure loves unequivocally and out of balance with his or her object: the asymmetry of passionate love; the asymmetry of family obligation; the asymmetry of love between mother and child. She declares in “And it would be even easier”:

As for my crying over you, I bleached it away slowly  
day by day as full light does  
and in silence I sent it back to my eyes,  
which, if I look at you, are alive with stars.

Such uneven or non-existent reciprocity is the necessary condition of a founding love that precedes any notion of economy and must resist the contingency of errors and failures of communication.

This account brings us to the present translation, which is made up of selections from *Fiore di poesia*, hence all of Merini's books up until 1997, including the aphorisms that first appeared in that volume, and other lyrics from the 2000 collection, *Superba è la notte*. My title, *Love Lessons (Lezioni d'amore)*, was suggested by Merini herself when she viewed the completed translation in November 2007.

In her *Delirio amoroso*, Merini wrote, ambiguously, "All my books are tied to my mental illness, almost always wanted by others to witness my damnation," thereby not indicating whether it is her books or the mental illness itself, or their inter-relation, that was demanded by her audience. Indeed her tremendous, bestselling popularity in Italy—witnessed by the fact that her books can be found in the kiosks of every Italian train station as well as every bookstore—speaks to the importance of the Merini legend of the mad poet. If you find yourself in a conversation with the Italian, mostly male, poets of her generation, a mention of Merini's name will quickly bring out somewhat sullen condemnations of her "sensationalism" and ostensibly undeserved recognition by "feminists" and others. And if you speak to feminists about her, you will find that they complain about her subservience to male mentors or her irrational imagery.

As she was once the mascot of older male poets, she is now too often the mascot of younger fans who admire her less for her poetry than her persona. Merini thereby continues to be both honored and dismissed by acknowledgments of her gifts as a poet, gifts that truly cannot be explained away. Yet in everything she has written, the terrible facts of the twentieth century, and her experience of them, loom; she is both learned in the tradition and schooled in suffering—to deny either aspect of her experience is not to read her at all.

Poetry, at least since Callimachus and Ovid, has been concerned deeply with the aetiology of things both ordinary and extraordinary, and in Merini's obsessions and successes at once we can see a mind uncovering, inferring causes, seeking out lessons to be learned—even traumatic ones—within a larger practice of poetry as a steady means of discovery. Consider the progress of one of her most perfect lyrics:

As for me, I used to be a bird  
with a gentle white womb,  
someone cut my throat  
    just for laughs,  
    I don't know.  
As for me, I used to be a great albatross  
and whirled over the seas.  
Someone put an end to my journey,  
without any charity in the tone of it.  
But even stretched out on the ground  
I sing for you now  
my songs of love.

The Villa Fiorita mental hospital, the western ring-road, the Naviglio district, Lombardian sinners—all anchor the poems in Milano's public reality. Meanwhile, her natural images—the moon, the grass, asphodels and violets, fruit, an olive

tree, snow, a raven, even a crocodile—tend toward universal significance, accompanying a mental world of paradises, saints and angels who coexist with the literature and myths of pagan antiquity.

Like her American peers Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton—all born within just a few years of each other—understanding her own mental states, and their origin in historical and psychological events, has been key to her outlook as a poet. But unlike the work of Plath, Sexton, and other poets of the Anglo-American confessional school, Merini's poetry always has had a metaphysical frame and she continually places her experience within these larger patterns of history and myth. Perhaps in the end this broader palette, this more profound sense of her place in the world, has enabled her to save her own life.

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